Best Practice: Collaborative Decision Rule Options

Summary

Consensus is the standard decision rule for collaborative groups. In this best practice, we explain consensus, and share other decision rule examples for your collaborative group to consider.

Keys to Success

- Strive to achieve consensus.
- If needed, create a decision rule that better meets the group's needs.
- Adopt the new rule with full consensus; ensure there's total agreement and understanding.

"To me, it makes more sense to seek unanimity, and then, if necessary, to settle for overwhelming agreement once every effort has been made to resolve differences creatively."
- Lawrence Susskind, The Consensus Building Institute ("The Consensus Building Approach")

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Consensus will always be the highest standard for collaborative decision rules. However, there are other options that your group may consider. This best practice highlights five different collaborative decision rules:

1. **Consensus**
2. **Supermajority after attempts at consensus**
3. **Consensus, with rules for proposed alternatives**
4. **Supermajority vote**
5. **Final Decision made by Executive Committee**

In 2016 the San Gabriel Mountains Community Collaborative, which initially chose to make all decisions by consensus, decided to evaluate decision rule options and create a new rule that would better suit the Collaborative's needs. After much discussion about the pros and cons of consensus, the Community Collaborative created a new "fallback rule" focusing on consensus, allowing the group to move forward after multiple attempts at finding full agreement. To date, the Collaborative has not used the new rule. Striving for consensus has proved to be a successful strategy. In 2016 the group developed consensus comments in response to the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument Draft Management Plan, and as a result of strong efforts to find the zone of agreement, the group reached full consensus on the final comments.

Members were proud to put in the work to reach consensus. As one member explained at the end of the meeting, "If people from such diverse perspectives can come together and find agreement, then this process is proof that we can find points of agreement among people that we didn't know before."

Consensus may not be for everyone, but it's still an excellent goal to strive toward. Articulating a process to handle the potential for non-consensus situations can be reassuring to group members, even if it is rarely used.

Links

- San Gabriel Mountains Community Collaborative
www.nationalforests.org/sangabrielmountains

Collaborative Decision Rule Options

Consensus

From the San Gabriel Mountains Community Collaborative Code of Conduct (SGMCC)

Strive for consensus. Decisions on recommendations will be made by consensus of all named Collaborative members. Consensus means the willingness to go along with the decision either in active support of it or in not opposing it.

    a. Tentative agreements may be made at meetings pending the opportunity for members to consult with their constituencies. This will be done on a timely basis.

    b. The commitment to work for consensus means that members will:

- Participate in the give and take of the process in a way that seeks to understand the interests of all;
- Generate proposals thought to be workable for all; and,
- Work together to reach consensus.

    c. If the group is in general agreement on an issue, dissenting members are responsible for proposing alternatives they believe might achieve group consensus.

Supermajority vote after several attempts at consensus

From the SGMCC Code of Conduct, amended January 2016

If the Community Collaborative cannot reach consensus after at least two attempts at the same meeting that include discussions with members present who cannot agree, another attempt at consensus will be made at a subsequent meeting. If that attempt at consensus is not successful, the Community Collaborative will vote on the issue. The issue will be approved if at least 90% of those Community Collaborative members present in the room agree.

When a vote is taken, names of members who do not approve will be recorded in the meeting record. If/when a proposal is made to the Forest Service or shared publically, language will be included to say, "The Community Collaborative reached super majority approval on this issue. Please see the meeting record dated [DATE] for details on dissenting votes."

Dissenting member(s) and their represented organizations shall have the opportunity to provide public comment, on the dissenting item, outside of the Community Collaborative's process.

Consensus, with timeframe rules for proposal of alternatives

Adapted from the Clearwater Basin Collaborative Operating Protocols

For the purposes of efficacy, such alternate proposals should be developed by the close of the meeting. If impossible, an extension will be granted to prepare alternate proposals by the next meeting, or by another timeframe determined by the Collaborative. If a member is not present during the formulation of a consensus recommendation, that member cannot subsequently block it. Skipping a meeting shall not be used as a blocking strategy. The principle is "play or pass."

Adopt a recommendation with 75% supermajority vote

Adapted from the Dinkey Collaborative Charter

If consensus cannot be reached after good faith efforts, the different recommendations on how to proceed will be documented, and members will use a 75% supermajority vote of members present at the meeting to decide which recommendation to adopt. Each member will have one vote. Every effort will be made to announce in advance whether any decisions are anticipated at a meeting, and members will be encouraged to attend, because without the benefit of hearing the Collaborative's discussion they will not be able to make a fully-informed decision. The different recommendations and the final vote will be recorded in the meeting record.

Ability to submit multiple options if consensus cannot be reached; executive committee makes final decision

Adapted from the Mokelumne Avoided Cost Analysis Work Group Charter

The Collaborative will work diligently to find common ground and seek consensus on issues. If the Collaborative cannot reach consensus on an issue, and has made a determined, good faith effort to fully explore the issues, understand the information available, and develop inclusive solutions, it may recommend two or more options to the executive committee. The executive committee will then decide which direction to go or recommendation to advance. The different recommendations will be included in the meeting record, as well as the executive committee's final decision.