

Teacher Notes: Consensus Decision Making



Consensus decision making is a complex, collaborative process that relies on the understanding of certain basic principles, as well as the application of interpersonal skills. Students need to understand that consensus is not reached by a majority vote, nor through compromise, but that it is the result of negotiation. Its goal is to reach an innovative solution that reflects the perspectives of every team member. For this reason, consensus building requires active listening and a high degree of commitment from all team members.

Basic Principles of Consensus Decision Making:

1. *All members are equal and have a valid perspective to contribute to the group.*
2. *Everyone has the right, but not the obligation, to change his or her mind.*
3. *The decision is reached when all the members accept it.*

Indispensable Elements

1. *Willingness of each member to share power*
2. *Respect for assigned roles*
3. *Commitment to follow the established process*
4. *Clear common objective*
5. *Neutral facilitator accepted by the group*

Practical Advice

- A heterogeneous team of four to six students is the most effective group size for consensus decision making.
- Ground rules for the process should be established at the beginning of the year.
- Students should sit in a circle or facing one another.
- Each student in the group should have an opportunity to take on a leadership role over the course of the year.
- Teacher intervention should be minimal.
- Consider allocating an initial period of time for *dialogue* (exchange of ideas) before indicating that it is time to pass on to the *discussion* phase (when the purpose is to make a decision).

Student Roles within Collaborative Groups

If students have little experience with cooperative learning, it is advisable to assign a specific role to each group member. As they develop the skills and competencies of collaborative decision making, students may select their own roles or create variations, depending upon the nature of the task at hand. The number and type of roles may vary according to the group task, size, and dynamic. The only essential role in groups of four or more is that of a facilitator. Possible roles include:

1. *Facilitator:* remains objective, poses questions, ensures that each group member has the chance to speak in turn
2. *Task Protector:* presents and supports the central task and reminds group members to focus on the main idea without straying
3. *Spokesperson:* reports ideas and decisions to other groups

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4. *Timer*: monitors time and reminds group members of the time constraints
5. *Materials Person*: coordinates space and makes sure that the group has the necessary materials to carry out their task
6. *Scribe*: records and organizes ideas
7. *Researcher*: locates sources, definitions, and helpful information as needed
8. *Graphic Artist*: creates charts or illustrated representations of ideas and information
9. *Keeper of the Peace*: mediates conflicts and proposes solutions as needed
10. *Questioner*: checks that every member of the group is satisfied with the decision

Observing the Skills of Consensus Building

(This may be used as self-evaluation, peer evaluation, or teacher evaluation)

Target skills

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| S-100 | Collaborate with others to establish and carry out goals and responsibilities. |
| S-101 | Use a variety of strategies to resolve conflicts peacefully and fairly.
<i>Examples: clarification, negotiation, compromise...</i> |
| S-102 | Make decisions that reflect fairness and equality in their interactions with others. |
| S-104 | Negotiate constructively with others to build consensus and solve problems. |
| S-400 | Listen to others to understand their perspectives. |
| S-401 | Use language that is respectful of human diversity. |
| S-402 | Persuasively express differing viewpoints regarding an issue. |
| S-404 | Elicit and clarify questions and ideas in discussions. |
| S-405 | Articulate their beliefs and perspectives on issues. |

Rarely
1

Usually
3

Always
5

1. Paraphrases and responds to the ideas of others
2. Poses questions to help elicit and clarify ideas, evidence, and opinions
3. Negotiates points of agreement among group members
4. Takes time to consider new or different ideas
5. Provides and requests reasons and evidence
6. Revises his or her ideas based on new ideas and information
7. Is tactful when disagreeing with ideas and opinions
8. Proposes creative resolutions to problems
9. Defuses rather than escalates conflict
10. Avoids stereotypes or unjustified generalizations

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Individual Comments:

What do you find most difficult in consensus decision making?

What do you find the easiest in consensus decision making?

Evaluate how well your group collaborated *as a group* in this activity.
