

The B.C. Compassion Club Society
Consensus Decision-Making Manual



This manual is based in part on materials borrowed and adapted from *Meetings Process Manual of the Green Committees of Correspondence; On Conflict and Consensus—a Handbook on Formal Consensus Decision Making*, by Butler and Amy Rothstein; the War Resisters League, *Handbook for Nonviolent Action*; and *Building United Judgment*, by Michel Avery

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

What is Consensus?

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. The goal of consensus is for the group to work collaboratively to achieve better solutions, and to promote the growth of community and trust among the group members. All the participants are encouraged to give ideas and input. Consensus requires participants to listen and understand all sides of the issue.

The Manual

This manual has been assembled to provide staff, board members, and members with a common basis for developing and utilizing effective group decision-making techniques. This manual is meant to be useful both as a means of orientation for new participants and as a reference for those experienced with consensus decision-making.

This manual describes the decision-making process to be utilized within the Society's Board of Directors, Core Group, Staff Circle, Standing and Special Task Circles, and in other group decisions. The text is divided into two parts: 1) Participant Roles and 2) Process. The first section, "Participant Roles," describes the roles and responsibilities to be performed by members of the group to help the process run as smoothly as possible. The second section, "Process," describes how decisions are made.

Improvements to this manual should be an on-going process. Changes should be made to improve the process, but never in the midst of a pending decision or to affect the outcome of a pending decision. The Core Group is responsible for changes to this manual.

This Manual is not meant to be an exhaustive text on consensus decision-making. All participants are encouraged to consult other sources to deepen their knowledge and skills in consensus. Suggested reading materials are included in the Bibliography at the end of this manual. Workshops in consensus, facilitation, dispute resolution and other topics will improve individual participation as well as the group process.

2.0 PARTICIPANT ROLES

The roles of agenda planner(s), facilitator, and minute-taker should be fulfilled at every meeting. Other roles may be used as needed. Everyone should have the opportunity to become proficient in every role.

2.1 Agenda Planner(s)

A well planned agenda is an important tool for a smooth meeting. Experience has shown that there is a definite improvement in the flow and pace of a meeting if an agenda is prepared prior to the start of a meeting and circulated at the beginning of each meeting. One or more persons may take on the responsibility of preparing the agenda. Sometimes the agenda planner is also the facilitator.

The agenda planner has six primary tasks:

- **Collect Agenda Items:** There are many sources of agenda items depending upon the particular meeting: individual participant suggestions (which should be listed in the book maintained at the front desk for this purpose), items referred from other circles (e.g., Standing Circle and Special Task Circle referrals to the Staff Circle or Core Group or Staff Circle referrals to the Core Group); items carried over from the last meeting; and standard agenda items (e.g., check-in, agenda review, up-dates on pending items, and meeting evaluation).
- **Arrange Agenda Items:** Once all the agenda items have been collected, they are listed in an order which seems efficient and appropriate. Planners need to be cautious that items at the top of the agenda tend to use more than their share of time, thereby limiting the time available for the remaining items. Each group and each meeting has different needs. Some groups work best taking care of routine items first, then addressing the difficult items. Other groups might find it useful to take on the most difficult work first and strictly limit the time or take as much time as necessary. The following are suggestions for workable agendas: alternate long and short, heavy and light items; place reports before their related proposals; take care of old business before addressing new items; address items which may generate a sense of accomplishment early in the meeting; alternate presenters; be flexible.
- **Assign or Identify the Presenter for Each Item:** Usually, each item already has a presenter. If not, assign one. Generally, it is not wise for facilitators to present controversial proposals. However, it is sometimes convenient for the facilitator to present some of the standard agenda items.
- **Suggest Discussion Techniques as Needed:** For complex or especially controversial items, the agenda planners could suggest various options for group discussion techniques (e.g., brainstorm, go-round, small groups, etc.)
- **Assign Time Limits:** Next, assign time limits for each item. It is important to be realistic, being careful to give each item enough time to be fully addressed without being unfair to other items. Generally, it is not desirable to propose an agenda which exceeds the desired overall meeting time limit.

- **Prepare the Proposed Written Agenda:** The last task is the writing of the proposed agenda so all can see it and refer to it during the meeting. Each item is listed in order, along with its presenter and time limit.

2.2 Facilitator

The facilitator guides the consensus process so that it flows smoothly, generally acting as a traffic director for the meeting. Other tasks include calling the group back to the agenda, keeping member comments short and to the point, restating comments for clarity as needed, ensuring group adherence to the process, being attentive to the needs and input of the group members, starting and stopping the meeting on time, and generally, keeping things moving at a reasonable pace.

