
How Do You Help the Group Reach Consensus When They Simply Don't Agree?

The Problem:

Do you ever feel that you're herding a group of feisty cats instead of leading a meeting because your team members simply can't agree? Well, take comfort in knowing that this common problem plagues most meeting facilitators at one point or another. Indeed, if your group is disagreeing vehemently (but respectfully), that's a sign of healthy conflict...congratulations, you're likely on your way to some great ideas and solutions! Unfortunately as meeting facilitators, we often need to guide the group towards a consensus decision and oftentimes that just doesn't seem possible. The good news is that reaching a consensus decision does not mean that a two hour session must turn into a two week session...or worse, a real knock down drag out. Let's explore a few tips you can use the next time you're faced with this situation...

Consider these suggestions....

- Remember first that consensus does *NOT* mean everyone gets exactly what they want. It *does* mean that everyone can live with the decision and support it outside the team.
- Develop a ground rule with the team about how the group will make decisions BEFORE you need to make those decisions. If the group has already reached agreement on the decision process, making those subsequent decisions becomes much easier (and less emotionally charged). For example, if the group has already agreed on the decision criteria and selection process before initiating the discussion of which employee gets the "Employee of the Year" award, this decision suddenly becomes much easier.
- When you get bogged down in disagreement, separate areas of agreement and disagreement. Clearly identify and document areas of agreement to continue to move the group forward. For areas of disagreement, clarify the range of disagreement. (e.g. *Mike, it sounds like you and Beth both agree that the current cycle time of 5 days is too long. It sounds like the area of disagreement is around just how much that should be reduced. Mike proposes 2 days while Beth thinks 1 day is a better target, so we have a difference of opinion of 1 day. Is that correct?*)
- Sometimes we can't agree because we don't have enough information and we're operating based on poorly informed assumptions. Inviting key stakeholders to participate in the discussion (e.g. IT experts, members of the leadership team, HR or Finance subject matter experts, etc.) can often shed light on critical issues and help the group more easily expose the best alternative.
- If you have a tendency to think the group may be quibbling over trivial differences, consider suggesting that they conduct the remainder of the meeting standing (until a decision is reached). This technique is sometimes used as an "out of the box" method for encouraging brevity and a spirit of compromise.
- Use a facilitation technique that encourages collaborative decision making (e.g. affinity diagramming, dot voting, etc.) These techniques typically offer each participant a certain number of votes; then participants vote simultaneously and the option(s) receiving the highest numbers of votes overall is typically selected.
- If you sense that the disagreements may be driven by personality conflicts or other personal reasons, address those issues offline in a more private setting with the individuals involved.

If you have other tips on this challenge, please email us at tips@meetinggenie.com!

Next Month's Meeting Challenge:

"How Do You Effectively Manage Time During the Meeting?"