

CBDM Basics

What is Consensus-Based Decision Making?

The principle of anonymity in NA means we serve as equals, and CBDM is how a service body, as a team of equals, makes decisions. 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 is a different mindset from pro/con debate.

The process rests on the fundamental belief that each member of the body has a piece of the larger truth. In this spirit, striving for consensus is an affirmation of the principles inherent in both the Seventh and Ninth Concepts. Consensus may not mean total unanimity. 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. CBDM does not require unanimity.

In CBDM, consensus exists when each member of the service body can say:

- ✓ I had the opportunity to voice my opinions
- ✓ I believe the team has heard me
- ✓ I can actively support the team's decision, even if it is not my first choice

The NA Traditions and Concepts need to be at the forefront of all the member's minds. Of note:

Tradition 2: For our group conscience, 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.

Concept 6: Group Conscience is the spiritual means by which we invite a loving God to influence our decisions.

Concept 7: All members of a service body bear substantial responsibility for that body's Decision 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.

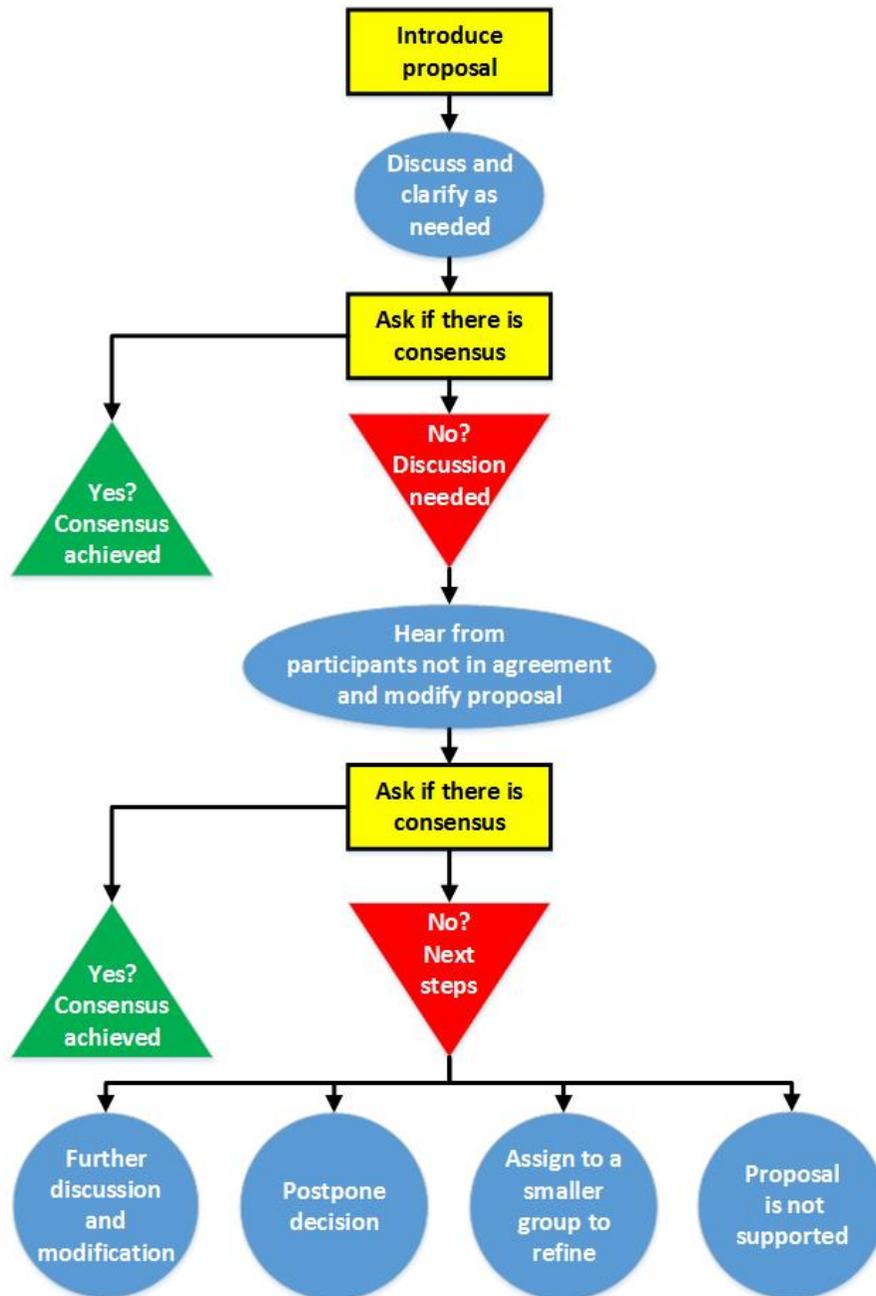
Why Consensus-Based Decision Making?

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. CBDM offers a potentially more inclusive process than parliamentary procedure, which can marginalize addicts who do not know "the rules" well. Our service bodies should be a forum 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.

How does CBDM work?

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. 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.

Below, some of the details and variations are described.



Introduce proposal

Provide relevant details including:

- Why is the proposal necessary?
- What are the specific objectives of the proposal?
- What human and financial resources 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.

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.

Ask if there is consensus

A simple way to do this is to ask the room “Is everyone comfortable with 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 make a decision.

Others include options such as “agree 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.

