



# How to Gain True Consensus on Team Tasks and Decisions

*If human beings only use ten percent of their brain, then ten people have to be in a meeting to get whole-brain thinking. The problem is getting them all to agree.*

By Mac McIntire

Someone has postulated that most human beings only use ten percent of their brain. If that is true, then ten people have to be in a meeting to get whole-brain thinking. This explains the value of working in teams.

Everyone who has been in one of my management training sessions knows that I define a “team” as a group of individuals who “*step forward together*” to achieve a common goal. Teamwork requires individuals to pool information and consider different viewpoints to find solutions and make decisions. Seldom do all team members have the same view about an idea or issue. Polarized views, opposing opinions, and stubborn hold outs can often block the progress of a team. The success of a team relies heavily on how quickly the members can come to consensus on both what their goal is and how it will be achieved.

A significant portion of a team’s effectiveness and “health” is tied to how well the team members interact and make decisions. Too often the most powerful or outspoken member of a team dominates the team’s discussion and determines the team’s actions. Quieter or less assertive members are not heard, which negates the power of the collective thinking of the team.

What happens to the motivation of individuals whose ideas are not considered or whose suggestions are not adopted? How is team commitment impacted when team members are not personally vested? What is the impact when arguments and off-purpose behaviors disrupt the progress of the team?

Coming to *true* consensus among a group of individuals is hard to do. It takes great facilitative skills and effective process tools among the group to bring everyone to agreement. True consensus requires everyone to remain firmly grounded and completely committed to their consensus decision once the team discussion has ended.

Unfortunately, I’ve found that consensus in many companies is only consensus until everyone leaves the room. Once people get back into their work area or start to ponder the team’s decision outside the team room, some members tend to question the team’s decision and their commitment to it. The key, therefore, to achieving consensus is not just getting it, but also making sure it sticks once it is reached.

## Definition of Consensus

As I facilitate groups I find there are several misconceptions regarding what constitutes a consensus decision. Some people believe consensus is when everyone in the group is in agreement with an idea or proposal. This, of course, is not consensus. A decision that everyone agrees to is *unanimous*; which is better than consensus. Team commitment to a decision is seldom questioned when everyone on the team is in unanimous agreement.

Other people I’ve encountered have the misconception that consensus is achieved when the team votes on a proposal and the idea that gets the most votes wins. *Majority* rule is never consensus. Majority rule is where the

dominant majority overrules the less convincing minority.

The problem with majority rule is the minority. Whenever the majority rules; someone is left out. And those who are left out seldom step forward with the rest of the team. Majority rule is not an effective group decision making method for a team.

Still others believe consensus is achieved when members of the team agree to compromise in order to get everyone’s buy-in. *Compromise* is not consensus either. Members on a team may have to compromise to come to consensus, but consensus does not necessarily require compromise. In fact, sometimes compromised decisions can be the worst possible decisions. Compromise usually means everyone had to lose something in order to win. But a lose-lose situation seldom is a win-win for the team.

So what is team consensus?

A consensus decision is an idea that results from the full input of all team members. Sometimes one suggestion is universally accepted as best, and sometimes the decision is a combination of the thoughts of several individuals. Consensus does not necessarily mean the decision is everyone’s first choice.

*Consensus* is defined as . . .

**A decision or position reflecting the collective thinking of the team that all members participated in developing, understand fully, believe is workable, can live with, and will actively support.**

To reach consensus, every team member must express themselves

and participate fully in the discussion. Each member should listen to and respect the input of others and remain open-minded. Disagreements need to be confronted and explored until every idea is out on the table and an acceptable solution is found. Everyone must feel they were heard and their viewpoint considered when making collective decisions.

### **Pseudo-Consensus**

True consensus cannot be reached until everyone on the team clearly understands what they are agreeing to. Pseudo-consensus – where people agree in the room and then disagree later – occurs when people think of something outside of the team room that was not understood or addressed during the team discussion. Team's need to take the time during the team meeting to ensure everyone is fully onboard before declaring consensus has been achieved.

Team members seldom accept a proposal that they feel is unworkable. Before consenting to an idea or solution people test the proposal in their mind to assess its viability. To achieve true consensus the team must work together to come up with decisions that everyone feels are feasible. If someone feels the proposed idea won't work, the team should discuss how to make it work or come up with alternative solutions.

