




## Understanding Consensus as an Essential Element of Shared Leadership

Before a school leader can facilitate consensus-building conversations and activities, they must understand the concept of shared leadership and why consensus-based decision-making is integral to it.<sup>1</sup> While shared leadership can operate under several different models, it generally expands decision-making authority beyond the principal and any assistant principals to include other school community members such as teachers, support staff (e.g., school psychologists, social workers), parents/guardians, and even students.<sup>2</sup> Shared leadership expands decision-making powers beyond the formal leaders of a given school and encourages collaborative discussion and the free exchange of ideas between contributing community members so that a given school reaches the best decisions for its students, families, and staff.<sup>3</sup>

### Three Dimensions of Shared Leadership

| DIMENSION  | DESCRIPTION   |
|--|---|
| <br><b>Purpose</b>  | School leadership teams understand and appreciate the priorities and goals of the school and ensure that the full team focuses on them. |
| <br><b>Support</b> | School leadership teams support, encourage, and affirm one another and recognize individual and team successes.                         |
| <br><b>Voice</b>   | Individual school leadership team members offer their own input and thoughtfully and respectfully listen to the viewpoints of others.   |

Source: CQ Net<sup>4</sup>

**Consensus decisions—essential to shared leadership—are those which all individuals participating in the decision-making process are willing to accept (or at least, not openly combat and object to) even if they believe a different decision is ultimately the better course of action.**<sup>5</sup> Achieving consensus does not mean attaining *unanimous agreement* that a given decision is the best one and, instead, emphasizes the process of sharing ideas, exploring different perspectives and options, and pursuing actions that account for diversity of ideas and viewpoints.<sup>6</sup> However, consensus decisions do require *unanimous consent* from all team members, as individual leaders should retain the ability to block a decision from proceeding should they harbor irreconcilable objections or believe that the proposed action may cause harm to the school community.<sup>7</sup>

### The Nature of Shared Leadership

Great leadership is at the heart of every high-quality public school. Within schools, leadership is most effective when it is distributed among a team of individuals with different skillsets and experiences but a shared mission to spark and sustain a schoolwide culture of learning and improved outcomes for students. These types of instructional leadership teams can drive positive change throughout a given school community.

Source: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation<sup>8</sup>

## Establishing Processes to Facilitate Consensus Decisions

Given the innate collaboration required for and the importance of team-based decision-making to shared leadership, it is important that school leaders understand and seek consensus on major decisions (i.e., those focusing on major policy shifts, programming changes, or personnel matters) and set procedures and parameters by which consensus will be sought.<sup>9</sup> Through consensus, school leadership teams reach an agreement on subsequent actions in response to a given situation or challenge that are mutually acceptable to all team members and which best address the issues currently necessitating a response.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, consensus is vital so that all important decisions about school programs, policies, and operations have broad support and cooperation from leaders, implementing stakeholders, and impacted community members.<sup>11</sup>

To start, school leaders should establish working and social conditions to set a foundation for consensus-building.<sup>12</sup> This includes identifying constituencies that should be represented on the school leadership team, offering representatives of those constituencies membership on the team,

and building and maintaining cordial, productive, and collaborative relationships between team members.<sup>13</sup> It also means constructing leadership teams with members who are willing to:<sup>14</sup>

- Agree on core values regarding their purpose as team and service to the school community;
- Establish norms to govern collaborative discussions and navigate disagreements;
- Advocate for their own views and the priorities of those constituencies they represent;
- Understand the priorities of team members and the constituencies they represent; and
- Be patient in pursuing consensus, and trust that the process will work.

