



What is consensus-based decision making?

In Narcotics Anonymous, we make decisions by seeking direction from a loving Higher Power as it expresses itself in our group conscience. The principle of anonymity in NA means we serve as equals, and consensus-based decision making (CBDM) is one method for a service body, as a team of equals, to hear that group conscience. The heart of consensus is a cooperative intent, where members are willing to work together to find or create the solution that meets the needs of the group. The cooperative nature of consensus building is a different mindset from pro/con debate.

Tradition 2: For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Tradition 12: Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

CBDM rests on the fundamental belief that each member of the body holds a piece of the larger truth. In this spirit, we strive for consensus to affirm the principles inherent in both the Seventh and Ninth Concepts. A decision reached by a consensus-based process may not mean total unanimity, but in CBDM, consensus can exist when each member of the service body is able to say:

- ✓ I had the opportunity to voice my opinions.
- ✓ I believe the team has heard me.
- ✓ I can accept the team's decision, even if it is not what I would choose as an individual.

Concept 7: All members of a service body bear substantial responsibility for that body's decisions and should be allowed to fully participate in its decision-making processes.

Concept 9: All elements of our service structure have the responsibility to carefully consider all viewpoints in their decision-making processes.

Why consensus-based decision making?

CBDM isn't just about particular policies or rules, or one or two specific Concepts or Traditions. It's about a group conscience process that connects us with a Higher Power and offers a potentially more inclusive process than parliamentary procedure. Our service bodies' meetings should be forums where trusted servants can be heard, and CBDM is about listening. With its emphasis on inclusion, collaboration, and consensus building, CBDM is in harmony with our spiritual principles. The consensus process is how we manifest the idea "together we can do what we cannot do alone" in a service setting.

What types of decisions can we make with CBDM?

CBDM can be used to reach agreement on the types of decisions that are also made using parliamentary procedure. It can also be used to hold broader discussions that may not result in a specific decision. Each community is free to determine when a CBDM process will be most effective for them. Elections are one type of decision where it is common to simply seek a majority or a two-thirds vote rather than utilize a consensus-based decision making process.

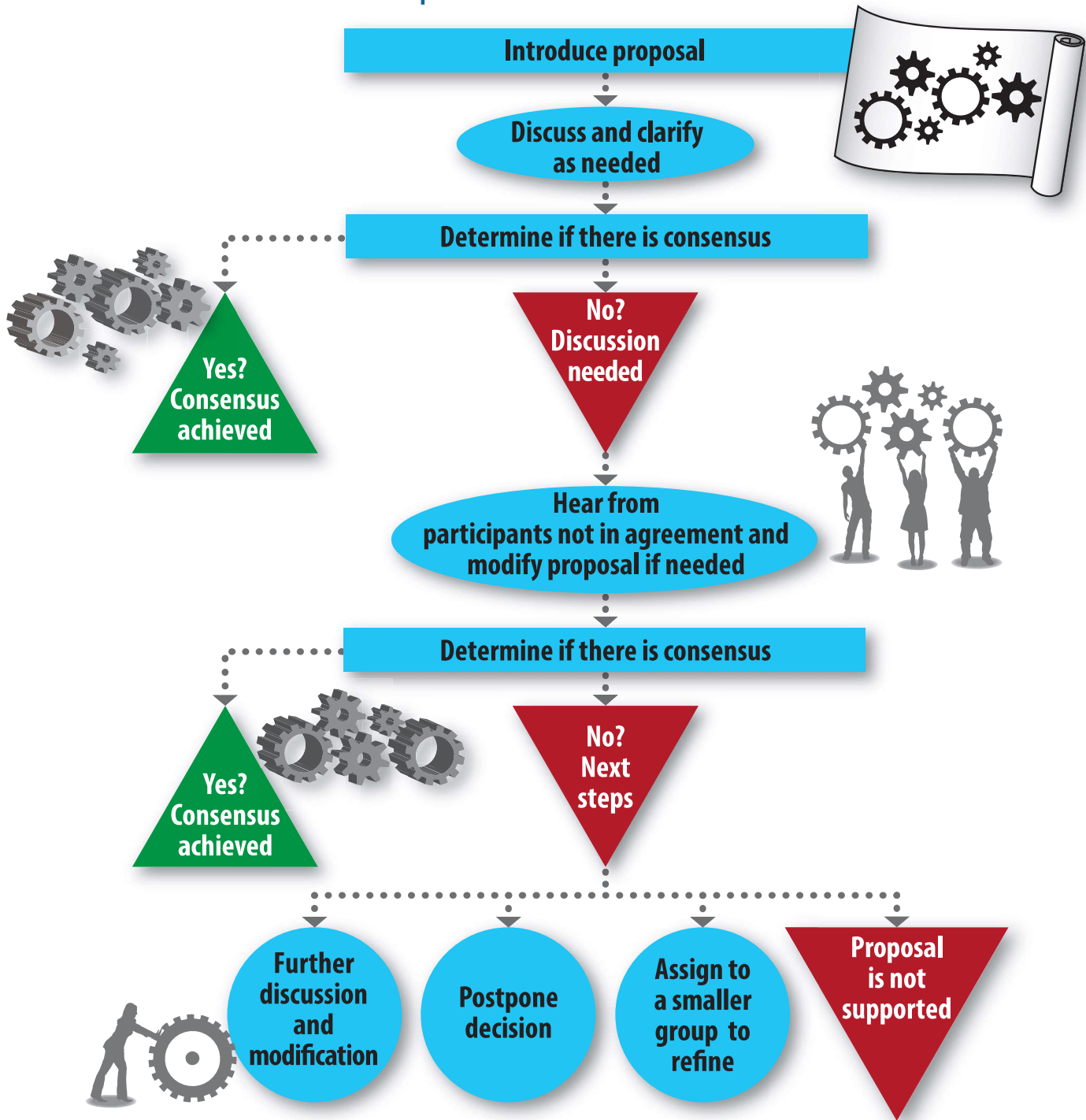
How does CBDM work?

