

CBDM Basics

This document is meant to serve as an introduction to consensus-based decision making for communities that are field testing the Service System Proposals. As such, it is a rough draft, and we welcome any input. Please send any thoughts you have on this tool to worldboard@na.org.

What is Consensus-Based Decision Making?

CBDM is a method of making decisions that attempts to hear all voices and synthesize participants' views in order to come to a resolution or decision acceptable to the group as a whole.

In strict consensus, everyone in the group agrees or gives their consent; a single dissenter can block a decision. For the purposes of most LSCs and GSFs, we're suggesting some form of consensus-**based** decision making (CBDM) rather than strict consensus. CBDM does not require unanimity the way that strict consensus does. It might be more accurate to say in a CBDM body, we "aspire" to consensus.

How Does the Process Work?

Ideally, the discussion that takes place when using a consensus-based model is an evolutionary process. There is a common misconception that building consensus is easy or quick and painless, when in truth it is a building process that takes time and faith. Rather than speaking for or against a static proposal, participants in a CBDM body try to work together to build a proposal that the body or most of the body can agree upon. Of course, that's an ideal, and the reality is that CBDM isn't always that productive or harmonious, but the discussion in a CBDM body is designed to hear and synthesize the range of ideas rather than just listen to "pros" and "cons." It's about building consensus not winning or losing a debate.



There are different variations of CBDM, but the basic steps are fairly consistent. 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. Below, the basic steps of CBDM are in bold, and some of the variations are described next to those steps.

We offer these basic steps to help service bodies understand how the basics of a consensus-based process work. These steps should be adapted to fit the needs of your community.

- **Introduce a proposal**
 - Your community will have to decide who can introduce a proposal.
 - Most bodies allow only trusted servants (including delegates) to make proposals.
 - In some bodies only delegates can make proposals.
- **Discuss the proposal**
 - Your community will have to decide who can speak to a proposal.
 - It's common for consensus-based bodies to allow anyone present to speak, though some recognize trusted servants before hearing from interested members.
- **Take a pulse of the body** (e.g., a straw poll) In most cases, a straw poll (a non-binding vote) is the easiest way to get a sense of whether a body supports a proposal. Again, there is variation here.
 - Each community will have to decide for itself who can participate in straw polls. Though it may be common for any interested member to have a voice in CBDM, it's less common for any interested member to have a vote.
- **Either continue discussion or move to a decision**, depending on the pulse
 - If the body seems divided or unready to move to a decision, there are a number of options about what to do next.
 - You can modify the proposal based on what's been heard in discussion
 - You can ask members who are against the proposal to explain their objections
 - You can decide the body isn't ready to make a decision and wait until the next meeting
 - You can give the proposal to a specific body (e.g., the LSB or a workgroup) to refine
 - You can recheck the pulse after more discussion
 - The amount of discussion and the number of times the pulse of the body is taken will vary depending on the service body and the facilitator.
- **Make a decision** about the proposal
 - Your community will have to determine what threshold is needed to pass a proposal.
 - Some communities require close to unanimity.
 - Others require simply a majority. Still others have established a threshold somewhere in between.
 - Your community will have to decide what options to give members when making a decision about a proposal.

- Some communities take a simple “for” and “against” vote to make a decision.
- Others include options such as “assent with reservation” for members who basically agree with the proposal but have some issues that have not been addressed and “stand aside” for members who do not agree with the proposal but will not stand in the way of it passing.
- Some communities include an option where members can “block” a proposal. What that means varies from place to place. In pure consensus, one person can register a block and stop a proposal from passing. In consensus-*based* decision making, a block is often dealt with differently. In some communities, the person blocking must make their case (some places reserve a “block” for instances where someone believes a proposal violates a Concept or Tradition.). Then members vote for or against the block. In other communities it takes a certain number of people “blocking” a proposal to keep the proposal from being approved.

Why Consensus-Based Decision Making?

With its emphasis on inclusion, collaboration, and consensus-building, CBDM seems more in harmony with our spiritual principles than a process centered around debate and parliamentary procedure. The principle

of group conscience refers to more than just a vote, and CBDM is a cooperative form of decision making well suited to the development of a collective conscience.

Recovery is learning to live by spiritual principles.
CBDM is making decisions by spiritual principles.