Essentially, school leaders should promote positive social dynamics among their teams and create safe spaces for critical dialogue around issues.<sup>16</sup> School leaders should consistently work to build comradery within their teams via ongoing discussions about school programs and operations and regular check-ins regarding team members’ perspectives on school performance—both within and outside of the context of consensus-based decision-making.<sup>17</sup> Such dynamics will be integral as team members propose solutions to specific situations, weigh the benefits and consequences of different approaches, and work toward decisions that all members can accept.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, school leaders should collaborate with their team to establish procedures for consensus decision-making and norms for engaging in corresponding discussion.<sup>19</sup> Such procedures and norms should include defining what level of agreement constitutes consensus for your team, determining how team members will present their ideas and discuss others (e.g., with respect, assuming the best intentions), and specifying if any veto mechanisms will be put in place to block consensus or trigger automatic revisions of proposed actions.<sup>20</sup>

## Reflection Questions to Consider When Setting Consensus-Building Procedures

- ❓ How are decisions currently made at the school? Is a consensus model used?
- ❓ Are systems in place to ensure all constituencies are represented in the decision-making process?
- ❓ What decisions are made by school leadership teams? What decisions are made by principals?
- ❓ How do school leaders solicit input from the school community before making decisions?
- ❓ How do school leaders communicate about decisions after they are made?
- ❓ What happens when members of a school leadership team disagree with a decision?
- ❓ What happens when one or more constituencies within the school community disagree with a decision?

Source: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, Stanford University<sup>15</sup>

## Unifying Principles for Consensus-Based Processes

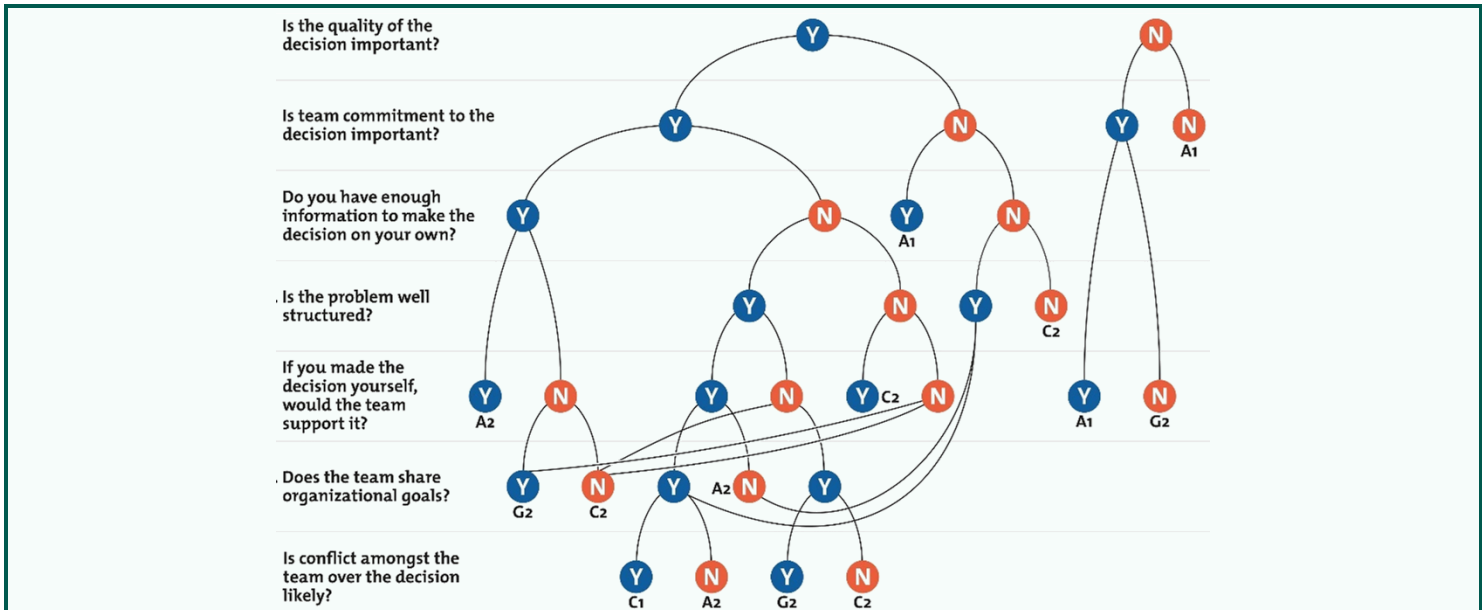
| PRINCIPLE                                 | DESCRIPTION  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Inclusive and Participatory</b></p> | In a consensus process, all group members are included and encouraged to participate. Further, the needs of all constituencies affected by a decision are included in the deliberations. As such, the decision-making group should include representative of impacted constituencies—or at the very least, individuals familiar with the needs and priorities of impacted constituencies.  |
| <p><b>Agreement-Seeking</b></p>           | Consensus decision-making is a process that seeks widespread or full agreement. Groups using this process commit themselves to the goal of generating as much agreement as possible. Different groups may have different decision rules (i.e., standards for how much agreement is necessary to finalize a decision). Regardless of the ultimate decision rule, however, all groups using a consensus process strive for the full agreement of all participants. |
| <p><b>Process-Oriented</b></p>            | Consensus highlights the process of making decisions, not just the result. In a consensus process, all participants are respected, and their contributions are welcome. Power leveraging, adversarial positioning, and group manipulation tactics are discouraged by the facilitator or the structure of the discussion. The way the decision is made is as important as the decision.   |
| <p><b>Collaborative</b></p>               | Consensus decision-making is collaborative. All participants contribute to a shared proposal and shape it into a decision that meets the concerns of group members to the extent possible. Consensus is distinctly different from an adversarial process wherein participants compete for support and the concerns of the “losing” parties are not addressed by the “winning” proposal.  |

