

# Reaching an Agreement (The Consensus Method)

(Decisions! Decisions!)

 <p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<p>To raise awareness of the power which an effective team can bring to any decision making process, through experiencing a consensus reaching exercise.</p>
 <p><b>Application</b></p>	<p>This session can be used with great effect at any stage of a team's development, but is most powerful when either a team has just formed, or when there have been significant changes of membership.</p> <p>It can also be a valuable 'warm up' exercise for an established team, just before engaging in a major decision making process. Refining the skills will almost certainly result in a better decision.</p>
 <p><b>What happens?</b></p>	<p>After an initial briefing, the participants complete an individual exercise, which injects them into an unusual decision taking situation.</p> <p>The team then forms and, through discussion, reaches a team consensus view on the answers provided individually.</p> <p>Finally the team reviews its performance, aided by comments from observers and the facilitator, comparison with an 'expert' rationale for the exercise and perhaps a video recording of the discussions.</p>
 <p><b>Resources</b></p>	<p><b>Overall time required: 2 hours.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 minutes for introduction and initial briefing</li> <li>• 15 minutes for participants to consider the task and arrive at individual scores, answers or ratings</li> <li>• 45 minutes for team discussion to arrive at an agreed collective view on the task</li> <li>• 50 minutes for debrief and feedback.</li> </ul> <p><b>Materials and resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flipchart Stands with Blank Pads, or a Whiteboard, with Marker Pens. Blue-Tack, etc.</li> <li>• Paper, Pens or Pencils for Participants</li> <li>• Sufficient copies of a consensus reaching exercise, together with the debriefing rationale. Exercise '<b>Cave Rescue</b>' is attached to this activity sheet</li> <li>• Handout: <b>Reaching a Consensus – Observer checklist</b></li> </ul>



## INTRODUCE THE SESSION

Few people will dispute that an effective team will generally produce better decisions and results than individuals, and this session is designed to give a measurable result.

The emphasis is on the word 'effective', which does not describe a group of individuals who are simply thrown together for administrative or operational convenience and termed a 'team'.

For a team to be effective, a number of key elements need to be in place; for example, a shared vision of the future and common goals. These and other important items are the subject of complementary modules.

There are a number of different approaches a team can adopt when decisions need to be taken. The decision could be taken by the leader alone, or in consultation with a small, decision making group.

Alternatively the majority view could prevail. Whilst all these methods are relatively fast, and may help you to arrive at a good answer, they suffer from two disadvantages:

- ***By their very nature, they do not use the full range of knowledge and skill available within the team.***
- ***Any decision does not automatically receive the full support of all team members.***

So what should a team aim for? Ideally they should aim to reach a decision which has unanimous support, even though individual team members may have preferred some other result. This concept of widespread or general agreement is also known as '**consensus**'.

Reaching a consensus view will generally result in a better decision, and also one which most people can readily commit to. However, it does take more time than simply imposing the majority view.

Of course, time pressures are always present, and it may be tempting to say 'We haven't got time to reach consensus this time, but we'll aim to next time.' If this becomes the standard way of working, it may be worth questioning why there never seems to be the time to take a more balanced view.

Ask your team for any examples they can give of decisions reached quickly without any attempt to reach a consensus, and which clearly resulted in wasted effort.

## **THE INDIVIDUAL TASK (EXERCISE CAVE RESCUE)**

Outline the way the session is going to be run. There will be three main elements:

1. Initially, your team will consider an unusual problem individually, and make certain decisions.
2. Then, working together, they will agree a team view.
3. Finally, they will review their performance as a team, and decide how their combined decision-taking ability could be improved.

***It should be noted that there is no right or wrong answer to the exercise. You should try not to give this away, but you should stress the importance of making a decision on which the participants can all agree***

Before distributing the individual exercise, it is worth explaining why a non-work-related topic is useful for this exercise.

They will all recognise that, if they were to try to learn the skills of consensus reaching on a live topic, operational knowledge and previous experience would quite naturally come to the fore and 'cloud the issue'.

Before handing round the materials, talk through any special briefing associated with the exercise. Full details are contained in the scenario, so there should be few questions.

Stress that the individual exercise should be completed without any discussion between participants - there will be plenty of time for that later! Suggest the time you would expect them to take for this part of the exercise; generally, it will be between 10 and 15 minutes.

