

# Coming to Consensus

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*Consensus is reached when everyone in the group can buy into, or live with, the decision without feeling compromised in any way.*

Michael Doyle and David Straug

Any group's goal should be to reach decisions that best reflect the thinking of all group members. We call this *reaching consensus*. It is easy to be confused about what consensus is and isn't, so here are some guidelines:

*Consensus is...*

- Finding a proposal acceptable enough that all members can support it; no member opposes it.

*Consensus is not...*

- A unanimous vote—a consensus may not represent everyone's first priorities.
- A majority vote—in a majority vote, only the majority gets something with which they are happy, while those in the minority may get something they don't want at all.
- Everyone is totally satisfied.

*Consensus requires...*

- Time to discuss ideas.
- The active participation of all group members.
- Good communication skills (listening, clarification, conflict resolution, and facilitation for both discussion and dialogue).
- Creative thinking and open-mindedness.

How do you know when you have reached consensus? Probably no one will be completely satisfied with the decision, but everyone can live with it.

Not every decision needs consensus. Your group should decide ahead of time when you will push for consensus. Decisions that may have a major impact on the direction of the project or conduct of the team—such as which problem to study, or what ground rules to establish—should belong to the whole team and be supported by consensus.

*Benefits of Consensus*

- Decisions are more accurate and usually of higher quality.
- People are more willing to support decisions.
- Disagreement can be explored rather than avoided.

*Why Not Vote?*

- Voting causes an individual to establish a position. It is difficult for anyone to publicly change her or his position.
- Voting ignores the opinions of the minority.
- Voting avoids conflict and discussion. It denies the group the benefit of understanding others and the natural synergism created by group interaction.