

## Reach Consensus

Having disagreements in a team environment is inevitable. One of the most challenging responsibilities of a facilitator is helping a group reach consensus in order to make a decision on tough, controversial issues. Even facilitators that deftly solve problems that commonly arise during meetings may find themselves unable to reconcile different viewpoints among their staff and volunteers.

Before we begin, please think about two questions:

1. Have you ended an argument with “we will agree to disagree”? What was the result?

Recognize that it is okay if your personal views are different from the consensus view reached by your organization. Sometimes you may personally feel that your organization should be doing more, but as an organization you recognize that your current capacity is limited. What you believe as an individual may not always be exactly what your organization agrees to do. Recognizing this difference can be especially hard for executive directors of organizations.

2. If you and your teammates have a disagreement, is there a better way to reach consensus than “agreeing to disagree”?

“Agreeing to disagree” might be okay with people who you do not know well, but it is not an option at a small

NGO when you need to make a decision on an important matter. Please remember: you should never end a meeting with everyone in disagreement. In order to work together, especially in smaller organizations, it is important to have shared goals and a shared sense of responsibility. At the same time, it may not be possible to reach 100% agreement. What can you do in this case?

One way is to find the “lowest common denominator” or areas of commonality or overlap between different viewpoints, even if they are small. From small areas of agreement, you can work to build consensus or reach a decision that people can agree with, at least in part.

## Role-playing Exercise

Reaching consensus can be especially difficult when your organization faces a decision about its mission or future direction, as in the scenario we will discuss next. You may

In this exercise, every group has to practice setting ground rules, conducting constructive discussions, dealing with disagreements or other issues (for example, people are not providing input), and reaching a consensus.

encounter a similar situation when working with your staff and volunteers to create a strategic plan for your organization (refer to [How to Make a Strategic Plan](#)). Some people may want to develop your work in one direction, while others may want to move in a different direction. Consider this role-playing exercise practice for facilitating the strategic planning meeting you will learn in the next chapter.

Read the following scenario and, if there are more than ten participants, divide into groups of five. Each group will select one person to facilitate the discussion; the other four people will role-play staff members, volunteers, or other meeting participants. By the end of the discussion, your group must reach a decision on whether or not to accept the grant and start a new program. You can cut or increase roles, as necessary.

**Scenario:** You are working in an NGO called Children Treatment Support. The mission is to provide HIV/AIDS treatment, social support, and education for affected children in Anhui Province. Lately, you have found that most donors are interested in funding primarily to Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV (PMTCT) programs. PMTCT is also a hot topic in the field of pediatric AIDS. Therefore, treatment, social support, and education are receiving less and less funding. Your organization has just been contacted by an American foundation – The Elizabeth Glaser Children HIV/AIDS Foundation, which would like to fund your new program.

However, some of your colleagues worry that your organization will drift from its original mission if you take this grant.

Before discussion, you can think about the questions below:

1. What are the benefits of taking this grant?
2. What are the risks?
3. How will you make the final decision on whether take it or not?

Give participants 45 minutes to discuss in groups, and then invite one person from each group to report their discussion. The speaker must be chosen from the ones who did not facilitate the group discussion. Speakers' reports should cover the following:

1. Has your group reached consensus? What was your final decision?
2. What was successful in your discussion?
3. What could have been improved in your discussion?
4. Are there other questions that arise from your discussion?
5. How was this role-play different from real life discussions within your organization?
6. What are the similarities between the problems that occurred in the role-play and the problems that arise in similar scenarios at work?
7. What would you do differently if you were to have the same discussion in the future?