There are different variations of CBDM, but the basic steps are fairly consistent and simple to follow. Within those basic steps there is a great deal of variety depending on the individual service body's process and the type of decision being made. The material in this section is intended to help service bodies understand how the basics of a consensus-based process work, and can be adapted to fit local needs. Each NA community is free to create a process that works for them.

Using CBDM doesn't have to mean a service body has to change the order of the agenda it is accustomed to using. What it does mean is that instead of making a decision by first making a motion, proposals are introduced and can be adapted to include ideas and concerns offered by participants in the course of the discussion.



Here are some details of a CBDM process.



Introduce proposal

- Provide relevant details including:
- ✦ Where did the proposal come from?
 - ✦ Why is the proposal necessary?
 - ✦ What are the specific objectives of the proposal?
 - ✦ What human and financial resources are required?

Community decision: Who can introduce an idea or proposal?

- ✦ Most bodies allow only trusted servants (including delegates) to make proposals.
- ✦ In some bodies, only delegates (GSRs, RCMs, and RDs) can make proposals.
- ✦ Other bodies will allow anyone present to make a proposal.



Discuss and clarify as needed

Asking questions, sharing resources, and offering experience and ideas are all parts of this phase of the process. Newer members may need extra time to catch up with previous discussions on the topic.

Community decision: Who can speak to an idea or proposal? It's common for consensus-based bodies to allow anyone present to speak, though some recognize trusted servants before hearing from interested members.

Determine if there is consensus

A simple way to do this is to ask the room, "Is everyone comfortable moving forward with this proposal?" If everyone is not in agreement, then a show of hands (a straw poll) can be used to determine the level of support.

Community decision: Who can participate in a straw poll? It's common for any interested member to have a voice, but less common for everyone to participate in polls.

Some communities take a simple "for" and "against" vote to determine if consensus exists and a decision can be made.

Others include options such as:

- ✦ "Agree with reservation" for members who accept the proposal even if it is not what they would choose as an individual.
- ✦ "Stand aside" for members who do not agree with the proposal but will not stand in the way of it moving forward.

Community decision: What is the threshold for achieving consensus? Some options include:

- ✦ Two-thirds majority
- ✦ 80%
- ✦ More?

If consensus isn't achieved in the straw poll, then further discussion may be required. A very low level of support may indicate that no further discussion is needed, although care should be taken to ensure that the minority voice has been heard.

