



LEADERSHIP insights

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By Jo Anne Preston
RWHC Workforce
& Organizational
Development Manager



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jpreston@rwhc.com](mailto:jpreston@rwhc.com)

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jpreston@rwhc.com
Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative
880 Independence Lane
Sauk City, WI 53583
Phone: 608-644-3261
Fax: 608-643-4936



Decisions, Decisions

In health care it seems we have almost a “consensus” about consensus. The norm is, “Let’s get everyone’s ideas, make sure you all get a chance to have your say, then we will discuss all the merits and challenges of each idea until we can find something that we all agree is the best decision.” Consensus doesn’t mean everyone gets what they want, but after a thorough discussion people consent to the outcome and everyone walks out the door with one voice. At best this is a powerful process that builds buy-in because people feel heard. It can prevent unintended consequences because all stakeholders weigh in. It also can help people relate to the bigger picture because the decision is aimed toward the greater good vs. one individual point of view.

Consider though that consensus is not the *best* decision making process, it is just *one* decision making process. *Here are some ways it breaks down and strategies for improvement:*

Over use – Where shall we go for lunch? Should we choose the tan or the brown tile for the mail room? Should we lock the crash cart??? We use long drawn out discussions about decisions that are best done by a simple majority vote, assigning a delegate to decide, or for which a regulation trumps all discussion anyway!

• To keep energy high in your team, **save consensus for decisions that have high impact and that have not already been made** by forces beyond your control.

Under use – There are leaders who overdo an authoritarian decision making style, thinking consensus just takes too much time. People check out because there is no opportunity for them to engage in the conversation and they feel like their voice is not heard. If this is you:

• Develop your facilitation skills to encourage discussion and **learn where to focus more on process than outcome.**

Midwestern niceness – This may explain some of our enthusiasm for consensus. It is “polite” to give everyone the chance to speak their views and we believe we “ought to.” However, even though we offer this opportunity, that same Midwestern niceness can keep people from openly disagreeing. People nod their heads and you think, “Great! We have consensus!” But what you may have instead

is compliance (at best). **False consensus** stalls your change efforts and you are left wondering how something that seemed so agreeable is not moving forward. It is also a perfect set up for the “meeting after the meeting,” a real energy drainer. Go for robust disagreement carried on openly and respectfully. **To work toward true consensus:**

- **Invite people to disagree**, and then **thank them** for it when they do.
- **Attend to your team relationships** in *other* ways so that people feel safe in stating an unpopular view.
- Establish **participation agreements** (aka ground rules) that encourage respectful disagreement, and then follow them.

Fear of taking charge – You are the leader, and it is ok to make a unilateral decision about some things. If you tend to back off from decisiveness fearing you will come across like a dictator, consensus can feel like you are doing the right thing when in fact you might be exhausting yourself and your team unnecessarily.

- **If a decision really is non-negotiable**, make the decision and inform the team. Don’t waste their time discussing something that you have already decided and for good reason.
- **Tell your team what decision making process you are using and why** (i.e. “I will make the decisions on this event because time is critical and I need your energy focused on developing our long term plans,” or “majority will rule, so let’s vote,” or “we need consensus on this because it is important and will affect everyone so I need your honest thoughts and best ideas-this may take some time but in the end we will come out with a decision that we can all get behind,” etc.).
- **Build trust with your team** so they know when you make a decision without asking their input, they are more likely to “assume good intent” on your part.
- **Get comfortable with not making everyone happy.** When you do the right thing, it does not always end in happiness, but you can make it end with integrity.