A Guide to World Services in NA explains,

Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and no one person has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!). The consensus process is what a group goes through to reach an agreement. It is how we manifest the idea “together we can do what we cannot do alone” in a service setting.

Our service bodies should be a forum where trusted servants can be heard regardless of how well they know Roberts Rules of Order. Parliamentary procedure can marginalize addicts who do not know “the rules” well. CBDM offers a potentially more inclusive process for discussion.

What to Consider When Adopting CBDM

Your community will need to answer a number of questions for itself when developing a consensus-based process for making decisions. Talk together about what will work best for your service body. What will be most effective for a large group in a community known for spirited debate won’t be the same as the most effective process for a handful of addicts in a place where they generally come to an easy agreement on most things.

You will have to make decisions about two main issues:

1. What is the level of participation of the different members at the service meeting—delegates, elected trusted servants, and interested members?
 - Who are the voting members of the service body?
 - Who is allowed to make proposals?
 - Who is allowed to speak to proposals?
2. What is the threshold for decision making (i.e., how many must be in favor of a proposal before it “passes”). This can range anywhere from a simple majority to 80% or even more, depending on the culture of your service body and perhaps the type of decision being made. Many service bodies require a higher threshold for budget or policy decisions, for instance.

The history or precedent in your community will be one factor that will help when making these decisions. Your ASC or RSC currently has policy on voting members and who can make or speak to motions as well as policy on what sort of majority motions require to pass. You’ll want to consider those policies when making decisions about how to implement CBDM. But rather than simply carry forward these legacy policies, you should take the time to think about whether they reflect the beliefs of your community.

For instance, some communities hold a strict interpretation of the “group” in group conscience as solely referring to a

Our processes reflect our spiritual principles

recovery group’s decision making process. It may make sense in those communities for only delegates to have a vote or a voice in a straw poll. Other communities see group conscience in a broader sense as a spiritual process that can take place in any group decision making, including a service meeting. For those communities, it may make sense to allow all trusted servants to take part in the decision making. This is just one example of the ways in which our principles influence the way we “do business” at our service meetings.

Defining members’ level of participation and determining thresholds for decision making is not a “violation” of CBDM. There is nothing wrong with according different levels of participation for different members or establishing a percentage needed to approve a proposal.

Those policies or protocols may vary depending on the type of discussion or decision being made—whether it’s elections, old business, budget-related items, or new business, for instance.

Facilitating a CBDM Body

Some say CBDM is a process that makes it easier for participants and harder for the facilitator, and there’s some truth to that. One of the biggest advantages of CBDM is that participants can more easily share their views on a proposal or issue. But one of the biggest challenges of CBDM is that it requires a strong facilitator who has the trust of the body to ensure that decision making doesn’t turn into an open sharing session. Conversations need to progress toward a decision and that requires some guidance on the part of the facilitator. At the same time, the facilitator needs to have a good sense of the body so that that guidance doesn’t feel like control.

CBDM bodies need to think carefully when electing a facilitator. A good facilitator can feel the sense of the body and earn the trust needed to guide discussion toward a decision. The Fourth Concept Essay explains:

When we carefully consider the leadership qualities of those we ask to serve, we can confidently give them the room they need to exercise those qualities on our behalf. We can allow effective leaders freedom to serve, especially when they demonstrate their accountability to us, reporting regularly on their work and asking, when necessary, for additional direction. True, our leaders are but trusted servants, not governors; yet we also expect our trusted servants to lead us. If we select them carefully, we can confidently allow them to do so.

Participating in a CBDM Body

Being an effective participant in a CBDM body is, in some respects, easier than being an effective participant in a parliamentary procedure-based body. You needn't be proficient at Robert's Rules or some other set of parliamentary guidelines. However, because the discussion in CBDM isn't just about weighing in with a pro or a con, but should help evolve a proposal, it is important to be flexible and to be a good listener. Openmindedness is key. While CBDM "considers" all voices, that does not mean that all opinions result in or even influence the final decision.

Whatever the outcome of discussions, everyone needs to be ready to shoulder the load to do the work involved to implement the decisions. As our Basic Text says "All that is required is willingness. All that is essential is that we open the door to a Power greater than ourselves."

This draft was produced for the Service System Proposals field test. It is a work in progress. Please send any input on the draft to: worldboard@na.org.