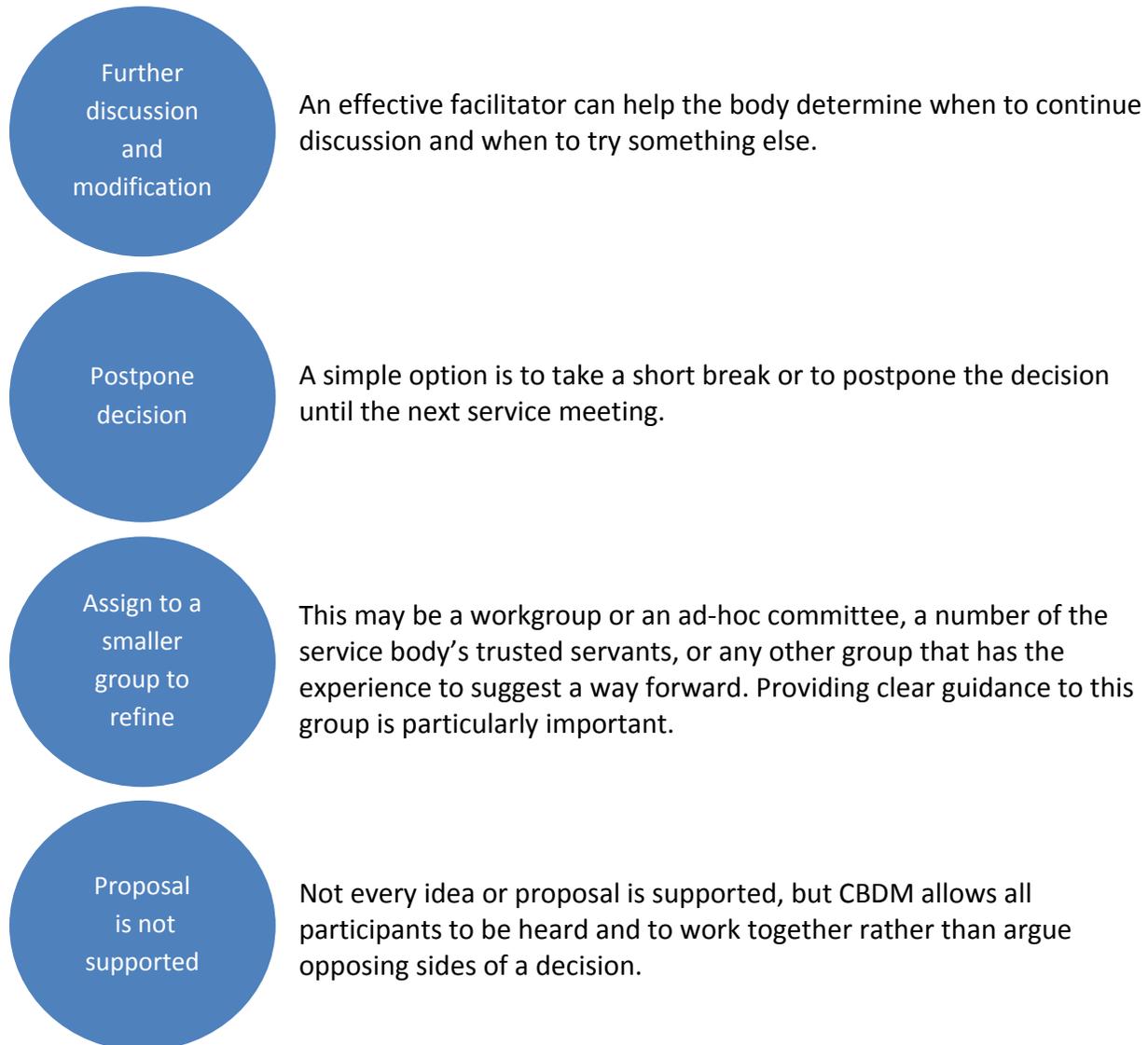
Community decision: What is the threshold for achieving consensus? Some options include:

- 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 – “consensus not in 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

This phase allows those not in agreement to share their concerns. All participants are encouraged to listen and offers ideas for modifying the proposal. Not all concerns will lead to changes.



What types of decisions can we use CBDM for?

CBDM can be used to reach agreement on the type 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.

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 turning into an open sharing session and help everyone to reach a decision they can all agree with in a timely manner.

What does the facilitator do?

The role of the facilitator is to help a group or service body reach consensus on an issue. To do this certain actions are required:

- Ensure everyone has a clear understanding of the process being used and the issue being discussed.
- Help everyone to participate, including the quieter members in the room.
- 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 towards a decision when needed.
- Ensure everyone has a clear understanding of any decisions that are made and any further actions that are required, and that these are recorded.

Different communities will expect different levels of participation from their facilitator. Some require them to simply 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 being 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.
- Patience and the understanding that some participants may need more time to reach a decision than others.

What spiritual principles can we 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:

- 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.

Participating in a CBDM Body

The Seventh Concept essay reminds us that “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 other trusted servants on the team. The full participation of each member 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 or some other set of parliamentary guidelines. However, CBDM also requires some skills that parliamentary procedures do 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 towards 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 preference.
- Commit to 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 role 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 decisions can be revisited if needed.
- The ability to pass on making a point when someone else has already made it.
- An awareness of personal characteristics and circumstances, and how these may effect 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 we apply?

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

- 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 discussed in the Ninth Concept, this does not mean that all opinions influence the final decision.
- Patience – allowing 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.