| PRINCIPLE                           | DESCRIPTION  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <p><b>Relationship-Building</b></p> | <p>Consensus decision-making has an over-arching goal of building group relationships through discussion. The effort to gain widespread agreement and include all perspectives is intended to support positive relationships between consensus participants. The resulting shared ownership of decisions and increased group cohesion can make implementation of decisions and future consensus discussions proceed in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.</p>     |
| <p><b>Whole Group Thinking</b></p>  | <p>Consensus decision-making values individuals' thinking about the good of the whole group. Participants are encouraged to voice their personal perspectives fully so that the group benefits from hearing all points of view. Participants are also expected to pay attention to the needs of the whole group. Ultimately, in consensus, personal preferences are less important than a broader understanding of how to work together to help the group succeed.</p> |

Source: Consensus Decision-Making<sup>21</sup>

More specifically, the school leadership team must select a decision-making model and outline required steps that the team will complete within each application of the model and each iteration of consensus decision-making.<sup>22</sup> The purpose of such actions is to set rules and guidelines by which school leadership teams can discuss and deliberate potential options when making important decisions that will impact their school community and its various constituents.<sup>23</sup> For example, school leaders may use a hybrid model, wherein they make some decisions on their own, consult their team for others, and seek consensus in some cases—similar to the [Vroom-Yetton Decision Model](#) presented below.<sup>24</sup> Comparatively, school leadership teams may use the [4-step](#) or [7-step consensus decision-making processes](#) described on the next page.<sup>25</sup>