Hear from participants not in agreement and modify proposal if needed

This phase allows those not in agreement to share their concerns. All participants are encouraged to listen and offer ideas for modifying the proposal. Not all concerns will lead to changes. Compromise is an essential part of the process.

In strict consensus, everyone agrees or gives their consent; a single dissenter can block a decision. Most NA service bodies, however, use some form of consensus-*based* decision making rather than strict consensus. Any participant that believes a decision is in conflict with NA's guiding principles should have the opportunity to explain the details of their objection so the body can carefully consider whether it is appropriate to move forward.

No? Next steps

The role of the facilitator is to suggest possible next steps in the process and to help the body determine which are appropriate.

Assign to a smaller group to refine

This may be a workgroup or an ad-hoc committee, a number of the service body's trusted servants, or any other group that has the experience to suggest a way forward. Providing clear guidance to this group is particularly important.

Further discussion and modification

An effective facilitator can help the body determine when to continue discussion and when to try something else.

Proposal is not supported

Not every idea or proposal is supported, but CBDM allows all participants to be heard and to work together rather than argue opposing sides of a decision.

Postpone decision

A simple option is to take a short break or to postpone the decision until the next service meeting.



Facilitating a CBDM body

CBDM requires a skilled facilitator who can guide the body in its decision-making process. A good facilitator can prevent a discussion from turning into an open sharing session and help everyone reach a decision they can all agree with in a timely manner. Facilitators may lead discussions, but they do not govern them.

What does the facilitator do?

The role of the facilitator is to help a group or service body reach consensus on an issue. Certain actions are recommended to accomplish this:

- ✦ Invite a loving Higher Power into the process, often by opening the meeting with an NA prayer or a short excerpt from NA literature.
- ✦ Ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of the process being used and the issue being discussed. This may include distributing relevant materials in advance of the discussion or making information available at the meeting.
- ✦ Help everyone to participate, including the quieter members in the room, and discourage domination of the discussion by one or two members.
- ✦ Listen for common ground and points of agreement, and share these with the body.
- ✦ Repeat ideas that are shared to be sure everyone has a common understanding of them.
- ✦ Suggest ways to combine ideas to build consensus.
- ✦ Manage the time available and ensure enough is allocated for the proposal.
- ✦ Keep the conversation focused and move it forward toward a decision when needed.
- ✦ Confirm that everyone has a clear understanding of decisions made and further actions required, and that these are recorded.

Different communities will expect different levels of participation from their facilitator. Some require them simply to facilitate the meeting, while others encourage the facilitator to share information relevant to the discussion. Many facilitators find it easier to maintain the respect of the entire body by remaining neutral and providing information but not opinions.

Tips for Facilitators:

- Make eye contact, smile, and be enthusiastic.
- Be who you are – let your own style come through.
- Remember that communication isn't just the spoken word; for example, try to avoid "closed" body language such as crossing your arms or turning your back on your audience.
- Remember that listening is a key part of successful facilitation—listen first and speak second.
- Speak clearly so that everyone can hear, use a positive tone, and remember to breathe!

Useful questions for facilitators include:

- What have we tried before that works?
- If we tried this, what would happen next?
- Can anyone add anything to these ideas?



What qualities does a facilitator need?

CBDM bodies need to think carefully when electing a facilitator and may find the Fourth Concept a useful resource. A good facilitator can feel the sense of the body and earn the trust needed to guide discussion toward a decision. Some of the qualities to look for include:

- ✦ Familiarity with the group or service body and an understanding of the experience level of those attending.
- ✦ Some experience with CBDM and a clear understanding of the details of the process being used locally.
- ✦ Being prepared with information about the issues to be discussed and any relevant resources, such as guidelines, handbooks, and Traditions and Concepts materials.
- ✦ Commitment to the CBDM process and a willingness to focus on more than just their own ideas.
- ✦ The ability to earn the trust of a body by guiding rather than controlling discussions.
- ✦ Flexibility, patience, and the understanding that some participants may need more time to reach a decision than others do.



What spiritual principles can facilitators apply?

