

## **Consensus Decision Making**

*Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW*

Making decisions by consensus is far and away the most desirable approach, but achieving it is much easier said than done.

The reason for its desirability is that consensus can lead to full digestion of the facts and arrive at sound, evidence based solutions. Unfortunately, there is one major stumbling block: humans are social creatures and readily influenced by the views of others. Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in social psychology, demonstrated in his studies that the need to conform can lead individuals to distort or revise initially accurate perceptions.

How, then, do we take the social interplay out of consensus decision making? Having chaired hundreds of management team meetings, I think it starts with the group leader. As the group leader, I could not sidestep the fact of my authority and people's concern about displeasing an authority figure. To overcome that obstacle, I used many approaches to make disagreement "safe."

I started by making it clear that this was a brainstorming decision, not a social niceties session. Our job was to test ideas, regardless of source, fully digest them and come up with well-informed solutions. Unfortunately, what many consider "consensus" is not consensus at all. It's compromise in which some win, some gain. Compromise isn't all bad, but it isn't the best of approaches. First, some members will feel they yielded their judgment in order to reach agreement. Second, the group will not have fully vetted the data at hand. Our political process is based on compromise, which often leads to the "least worst" solution.

When dealing with thorny issues within the management team, I sometimes opened the meeting with a teaser, like saying: "I have this great idea that I know is too good to be true. Tell me what's wrong with it." At first, there would invariably be cautious silence. Eventually, as my team became thoroughly assured that when I asked an honest question I was seeking an honest answer, the awkwardness gave way to quick engagement.

Treat the idea as something laid out in the middle of the table for all to see and examine. That tends to reduce social fears and more readily gets down to constructive problem solving. As I earned trust, team members quickly told me something I overlooked. I always thanked them for affirming my suspicion of "too good to be true" and went on to "now let's look at what will work." The hunt was on for the best idea the team could find. Team members became fully engaged in the brainstorming effort and had only one focus: good solutions.

This enthusiastic engagement and determination to come up with good solutions led to laughter, and fearless presentation of "what-if" thinking. This is when breakthroughs happen.

When we hit, everyone knew it. Faces glowed with pride of ownership. A great solution somehow emerged from the middle of the table. I could never trace the idea's origin, but that was unimportant. Most important was the feeling of jubilation over having reached our solution. That is what consensus looks like. When it's impossible, or no one cares, to trace sources of an idea, that's your signal that a true consensus decision was achieved.

Sometimes people can be incredibly timid. Here's a technique to deal with that. Lay out the problem and ask individuals to write their ideas in a sentence or two. Then post the ideas on a board and examine them as a group. Allowing people to lay out their thinking anonymously is a great icebreaker. When everyone is scanning the results on the board, the focus of discussion bypasses political correctness and yields results. Typically, you will find multiple clusters of similar ideas. That's the place to start. Start with the highest area of agreement and work downward. The resulting discussion typically tries to assimilate all the perspectives listed. Again, the issue is well-considered and yields evidence-based solutions. I've done this many times. It works.

Only when ideas regardless of origin are thoroughly vetted does a group arrive at true consensus.

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