

# How to Reach Agreement in Your Organization

Here's how to streamline consensus-building to increase productivity and propel your organization to greatness.

By Monica Enand

With the pace of work accelerating, organizations are finding it harder to work efficiently. One way to cut wasted effort is by using an efficient process to reach agreement with staff, board members, committees, and partners of all types.

## Problems with Current Consensus-Building Processes

To come to agreements and reach consensus, most organizations use meetings or e-mail. Both are imperfect tools.

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Only about 10% of meeting time is productive, according to numerous studies. And e-mail has its own problems. Technology blogger Robert Scoble has suggested that the number of e-mails required to get something done is equal to the number of participants squared (that is, eight people will send 64 e-mails). This may not be a precise measure, but Scoble's premise is sound.

Not only does e-mail result in wasted time, it's hard to maintain a record. A long e-mail string in an inbox folder is tough to track and reference.

Even worse, the lag time between e-mails lets personalities and politics sneak into the process, adding friction, confusion, and lack of clarity. At the end of the process, it's common for a group to begin all over again because people aren't sure what they agreed to.

## Build a Process that Works

What you need is a handy system that lets you minimize the number of meetings and e-mails you need to reach agreement on an issue. The solution is to turn to the Web.

There are many affordable Web-based tools that can help, or you can create a system using a combination of e-mail and online collaboration. One tool called Zapproved ([www.zapproved.com](http://www.zapproved.com)) was created by the author to solve organizational problems encountered when using e-mail.

With this method, you write a description of the agreement under consideration, and enter e-mail addresses. Recipients receive e-mails with simple buttons to click for "approve," or "deny."

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Web systems like this help people respond swiftly and eliminate the long e-mail back-and-forth that does little more than fill up inboxes. Such approaches also create an audit trail so that you have a com-

plete record of who agreed to what, and when.

Whether you use this tool or others like it, make sure your system for handling decisions is:

- **intuitive to use;** piggybacking a process on e-mail makes sense because it's comfortable, but you can use other online resources to accomplish similar results.
- **collaborative;** share the same information with all participants so everyone feels equally included.
- **instantaneous;** streamline the time it takes to respond and people are more likely to get back to you.
- **archivable;** e-mail is a poor place to store information, as e-mails get deleted and e-mail threads may not show the complete picture.

## Seven Keys to Successful Agreements

Use these tips to help you reach agreement faster and easier:

- **Focus on one decision at a time.** Don't lump several issues into one. Break them apart so that people can address them individually. This will narrow the focus of any objections raised and keep discussion manageable.
- **Be transparent.** Hold discussions in the open, either in person or virtually. Successful organizations put decisions in the sunlight. Closed-door agreements fuel speculation and inhibit buy-in by the whole group.
- **Give the facts.** Be proactive about gathering the required information in advance. Data-driven

decisions go smoothly and avoid muddling the process with emotion. People need data—research, budgets, timelines. Provide it so they don't have to come back and request it later.

- **Minimize participants.** Include only the people required to reach agreement. If others have an interest, keep them informed, but don't invite them into the decision-making process.

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- **Subtract words.** Use the fewest words necessary to convey the essence of what the group is to decide. Extraneous details will dilute the message and distract from the main objective.

- **Be clear what “yes” means.** Don't say “Let me know what you think” or “Give me your feedback” when you mean “Do you approve this project?” Even if someone answers “no,” the wording of your question will compel them to explain their reasoning. Such an explanation is invaluable, because otherwise their objections may remain masked. Getting a “no” isn't always a bad thing, plus it gives you something concrete to react to rather than letting dissenters hide behind passive techniques like stalling.

- **Record the decision.** People will take the decision seriously and abide by it if they know it's saved in a place that's public. Think about a document or folder on an intranet or on the Web. Even if it's not referenced, the simple fact of knowing it exists will create peer pressure and accountability that's powerful. ■

*Monica Enand (monica@zapproved.com) developed a passion for decision management after experiences with the inefficiency of organizational decisions. She speaks on the issue and has created an online decision management system called Zapproved (www.zapproved.com) to help overcome this challenge. She has worked for more than 16 years in large corporations and startups.*

### Resources that Can Help

#### Web Sites & Tools

- **ApprovalTrack** (www.approvaltrack.com)
- **Snapflow** (www.snapflow.com)
- **Zapproved** (www.zapproved.com)
- **eUnify Approval Management** (www.eunify.net)
- **Integrify iApprove** (www.integrify.com/iapprove/)

#### Nonprofit World Articles (www.snpo/members)

- **Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)
- **Is It Time to Consider New Ways to Communicate?** (Vol. 25, No. 4)
- **How Jargon Undermines Communication** (Vol. 27, No. 2)
- **Collaboration and Leadership: Secrets of Success** (Vol. 24, No. 1)

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<http://www.snpo.org/social/>  
(free Yahoo login required)

or send a blank e-mail to:

[snpo-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:snpo-subscribe@yahoogroups.com)

If you have any questions, contact Jason Chmura at [jchmura@snpo.org](mailto:jchmura@snpo.org).