Consensus Decision Making Guide

Definition
Formal consensus decisions are decisions that everyone can abide by. Not everyone discusses every decision, and perhaps not everyone agrees 100%.

Up-to-date process
Early on, Unicorn agreed a specific process for making consensus decisions (see Structure Policies). As a larger co-op, much of this work takes place in teams.
1. Identify issue (start with this before a specific proposal), usually in team
2. Clarify the issue and invite feedback, e.g. via forum or newsletter
3. Identify concerns and views (list, do not discuss yet)
4. Resolve concerns and develop a clear proposal, usually in team
5. Identify appropriate meeting and facilitator for agreement of proposal
6. Share proposal and background pre-meeting (team, forum or MM)
7. Discuss proposal at meeting, making changes or amendments
8. Restate proposal and test for consensus (ask, 'Are there any unresolved concerns? Are there any objections?')
   - YES: Record and implement decision.
   - NO: Withdraw proposal, go back to 3 or agree next step.

The chair or facilitator
Every meeting needs a chair 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 outside training may be useful.

Consensus Positions
There are four accepted positions that lead to passing a proposal:
- Agree
- Non-support ('I don't see the need but I'll go along with it')
- Agree with reservations ('Not sure but I can live with it')
- Stand aside (due to lack of information or emotional involvement)

However, the following position blocks a proposal:
- Cannot abide, believe it will <u>harm</u> Unicorn

What if everyone agrees 'with reservations'?
This situation is unlikely to mean true consensus. The chair should have some means to test the level of agreement, and may suggest a workshop or other route.

What if the proposal is blocked?
When Unicorn had fewer members, a single objection or 'block' would stop a proposal going through; with 60+ members, the membership needs two objections to block a MM proposal. There are a few options in case of a block:
- Withdraw the original proposal
- Suggest an alternate proposal in the meeting (this is time consuming and best done in advance or in small groups)
- Go to a workshop (usually just for MM proposals)

- If a proposal is still being blocked after a workshop, take a vote

What happens if we need workshop?
Workshops are one of the great strengths of consensus decision making; the collaborative proposals that result from workshops are usually far 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 (usually within one week) and a further MM or EGM (e.g., within two weeks) to agree the outcome (e.g., within a ten minute time limit).

Interested parties – at least the member(s) behind the original proposal and any objectors – attend the workshop after hours to discuss the issue. 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 MM for formal agreement.

Why practice consensus?

Pros	Cons
Can save time – everyone involved and decisions not 'trickled down'	Can be very time consuming
All voices are equal, not hierarchical, safety for minority opinions	May not overcome power differences (e.g., louder, longer serving, etc.)
Ideas can be more innovative with knowledge/skills of whole group	Can be cautious, risk-averse, slow to change or challenge status quo
Decisions more likely to be implemented, inclusive	Consensus decision making can default to doing nothing
Ideas get a more thorough development	'Passive consensus' – lots of reservations but no one objects
Resolves conflicts	You may not get your own way
Reduces pressure on individuals Encourages us to take responsibility as directors	Can be difficult to ensure accountability and scrutiny