Why work collaboratively?

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Working collaboratively is coherent with our values of caring for others and respect for difference. Consensus allows all views to be heard and respected – and makes overall for better decisions. And a commitment to consensus flows through into our broader dealings with the community

You can have decisions made by voting where there is genuine respect for others views, but it's an add-on to the process – you don't have to. It's easy, and the usual way of working is to dismiss the views of the opposition as not being valid.

Conversely you can have consensus decisions which are dominated by the most articulate, and powerful where those who don't agree are too afraid to speak up; or where running out of time means the decisions don't get made, or are made by those who can stay the longest – but good or even just fairly ordinary facilitation will stop this occurring.

The biggest concerns people have about consensus
- It needs a commitment to consensus from the group
- It takes time. Most groups don't have the time to make consensus decisions about every little thing so you have to decide which decisions need to be delegated.
- It needs good facilitation
- Clear roles, clarity of purpose, and time allocations are important.

Advantages of consensus
- Builds trust, respect and understanding amongst participants and reinforces group coherence and togetherness.
- Decisions which are made have the support of all the group so all the resources of the group can be put toward carrying them out
- Results in better decisions which take into account the range of people's views
- Encourages flexibility in the decision making process and incorporates the ability to modify the decision to incorporate new information
- Participation in a consensus decision is genuinely empowering. People's views are taken into account and incorporated into the outcome
- Decisions are more likely to be longstanding and withstand changes in leadership
- Encourages participation, because everyone's contributions are valued.

Additional problems with voting
- Divisive. Voting accentuates the differences between people and their positions.
- More likely to end up with simple inappropriate 'solutions' to complex problems
- Decisions may be made on the basis of who are the most articulate and powerful orators, rather than the substance of their position.
- People who lose don't have ownership of decisions they lose. This is a big loss of resources. People who could be working with you to implement a decision at best may be neutral and at worst may be actively working to undermine the decision

- Although the initial decision may have been made quickly, decisions don't necessarily stay made. If the opposition get the numbers together then they can overturn a decision
- Division into a majority and an opposition can lead to people spending a lot of energy fighting each other rather than focussing on the issue at hand
- Division into a majority and an opposition can make it very difficult to present a united front on an issue.
- Being able to ignore or dismiss the views of a minority can lead the minority to feel disempowered, not listened to, and bitter and resentful to those in the majority
- The losing side can be painted as ignorant and misinformed. This is a small step towards feeling justified in labelling them as 'different', 'other', not worthy of being listened to, and not treated respectfully.

Some people say they prefer the speed of voting and don't mind losing a vote – they put it behind them and get on with things. In a consensus process this can be quick too – if they don't mind losing, then it's probably something where they aren't too concerned about how the decision turns out. If the rest of the group was keen to do something different they would not block consensus.

How to do consensus decision making
- Start with the issues, not a proposal on how to deal with them.
- Unpack the issues – what are the key issues that impact on the item that you need to make a decision about?
- Share what people think about them.
- Discuss
- Check on understandings, whether positions have shifted.
- Form a proposal that *someone thinks has a chance of consensus*- this is important, and this is what makes a proposal differ from a motion. It's why a proposal shouldn't be formed prior to discussions, when you don't know what everyone's views are.
- Discuss the proposal*,*
- *Critically* if people have a concern about a proposal then they need to be listened to, and their concerns either allayed, or taken into account by modifying the proposal. Anyone can propose modifications to a proposal.
- If it's clear that the proposal in fact isn't close to consensus then it may lapse, and someone else can have a go at putting up an alternative proposal.
- If someone wants to put up an alternative proposal the facilitator may wish to check whether the alternative is closer to consensus than the last – straw polls can be useful for this.
- Keep going until you get to a decision that everyone can agree on ☺
- A straw poll can also tell you where the discussion needs to be focussed, how close you are to consensus. But it's only of value if you are then committed to listening to the people who have concerns, and either allaying those concerns or modifying the proposal to take account of them.
- Respect people who block consensus. Really listen to them – they often can hold gems of wisdom that the rest of the group hasn't understood.