Decision-Making Process Sample: The Vroom-Yetton Decision Model

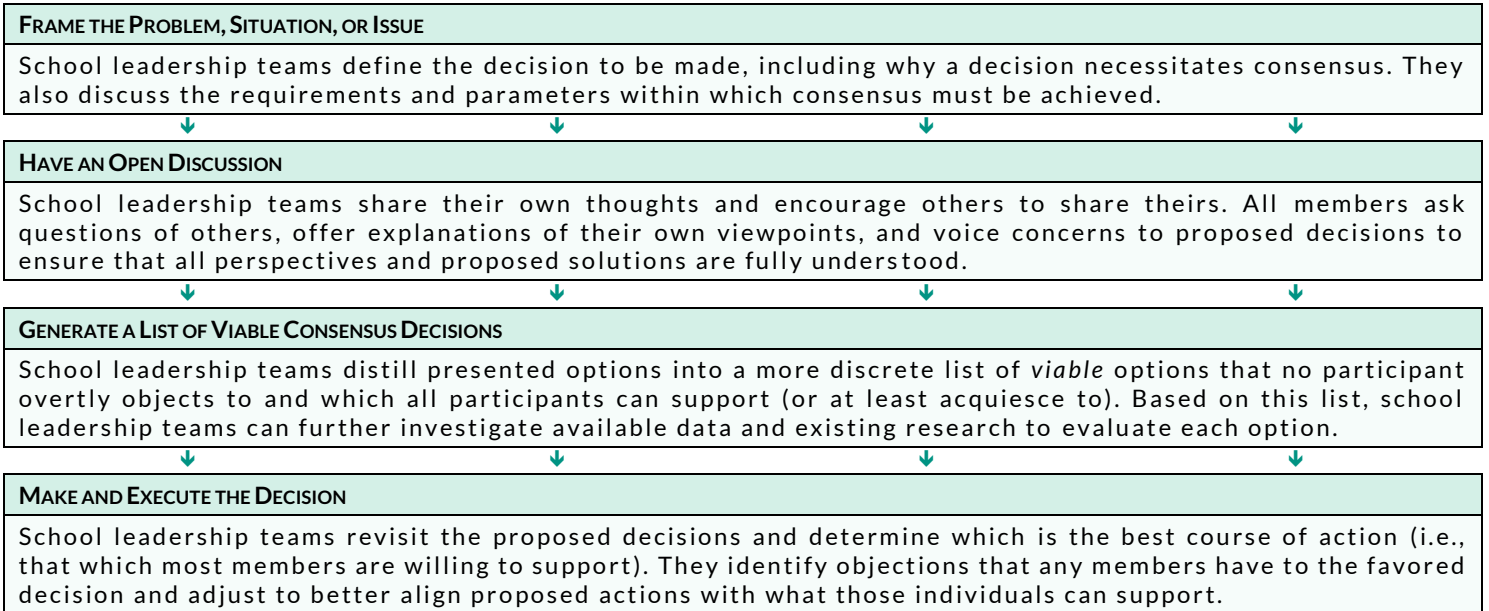


**Code Key**

- A1: School leaders use the information they already have to make the decision, without requiring further input.
- A2: School leaders consult their team to obtain specific information and then make the final decision.
- C1: School leaders inform their team of the situation and ask for opinions individually—but do not bring the group together for a discussion. They make the final decision.
- C2: School leaders get their team together for a group discussion about the issue to seek suggestions but still make the final decision themselves.
- G2: School leaders work with their team to reach a group consensus. Their role is mostly facilitative, and school leaders help team members to reach a decision that they all agree on.

