

Consensus Decision Making Guide

Definition

Formal consensus decisions are decisions that everyone can live with. Not everyone discusses every decision, and not everyone will agree 100% with decisions taken.

The Facilitator

Every meeting needs a facilitator who acts impartially, ensures all voices are heard and helps the group to reach consensus within agreed time constraints. With controversial issues this can be a demanding role, and external facilitation may be used.

Proposal Discussions

If during the discussion of a proposal it becomes clear that there is a high level of confusion over its wording and/or intent, the facilitator may call a break to consult with those bringing the proposal forward to decide whether or not it should be withdrawn to be rewritten in a more appropriate sized group.

Consensus Positions

There are four positions a member can take on any given proposal:

- Active Agreement ('I am in active agreement with the proposal')
- Agreement with Reservations ('I am in broad agreement with the proposal but I have one or more reservations')
- Non-Support ('I do not support the proposal as I have unresolved objections, but I do not wish to block it because I can live with it')
- Block ('I cannot live with this proposal')

What if everyone 'agrees with reservations' or quite a number express their 'non-support'?

If a proposal is not blocked then it will pass. However, if during the meeting there are many members expressing strong concerns which are unresolved after a period of discussion, then the proposal may be withdrawn for further development (at the discretion of the facilitator(s) in consultation with those bringing it forward) before it reaches the stage of formal consensus testing.

What if the proposal is blocked?

When Unicorn had fewer members, a single objection or 'block' would stop a proposal going through; with 70+ members this has increased to three members (roughly 5% of the membership) needed to block a MM proposal.

There are two options in case of a block:

1. The proposers may withdraw the original proposal for further development
2. The proposal may go to a workshop

When is it appropriate to block a proposal?

All members have the right to block a proposal if they feel that they cannot live with the proposed change. Reasons for blocking a proposal include (but are not limited to) believing it to be:

- in conflict with our Principles of Purpose
- detrimental to the viability of the business
- detrimental to the operations of the co-op
- detrimental to the wellbeing of members

Members choosing to use a block have the responsibility to share their reasons during the meeting before we formally test for consensus. This is important when practicing consensus because it allows other members to respond, and potentially for collective solutions to be found which address the stated concerns. It is also important to think carefully whether registering non-support would be a more appropriate way to express concerns.

What happens if we need a workshop?

Workshops can be one of the great strengths of consensus decision making; the collaborative proposals that result from workshops can be better than the original proposal. During or directly after the meeting at which a proposal is blocked, the Secretary publicises the date and time for the workshop, after which a decision is taken whether to call an EGM or take the proposal to the next Members' Meeting to agree the outcome.

Interested parties – at least the members behind the original proposal and any objectors – attend the workshop to discuss the issue. This will be during a Thursday Training session where possible. Usually this group agrees an alternate proposal and resolves most concerns. Members who do not attend are informally expected to accept the outcome of the workshop, however any new proposal must still be brought back to a Members' Meeting or EGM for formal agreement.

What happens if after the workshop the proposal is still blocked?

If in the meeting following the workshop the proposal is still blocked then a vote will be taken. For most proposals this will be a simple majority decision – 51% or more of members present must vote in favour of the proposal for it to pass. If a proposal receives an equal number of votes for and against, then it has not achieved a majority and it will not be passed. According to our Co-op Rules there are certain decisions that require a supermajority of 75%, including decisions to wind up the co-op, dispose of assets or make amendments to the rules.