Rotating facilitation from meeting to meeting shares important skills among the group members. If everyone has firsthand knowledge about facilitation, it will help the flow of all meetings. Co-facilitation, or having two (or more) people facilitate a meeting, is sometimes helpful. Also, an inexperienced facilitator may apprentice with a more experienced one.

Good facilitation is based upon the principles of adherence to the agenda “contract,” clarity of process, and non-directive leadership.

- **Adherence to the Agenda Contract:** The facilitator is responsible for honoring the agenda contract. The agenda contract is made when the agenda is reviewed and accepted. This agreement includes the items on the agenda, the order in which they are considered, and the time allotted to each. Unless the whole group agrees to change the agenda, the facilitator is obligated to keep the contract. The facilitator keeps the questions and discussion focused on the agenda item. The facilitator should be gentle, but firm, because fairness dictates that each agenda item gets only the time allotted. The decision to change the agenda must be a consensus decision, preferably with little or no discussion. At the beginning of the meeting, the agenda is presented to the whole group and reviewed, item by item. Any group member can add an item if it has been omitted. While every agenda suggestion should be included in the agenda, it does not necessarily get as much time as the presenter wants. Time ought to be divided fairly, with individuals recognizing the fairness of old items generally getting more time than new items and urgent items getting more time than items which can wait until the next meeting, etc. Also, review the suggested presenters and time limits. If anything seems inappropriate or unreasonable, adjustments may be made. Once the whole agenda has been reviewed and consented to, the agenda becomes a contract. The facilitator is obligated to follow the order and time limits.
- **Clarity of Process:** The facilitator is responsible for leading the meeting openly so that everyone present is aware of the process and how to participate. This means it is important to constantly review what just happened, what is about to happen, and how it will happen. Every time a new discussion technique is introduced, explain how it

will work and what is to be accomplished. This is both educational and helps new members participate more fully.

- **Non-Directive Leadership:** Facilitators accept responsibility for moving through the agenda in the allotted time, guiding the process, and suggesting alternate or additional techniques. They need to be aware of the group dynamics and constantly evaluate whether the discussion is flowing well. They need to be diligent about the fair distribution of attention, being sure to limit those who are speaking often and offering opportunities to those who are not speaking much or at all. In this sense, they do lead the group. However, they should not use the facilitator's role as a platform to promote their personal opinions or dominate the discussion, even though they are free to express their opinions as member of the group. Even while doing so, the facilitator should attempt to remain as non-partisan and objective as possible. If the appointed facilitator becomes emotionally charged by a particularly intense exchange or agenda item, he or she should relinquish the facilitators role to someone who can remain more objective. For highly controversial, emotionally charged issues, groups may choose to select an outside or third party facilitator.

2.3 Minute-Taker

It is the Minute-taker's job to create an accurate written record of meetings and decisions made at meetings. The importance of this role cannot be overstated—an accurate written record will serve as the group's collective memory and will be called upon to verify past decisions as individual memories fade. The notes of a meeting will also allow persons absent from meetings to keep informed on group decisions. The notes of all meeting should include the date, participants present, the agenda for the meeting, notes of announcements and reports, the decision made on each agenda item (including, a decision to carry the item over to another meeting or refer it to another group for decision), and the person responsible for acting on decisions. With regard to decision-making, the notes should reflect the entire discussion on an issue, including the concerns, ideas, and opinions offered by each participant, including ideas generated during brainstorm. Decisions made by the group should be clearly set forth in the notes. After a decision has been made, it is a good idea for the Minute-taker to read the decision aloud to ensure accuracy. The notes of each meeting should be made available to the group for review in a timely manner.

2.4 Timekeeper

The Timekeeper does exactly what you would expect: he or she keeps track of the time and advise the group on its progress in adhering to the time schedule set forth in the agenda. Occasionally, the Timekeeper may have to keep track of several things at once. For example, timing a general agenda segment, a sub-segment's overrun period, and the length of a speaker's comment. Or, if the sense of the meeting is to be more laid back, they may only be keeping track of an agenda segment's starting and stopping time.