As with all NA service, applying spiritual principles helps a CBDM body to be more successful. Some of the principles that we can focus on when facilitating are:

- ✦ **Integrity**—Honesty, consistency, and trustworthiness are all elements of this principle and are essential for successful facilitation.
- ✦ **Humility**—An attitude of service rather than government allows a facilitator to focus on helping the body reach consensus.
- ✦ **Open-mindedness**—Being open to new ideas is essential in helping to build consensus.
- ✦ **Accountability**—A CBDM facilitator is a trusted servant and is accountable to the body they serve.
- ✦ **Cooperation**—The facilitator helps create an environment in which everyone can work together to understand and consider the proposal.
- ✦ **Trust**—A CBDM facilitator needs to both trust the process and the body they are serving.

Developing a collective conscience provides us with the spiritual guidance we need for making service decisions. We pray or meditate together, we share with one another, we consider our traditions, and we seek direction from a Higher Power. Our groups, service boards, and committees often use the vote as a rough tool for translating that spiritual guidance into clear, decisive terms. Sometimes, however, no vote is needed; following thoughtful, attentive discussion, it is perfectly apparent what our collective conscience would have us do in a given service situation.



*Twelve Concepts for NA Service,
Sixth Concept*

Participating in a CBDM body

The Seventh Concept essay reminds us, “NA service is a team effort. Our service representatives are responsible to the NA Fellowship as a whole rather than any special constituency; so are all the other trusted servants on the team. The full participation of each member of the team is of great value as we seek to express the collective conscience of the whole.”

Being an effective participant in a CBDM body is, in some respects, easier than being an effective participant in a parliamentary procedure-based body as there is no need to be proficient at Robert’s Rules of Order or some other set of parliamentary guidelines. However, CBDM also requires some skills that parliamentary procedure does not.

What do participants do?

Members of a CBDM body are required to work together to make decisions that can be supported by the entire body. To be successful in this, certain actions are required:

- ✦ Contribute toward a positive and respectful meeting environment where everyone feels comfortable contributing.
- ✦ Be prepared with the necessary information in advance of the discussion.
- ✦ Participate in the entire discussion process so that a clear understanding of all viewpoints can be gained.
- ✦ Ask questions when more information is needed.
- ✦ Consider what best serves our primary purpose rather than our personal preferences.
- ✦ Commit to the process and actively support the consensus of the body.

What qualities do participants need?

Participating in CBDM should help evolve a proposal, so it is important to be flexible and to be a good listener. Some qualities that will help participants fulfill their roles are:

- ✦ A focus on creating solutions rather than on finding fault with ideas.
- ✦ The willingness to share ideas and let go of the outcome. Remember that compromise may be required and decisions can be revisited if needed.
- ✦ The ability to pass on speaking when someone else has already made the same point.
- ✦ An awareness of personal characteristics and circumstances, and how these may affect participation in the CBDM process. Examples of these include irritability when tired or hungry, impatience with a slower decision-making process, or intolerance of certain ideas.



What spiritual principles can participants apply?

Some of the principles we can focus on when participating in a CBDM body include:

- * **Anonymity**—Participants have the right to be respected and to be heard as equals.
- * **Humility**—Listening to others and understanding that we don't have all the answers is a foundational part of CBDM and is firmly rooted in the Second Tradition.
- * **Open-mindedness**—While CBDM carefully considers all viewpoints, as is discussed in the Ninth Concept, this does not mean that all opinions influence the final decision.
- * **Surrender**—Participants accept the decisions reached by the body.
- * **Patience**—Allow everyone the time to understand and consider the issue.
- * **Trust**—CBDM participants need to trust the process and the facilitator they have chosen.
- * **Unity**—Whatever the outcome of discussions, everyone needs to work together to do the work involved to implement decisions.

Additional information and resources are available at www.na.org/toolbox



Notes

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World Service Office
PO Box 9999
Van Nuys, CA 91409 USA
TEL (818) 773-9999
FAX (818) 700-0700
WEB www.na.org

World Service Office—Canada
Mississauga, Ontario

World Service Office—Europe
Brussels, Belgium
TEL +32/2/646-6012
WEB www.na.org

World Service Office—Iran
Tehran, Iran
WEB www.na-iran.org



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