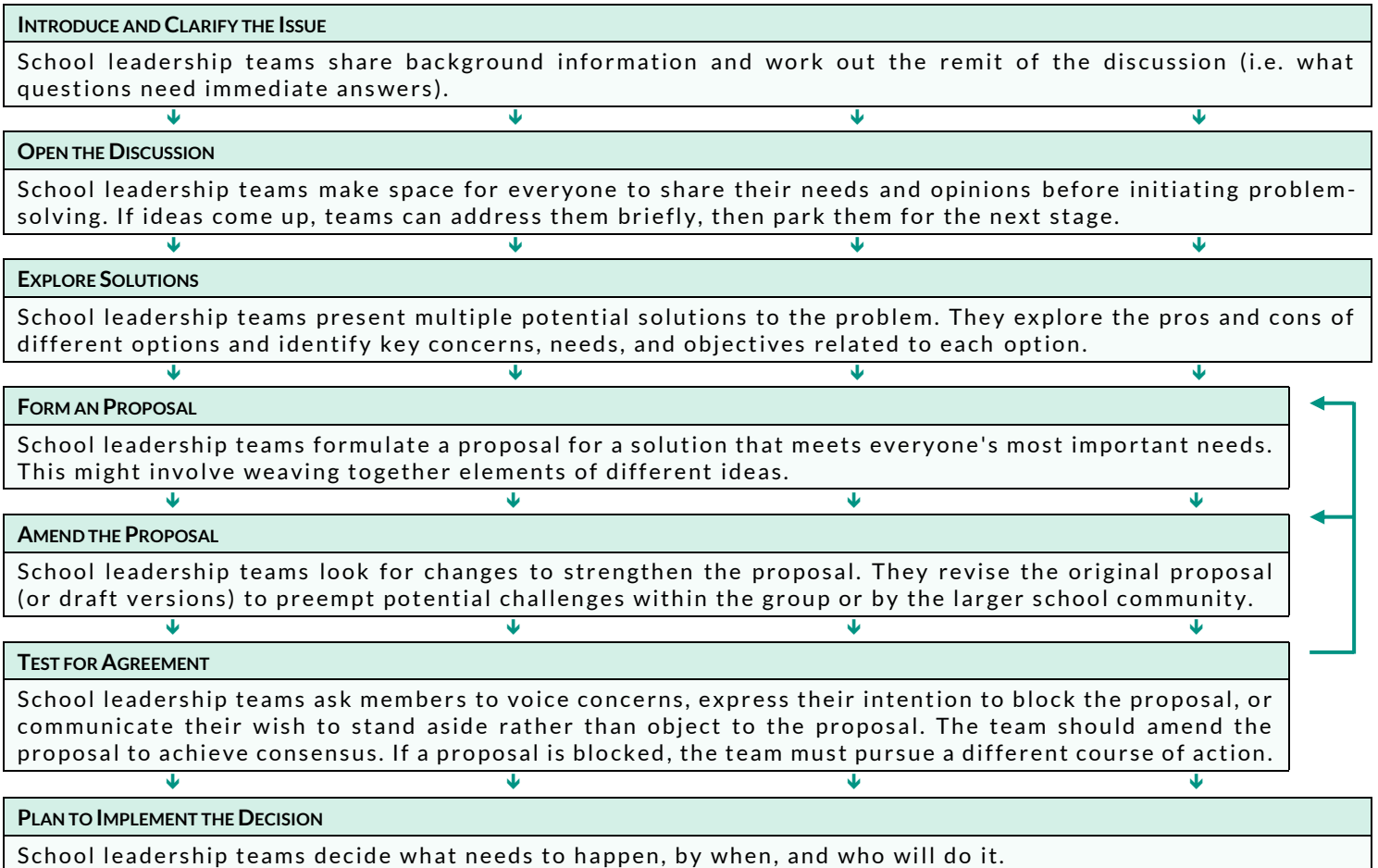
Source: MindTools<sup>26</sup>

## Decision-Making Process Sample: 4-Step Consensus Decision-Making



Source: Office of Human Resource Services, University of Florida<sup>27</sup>

## Decision-Making Process Sample: 7-Step Consensus Decision-Making



Source: Seeds for Change<sup>28</sup>

## Managing In-Progress Conversations for Consensus

Once a process has been established for executing consensus-focused conversations, school leaders and their teams must successfully participate in and manage those conversations.<sup>29</sup> This means holding all participants accountable to executing the process and adhering to established norms and rules for discussion.<sup>30</sup> For example, school leaders and other members of their team may have agreed to the norm of respecting one another’s talking space and time. Under such a norm, the team would need to commit to behaviors such as not interrupting one another, responding to colleagues in a considerate manner, and disagreeing based on facts and reasonable hypotheses.<sup>31</sup>

Most importantly, however, **school leaders should seek to guide all team members to contribute to the process while also helping the larger team navigate disagreements and barriers inhibiting achievement of consensus.**<sup>32</sup> Consequently, school leaders and other members of the leadership team must follow the trajectory of conversation around presented challenges and situations and the proposed solutions to determine what level of agreement exists among the group, as well as the nature and intensity of disagreements that may exist.<sup>33</sup> When approaching conflict and disagreement within the team, school leaders should have a clear strategy to ensure a productive outcome, such as the “5 Cs” approach:<sup>34</sup>