If anyone asks for further clarification about the issues raised in the material, be careful not to volunteer additional facts or to be drawn into a discussion about options.

If you are using an exercise which involves multiple choice answers, ask each person to list their answers on a separate piece of paper and collect them in.

Once everyone has finished the individual exercise, you are ready to move on to the team discussion.

## **TEAM MEMBERSHIP AND OBSERVERS**

The first decision you need to make will depend on the number of participants you have. If you have fewer than five people, then have them work as one team, with yourself acting as an observer.

If you have eight to ten people, then ask one or two of them to act as observers, with the rest reaching consensus on the task.

If you have more than 12 participants, you can give them enhanced opportunities to practise consensus reaching skills. Initially, working in two teams they can arrive at interim decisions, which they then negotiate in the final, combined team.

If you are planning to have some participants acting as observers, they will require appropriate briefing. Ask the team members not to discuss the task until you return, whilst you quickly take the observers out of earshot and brief them on their task.

Tell them what you expect of them and, ideally give them a simple checklist which they can use to record the key events. The observers should not participate in the discussions in any way, but should be prepared to give verbal feedback to their colleagues after the team exercise is finished.

### **TEAM DISCUSSIONS**

Once the observers are clear on their role, return to the main room and briefly explain the observer's role to the other participants. Mention the checklist (see Reaching a Consensus – Observer's Checklist provided at the end of this module), and state that the observers will not be participating in the discussions.

Operational requirements will dictate whether you impose a time limit, or allow the discussions to continue until a natural conclusion is reached. If you have no option but to set a time limit, most teams will achieve a good result in 45 minutes to 1 hour.

If you are constrained by time, it is worth mentioning that you would prefer the team to spend the whole time reaching consensus on one element, rather than rushing to simply complete the task.

Once you are sure that everyone is ready, ask the team to start their discussions.

The quality of the observer's comments will vary enormously, depending on their powers of observation and their relationship with the team members. You will almost certainly wish to take your own notes of key events, to supplement their comments.

As the discussions proceed, look for sights and sounds which reveal agreement, or underlying tension or disagreement.

For example, you might see the following types of poor team behaviour:

- not being clear about the objective
- ignoring expert knowledge
- not involving everyone in the discussion
- failing to explore the reasons for apparent agreement
- voting being used inappropriately, which results in 'win-lose' groups
- people being physically 'shut out' through poor seating layout
- poor listening
- people interrupting and talking over each other

Equally, look for specific examples of good team behaviour, for example:

- the team spends some time deciding how to tackle the task
- the team manages time effectively
- people are prepared to change their views having listened carefully to another's viewpoint
- the team is willing to recognise that a member has relevant personal experience or knowledge
- everyone becomes involved in the discussion, including the shy or quiet members
- member's feelings are considered, and positive 'strokes' are given when appropriate
- lists are used to summarise key points, and diagrams are used to explain complex ideas
- the team creates an atmosphere which encourages everyone to participate, even those whose ideas appear to be in the minority

The team discussions come to an end when either:

- agreement is reached on the whole task
- or
- the agreed time runs out

If the team seeks to negotiate extra time, you will need to balance the additional benefits of completing the exercise against the loss of time for debriefing. A lot will depend on how much time is available, and how close to a final decision they are.

### **EXERCISE DEBRIEF**

You can handle the exercise debrief in a variety of different ways, but you may wish to try the following sequence:

1. General comments from the observer(s)
2. Detailed discussions involving everyone on how the final decisions were reached
3. Revealing the 'expert' answer (there is none)
4. Closing comments

### **OBSERVER'S COMMENTS**

Ask the observer(s) to give their feedback to the team on how they tackled the task. You will find that some observers will give very detailed and specific comments, whilst others may give quite limited feedback.

Whilst these comments are being given, it is generally helpful if the team quietly listens to the points being made, and resists the temptation to argue about or defend what took place. You may wish to record the key points on a flipchart.

As each point is made, check your own notes to see if you recorded it. If you did, cross it off and do not include it in your own comments later. A comment about the team will have much more power if it is delivered by one of their peers. Record key learning points on a flipchart.

Once the observer(s) have finished their feedback, it is worth spending a few minutes discussing the feelings associated with giving and receiving feedback.