It is possible, however, to achieve consensus even if someone on the team feels a proposed solution won't work. This happens when someone – usually a lone holdout – cannot justify their hesitation to consent with valid proof that the proposed decision is wrong. Accepting the possibility that the majority of the group may be right, and they may be wrong, the individual agrees to give their consensus to the group.

Please note that this constitutes consensus – and not majority rule – only if the last two elements of the definition of consensus apply. The hesitant individual must be

able to *live with* the decision and *actively support* it. If they cannot live with it or actively support it, the team discussion must continue until real consensus is achieved.

### **True Test of Consensus**

These last two elements of consensus are the true tests of the team's buy-in. Can everyone on the team live with the decision and will they actively support it? If any team member feels they cannot live with the implications and consequences of the team's decision, the proposal must be addressed until everyone can. Actively supporting a decision means everyone on the team will put their full energy and effort into ensuring the team's decision is carried out as designed. Half-hearted or disgruntled support is never acceptable on a team. Real consensus requires real commitment.

Consensus decision-making often requires more time and skilled facilitation to discuss the ideas and issues fully. Teams should not expect quick consensus on every issue. Failure to achieve true consensus usually can be traced back to the team's failure around one or more of the consensus definition elements. For example, the team may have ignored the introverted or quiet members of the group and failed to solicit the collective thinking of the entire team. Or the team may not have explored the ideas fully enough for everyone to clearly understand what was being proposed. Maybe the team ran roughshod over someone who felt the idea was not workable. Perhaps someone on the team placated, giving in rather than fighting for what they believed was a better solution. Many factors contribute to a team's failure to achieve true consensus.

### **Consensus Isn't Always Necessary**

During the early stages of a team's development the team

should decide where consensus support is absolutely essential to the team's success. On less important issues it's often possible for the entire group to step forward together with a much simpler and faster decision making process than consensus. However, consensus decision making should always be used on team decisions regarding the team's charter, ground rules, project plans, completion dates and other critical elements impacting the success of the team's mission.

### **Avoiding Group Think**

As a team strives to achieve consensus there will be times when it is difficult to get everyone on board. Invariably there may be one obstinate, hard-headed holdout who refuses to consent to what others on the team agree to. Sometimes this individual is a true roadblock, but often the person is merely trying to keep the team from falling into *group think*.

Group think occurs when the team cannot come up with alternatives to their ideas or solutions. Group think is particularly prevalent when a solution or decision seems obvious. Devil's advocate dissidence among the team may be the very thing the team needs to keep the group from falling into the trap of collective blindness.

A perfect example of this is Galileo Galilei, the father of modern observational astronomy. Galileo's championing of Copernicanism – the view that the earth revolves around the sun – was controversial within his lifetime. The geocentric view that the sun revolved around the earth had been dominant since the time of Aristotle. The controversy engendered by Galileo's opposition to this view resulted in the Catholic Church's prohibiting his advocacy of heliocentrism. Galileo was brought before the Inquisition because of his views where he was forced to recant what he knew to be true. He spent the last years of his life under house arrest.

Like many lone voices on a team, Galileo was right. But more powerful voices in the group – in Galileo’s case, that of the ecclesiastical leaders – can dominate the team so strongly that anyone who actually agrees with the dissenting person quickly changes their position to avoid the “inquisition.” Group think often occurs when someone on the team is in a “power position” within the organization. Those on the team, not wishing to jeopardize their careers align themselves with the person who wields power over them. Sadly, consensus by decree or covert coercion is not real consensus.

### The Dissenter May Be Right

This is why a team must take great care to ensure all voices are heard. Sometimes one person can sway the views of many. I saw this happen when I was facilitating a team of 27 scientists. As you might guess, trying to get 27 scientists to agree on anything is extremely difficult. There were many knock-down drag-out fights among the team before the group accomplished its mission.

During one of those fights 26 scientists were in agreement on a particular issue. Only one team member disagreed. No matter what everyone else on the team said to try to sway the one holdout to the position of the group, he refused to budge. He believed he was right. He stood his ground and fought for his idea. And, eventually, many hours later, he convinced the entire team to change their vote and consent to his idea. In the end his solution proved to be the right choice.

### How to Reach Consensus

In that case the dissenting voice was correct. But sometimes there are dissenters within the team who are wrong and refuse to give in. They keep the team from moving forward because they stubbornly stand their ground. The nineteen techniques described

below show the progressive steps to gaining consensus on a team. The steps start out easy and become increasingly adamant as obstinate team members refuse to consent.