- *Carefully listen:* School leaders and their teams should listen carefully and closely to ideas and opinions expressed by others. This helps to ensure an accurate understanding of all proposals and the motivations behind them. It also validates the ideas of the full group membership as worthy of consideration and discussion.
- *Considerately look at the situation:* School leaders and their teams should maintain an openness to the ideas of others rather than standing rigidly by their own. The merits and challenges of all presented solutions should be weighed against one’s own preferred solution so that the best outcomes for the school community are achieved.
- *Calmly discuss the conflicting perspectives:* School leaders and their teams should remain calm in their expression and collected in how they present their ideas and respond to others. Emotions should be managed constructively to avoid the likelihood of personal attacks or of a discussion descending into incivility.
- *Conscientiously look at the facts:* School leaders and their teams should examine available data and carefully consider the rationales behind presented proposals before committing to a preferred solution or developing a consensus that includes facets of multiple proposals. This also means that leadership teams should ask critical questions about different proposals’ potential impacts and costs to weigh and rank the benefits and challenges associated with each.
- *Cooperatively work together:* Regardless of disagreement or conflict, school leaders and their teams should remain committed to productive collaboration with one another and maintain a focus on common goals. This will help make the consensus-building process smoother than if participants viewed one another as adversaries.

### Additional Strategies to Facilitate Consensus-Building

| STRATEGY   | WHEN TO USE   | WHY IT WORKS   |
|--|---|--|
| School leaders help team members focus on big ideas rather than on specific details when considering proposals for action. | School leaders can apply this strategy when team members focus on specific details surrounding an issue and lose sight of their common purpose as a result.         | Teams often disagree or fall apart because they get hung up on specific details, and this strategy brings the group discussion focus back to a more general level. |
| School leaders float a trial balloon to encourage brainstorming about the pros and cons of various alternatives.           | School leaders can apply this strategy when a new idea is introduced and they want the team to focus on the positives of the idea before considering the negatives. | Some people greet almost any new idea with negative comments. Team members may stop bringing up new ideas because of their fear of having them shot down.          |

| STRATEGY  | WHEN TO USE   | WHY IT WORKS  |
|---|---|---|
| School leaders clarify what team members who do not support a proposal would need in order to support it.   | School leaders can apply this strategy when they sense that the team is approaching consensus, but there is still resistance from a small number of people. | The information that opponents provide is used to modify the proposal in such a way that everyone can accept it.  |
| School leaders encourage team members to listen to one another's ideas with respect, empathy, and openness, continuing to modify a proposal until all members' key needs are met. | School leaders can apply this strategy when team members seem to have difficulty understanding the needs or objections of others.                           | For team members to work well together and make appropriate proposals, they must listen respectfully to each other's ideas and consider a whole range of ways of dealing with issues. |
| School leaders ask every team member to take a turn expressing their opinion about the idea or proposal being considered.   | School leaders can apply this strategy when a proposal has been generated and they want the team to share ideas about it.                                   | Hearing the views of each team member can uncover common agreements or potential areas of alignment.  |

Source: University of Colorado<sup>35</sup>

In cases where a given conflict or disagreement arises due to personality clashes, school leaders should recognize that every situation has its own background and social dynamics—preventing the application of a universal strategy or rule for mediation.<sup>36</sup> Instead, leaders should consider how to deploy their managerial and communication skills and existing group procedures and norms to maintain disagreeing team members' focus on the issues and the larger success of the school.<sup>37</sup> The key ideas are to acknowledge personality differences, ask those in conflict to recognize others' points of view, and emphasize the importance of teamwork.<sup>38</sup>

Relatedly, **school leaders must work to ensure that all voices are heard and that all team members participate in decision-making discussions** so that all decisions represent an actual consensus.<sup>39</sup> At the most basic level, this means school leaders explicitly assigning value to team members' insights and opinions (e.g., via public recognition of their strengths and qualifications, by personally telling team members that their opinion is valued), communicating the importance of full participation in consensus decision-making, and creating a safe team dynamic in which individual members feel comfortable speaking up.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, school leaders "should have a specific strategy and structure in place to encourage [team members] to share their thoughts and ideas" such as conducting a "round-robin" in which all discussion participants respond to a question or prompt or asking questions of team members who have not contributed equitably to a specific conversation.<sup>41</sup>