Ask the team and the observer(s) how they felt whilst adverse comments were being explored, and discuss their reactions. Remind everyone that being an observer can feel very lonely, and bringing bad or unwanted news to a team can make the messenger feel quite isolated.

Unless a team creates an environment which positively encourages adverse comments, it is only human nature that people who see something going wrong will be very reluctant to mention it. Sadly, this has often resulted in catastrophic, but nevertheless avoidable consequences.

### **TEAM REVIEW**

Now ask the team to work through the decisions they reached, and to review in detail how each one was handled. Encourage open and frank comments by individual members on specific aspects of the discussions.

By using your own notes, or comments from observers, ensure that any examples of good or poor team behaviour are highlighted and discussed. Again, you may wish to record key learning points on a flipchart.

### **EXPERT VIEW**

The greatest benefit from the exercise will have been the preceding discussions, although most people will wish to compare their final result with the 'expert' view. However, it is worth sounding a note of caution, as few things in life have an absolute 'right' or 'wrong' answer and **'Exercise Cave Rescue'** is a case in point!

The exact process you now go through will depend on the type of consensus reaching exercise you have used. Basically there are two main varieties:

1. A task having a number of multi-choice questions.
2. An exercise which asks the team to rank a number of items or people in a preferred sequence.

Because the methodology differs quite significantly, please read the paragraphs which apply to your particular exercise.

### **MULTIPLE CHOICE**

Your preparation starts whilst the team discussion is underway. Check each participant's answer sheet against the expert view (if the exercise you have chosen has one), and record the number of 'right' answers. Once completed, you will know the lowest and highest individual scores and can calculate the average of the individual scores.

Marking the individual results in this way protects the self-esteem of any individual who scores a low result. Individual participants will be able to recognise their own low or high scores, but it will be up to them publicly to declare their scores.

Record the scores on a flipchart sheet laid out as follows:

#### **INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM RESULTS**

Individual scores:    highest

                                 lowest

                                 average

Team score:

As the team discussion develops, you can score the team's overall result. This enables you to compare the highest and lowest individual scores with the final team result. You can also compare the average of the individual scores with the overall team result.

### **RANKING**

Ask each person to give you their own ranking, together with the criteria that they applied and record the results on a flipchart sheet. Identify the individual order of preference.

Now ask the team to derive their order using the same approach, based on the criteria they have just agreed together. In this type of exercise, the broader the criteria, the wider is the divergence in the discussion and hence the 'poorer' the result.

#### **INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM RESULTS**

Selection criteria: who? why? when?

Individual ranking: highest to lowest

Team ranking: after discussion

### **WHAT DO THE SCORES TELL YOU?**

The 'ideal' result is for the overall team ranking to be better than that of the individual, since this shows that the synergy of the team has ended with a better result than any one individual could have achieved.

In practice, you will generally find that the team result is better than the average of the individual ratings, although one or two individuals may have scored better.

What can the team learn from this result? It shows that, whilst the team has arrived at a better decision than if the individuals left to themselves, it has failed to use the full potential of all its members.

What if the team result is poorer than the average individual result?

This does sometimes happen, and you will need to handle the situation carefully to enable the team to draw something positive from the experience.

This type of result shows that the team has so mismanaged its resources that it achieves a result which is worse, on average than the individuals left to their own devices. If the team is heading for this result, you will certainly be aware of it quite early on.

	<p>Make sure you identify the critical elements which contribute towards this result, and ensure that the team confront the issues fully in the subsequent debate. Record key learning points on a flipchart.</p> <p><b>CLOSE THE SESSION</b></p> <p>Close the session by highlighting the key learning points which have emerged from the discussions. Ensure that any points which you noted during the team discussions, and which have not already been discussed are now considered.</p> <p>The principles contained in the module can equally be applied to a live topic requiring consensus within the team.</p>
 <p><b>Note</b></p>	<p>It is as well to minimise the importance of comparing the team result with the expert view. The main benefit comes from the team discussion, and it is quite possible for a team to enjoy a valuable learning experience, whilst arriving at decisions out of step with the 'experts'.</p> <p>In any case the expert view is rarely absolute, and many teams can quote personal experiences which run counter to the expert's opinion.</p> <p>From experience, the team will often derive great benefit from seeing a video 'replay' of their performance. In the heat of discussion, many things will have been forgotten which, when presented with the recorded 'evidence', can be usefully explored more fully"</p> <p>Teams will often ignore individuals who persistently mention that they have personal experience of some aspect of the problem. Seeing it on camera can prove a painful experience!</p>
 <p><b>When?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When a team is required to reach agreement on a new working practice (non SOP or MPD driven)</li> <li>• It can also be a valuable 'warm up' exercise for an established team, just before engaging in a major decision making process</li> </ul>