1. The first step to gaining consensus is to **make sure everyone understands the idea or issue fully**. As stated above, the primary reason why people cannot agree is because they don’t fully understand what is being discussed. A dissenting opinion can often be easily swayed with more information about the proposed action. Ask the dissenting team member what they don’t understand and then address each of their concerns.

2. To solidify the team’s agreement you should “*call for consensus*” on the issue being discussed. This means you ask the team members to signify their consent. The fastest and easiest way to do this is to **ask if anyone disagrees**. If no one disagrees, the team is in consensus. However, this step only works if the team has established a ground rule stating that if anyone disagrees they *must* speak up. Otherwise someone could quietly disagree, but be too afraid or introverted to voice their dissent. Passive aggressive individuals often use silence as a way of showing their disapproval. Therefore, if you use this technique, great care must be taken to ensure everyone on the team truly does agree.

3. If there is concern that someone might be silently disagreeing without speaking up, you should **visualize the team members’ positions**. Call for a visual vote to see where people stand. I’ve found the best way to do this is with thumbs. If a person agrees with the idea or proposal they should indicate their sanction with a thumb up signal. If a person disagrees with the idea being presented they should give it the thumbs down. And if a person is not sure whether they agree or disagree they should indicate their

waffling with a sideways thumb. Now you can see where everyone stands.

4. Once everyone’s position has been identified, **ask the minority if they can live with the decision of the majority**. The purpose of this step is *not* majority rules but, rather, to speed up the process if dissenting members can actually live with the majority’s decision and will actively support it. It’s amazing how many people can easily accept the opinions of others when merely asked if they can do so. Minority members need to decide whether the proposal is significant enough to adamantly oppose it, or whether they can easily “live with” and “actively support” it so the team can move forward.

5. If any member with an opposing or waffling view cannot live with the majority’s position, **always start with the majority first** when opening up the issue for discussion. There is a strong possibility that the majority is right. If this is true, then a few additional explanations from the majority may easily sway the minority opinion and get opposing members to consent.

6. After allowing a few comments from the majority, **ask if any of the dissenters have been swayed**. If everyone’s thumb is now up, you now have the consensus of the group. If not, continue the discussion while continuing to ask if anyone has been swayed throughout the discussion.

7. If anyone on the team has not been swayed by the majority’s explanation, **get the opposing opinion** (those whose thumb was down) before hearing from the wafflers. Wafflers usually are swayed either by the thumbs up or thumbs down arguments. Allow the team to discuss the issue in a point and counter point fashion. Wafflers should also participate in the

discussion if they have points to add to either side of the discussion.

8. Ask the team members to **indicate when they have been swayed** by showing the changed position of their thumb when they are swayed. When all thumbs are either up or down, you have consensus. Always keep in mind that consensus is when everyone on the team can *live with the decision* and *will actively support it*. They do not have to agree.

9. If someone on the team is having a hard time agreeing to something that everyone else seems to willingly accept, **ask if they conceptually agree** with the proposal. Sometimes a person may agree with the concept, but not with the particulars of an idea. In such cases they may appear to be in complete disagreement when, in reality, they are only stuck on a few minor points. Consequently, by getting them to agree conceptually (or in theory) first, you then can work out the kinks of the minor sticking points.

10. Another technique similar to the one above is to **determine how close the person is to agreement**. Ask the dissenter to state in a percentage how close they are to agreeing to the proposal. Someone who is “90% there” will be a lot easier to sway than someone who is “not even close – maybe 10%.” Usually the person who is close to agreement can be easily swayed by merely asking them what they need in order to give their 100% support. On the other hand, it may take a great deal of discussion or a revamping of the proposal to sway the person who is far from giving their consensus.

11. Another way to sway dissenters is to **agree on the separate parts of the proposal**. This is what I call “chunking down the issue.” The purpose of this technique is to separate out the various parts of the proposal to see which pieces a dissenter agrees

with and which pieces they oppose. Quite often a team member appears to be in disagreement with an entire proposal when they really are only in disagreement with a specific part of it. For example, they may agree with points A, B, D and E; but be in complete disagreement with point C. In this case they actually are “80% there, yet seem to be in complete disagreement because no one chunked down the issue.

