

VESD Procedures for Reaching Consensus

STAGE 1: Understand the Proposal

- 1.1 State the Proposal
- 1.2 Clarify the Proposal
- 1.3 State Concerns
- 1.4 1st Call for Consensus

1.1 State the Proposal

The proposal is presented to each member in written form when necessary. The proposal may be presented by an individual or a group. If possible the presenter will distribute a draft of the proposal prior to the meeting and will agendize the proposal for discussion.

1.2 Clarify the Proposal

The facilitator opens the floor for clarifying questions. The purpose is to ensure that group members have a clear and common understanding of what is being proposed. This is a time to clarify the proposal, not to raise objections or concerns about its merits, impact, or effects.

1.3 State Concerns

Once the group is satisfied that the proposal is clearly understood, the facilitator asks if anyone has any legitimate concerns. Legitimate concerns are possible consequences of the proposal that might adversely affect the group or that are in conflict with the purpose and values of the group.

It is imperative to allow ample time to receive responses from all who wish to share. One obstacle to overcome in reaching group consensus is to ensure that individuals do not feel that their ideas, opinions, or perspectives are discounted because others are more aggressive or outspoken. The facilitator must create an environment in which people are encouraged to share their opinions and perspectives.

It is the responsibility of those who are having trouble with a proposal to put forth alternative suggestions to reconcile concerns or provide other opinions.

1.4 1st Call for Consensus

When there are no stated concerns, the facilitator says "Do we have any more concerns?" (long pause) Upon hearing no more stated concerns, the facilitator says, "We have reached consensus."

STAGE 2: Resolve Concerns

- 2.1 List All Concerns**
- 2.2 Discussion to Resolve Concerns**
- 2.3 2nd Call for Consensus**
- 2.4 Evaluate Group Purpose and Values**
- 2.5 3rd Call for Consensus**
- 2.6 Evaluate Individual Motives**
- 2.7 Final Call for Consensus**

2.1 List All Concerns

If concerns are stated, the facilitator and the recorder should try to distill each one into a short phrase. A recorder should write these summations in full view of the group. Group members should assist in summarizing stated concerns.

Writing concerns on a chalkboard or flip chart page helps the group to focus on the concern, not the presenter or the person stating the concern. The facilitator can use this process to build group cohesion, consensus, and team spirit by reminding the group of the distinction between legitimate and personal concerns. The facilitator might ask the group to validate each concern as it is presented by asking the question: "Might this be a legitimate concern?" Again, it is imperative that ample time be allowed in order to ensure participation by all persons.

Avoid Repeating Concerns

Members may want to clarify concerns, but should refrain from repeating concerns already listed on the board. There is a tendency (a hold over from our voting processes) to repeat or second a concern in order to give it more weight with the group. There is also a tendency (a hold over of our advocacy or competitive processes) to lobby a concern by repeating it or rephrasing it in several different ways. No concern needs to be repeated or seconded.

Once all the concerns are listed, it is useful to spend time having the group look over all of the concerns as a whole. They can then check for duplication, clarity, and wording to ensure that they have a list of unique concerns.

After the group has finished listing its concerns, the facilitator can judge how close to consensus the proposal is. If the concerns are many and the time short, the proposal may be continued to a later meeting.

If time permits, the group members must now put their heads together and attempt to integrate the concerns into the proposal. Rather than thinking competitively to either pass or reject the idea, the group seeks consensus by thinking cooperatively.

2.2 Discussion to Resolve Concerns

The proposal is explained or changed to address concerns. The presenter has first option to resolve the listed concerns by using one of the following techniques:

- ◆ Withdraw proposal.
- ◆ Clarify the proposal.
- ◆ Change the proposal.
- ◆ Send to subgroup.
- ◆ Explain why the proposal as stated is not in conflict with the group's values.
- ◆ See if those with concerns will stand aside.

Cross Through Concerns

If those stating concerns are satisfied with the presenter's explanation of, or changes to the proposal, they indicate so by having the concerns on the board crossed through. Other group members may assist the presenter in resolving concerns.

While some claim consensus cannot work in large groups, others argue that consensus becomes more likely the larger the group gets: the more minds, the better the odds someone will come up with a perfect solution.

