

Choosing a Decision-Making Method: Consensus Building

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What is Consensus Building?

Consensus building is often misunderstood and frequently confused with other decision methods, particularly compromise. While compromise and consensus may sometimes lead to similar-looking outcomes, they are fundamentally different in both intent and process. Consensus building is the most time-intensive and demanding decision method, but when used appropriately, it can produce decisions that are durable, legitimate, and widely supported.

A critical distinction must be made between consensus and consensus building. *Consensus* refers to the outcome of a decision-making process: a decision that everyone can live with, support, and commit to implementing. A consensus outcome can sometimes emerge from other methods, such as multivoting, or even from intense disagreement followed by reflection and integration. In contrast, *consensus building* refers to the process: the structured, collaborative effort through which a group works together to search for the best possible solution.

Consensus building is not about everyone getting exactly what they want, nor does it require full agreement on every detail. Rather, it asks a different question at the end of the process: Have we arrived at a solution/option/idea that everyone can support, commit to, implement and believe in enough to carry forward? This emphasis on shared commitment distinguishes consensus building from compromise, where agreement may reflect concession rather than conviction.

Navigating Consensus Building

Because consensus building involves collective problem solving rather than positional bargaining, it requires a high level of skill and structure. Effective consensus building depends on a competent leader, principal investigator, or trained facilitator (particularly when team members do not already possess facilitation or conflict-navigation skills). Without these capacities, consensus efforts can stall, become dominated by a few voices, or collapse into frustration for many of the reasons we have covered in other explainers (see majority voting, compromise, groupthink, decision levels or decision gradients).

Despite its unifying potential, consensus building is not always the best choice. It is time consuming and can be mentally and emotionally taxing, especially for participants who prefer quick decisions or clear authority (i.e., hierarchical decision making). The process requires trust, openness, and a willingness to challenge conventional thinking. It also scales poorly; consensus



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building may be feasible within a small team or department, but it is rarely practical for very large groups such as entire institutions or networks (NASEM, 2015). In the case of consensus building group size matters a lot, as the likelihood of reaching consensus among a group of 6 to 10 is much higher than even a group of 20.

Consensus building also depends heavily on follow-through. Because the process invests significant effort in shared understanding and ownership, failure to implement the resulting decision can be especially damaging to morale and trust. When consensus building is attempted without sufficient time, trust, or commitment, it can exhaust teams rather than empower them. Like all decision methods, consensus building is context dependent. Its strength lies in situations where trust, equity, long-term collaboration, and shared ownership are essential and where the team has the capacity to do the work well.

Consensus Building Decision Tree

If you and your team are trying to decide if compromise is right for you, consider the following questions:

1. Is the decision high-stakes or central to the team's mission, values, or long-term work?
→ If no, a simpler decision method may be sufficient.
→ If yes, continue.
2. Is it important that everyone can actively support and commit to the decision?
→ If no, consider majority voting, compromise, or multivoting.
→ If yes, continue.
3. Does the team have sufficient trust, time, and capacity for deep collaboration?
→ If no, consensus building is likely to fail or cause frustration.
→ If yes, continue.
4. Is the group small enough for meaningful dialogue and shared problem solving?
→ If no, consensus building may not scale effectively.
→ If yes, continue.
5. Is there skilled leadership or facilitation available to guide the process?
→ If no, invest in facilitation or choose a different method.
→ If yes, consensus building may be appropriate.

If consensus building is used:

Clarify the process, set realistic time expectations, and confirm commitment to implementing the final decision at the end. Remember that just because consensus is a unifying decision-making method, it should not be the only decision method used, as the team will not be able to function. The PI or leader of the team needs to be able to identify when strategic use of consensus building



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would most benefit the goals of the group.

References

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). (2015). Enhancing the effectiveness of team science. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

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