### Strategies to Facilitate Participation in Conversations for Consensus

- Review the issue or challenge at the start of the session to orient participants to the nature of the discussion and the decision to be made
- Establish a ground rule at the start of the session that everyone participates and that it is important to hear everyone's ideas and opinions
- Limit presentation of your own opinions at the start and, instead, draw out participants' ideas
- Ask participants who are not contributing for their thoughts (e.g., "What do you think about this?")
- Ask people who have not contributed to play "devil's advocate" for an idea that has been presented
- Acknowledge contributions by thanking the person or by indicating in other ways that the contribution is helpful (e.g., "Very interesting..." or "That's a new way of looking at the problem.")
- Encourage participants to generate new ideas or approaches
- Encourage a healthy discussion of ideas
- Accept opposing points of view
- Assign individuals to summarize key discussion points at the end of the session

Source: American Stroke Association, American Heart Association<sup>42</sup>

## Communicating Decisions to Stakeholders






One final consideration regarding consensus decisions is how the school leadership team intends to frame their decisions and communicate them to the larger community of stakeholders.<sup>43</sup> Specifically, school leaders must determine:<sup>44</sup>

- **What are the key points or major messages they want to share when communicating the decision?** School leaders should outline these points ahead of time. If each member of a leadership team is communicating individually, creating a common list of key messages is even more important, especially as a message is delivered to different constituencies.
- **How is this decision connected to or in alignment with the school's strategic priorities, vision, mission, and values?** School leadership teams should make decisions that account for their organization's established priorities, mission, vision, and values. As such, leaders should clarify for stakeholders how a given decision aligns with long-term goals and what the community expects of the school.
- **Have we answered the "why?" to this decision?** Stakeholders need to understand why decisions are made, especially if there are obvious pros and cons to which different constituencies may latch. Too often leaders describe the what but never address the why. Knowing the reason behind a decision helps people hear, understand, and accept it.
- **Who will provide the communication?** While all school leadership team members may be called on to discuss or defend a decision, they should decide if one or more individuals will assume primary responsibility for communication.
- **How will it be communicated?** School leaders should consider the message, its implications, and the audience before automatically determining the approach. They likely will want to use multiple media and channels to communicate decisions, which may vary by audience.
- **When will it be communicated?** Ideally, communications will occur as close to the decision's finalization as possible (perhaps even before depending on the nature of a decision). This will support transparency and facilitate gathering of stakeholder feedback.
- **What will be the process to check for understanding and acceptance?** Communication is a two-way process. A complete communication plan makes sure that community members have gotten the message and that they understand it. To be most successful, leadership teams also need to create some sort of feedback mechanism or dialogue. In short, an email or memo may not be enough to confirm that everyone fully understands a decision, nor will it allow decision-makers to gauge community reaction to a decision.

Consequently, school leadership teams should outline and implement a clear plan of communication that explains the rationale behind their decisions and the intended or anticipated impacts of those decisions to various constituencies.<sup>45</sup> School community members need to understand what changes to expect and the motivation behind those changes if they are to support (or at least, accept) a decision.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, school leaders must anticipate the community response to major decisions—which should be somewhat predictable if various stakeholder constituencies' interests are adequately represented on the leadership team—so that they have a rational and constructive response to critical feedback and clear ideas on how to harness positive reactions into momentum for executing the decision.<sup>47</sup>

## Supplemental Resources

The following resources provide additional information for school leaders to explore related to consensus-building. These resources will support school leaders as they develop their understanding of consensus, implement procedures and structures to facilitate consensus-building discussion and activities, and communicate about consensus decisions to various constituencies within the wider school community.

