# Quick Decision Making Using Consensus

Consensus Decision Making is a system of reaching decisions that is widely regarded as one of the most participative and empowering processes available to activist groups. There is a method of using consensus, quickly, in an action situation - Quick Consensus. You might also find it useful to read our briefings on *Facilitation of Meetings*, *Consensus Decision Making* and *Consensus in Large Groups*.

## Why use consensus?

Many activists working for peace, the environment and social justice regard consensus as essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, nonviolent, egalitarian society. Consensus is also a way of building community, trust, a sense of security and mutual support - important in times of stress and emergency.

- When used properly, Consensus is *participative and fully democratic*. It not only encourages, but actually requires everyone to take an active part in the decision making process - unlike conventional democratic systems in which we give our power to others to wield on our behalf.

- Consensus *actively discourages domination* on account of gender, race, sexuality or any of the other 'usual' isms.

- The quality of a consensus decision should be better. Groups using consensus are attempting to find *win-win solutions* to their problems. They try to *synthesise* the best of all the group's proposals into a decision that everyone is happy to implement, thus avoiding isolating and alienating minorities.

- Consensus is also *task orientated* - it's a decision making process, and therefore by definition about *making effective decisions*

## Conditions for using consensus

Consensus may sound perfect, but it's not a easy option. In order to make it work any group has to meet certain conditions. A group wanting to use consensus would ideally:

- Trust each other! Trust that everyone has the group's interests at heart.

- Share an understanding of what consensus is, why they should use it and how it works.

- Share a co-operative intent - in other words, be willing to work for the benefit of the group, suspend their own personal agendas and work together with a unified group agenda.

- Have well facilitated meetings to encourage inclusion, democracy and fun!

- Actively participate in the decision making.

- Have an important issue to decide - don't waste time using consensus to decide whether to have tea or coffee in a break.

# Using Quick Consensus

Since consensus needs everyone to agree to abide by the process, and to be familiar with it, you need to be honest with yourselves. Sometimes it might be better to bite the bullet and appoint someone to take decisions in a tight corner (you can, of course, agree this in advance by consensus!). But if you do decide you want to try out 'Quick Consensus', here's how it works….

So, imagine you're taking part in an action to prevent a convoy of lorries that's carrying bombs arriving at a military base. The police have given you 2 minutes to get out of the road, or they say they'll move in and arrest you all. How do you decide what to do?
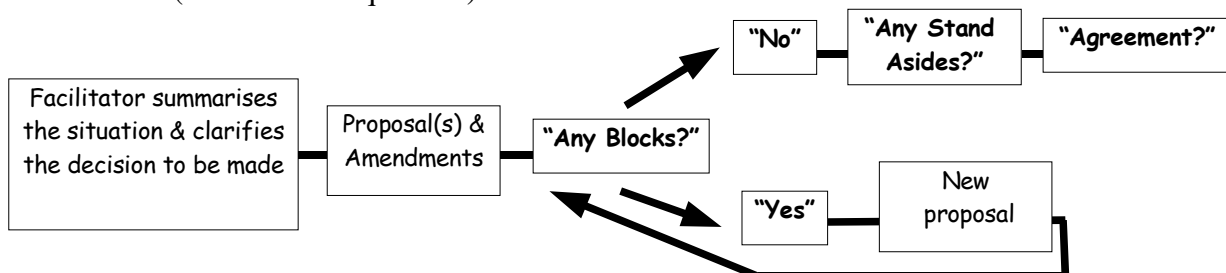
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## The Quick Consensus Process

- Firstly appoint a facilitator – it would be wise to do this in advance – saves wasting precious time now. The facilitator is there to make the process work – not to make all the proposals or dominate the group!

- The facilitator briefly restates and clarifies the situation to make sure everyone is clear - **"We've been given 2 minutes to move or we'll all be arrested"**

- The facilitator asks for proposals: **"Any proposals?"**. In some cases there may be time for discussion, but in others there won't be. It's up to the facilitator to assess the time and act appropriately…

- **"Yeah, I propose we link arms and sit down"**. Again, in some cases you might have time to make friendly amendments to the proposal: **"Lets sit down in a circle and link arms – we'll be stronger that way"**

- Facilitator restates the proposal, for clarity, and then tests for consensus:
  **"OK, it's proposed that we sit in the road and link arms. Any Blocks?"** – no
  **"Any Stand asides?"** – **"Yeah, I'll lose my job if I'm arrested – I'll watch from the side and act as a legal observer"**
  **"Everyone else agree?"** – chorus of agreement

- Group implements decision

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## Blocks, Stand Asides & Friendly Amendments in Quick Consensus

- A **block** kills a proposal dead -it's a total veto, and everyone has the right to block. In quick consensus people normally block for 2 reasons - 1) a proposal will split the group, usually because some people have an ethical objection to it or 2) the group is failing to make a decision, is paralysed, and needs to move on. If a proposal is blocked, you need a new one (quick!). Some groups insist that in quick consensus before you can block you must have a counter proposal. As long as your group is clear on the way the block is used, this isn't a problem.
- A **stand aside** is agreeing to disagree. It allows the proposal to go ahead in the group's name, but those that choose to stand aside take no part in that particular action.
- A **friendly amendment** enhances a proposal. It's not a new idea, but a way of making an existing one more effective.

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## Quick Consensus Flowchart
At its most basic (and therefore quickest) it looks like this:

# Facilitating Quick Consensus

## The role of the facilitator

Because Quick Consensus can be 'high stakes' stuff, deciding things that can be essential to the success of an action, the group need to trust the facilitator. So it's vital that you are truly neutral. The group need to be sure that your main concern is working with them to reach an effective decision and not promoting your own agenda.