# Cave Rescue Exercise

## Introduction

You are a member of an international research management committee that is funding projections into human behaviour in confined spaces. You have been called to an emergency meeting as one of the experiments has gone badly wrong. Six volunteers have been taken into a cave system in a remote part of the country, connected only by a radio link to the research hut by the cave entrance. It was intended that the volunteers would spend four days underground, but they have been trapped by falling rocks and rising water.

The only rescue team available tell you that rescue will be extremely difficult and only one person can be brought out each hour with the equipment at their disposal. It is likely that the rapidly rising water will drown some of the volunteers before a full rescue can be completed. The volunteers are aware of the dangers of their plight. They have contacted the research hut using the radio link and said that they are unwilling to take a decision as to the sequence by which they will be rescued. By the terms of the research project, the responsibility for making this decision now rests with your committee.

Life-saving equipment will arrive in 50 minutes at the cave entrance and you will need to advise the team of the order for rescue by completing the Ranking Sheet. The only information you have available is drawn from the project files and is reproduced on the volunteer personal details sheet. You may use any criteria you think fit to help you make a decision – but bear in mind that you may have to justify your selection to the families of the volunteers and the press.

## Group-Decision Instructions for Reaching Consensus

Consensus is a decision process developed to utilise all available human resources and to resolve conflict creatively. Consensus is not easy to reach, since it forces groups to consider all aspects of a problem and objections to a possible course of action. While all members of the group should take part in a decision, this does not mean that all of the group must agree. Complete unanimity is not the goal and is rarely achieved. Instead, each individual within the group should be able to accept the group's decision on the basis of rationality and feasibility. When your group reaches the point where each person say, "well, even though it may not be exactly what I want, at least I can live with the decision and support it" then the group has reached consensus as defined here. This means, in effect, that any member can block the group if he or she thinks it is necessary, at the same time this option should be used in the best sense of reciprocity.

The following are tips for use in achieving consensus.

1. **Avoid arguing for your own choices.** Present your position, but listen to other group members' reactions and consider them carefully before you press a particular point.

2. **Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate.** Try not to compete, even if you win, the group may lose. Instead, look for the next-most-acceptable alternative.
3. **Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict.** Differences should be expected and accepted. Be careful of quick and easy agreements. Explore the solution and be certain that everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons. Try to avoid compromise. Yield only to positions that have objective and sound foundations.
4. **Avoid conflict-reducing techniques.** E.g. majority vote, averaging, tossing a coin, or bargaining. They tend to split the team into winners and losers. When a dissenting member finally agrees to an alternative, don't feel that he or she must be rewarded by having his or her way on some later point.
5. **Recognise that differences of opinion are natural and to be expected.** Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the discussion and the decision making process. Disagreements can enhance the quality of the decision because a wide range of information and opinion maximizes the chance that the group will reach a better decision. Treat differences of opinion as a means of gathering more information, clarifying issues, and causing the group to seek better alternatives.
6. **Empathise.** "Put yourself in the other person's shoes". When making a policy decision concerning other human beings, it is sometimes wise to consider your own reactions to the implementation of the decision as if it were to affect you personally. In other words, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you".
7. **Do not substitute camaraderie, harmony, and good fellowship for sound decisions.** If conflict arises, try to deal with them in a manner that will not hinder the group. Your willingness to take the risk and deal with personal conflicts can mean the differences between success and failure for the entire group.

# **Volunteers - Personal Information**

## **Helen**

Helen is 34 years old and an unmarried mother living on social security. She has four children aged between seven months and eight years. In her spare time she does voluntary work with the Samaritans and counsels young people who are addicted to drugs. Her supervisor thinks she lacks objectivity because she tends to become too involved with the people she is counselling. She is taking a course in social work through the Open University to prepare her for a full-time career. She is currently having an affair with a married man whom she met through her voluntary activities. Unfortunately, he has tested HIV positive.

