



Achieving Results through Consensus Decision Making Small Group Worksheet

You will be asked to make a number of decisions as a regional water planning council over the next three years. The clarity of those decisions and the support behind them will depend, in large part, on how those decisions are reached. Many of the decisions reached will have broad and substantial implications, and not all decisions will be 100% beneficial or acceptable to every member of the Council. However, the focus must be on results - **“How can we best assure that our regional council develops a regional Water Development and Conservation Plan that promotes the sustainable use of the water resources of the planning region, through the selection of an array of management practices, that will support the region’s and the state’s economy, protect public health and natural systems, and enhance the quality of life for all citizens?”**

The model of decision making for all of the regional water planning councils throughout the state is one of **consensus decision making** that is clear, transparent and open. Consensus is a method of group decision making that has been described as the willingness of everyone to give the decision a ‘trial run’. Consensus helps to build trust, commitment, and accountability in group decision making processes, and it focuses on results.

When using a consensus approach, council members agree in good faith to listen to all points of view, make room for minority views, and attempt to compromise for the good of the plan and the region. The Operating Procedures document for the regional water councils states:

The _____ Water Planning Council shall attempt to reach consensus in its decision making (as described in its Rules for Meetings). In the event consensus on a decision cannot be reached in a reasonable time period, the Council may make decision by a two-thirds majority vote of the members present at the meeting. The Chair, after a reasonable discussion period, may initiate a vote on a decision, unless over-ruled by a simple majority of the members present at the meeting.

Consensus refers to “agreement on some decision by all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives. The consensus process is what a group goes through to reach this agreement...Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and that no one has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!) It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered...By combining their thoughts, people can often create a higher-quality decision than a vote decision or a decision by a single individual. Further, consensus decisions can be better than vote decisions because voting can actively undermine the decision. People are more likely to implement decisions they accept, and consensus makes acceptance more likely.”²

The following steps describe a typical consensus decision making process you will likely encounter as part of your work on the regional council:³

Introduction

- * *Start with a problem, issue or proposal*
- * *Questions to clarify the problem, issue or proposal*

Level 1

- * *Broad, open discussion to identify potential solution or decision*
- * *Group discussion*
- * *Statement of proposed decision as modified through group discussion*
- * *Test/Explore consensus*

Level 2

- * *Identify concerns – group and individual*

Level 3

- * *Resolve grouped concerns*
- * *Test/Explore consensus*

Level 4

- * *Restate remaining concerns*
- * *Questions to clarify concerns*
- * *Limit discussion to one issue at a time*
- * *Test/Explore consensus*

Options if unable to reach consensus:

- * *Table until following meeting/later in same meeting*
- * *Call for 2/3 majority vote*
- * *Send to committee and/or get additional information*
- * *Send to committee and/or get additional information*

Testing and/or exploring for consensus may occur at different times during the process, depending on the complexity of the issue and the need to resolve sub-issues. Some groups have found that consensus is more workable using a way of thinking about and expressing their **level** of consensus or agreement. The diagram below demonstrates how and why a member may ultimately vote with the group without completely agreeing with the proposal.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I hate this option and would never agree to it			I have substantial reservations			I could agree to this to move the process forward, but there are parts I don't completely agree with			I love this option

Please discuss the following questions in your work group and be prepared to discuss your responses with the larger group:

1. What does consensus mean? Should “consensus” mean all members can say they are at a 7? What other options are suggested by this diagram?
2. Do you think the consensus-based process described here, with two-thirds majority vote as a fallback, will be workable for this Council? If not, what changes would you recommend?
3. How will we know when we’ve reached a consensus decision? How should it be recorded? Should the concerns of those not in agreement be documented?