**Q.** *Should the facilitator express an opinion?*

**A.** You are still a part of the group, and when the time comes you also need to affirm the decision along with everyone else or it's not a consensus decision. So if you don't agree with it, or even more seriously, feel moved to block a proposal, you need to get that out early to avoid wasting time later.

**Q.** *Can the facilitator make proposals?*

**A.** Ideally you wouldn't need to. Hopefully there will be a good idea out there in the group. But if time is ticking on, and there are no coherent proposals emerging, then you might feel it's appropriate. Remember that it's your role to get the group to a decision. Making a proposal might, occasionally, be a useful tool to do that.

## Do's and Don'ts of facilitation

- **Do** keep the task in mind - the group are trying to reach a decision
- **Do** remain neutral - the facilitator isn't there to sway the discussion with their opinion. **Don't** steer the discussion towards an answer you prefer! The group has to trust your neutrality
- **Do** highlight (dis)agreement. **Don't** ignore dissent – you're working towards consensus and need full agreement
- **Don't** feel the need to provide all the answers. It's not the facilitator's job to initiate all the proposals and solve all the problems - throw them back at the group!

## Tools for facilitating Quick Consensus

Facilitating Quick Consensus Decision Making requires a clear head. It's not an easy task – the situations in which you'll need this process are likely to be more stressful than your average group meeting. There are a few facilitation tools you can keep in mind to make Quick Consensus more effective......

**The Agenda:** usually this will be just one decision. The art is to be clear on it yourself, and to ensure that the whole group shares the same understanding of what they are discussing and deciding.

**Timekeeping:** if you've got just a few minutes to make a decision you need to keep your eyes on the clock (or ask someone else to do so!) - you'll have to decide whether there's time for any reflection before you start asking for proposals, and then whether there's time for discussion, friendly amendments and so on. In a Quick Consensus situation, the facilitator will have to make these sort of decisions at the start, often without having the time to negotiate them with the group.

**Handsignals:** there are a number of hand gestures that can speed up the process of decision making. For them to be effective, everyone in the group must be fluent with them, so agree them in advance! You might want to minimise the number of handsignals you use – do you have time for 'Technical Points' or 'Process Points' or any of the many other handsignals in common use in activist circles? The essential few seem to be:
- 1 finger raised - "I'd like to speak"
- 2 fingers raised - "I've got something immediately relevant to say"
- Hands waving with fingers upwards (someitmes called 'silent applause' or 'twinkling') –"I support the idea currently being discussed", "I agree"
- Fist - "I block this proposal"

✭**Groundrules:** if you chose to use them, you'll need to agree groundrules in advance and ensure everyone understands them. You might like to consider:
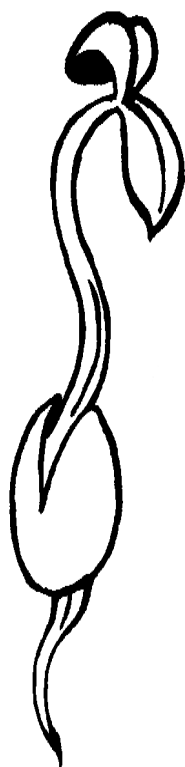
- *Active agreement* – consciously participating in the decision, and showing agreement (using handsignals or whatever) – if you're not getting active agreement, you need to ask "is there really any energy for this idea?"
- *One voice at a time* – avoids discussion descending into chaos. Handsignals can help structure this
- *All voices heard* – acknowledging that everyone is valuable and should have the chance to speak if they have a relevant point. Helps cut down on domination by one or two people.
- *Work towards agreement* – reminds everyone to suspend their own agenda and work together

Your group might have any number of other pre-agreed conventions that define the limits of the actions that you're prepared to take. As facilitator you can draw people's attention back to the groundrules whenever discussion is getting bogged down, or being dominated by a few individuals.

✭**Go-rounds:** a classic facilitation tool where everyone is given the chance to speak on a topic, in turn, with no interruption. In a Quick Consensus setting Go-rounds need to be short and focused. Remind your group of the no interruption convention and be clear on how long people can talk for (e.g. 30 seconds each, one short sentence). It can help to go first yourself to set the tone and the pace. If people ramble on, you'll need to be firm. In a 30 seconds each Go-round, one person taking 2 minutes can mean three other don't get to speak!

✭**Throwing back to the group:** facilitating Quick Consensus can put you under more pressure than facilitating any other meeting. Remember though you don't have to make all the decisions, and it's not desirable for you to do so. When in doubt throw the responsibility back to the group and ask for active agreement....."Is everyone happy with that proposal?".... "is that really a block or just a stand aside?".... "I don't feel that we can make this decision in the time we've got. Are people happy if we withdraw from the action and have a longer meeting?" or whatever.

✭**Restatement:** throughout Quick Consensus it's essential that the whole group is clear on what's happening. One way to achieve this is to pause often to restate the proposal, the amendment, or where you are at in the process, to ensure the group has that clarity. When you restate it's important to be brief and clear. You might need to summarise someone else's rambling contribution in a few simple words to achieve clarity. You should also be listening to what's being implied in people's contribution. Get to the heart of what they're saying..."You seem to be saying that you agree with the proposal, but I hear some hesitation in your voice. Is that right?".

## For more briefings on grassroots activism, and to find out about training workshops look at our website:
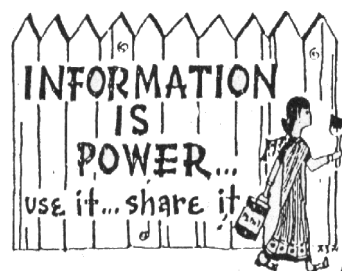
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