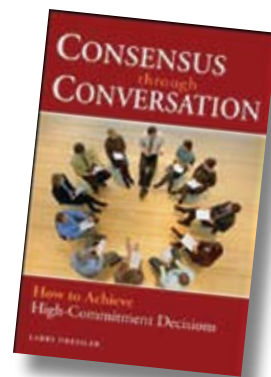




Best Use of Consensus

Here's a powerful way to build commitment around critical decisions.

By Terrence Fernsler



Consensus through Conversation: How to Achieve High-Commitment Decisions

By Larry Dressler. Softcover. 107 pages. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, www.berrett-koehler.com.

Consensus isn't appropriate for every decision, but it works well in many situations. It's best used when the following conditions exist:

- **The stakes are high.**
- **Strong support and cooperation** are necessary from those implementing the decision.
- **No single individual** in the organization possesses all the knowledge necessary to make the decision.
- **A creative solution** is needed to address a difficult problem.

In our complex, diverse world, consensus is becoming appropriate in more and more cases. Larry Dressler offers details about how to establish consensus, including participants' roles. Consensus can take more time than other decision-making processes, but it needn't be onerous. Dressler defines an excellent process to avoid getting mired down.

It's important to distinguish between legitimate concerns and personal agendas.

After determining whether consensus is a good fit for a situation, it's necessary to decide who must participate. A skilled facilitator is important, and Dressler describes what the facilitator must be able to do. The group must be clear on its scope and authority, and be educated about the process. An agenda can be very helpful to stay focused on the decision. The basic steps to consensus are:

- **Define** the issue. What problem is the group going to address?
- **Establish** decision criteria. Pinpoint requirements that any proposal must meet and outcomes it must achieve.
- **Craft** a proposal.
- **Test** the proposal by asking people to weigh in on

their level of support for it. If there are concerns, have the group search for new solutions and rewrite the proposal.

- **Reach** agreement. Be sure everyone can live with and support the decision.

Making a choice for consensus decision-making is a bold admission that formal leaders don't have all the answers

Disagreement during the process is likely, but it's important to distinguish between legitimate concerns and personal agendas. There are six common traps to consensus decision-making; Dressler identifies each and explains how to prevent them.

Making a choice for consensus decision-making is a bold admission that formal leaders don't have all the answers. It's a recognition that a leader's function sometimes is simply to convene and gather information to help with decisions. In the right context, and used carefully, consensus will strengthen organizational performance. ■

Terrence Fernsler is the executive director of the Washington Wilderness Coalition in Seattle.

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