12. Sometimes a consensus discussion bogs down because people disagree with a step that comes much later in the process. Fearing a future roadblock, they feel the need to oppose the idea now. For example, they argue against a proposal because they feel it will be hard to implement. Rather than agreeing that the proposal is the right thing to do, they worry about how hard it will be to implement the decision even though it's right, therefore they try to kill what is right because of their assumption of the difficult road ahead. In cases where there is a sequential step-by-step roadmap to follow, **discuss and agree on the steps of the proposal in order**. Only allow discussion about one step at a time and get consensus at each step. Don't worry about step three until you get to step two. Don't let the team take a detour on the right road just because they feel there may be bumps ahead.

13. **Make the right decision first**. Sometimes team members know a decision is right, but they fear the consequences of the decision. Once when I was facilitating a team discussing a significant reorganization within the company, it became obvious during the discussion that consensus on the proposal being discussed would require everyone in the room to relocate to a different state. Not wanting to uproot their families, some members on the team vehemently argued against the proposal. But it soon became obvious that their dissent was for personal reasons,

not because they thought the decision was wrong for the business. Consequently, I had to get them to set aside their personal objections and make the right decision first. Afterwards we would discuss how to minimize the impact that decision would have on them personally.

14. If, after using all of the techniques listed above, the team cannot come to agreement, you may need to **table the decision temporarily**. This gives people time to think about the proposal and weigh out the points and counter-points in their minds in a less heated setting. However, be sure to come back to the issue at the first opportunity, typically the very next time the team meets together.

15. If someone continues to hold out with a dissenting view after everyone else on the team is fully convinced a proposal is right, there are only two reasons why they cannot give their consensus. They either have a **valid or personal** reason for not agreeing with the majority decision.

A “valid” reason is any explanation that validates the person's opposition in the minds of the rest of the members of the team so they, too, agree with the dissenter's point of view. The purpose of this technique is to allow the dissenter to sway the rest of the team over to their position by presenting reasonable and rational arguments regarding their opposition until the other members see the validity of that position. If they cannot sway the rest of the team with their arguments, then the dissenter's view is not “valid.” The validity of the team member's viewpoint is determined by the other members of the group. They decide what is valid and what isn't by whether or not they have been swayed by the argument.

When the dissenter lacks a valid reason for their opposition, there

resistance is for “personal” reasons. Invariably they are arguing against the proposal because of how it will impact them personally. In most cases, personal reasons are not valid, and therefore should not keep the team from making the right decision. Personal dissenters should set their personal feelings aside and make the right decision for the team.

There are times, however, when someone’s personal reasons could be valid if they revealed them to the group. Unfortunately, many team members hide their personal reasons (hidden agenda) because they fear the team’s reaction if their personal concerns were made known. A perfect example of this is a team member who has been given implicit instructions by their boss to oppose the team’s idea and directs the employee not to disclose it to the team. The employee now has a personal (career) reason not to agree with the team, but fears exposing that reason to the team and incurring the wrath of his or her boss for violating confidentiality. The best approach to this situation is to be honest with the team, make the right decision, and then use the team to help determine how best to handle the boss.

16. If a member continues to be a lone holdout, **have the team leader or team sponsor meet with the member**. The team leader should meet with the team member to discuss his or her opposition. Sometimes things come out in a one-on-one discussion that won’t come out in the group setting. If the team leader cannot get through to the member, then the person who formed the team (the team sponsor) should meet with the member to try to remove the roadblock.

17. If a person continues to resist and offers no valid reason for doing so, **demand their consensus**. Tell them they *must* agree with the consensus of the team and *actively*

*support it*. If they have no valid reason for their opposition they must agree with the team if they want to be a member of the team.

18. If they refuse to give their consensus, **ask them to withdraw from the team**. The team cannot be held back from accomplishing their mission by one stubborn member. That person must leave the team if he or she can neither sway the team nor be swayed by the team.

19. Finally, if an obstinate member refuses to withdraw from the team, **ask the team Sponsor to remove a non-valid dissenter from the team**. The person who formed the team is the only person who can remove a member from the team. Unfortunately, sometimes the only way to get a team back on track is to remove the resisting member who is holding the team back.

Each of the steps outlined above are designed to get the team to true consensus. Once the team has come to agreement, I like to anchor the consensus by declaring: “So let it be written; so let it be done.” This signifies that, unless something in the world dramatically changes to alter the team’s decision, the team should stay true to its consensus and carry out their decision exactly as planned. §

*Innovative Management Group* is renowned for our team facilitation skills. We know how to drive groups to consensus decisions on tough issues. We also know how to resolve conflict among struggling teams. We offer several results-oriented team building workshops that help teams stay focused on accomplishing their assigned tasks.

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