2.5 Vibes-Watcher

This role may be considered optional, but should be utilized for very controversial, emotionally-charged meetings. The Vibes-watcher is an objective observer not directly involved in the discussion. Their role is to be attuned to the emotional climate of the meeting and to point out "hidden agendas," individual power struggles, role playing, extrinsic conflicts (conflicts not related to the discussion item) etc., when those things become impediments to the decision-making process. Vibes-watchers inject their comments when necessary and are called upon during the evaluation phase of a meeting to present their general observations.

3.0 PROCESS

Set forth below and in the accompanying chart is an outline of the basic process groups should employ to arrive at decisions. The tools utilized (e.g., stacking, brainstorming, go-rounds, etc.) may vary somewhat depending on the particular group or meeting, but the essence of the process should be maintained. As noted above, improvements to the manual should be an on-going process. However, changes should not be made in the midst of a pending decision or to affect the outcome of a pending decision.

3.1 Check-In and Introductions

Before the meeting begins, everyone should position themselves wherever they feel most comfortable in a circle (the preferred configuration for effective communication). Most meetings should begin with a "check-in." This is usually a go-round in which each participant lets the rest of the group know how they are feeling. This is an important part of meetings which should not be overlooked. Often a participant will reveal something during the check-in which will help the group to better understand that participants comments and interaction during the meeting. Sometimes it is useful to ask the participants to address a particular issue during the check-in. For example, if the meeting will involve issues which are controversial or emotionally-charged, it sometimes helps to ask participants to speak to their feelings about the meeting during the check-in. If there are new members in the group or people who do not know each other, the check-in should also include introductions with person stating their name and other relevant information (e.g., what work they do for the Society).

3.2 Agenda Review

Assuming the suggested agenda has been assembled prior to the meeting (a recommended procedure), a copy of that agenda should be distributed to all participants or posted on a large board so that it is easily visible to everyone at the meeting. The entire agenda should then be reviewed by the group with presenters providing clarification as needed. The facilitator should then call for limited discussion to arrive at the appropriateness of the proposed agenda items, items to be added or deleted, the order of the items, the amount of time allotted to each item, and, if necessary, the priority of the items.

3.3 Speaking Order

3.3.1 Stacking

The process of stacking is a means of ordering speakers' input. Those wishing to speak raise their hands. The facilitator generally uses body language to acknowledge them, and either logs the order mentally or, perhaps with assistance from the minute-taker or co-facilitator, records them on a list and they are called in that order. Stacking helps equalize participation. Periodically, the facilitator may wish to state the order of the stack or inform the group of the number of people in the stack.

3.3.2 Interruptions to Stacking

There are variations and exceptions to stacking. Generally, no participant should speak twice on an issue until all participants wishing to do so have had an opportunity to speak. However, when discussion is heated, people sometimes become so eager to speak it interferes with their ability to pay proper attention to other's input. In this instance, the facilitator has the discretion to allow a "limited exchange." It must be carefully guided by the facilitator, however, so that it does not get out of hand. When a "limited exchange" should be terminated, the facilitator so indicates and calls on the next person in the stack.

Other allowed interruptions in the stacking process or in general discussion include "point of information," "point of clarity," and "point of process."

- **Point of Information:** If a participant has information unknown to the rest of the group that is immediately relevant and necessary to what a speaker is saying, that participant should interrupt by saying, "point of information." The facilitator should then allow that participant to briefly and concisely present their strictly informational, non-opinionated input. Following this interruption, the regular sequence of discussion is resumed.
- **Point of Clarity:** If a participant is unclear about what has been said or what is going on and interrupts with "point of clarity," the facilitator may suspend discussion briefly to respond to that participant's question. If the facilitator is unable to clear up the confusion, another participant may be recognized to briefly offer the necessary information. This allows the participant seeking clarity to be brought up to speed so their input can be included in the ongoing discussion. Once the issue is resolved, or reasonable effort has been expended trying to do so, the facilitator should direct the group back to the regular sequence of discussion.
- **Point of Process:** The call for "point of process" should come from any participant who sees a problem developing due to process breakdown. Once recognized by the facilitator, the participant should briefly indicate what "point of process" is involved (such as an impending time limit, straying from the topic, dealing with a non-agenda item, etc.) and offer a proposed solution.

- **Call for Go-Round:** When a topic is very controversial or emotionally charged, someone in the group may feel the need to hear everyone's opinion. In this case, the participant should request a go-round. Honoring this request will also ensure that less vocal members of the group have an opportunity to speak. And, in some cases, the go-round will reveal that the group is not as polarized as some participants thought.

