

# Building consensus

## What is this tool?

Consensus building is used to resolve conflicts and make decisions when these involve multiple stakeholders and complex issues. The five rules in this exercise enable teams and groups to explore shared issues and decisions together. This exploration helps them reach real consensus and make decisions that are truly shared.

*(This tool was adapted from work by Alison Hardingham on Skilful Discussions.)*

### objective

To provide a means for working through collaborative decision-making process

### product

Decisions with greater collaboration and ownership

### who facilitates

Development facilitator  
co-leads with starter group members

### who participates

Starter group members or partnerships formed around child well-being priorities

### time span

approximately half a day

### materials

- flipchart paper
- markers
- handouts
- 'Stages of consensus building'
- 'Five rules of skillful discussion'
- 'Reviewing skillful discussions'

## Introduction

Stakeholders always have a wide range of understanding and perceptions of a problem. This exercise helps them to work out a common understanding of an issue or problem. The steps provide a framework for finding a solution that meets the most peoples needs more completely than decisions made without such widespread participation.

## Recommended Process

### Step 1

Before the session, the facilitator needs to work with the group leader to identify a few decisions which the team needs to achieve consensus on. Only one will be used for this exercise, but it is good to have some other topics ready in case the group resolves the first decision quickly and has time for another one.

### Step 2

Explain that this is more than just an ordinary decision-making exercise. It is an exercise in which everyone's voice has equal importance. This is ideal for stakeholder groups in a partnering approach because it is about consensus building. This will require looking at the issue or decision from many different angles. Explain that they will also practice 'joint thinking' about solutions to identify the solutions which meet their needs most fully.

### Step 3

Explain that the exercise will involve a series of discussions followed by feedback sessions, based on the "five rules of skillful discussion" at the end of this tool. It is useful to write the rules up on a flipchart at the start of the process to remind everyone what they are. Then give the participants the hand-out and go through it rule by rule, making sure each one is fully understood. As you go through the list, encourage the participants to give examples from their experience of times when the rules have been kept and times they have been broken. Ask the participants to agree to try to keep these rules during their conversation and explain that you as the facilitator will also try to help them to obey the rules.

### Step 4

Explain to the participants about the decision that they will be making and agree that there will be a series of three short practice discussions on the topic, followed each time by a review, and finishing up with a plan. Then invite the team to start the first discussion.

### Step 5

During the early part of the first practice discussion, intervene when you hear signs that the group is breaking one of the rules, explain which rule they have broken and why, and then coach and discuss with them how they could keep the rule in that situation.

### Step 6

After approximately 30 minutes, give a volunteer in the group the “Reviewing skillful discussion” form (attached at the end of this tool). Ask the volunteer to draw the form on a flipchart and explain the different headings to the group (symbols can also be used). Next review the discussion. Encourage them to be appreciative if they can, focusing on ways in which they succeeded in keeping the rules, with quotes if possible. Then go through each rule and ask the participants to read out the examples they have written down in the box next to it. Allow some general discussion on how to keep each rule before the next practice discussion session.

### Step 7

Start the next 40 minute discussion session. The facilitator should try to intervene less often. Only intervene if they seem to have forgotten the rules. Instead, try to keep notes of evidence that the rules are being kept. When the time is up, repeat Step 6.

### Step 8

Once the groups are using the rules, give each person in the team the ‘Stages of consensus building’ (on page 4 and 5). Ask them to work through the stages of the consensus process, from stage 4 to stage 6.

### Step 9

After the decision has been made, have a “benefits and concerns” session on the topic of skillful discussion. Ask the participants to think about the decision-making process they have just participated in, and to identify where it worked well and where it didn’t.

- What was easy?
- What was difficult?
- What did they learn?
- How did it change the way the team works?

Then ask the team to agree how they would like to use this skillful discussion-based decision making process in the future? For example, for big decisions when all team members should have a say, or maybe some of the rules could be ground-rules for normal team meetings.

### Step 10

Thank the team and close.



## Tips for Facilitators

### If the issue appears too complex:

- Clarify the issue, or ask someone else to do so
- Break issue into logical parts and proceed
- Suggest a short break, or
- Assign an issue to a working group for analysis and recommendations.

### If parties keep re-stating their positions and disagree on facts:

Note that the discussion should focus on interests. Initiate process to identify interests, or re-state what you believe the interests to be. Explore options to satisfy interests. Discuss the evidence or facts supporting the interests.

Move from positions to interests by asking “Why is this position important to you?” or “What is the underlying interest?”

- Clarify the disagreement – What facts are in question?
- Call on members or an expert to help clarify.
- Defer discussion and assign tasks to resolve factual disagreement.

### If no solutions are emerging:

- Discuss the components, elements, and criteria for a solution.
- Brainstorm suggestions.
- Generate options or suggest a solution.
- Suggest a short break, or
- Assign the issues to a working group for work and recommendations.

