

Association of Scottish Community Councils



Consensus Building

Decision Making Tool Kit

Introduction

It goes without saying that a community's views and ties to a resource can be strong.

Introduce a threat to that resource or a proposal for change in its use or boundaries and tempers flare between polarized interest groups. In our work with communities we often encounter individuals who have deeply held and differing values and contradictory assessments of political and economic impacts. In response to this complexity that can surround some projects, we open the floodgates to try and make sure all points of view are heard.

It can be difficult, and it does take time, but the outcome is worth it. People feel ownership of the process, have a stake in the decisions, and are committed to seeing work finished.

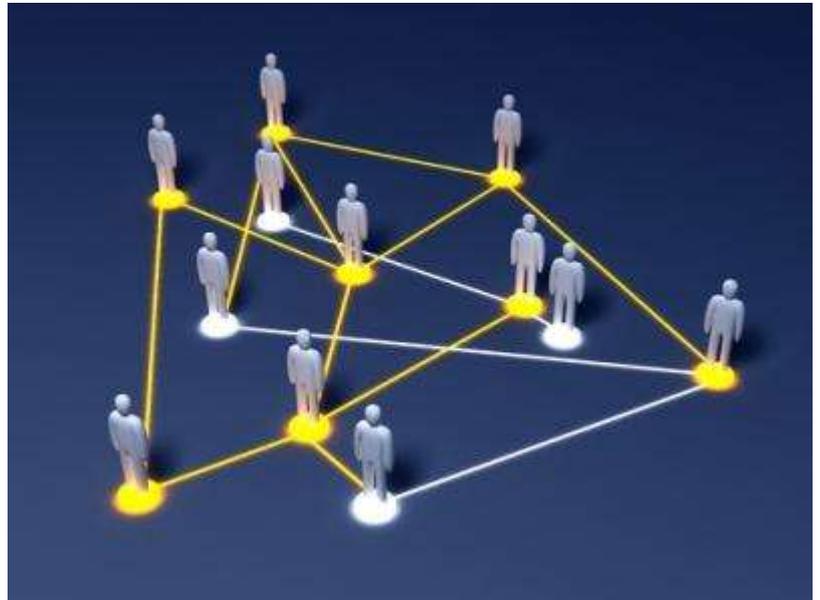


Definition

Bringing people together to express their ideas, clarify areas of agreement and disagreement, and develop shared resolutions.

Essentials

Consensus building is a decision-making process that is vital to any community planning effort or other process requiring public participation. With the assistance of an unbiased mediator or facilitator, participants can raise issues, seek to understand each other's views, and then cooperatively, often through compromise, develop an agreed upon resolution such as goals for a resource or actions for land use planning.



Consensus building involves a longer timeframe than most other forms of decision-making. Difficult decisions on significant issues require patience, time and participation. It may be necessary to break down big decisions into "mini-agreements" to help build group trust and lay the foundation for major decisions that can be supported and implemented.

In certain situations, consensus building will not be effective or will fail entirely, such as when the issues involve deep-rooted value differences, very high stakes, or win-lose confrontations. These characteristics occur in many environmental disputes that involve allocation or alteration of scarce resources. In these cases, other decision-making mechanisms may be necessary, such as formal arbitration or mediation.

An important reminder: Consensus Building does not mean everyone agrees that a decision is optimal. It means a decision is reached that everyone can live with; in other words, the decision addresses stakeholders' most important issues.

How It Works.

1. Pre-meeting Legwork.

Prior to beginning the process, it may be necessary to do some research to identify stakeholders and/or to convince different interest groups to participate. Take into account the history these groups may have with each other; they may need compelling reasons and assurances as to the validity of the process and what will happen with the outcomes. Meet with key stakeholders one-on-one to make clear the scope and goals of the consensus building process, the groups' level of decision-making authority, and what they can realistically hope to accomplish. Participants should have a say in the agenda, selecting their representatives, defining the issues, and developing appropriate ground rules. This is one way to build trust into the process, which is critical to a successful outcome. Take this step of meeting separately with key stakeholders even if the meeting is going to be open to the public at large.

2. Set up the meeting.

This event can be any size. It can be a large, well-advertised public workshop, a small meeting of a committee or task force, or a special convocation of stakeholders. What is most important is that the group represents diverse interests such as government, business, non-profits, and citizens. There may be one or several meetings depending upon the objectives. The meeting place should be in a "safe" neutral space and held at a convenient time and date that

does not conflict most schedules, which means not during a workday or on school or religious holidays. Depending upon the size of the event, invite participants by phoning, mailing invitations, and/or placing notices in newspapers and newsletters.

3. Assign a Facilitator.

Particularly in high stakes situations, a highly skilled facilitator who is viewed by all interests as fair and competent will greatly improve the chance for success. The facilitator can maintain group momentum and keep discussions on track by guiding for compromise and common ground in conflicting opinions.

4. Let the process begin!

Follow the agreed upon agenda and post the meeting objectives for all to see. These should be referred back to if participants get off track. The key to reaching a successful consensus is for everyone to have an opportunity to speak and be heard. Be sure to record statements verbatim. Capture thoughts on flip charts, whiteboards or overhead projectors so that everyone can see them and be able to them as the meeting continues.

5. Follow up.

After the meeting, mail meeting notes. This may include a summary of what happened, the actual quotes of participants, any agreed upon decisions, and any requested information and data that was referred to or is in preparation for the next meeting. If there will be additional meetings, give a large, clear reminder of the date, time, place and objective.

When to Use

- You want to build a strong public involvement program because the impact of a project or land use decision will be relatively broad.
- You want a forum that will build trust and bridge stakeholder differences by allowing diverse interests to work together, feel free to express their opinions and find mutually acceptable solutions based on common interests.
- You are seeking to build partnerships up among stakeholders in order to bring more resources and expertise to develop alternative solutions.
- The community will be ultimately responsible for implementation and ongoing management decisions. Stakeholders are less likely to block implementation if they understand that a plan or policy reflects their input and is crafted to meet their basic interests.



Do Not Use If....

- You need a quick solution because a community or organization faces an emergency situation.
- You find that a community or stakeholders are so polarized that face-to-face discussions are not possible, or likewise, there is overwhelming ambivalence.
- You are using the process only to create the appearance of openness and have no intention of using the outcomes. If this happens, significant

sense of distrust can emerge eliminating any chances of reaching a decision that participants can accept.

- A particular issue is best settled in a political or legal forum.