These interruptions in the speaking order should be used very sparingly. They should not be used simply because you feel a need to speak now. Other participants are probably feeling the same urgency. The facilitator is responsible to limit the use of these interruptions and should inform the group when these interruptions in the speaking order are being misused.

3.3.3 Speaker Time Limits

When an issue is hot and everyone wants to address it, the facilitator may need to impose time limits on each speaker. Speaker time limits may also be required in very large meetings with many speakers. Generally, limiting each speaker to one or two minutes forces speakers to be concise, emphasize only the most important ideas, and not dwell on long, rhetorical arguments or rebuttals.

3.4 REACHING CONSENSUS

3.4.1 Identify the Issue/Clarify the Question

Either the facilitator or item presenter introduces an agenda item and provides the relevant background information including a brief update on any previous action taken on the issue. Everyone in the group should understand what the group is talking about and what needs to be decided.

3.4.2 Discussion

During the discussion phase, the facilitator should take care to ensure that all concerns and viewpoints are expressed. Various discussion techniques may be employed, including brainstorming, go-rounds, small group discussions, etc. During the discussion of a particular item, a "sense of the group" often emerges that can be put into words. When the sense of the group becomes apparent it is appropriate to make a proposal for action or decision by the group.

3.4.3 Proposals

A proposal is a statement of an action the group should take or a decision the group should make. A proposal should attempt to incorporate and address all of the viewpoints and concerns expressed by the group. Proposals should be carefully and concisely stated. It is usually a good idea to write down a proposal before attempting to state it to the group. The group should only consider one proposal at a time.

Complex proposals (e.g., proposals concerning detailed policy or procedure, contracts, etc.) should usually be prepared and distributed to the group well in advance of a meeting in which a decision is required. This encourages prior discussion and consideration, helps the presenter anticipate and address concerns in advance, minimizes surprises, and involves everyone in creating the proposal. For complex issues, if the preliminary groundwork has not been done, the best decision may be to refer the matter to a committee for development of a proposal to be brought back to the group for consideration. Drafting complex proposals is difficult in a large group.

3.4.4 Clarification and Discussion of the Proposal

Once a proposal has been made, the group should engage in a focused discussion concerning the proposal. Initially, the facilitator should ensure that all questions aimed at clarifying or understanding the proposal are answered by the person making the proposal. Once the proposal has been clarified and all participants have a good understanding of the proposal, the facilitator should ensure that all concerns and viewpoints regarding the proposal are expressed. During this stage of the discussion, the facilitator should take care to ensure that the discussion remains focused on the proposal.

If serious concerns or strong objections to the proposal are raised at this stage, the person who made the proposal should consider withdrawing the proposal from consideration. If this occurs, the group returns to the broader discussion of the issue and attempts to arrive at another proposal for consideration. This could happen several times during the decision-making process, especially on difficult or controversial decisions.

3.4.5 Friendly Amendments

To make consensus more easily attainable, it may be possible for a participant having difficulty accepting a proposal to offer a "friendly amendment" that expands somewhat on the original idea or changes it to a minor degree to address the concern without altering the substance of the proposal. If accepted by the person making the proposal under consideration, the friendly amendment should be worded into the proposal being discussed.

3.4.6 Call for Consensus

When it appears that discussion concerning the proposal is complete and no new concerns are raised and if there appears to be general acceptance of the proposal, the facilitator, or someone recognized to speak, can request a call for consensus. In calling for consensus, the proposal should first be carefully restated. The facilitator should then ask "Are there any unresolved concerns or remaining objections concerning the proposal?" After a period of silence, if there are no additional concerns raised, the facilitator should state that consensus has been achieved. It is important to note that the call for consensus is not "Does everyone agree?" or "Is there consensus?" These questions do not encourage an environment in which all concerns can be

expressed. If some members of the group still have concerns, but are shy or intimidated by a strong showing of support for the proposal, the question “Are there any unresolved concerns or remaining objections?” invites these participants to speak.

If there are still objections, discussion should continue. Once again, if it appears that the group is unlikely to reach consensus on a proposal, the person who made the proposal should consider withdrawing the proposal thereby permitting the group to develop a new solution to the issue.

Once consensus has been achieved, the proposal should be restated again so that the entire group is reminded of what has just been decided. The accepted proposal should be clearly identified in the minutes of the meeting. Last but not least, it is important at this stage that the group determine who is responsible for implementation of the decision.