| RESOURCE  | PUBLISHER   | DIRECT LINK*  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>A Practical Guide for Consensus-Based Decision Making</b> <sup>48</sup>  | Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement                       |    |
| <p><b>Description:</b> This guide covers a number of topics related to consensus and consensus-building. For example, it begins by defining consensus-based decision-making and describing the necessary conditions to implement a consensus-oriented decision-making process. The guide also addresses how to develop procedures to reach consensus decisions and how to facilitate team discussions focused on achieving consensus around a given challenge or situation.</p>   |   |   |
| <b>Community Tool Box: Chapter 16. Group Facilitation and Problem-Solving</b> <sup>49</sup>   | Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas |    |
| <p><b>Description:</b> This website provides information that will help school leaders conduct meetings and facilitate discussions in a number of areas, including for consensus decision-making. Chapter sections include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conducting effective meetings;</li> <li>2. Developing facilitation skills;</li> <li>3. Capturing what people say; and</li> <li>4. Techniques for leading group discussions.</li> </ol>  |   |   |
| <b>Consensus Home</b> <sup>50</sup>   | Consensus Decision-Making   |    |
| <p><b>Description:</b> This website provides a wide range of information and resources related to consensus decision-making. Website material includes video trainings about consensus, a library of articles addressing various facets of consensus, and listings of books and other websites with related content.</p>  |   |   |
| <b>In-Depth Guide: Consensus Decision-Making</b> <sup>51</sup>  | Seeds for Change  |    |
| <p><b>Description:</b> This guide provides descriptions about various facets of the consensus process and directions and suggestions for how to successfully complete the process. Covered topics include setting conditions to engage in consensus-building, tips for participating in consensus meetings, rules for reaching consensus, and common challenges that may be experienced within the process. The guide also details seven discrete stages of the consensus process, including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introducing and clarifying the issue;</li> <li>2. Opening out the discussion;</li> <li>3. Exploring ideas in a broad discussion;</li> <li>4. Forming a proposal;</li> <li>5. Amending the proposal;</li> <li>6. Testing for agreement; and</li> <li>7. Working out how to implement the decision.</li> </ol>  |   |   |
| <b>Overview of Multi-Stakeholder Consensus Building</b> <sup>52</sup>   | The Consensus Building Institute                                  |  |
| <p><b>Description:</b> This resource presents and describes six steps that users can complete to “structure and facilitate the process of multi-stakeholder, multi-issue negotiation” required for consensus-building. These steps include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identifying stakeholders, assessing their interests, capacities, and potential for reaching consensus-based agreements;</li> <li>2. Determining whether to proceed with a consensus building process, and starting the process with clear goals, ground rules, work plan and timetable;</li> <li>3. Using joint fact finding to resolve technical and factual questions and help the group focus on the development of feasible options;</li> <li>4. Managing the process of deliberation among those stakeholders to maximize the chances for reaching agreements that are technically sound and politically acceptable;</li> <li>5. Promoting consensus agreements where possible, and enabling near-consensus alternatives when full consensus is not possible; and</li> <li>6. Providing opportunities for stakeholders to revisit and revise their agreements as necessary during the implementation phase.</li> </ol> |   |   |

\* Click the embedded icon to access the corresponding resource. You must be using an electronic copy of this document and have an active internet connection on your device to access this feature.

Source: Multiple

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> [1] Muir, M. "Leveraging Shared Leadership Teams for Better Learning Initiatives." Association for Middle Level Education, October 2020. <https://www.amle.org/leveraging-shared-leadership-teams-for-better-learning-initiatives/> [2] Harris, A. "Distributed Leadership." Teacher Magazine, September 29, 2014. [https://www.teachermagazine.com/au\\_en/articles/distributed-leadership](https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/distributed-leadership)
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- <sup>3</sup> [1] Cherry, K. "The Democratic Style of Leadership." Verywell Mind, July 30, 2021. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-democratic-leadership-2795315> [2] "Shared Leadership." New York City Department of Health. pp. 1–2. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/dpho/race-to-justice-action-kit-shared-leadership.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> Figure adapted from: Towler, A. "Shared Leadership: Fundamentals, Benefits, and Implementation." CQ Net, December 12, 2019. <https://www.ckju.net/en/dossier/shared-leadership-fundamentals-benefits-and-implementation>
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- <sup>8</sup> Figure contents quoted verbatim, with minor adaptations, from: "4 Key Things to Know About Distributed Leadership." Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, May 27, 2017. <https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/news-and-insights/articles/4-key-things-to-know-about-distributed-leadership>
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- <sup>15</sup> Figure adapted from: "Distributed and Shared Leadership." Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, Stanford University. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/studentcenteredlearning/distributed-and-shared-leadership>

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