Resolving concerns is a creative process with a goal to produce the best possible decision. Often a best decision is finding a third way; something in between the typical either/or, right/wrong, or black/white mind-set.

Send Proposal to Subgroup

This subgroup could be an existing subgroup or an ad hoc committee established for the purpose of working on the proposal. The subgroups will bring the proposal back in a form that addresses the concerns as outlined.

Withdraw Proposal

Presenters may withdraw the proposal from further consideration and allow the group to proceed at any point from this stage on.

Stand Aside

Group members stand aside when they have concerns about a proposal, but they can live with it. Standing aside signals that the person feels his or her concern has been heard, understood, and considered, although not necessarily accepted, by the group in its final decision.

Standing aside does not remove the concern from the list. If decisions are made that include the stand asides, the appropriate concerns should be recorded with the proposal.

2.3 2nd Call for Consensus

If all the concerns listed have been resolved, the facilitator asks, "Are there any unresolved or other concerns?" (long pause) If there are none, the facilitator announces, "Then, if there are no unresolved concerns, we have consensus."

2.4 Evaluate Group Purpose and Values

If listed concerns have been adequately discussed and remain unresolved, and concerned members are unwilling to stand aside, the facilitator moves the group to a new level of resolution in which it examines the nature of the concerns. At this level, the discussion moves beyond the impersonal evaluation of the proposal and of listed concerns to probe group purpose and values.

The group needs to assess how the proposal and unresolved concerns support or conflict with the school mission and site plan, District Beliefs, and Parameters.

- ♦ Is it legal?
- ♦ Is it doable?
- ♦ Does it solve the problem without creating another?
- ♦ Does it meet the school's interest?

2.5 3rd Call for Consensus

Once the unresolved concerns are scrutinized in light of the school mission and site plan, District Beliefs, and Parameters, the facilitator will identify one of the following conclusions:

1. The member(s) withdraws the concern based on the group purpose evaluation.
"Reached Consensus"
2. The concerned member(s) stands aside.
"Reached Consensus." Concerns listed in the minutes.
3. The member(s) is not willing to withdraw the concern or stand aside.
Noted by the minutes taken. "Impasse"

In the first case, the facilitator announces that the group has reached consensus. In the second case, the facilitator announces that the group has reached consensus, and the recorder notes the concern in the minutes. In the third case, the remaining concern is noted by the recorder. However, having reached the third conclusion, the facilitator may note that the group is still at an impasse. It is time for the next level of evaluation.

2.6 Evaluate Individual Motives

This is a time for self-reflection when everyone's feelings need to be considered. Group Rules are still in effect. The facilitator asks the group to read the following paragraph in 2.6.

At this point, any further impasse is most likely due to personal dynamics, vested interests, or philosophical view point, not group purpose. Concerns based on ego or vested interests originate with the question: "What is best for me and mine?" rather than "What is best for the group?" While vested concerns are often phrased in terms of strategy or issues, there are underlying tensions about authority, rights, personality conflicts, competition, lack of trust, or philosophical view points. Most likely, these kinds of concerns won't be resolved in a business meeting or work session. Trust is a prerequisite to the consensus process.

2.7 Final Call for Consensus

The facilitator asks, "Are there any unresolved concerns?" (long pause) If there are none, the facilitator announces, "If there are no unresolved concerns, then we have consensus." If any concerns remain, the facilitator moves to Stage 3.

Stage 3: Closing

3.1 Conduct Supermajority Vote

We have outlined a very thorough process for reaching consensus. Groups need to give themselves the time necessary to go through this penetrating and painstaking process.

Some groups will reach consensus without moving very far down the flow chart. Groups with solid agreements, good subgroup work on proposals, and ego detachment will breeze through faster than you can say, "The ayes have it!"

It is possible to structure a vote to close the decision. It has been argued that a simple majority vote is more democratic than a hung jury consensus. In trying to avoid the "Tyranny of the Majority," we do not embrace the "Tyranny of the Minority." A vote requiring a 90 percent majority for passage will approximate consensus. When possible, this vote will take place at the following week's staff meeting. All unresolved concerns will be noted in the final decision. A supermajority vote will be considered a last resort and time will be allowed for everyone to come to a careful decision.