## **Tozo**

Tozo is 19 years old and an art student at the Slade School, London. She is the daughter of wealthy Japanese parents who live in Tokyo. Her father is an industrialist who is a national authority on traditional Japanese mime theatre. Tozo is unmarried but has several high-born suitors as she is outstandingly attractive. She has recently been the subject of a TV documentary of Japanese womanhood and flower arranging. She is an active member of Greenpeace and her hobbies include watercolour painting, pottery and origami.

## **Edward**

Edward is a man of 59 years who has lived and worked in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, for most of his life. He is general manager of a factory producing rubber belts for machines. The factory employs 71 people. He is also a prominent member of the CBI and is actively promoting a Model Training Programme under the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) which, if successful, will employ over 100 people. His company is opening a branch in South Wales in association with the Welsh Development Agency which is the local community, and is a Freemason and a Conservative councillor. He is married with two children who have their own families and have moved away from Barnsley. Edward's hobby is collecting antique guns, and he intends to write a book on privatisation in the public sector on his retirement. He is also a keen cricket supporter.

## **Jobe**

Jobe is a man of 41 who was born in Jamaica. He is minister of religion whose life work has been devoted to the social and political evolution of Afro Caribbean peoples in the UK. Jobe has become disillusioned with organised religion and, for a time, became a Buddhist monk. He has paid several visits to Tibet in recent years to study Eastern religions and mysticism. He is married with 11 children whose ages range from six to 19 years. He is very interested in promoting health food, faith healing and holistic medicine. He is also a member of Friends of the Earth.

## **Owen**

Owen is an unmarried man of 27 years. As a short-commission officer he spent part of his service in Northern Ireland where, as an undercover agent,

he broke up an IRA cell and received a special commendation in despatches. Currently, he is a local union official and hopes to become a Labour MP some day. Since returning to civilian life he has been unsettled and recently spent some time in a psychiatric hospital where he was diagnosed as being manic depressive. He is currently on medication to control these symptoms. In his spare time he is a Youth Adventure Leader, devoted member of the local amateur drama society and plays rugby most weekends. He is also a member of the Toastmasters Club and lives in Brecon, South Wales.

### **Paul**

Paul is a man of 42 who has been divorced for six years. His ex-wife is now happily re-married. He was born in Scotland, but now lives in Richmond, Surrey. Paul works as a genetic research scientist at a large teaching hospital in London where he is recognised as a world authority on motor neuron disease. He has been currently working on a treatment and believes that he is only months away from a breakthrough which could provide relief for many who are diagnosed in the early stages. Much of the research data is still in his working note-books. Unfortunately, Paul has experienced some emotional difficulties in recent years, has a drinking problem and has twice been convicted of drink driving offences. The last time was 11 months ago. He has recently joined Alcoholics Anonymous where he is attempting to come terms with his problem. His hobbies are classical music, opera and sailing.

<b>RANKING SHEET</b>	
<b>Order of rescue (Name and reasons):</b>	
<b>1.</b>	
<b>2.</b>	
<b>3.</b>	
<b>4.</b>	
<b>5.</b>	
<b>6.</b>	

Adapted from: <https://sites.google.com/site/hmeducationwing/home/international-business/cave-rescue-exercise>



## Reaching a Consensus – Observer’s Checklist

As you observe the team reach a consensus you may wish to consider the following issues. Any additional comments or observations you can offer afterwards will be most helpful.

1. All team members participated equally in the discussion. (Agree/disagree)
2. Occasionally the team used pressure to influence some members to conform to the majority view. (Agree/disagree)
3. The leader (if appointed) generally avoided taking sides or leading the team to a preferred solution. (Agree/disagree)
4. The leader's control and direction was the major factor in the team's overall performance. (Agree/disagree)
5. The team could have achieved a better result if they had tackled the problem in a different way (Agree/disagree)
6. One or two people made particularly helpful suggestions at times when a stalemate seemed to block further progress. (Agree/disagree)
7. Everyone seems to be satisfied with the outcome, even the difficult or quiet ones. (Agree/disagree)
8. They seemed to spend rather longer on some aspects than they perhaps should have done. (Agree/disagree)

Other comments:

