

## The Question of Consensus

Copyright © 2014 Lance Decker.  
All Rights Reserved.

### *How do you know when a group has obtained consensus?*

I've often heard people say, "I can't define consensus, but I know when we've reached it." Even seasoned practitioners, who must wrestle with the concept daily, find it difficult, so it's understandable how people new to mediation and community dispute resolution might feel a little unprepared to claim a group has reached consensus.

Think of consensus as existing on a continuum (shades of gray) rather than in a binary state (black or white). Is full, unanimous agreement consensus? Of course it is. Is outright substantive or process impasse grounds to declare there is no consensus? You bet! However, life becomes more difficult when a group slips from consensus to disagreement and back again depending on the information they receive. The group will receive new information throughout the process sometimes at the eleventh hour, which can dramatically change their direction.

The idea of a continuum of consensus creates great opportunities, but can also be a bit of a problem because sometimes there is consensus and you don't even know it.

### *What is Consensus?*

Here are a few definitions of consensus I've gathered over the past 20 years. All share the common notion that full agreement is not needed, that voting and majority rule is not the best way to generate good decisions (and might prove to be a downright bad way to make a decision), and that groups can resolve disagreements if given sufficient time and information.

**Definition #1** - A group decision where, even if some members feel the overall direction is not the best one possible, all group members agree to live with, support, and commit themselves to not undermine the decided direction.

**Definition #2** - A process where everyone agrees that issues are fully aired, all group members feel adequately heard, all have equal power and responsibility, and individual influence is based on logic and persuasion rather than by stubbornness, intimidation or charm.

**Definition #3** - Mutual agreement that addresses the central issues but may not address every concern or be perfect from every possible perspective. In a consensus, the level of agreement is not usually perfect but is acceptable enough to the consenting parties to allow the process (decision) to proceed.

**Definition #4** - A decision making process that enables a group to satisfy all of its members to some level of acceptance, not just the majority.

**Definition #5** - A way of compiling and synthesizing viewpoints rather than choosing one over another. Participants in a decision making process using consensus as the basis do not merely express their individual points of view, but listen to the views of everyone, and find ways to improve the decision through incorporation.

Still confused? Here are some operational features of consensus that might help.

***Operationally, consensus is...***

- A method for developing and assessing a group decision
- The result of open communication and a supportive group climate where everyone in the group believes they have had a fair chance to influence the decision
- A way to create a decision that is generally more acceptable to the broader community
- A process filled with frustration, aggravation, provocation, irritation and exasperation

***Operationally, consensus is not...***

- Voting to determine the ultimate decision
- A guarantee that anyone will get their first choice
- A quick way to make decisions
- Appropriate for crisis

***In building consensus it is important to know when...***

- A proposed resolution is sufficiently acceptable... to be acceptable
- To stop the discussion, declare consensus and not re-open the debate until such time the group determines there is a need for revision.