### If consensus is not developing:

- Identify where consensus has been reached on components of the issue.
- Agree to as much as possible – principles / priorities / policies.
- Agree to operate within the scope of what has been agreed upon.
- Assign outstanding issues to a working group for further work and recommendations and...
  - Build on small wins
  - Replicate the process
  - Celebrate successes

- 1) **Identify the issue** the group want to reach consensus on.
- 2) **Make sure that you have the right people in the room for the discussion** (don't leave out people who can block or de-rail the group decision and make sure that the participants can legitimately speak for the groups they represent).
- 3) **Design a process** (which has a timeline and results in decision being made about the issue) and present it to the people who will be involved for their approval. Allow the participants to suggest any changes to the process so that no legitimate stakeholders feel their interests are being ignored, and agree ground rules for participant behaviour. (Setting ground rules is a great process to start with because it allows the participants to practice negotiating on something easy before they come to the more emotional issues of the real dispute).
- 4) Each stakeholder is likely to have different hidden concerns about the issue, and will probably explain exactly what they think the core problem is in a different way. So a **thorough problem definition and analysis** needs to happen next, which allows the different stakeholders to say exactly how they see the issue and why it is important from their point of view. As a result, a more complete picture of the problem will emerge as more stakeholders share how they see it, and come to understand how all their concerns and interests are linked to each other. After everyone has explained their views of the issue, the facilitator can ask the participants to talk about the concerns or interests that lie under their initial opinions (or positions) about how the problem should be solved. Once all sides understand these hidden interests, the participants can start talking directly about these deeper concerns, rather than the positions they came with, and they can start looking for new ways to address the concerns and new options for dealing with the conflict which were not obvious before they understood it from each other's point of view.
- 5) Next there needs to be an **identification and evaluation of alternative solutions**. Before the group decides on any one course of action, it is best to explore a variety of options or alternative solutions. This is extremely important in multiparty disputes, because it is unlikely that any single option will satisfy all parties equally. Parties should be encouraged to develop creative options that satisfy their interests and others'. As more options are explored, parties become able to think in terms of trade-offs and to recognize a range of possible solutions.

There are various ways to find alternative solutions. One of the most common is brainstorming, asking a group to think of as many options as possible, without evaluating any of them at first. Brainstorming can be used in a large group; in small work groups; on different issues and on different aspects of the overall problem.

It is important to look for new, mutually advantageous approaches, rather than going over the same win-lose approaches that the participants had before the consensus building process started. After the parties generate a list of alternatives, these alternatives are carefully examined to determine the costs and benefits of each (from each party's point of view), and the barriers to implementation. As with interest-based negotiation, it helps if the participants have the following attitudes: Be prepared to reveal / respond to emotions; be flexible and willing to negotiate (give and take); recognize the relationship is as important as the task; ask genuine questions; offer and agree compromise; give useful examples and evidence to illustrate suggestions; and finally, be open to new solutions.

- 6) Decision making:** Eventually, the choice is narrowed down to one approach, which is adapted to meet the needs of all the legitimate stakeholders in the process, and on which all the stakeholders agree. Consensus building is different from majority rule decision making in that everyone involved must agree with the final decision -- there is no vote.
- 7) Approval of the agreement:** The negotiators then take the agreement back to their constituencies and try to get it approved. This is one of the most difficult steps, as the constituencies have not been involved in the ongoing process, and often have not developed the level of understanding or trust necessary to see why this is the best possible agreement they can get. Negotiators need to be able to explain exactly why the agreement was drafted as it was, and why it is to the constituencies' benefit to agree to it. At this stage, it is important that stakeholder constituencies understand the trade-offs that were made. If they do not, it is likely that the agreement will be broken sometime down the road. It is also critical that stakeholders gain the support of those responsible for implementing the agreement, often government agencies.
- 8) The final phase of consensus building is **implementing the agreement**.** Consensus building often results in creative and strong agreements, but implementing those agreements is a separate task. If support for the agreement is not built with the stakeholder constituencies and others who are affected by it, the agreement will fall apart. It is also important to monitor the agreement, and make sure the stakeholders stick to it. If there are serious obstacles that prevent the group from implementing the agreement, the original decision-making group can come back together to solve the new problems.

### 1. Bear in mind the purpose of the discussion at all times

- Make sure that you understand the purpose of the discussion at the beginning and that you agree that the right people are in the room to make the decision.
- Make sure that the points you make in the discussion are relevant and to the point.
- Don't allow yourself to be sidetracked by other agendas, for example personal conflicts and political battles.
- Remind other people of the purpose of the discussion if it is helpful and necessary.

### 2. Enquire and advocate equally

- Ask questions and explore other people's points of view as often as you make statements about your own point of view.
- Stay curious about the issue being discussed and search for new information, insights, and perspectives.

### 3. Build shared meaning

- If you think people are not understanding each other during the discussion, intervene to help them understand each other better.
- When there is an important technical word, make sure it is defined clearly.
- Intervene to clarify what is meant if important words are not used clearly.
- Speak in clear and simple language that you know others will understand.
- Check that others have understood what you mean and ask them to say what they think you meant.

### 4. Use your feelings as a source of information

- Pay attention to how you are feeling and be ready to say how you feel (I feel hopeful or I feel frustrated). When you feel something strongly, ask yourself why.
- Be open, but also, try not to act on your feelings without understanding them first. (e.g. if you feel angry, don't shout).

### 5. Identify and explore strong disagreements

- If people disagree strongly explore why they are disagreeing, because an exploration of the conflict will lead to a fuller understanding of the issue for everyone. Remember, the "right" view is not likely to be one of the disagreeing party's views, but a third view which is based on better understanding.
- When others disagree with you, explore why with real curiosity.
- Help other people explore their disagreements.
- Don't avoid issues that are likely to raise conflict, and don't back down without exploring first.

### So....here are the five rules again:

#### 1. Remember purpose

#### 2. Ask as well as tell

#### 3. Understand and build understanding

#### 4. Feel and think

#### 5. Explore conflict

# Reviewing Skillful Discussions

	<b>Evidence we are keeping the rule</b>	<b>Evidence we were breaking the rule</b>
<b>Remember the purpose of the discussion</b>		
<b>Ask as well as telling</b>		
<b>Understand and build understanding</b>		
<b>Feel and think</b>		
<b>Explore conflict</b>		