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Consensus & Unanimity



by Tim Hartnett, PhD

Understanding the difference between various models of consensus decision making begins with understanding the term *consensus*. Often people use the term *unanimity* and *consensus* synonymously. Greater clarity is achieved, however, when the different meanings of these words are parsed. *Consensus* is defined by Webster’s Dictionary as “agreement of the majority in sentiment or belief” and by the Oxford dictionary as “general agreement.”

For group facilitators, *consensus* is most useful as a term describing the process of making decisions collaboratively. Thus, a consensus-oriented process is one in which people work together to reach as much agreement as possible. *Unanimity* (or unanimous consent) is more specific. It refers to the outcome of a vote showing all members are agreed. Consensus is the process. Unanimity is one possible result of a consensus process.

Once a consensus process has been used to develop a proposal, the group must have a way to finalize a decision. The criterion a group uses for this is called a decision rule. Some groups use unanimity as their decision rule. No decision is final unless everyone agrees. Other groups use other decision rule options. They may finalize decisions by voting (majority or supermajority) or by the verdict of a person-in-charge or governing committee.

A consensus-oriented process can be used in conjunction with any type of final decision rule. For instance, a business owner might use the CODM steps to guide her employees in developing a plan for reducing unnecessary paperwork in the office. All the employees may participate and collaboratively form a new plan, knowing that the owner will ultimately decide whether to adopt the plan.

Alternatively, a team of softball players might use a consensus process to reach as much agreement as possible on a set of

guidelines for adding players to the team. If they do not all agree, however, the team tradition may dictate that a majority vote is enough to make a decision on the most popular proposal they have been discussing.

The confusion of the terms unanimity and consensus have led many people to some false assumptions. Some have resisted the idea of using a consensus process because they thought it would mean the group could not make a decision without unanimous consent. Others have thought that requiring unanimity is a necessary component of any consensus process. Once the terms are better understood, it becomes more clear that groups can choose to use a consensus process whether or not they use unanimity as a final decision rule.

*Consensus Facilitation is local to Northern California, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Santa Cruz County. .
Services outside of Northern California are also available by special arrangement.*

Other websites of Tim Hartnett: [ConsensusBook](#), [ConsensusBlog](#), [ConsensusDecisions](#), [Santa Cruz: Therapist / Mandala Artwork](#) by M. Susan Hartnett Webb