

# Going for Consensus, Not Robert's Rules

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In my work with nonprofits, I'm always mystified by the pervasive use and abuse of parliamentary procedure, also known as Robert's Rules of Order.

Many, many board members believe that their discussions and decisions are somehow more valid when they make motions, second those motions, call the question, and hold formal votes that are recorded in the minutes.

Furthermore, people who know the rules—or think they know the rules—often use their alleged know-how as a way to exercise power within the group. "That's out of order," bellows the board bully. "You need to raise a point of order if you're going to reopen discussion on that motion, and you can't do that because we've already accepted an amendment to the original motion."

In response, everyone else feels sheepish, looks confused, and refuses to speak. All sorts of petty arguments arise from the ignorance or abuse of parliamentary procedure.

*There is no law mandating that nonprofits must make decisions using Robert's Rules.* After all, you're not a parliament. You're an animal shelter, or a sports league, or a theater, or an advocacy organization.

By way of comparison, imagine you're sitting around with a group of friends, trying to decide on a place for dinner. You discuss the options; people advocate for one restaurant or another. Perhaps you reach a tentative decision. At that point, someone opts out, saying, "I had Thai for lunch, but if that's what everybody wants, please go and enjoy yourselves." Maybe the rest of you decide to go, but more likely you return to the list to try to identify another option that will work for everyone.

The decision-making model you're using is called *consensus*, and it works something like this:

1. Someone presents an idea. It could be a formal proposal, but most of the time it's just an idea, not yet fully formed.
2. The idea is passed around and the pros and cons are discussed.
3. As a result of the discussion—the more input, the better—the idea is often modified.
4. If a general agreement seems to be emerging (this is where good listening and facilitation skills are helpful), you can test for consensus by restating the latest version of the idea or proposal to see if everybody agrees.
5. If anyone dissents, you return to the discussion to see if you can modify the idea further to make it acceptable to everyone.

Unlike parliamentary procedure, which results in an up-or-down, yes-or-no vote, the consensus process allows for (and even encourages) a continuum of responses. At one end is strong endorsement: "Great idea. I love it!" At the other end is strong disagreement: "It's a horrible idea, and I'll do everything I can to block it."

The consensus spectrum allows for more subtle reactions: "I like it pretty well" to "I don't like it, but I can live with it" to "I disagree, but if you're all in favor, I won't stand in the way." This is an intuitive way to make decisions, since it reflects how most of us make shared choices in our daily lives.

In the traditional consensus model, one person has the power to block the decision if they strongly disagree. If the board is unable to create a compromise to satisfy the blocker, they may call for a majority vote as a last resort. This is sometimes known as "modified consensus," and for groups that want to try out consensus, it may be the best way to begin.

Be aware that consensus decision making is often time consuming and requires patience and persistence. On the other hand, it creates a more informal and equitable environment where everyone's voice is valued. From my perspective, this is an excellent trade-off.