3.4.7 Stand Aside: Decision Made With Unresolved Concerns

When a concern has been fully discussed and cannot be resolved, it may be appropriate for the person with the unresolved concern to stand aside, that is, acknowledge that the concern still exists, but allow the proposal to be adopted by the group. It is appropriate for the facilitator to ask the person with the unresolved concern if they are willing to stand aside. A stand aside and the reason for the stand aside should be clearly noted in the minutes of the meeting. In conjunction with a stand aside, the person standing aside may ask that the decision not be precedent setting or choose not to be involved in implementation (provided this does not undermine the decision). Since the concern which led to the stand aside has not been resolved, it may be raised again when appropriate. In contrast, a concern which has been resolved in past discussion does not usually deserve further discussion by the group, unless something new has developed.

3.5 WHEN CONSENSUS CANNOT BE REACHED

3.5.1 Blocking

Blocking occurs when one or a few individuals oppose an otherwise agreed-upon decision that has been developed through full group participation. If significant time and energy invested in discussion, debate, persuasion, careful listening, and reasoned argument have resulted in agreement by most of the group, a holdout may be declared a “block.” A block says in effect: “I cannot support this or allow the group to support this.” Blocking does not occur when there are two large opposing factions with different viewpoints or during the early phases of discussion when there are many concerns and many differing viewpoints. In these situations there is no consensus yet, so consensus cannot be blocked. Rather, blocking occurs when one or a few individuals preclude what would otherwise be united judgment on an issue which has evolved through the consensus synthesizing process. Blocking is a statement of the great seriousness of someone’s objections to a decision. In practical terms, it may be an indication that the group requires more time to reach consensus.

The decision to block is a momentous one; it should not be taken lightly. However, if after careful consideration, a participant believes very strongly that a decision would be wrong, then she or he may choose to block the decision. Before deciding to block, the participant has a responsibility (as do all participants) to participate fully in the discussion leading up to the decision. Blocking at the end of the synthesizing process without such on-going involvement, is an abuse on one's power to block. Another basic responsibility is to consider the needs of the whole group distinct from your own needs: what is best for the group may be different from what is best for the group members individually. When deciding whether to block, a participant should ask themselves at least the following questions:

- What are my reasons for objecting to the decision? Why are they important to me? Are my objections based on principles which are fundamental to the group or to me or do they reflect minor personal preferences or egotistical impulses? Are my fundamental beliefs still in accord with those of the group?
- Do my objections reflect what is best for the group or what is best for me?
- Is there information the group needs that might change people's minds?
- Has the group fully discussed the issue? Have my objections been heard by the group? Do I need more assurance from the group that my objections have been heard?
- Can the decision be delayed? Will delaying the decision help the group achieve consensus?
- What kind of pressure does the group perceive itself to be under—time, needs or feelings of persons outside the group, other outside forces? Are these legitimate pressures? Can these pressures be changed?
- How significant is the decision at issue? Does it have far-reaching implications for the group? It is a minor issue that I can accept even though I don't really like it?

A careful assessment of what appears to be a case of blocking may allow the group to re-frame the situation as a lack of agreement or a lack of consensus. The group can then continue to explore the issues and work towards an acceptable solution. However, if consensus is blocked and no new consensus can be reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject or does nothing if that is applicable. The group may also be able to delay resolution until participants have time to reflect and gain new insights.

3.5.2 Vote to Vote

If the group absolutely cannot reach consensus and a decision must be made at this particular meeting, the facilitator or any other participant may call for the group to vote on whether or not to vote on the issue. The vote to vote must pass by an 80 percent majority. If the

vote to vote passes, the facilitator then calls for a vote on the issue, in place of the consensus process. The vote should be to accept or reject a pending proposal. To be adopted, the proposal must be accepted by an 80 percent majority. If adopted, the proposal becomes a decision of the group and should be clearly reflected in the minutes of the meeting. The vote to vote process is a last resort, to be utilized only where a decision must be made at a particular meeting. This will rarely be the case. Neither the vote to vote, nor the actual vote on the pending proposal may be blocked. If an 80 percent majority is not achieved on the vote to vote, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject or does nothing if that is applicable.

3.6 EVALUATION

If the process is to improve, there must be an opportunity to review what went on and why and a time to suggest ways to make it work better next time. Every meeting should end with an evaluation of the meeting and the process. The evaluation may take any form. It is important for each participant to express what worked, what didn't work, and what would have improved the meeting, especially those things that didn't work. The views expressed during the evaluation should be included in the minutes of the meeting.

4.0 CONFLICT RESOLUTION [TO BE ADDED.]

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