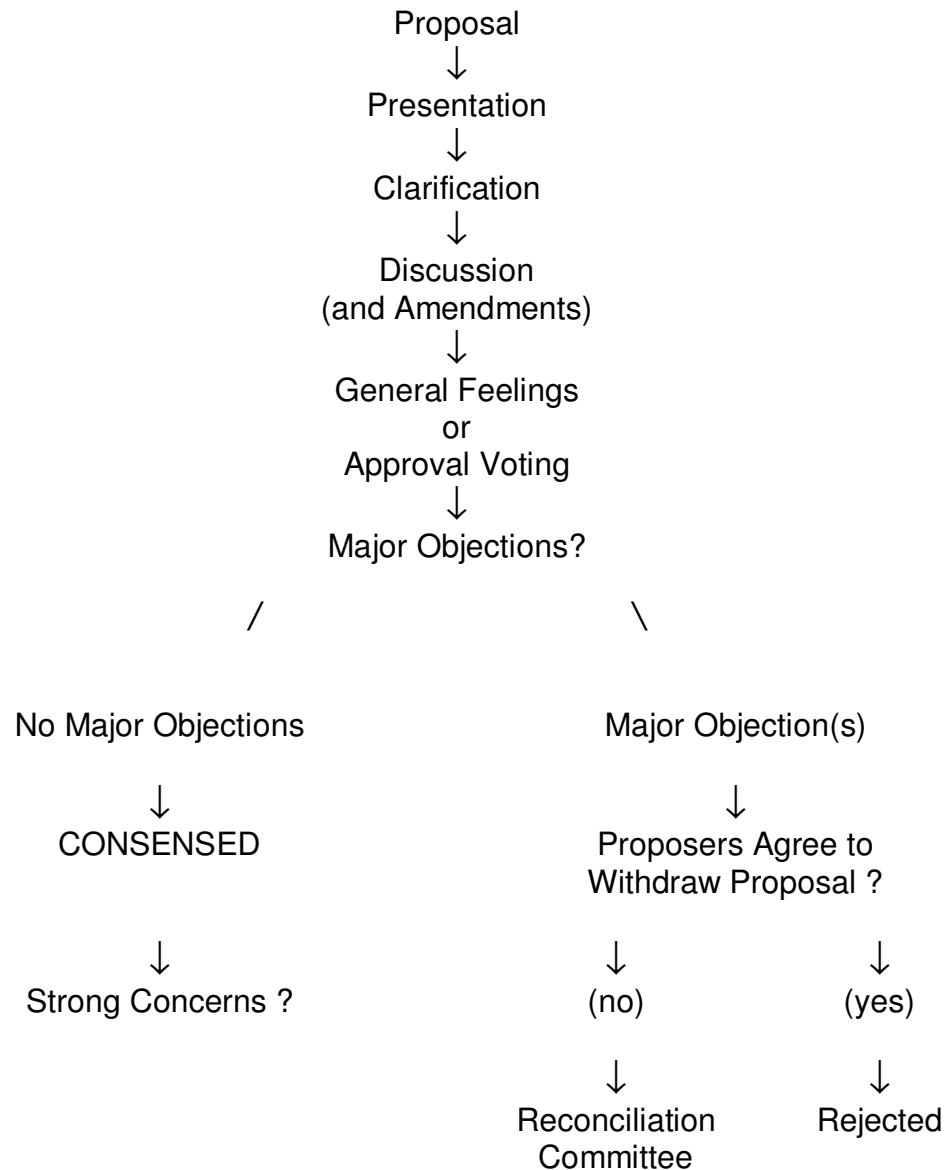


The OSCA Board's Decision-Making Process

Consensus

Flow Chart



A Brief Explanation of the Consensus Flow Chart

Proposal: A proposal concerns a change in OSCA's policy, the establishment of new policy or any situation that has arisen and must be dealt with by the Board. A proposal should be written in proper OSCA proposal form.

Amendment: An amendment is an alteration of the proposed section. Generally, amendments are made in the "clarification" part of the process, to make the intent of the proposal clear. Amendments during the "discussion" part of the process usually follow a good bit of discussion and aim at summarizing an articulated sentiment of the Board. **If amendments are made in co-op discussions, notify the entire Board so everyone can discuss it within their co-ops.**

Consideration Process

Presentation: The author(s) of the proposal or someone representing it, explains the proposal briefly. It is helpful to read the proposed, summarize the reason for the proposal, and state some areas for consideration.

Clarification: This is the time for bringing up any factual questions about the proposal. At the end of this time everybody should fully understand what is being considered.

Discussion: Between clarification and discussion, the proposers should step down from that role and become a regular member of the group again. This prevents the discussion from just going back and forth between proposers and to others. The discussion should allow the surfacing of the feelings concerning the proposal. Question on intent, benefits, and necessity and overall ramification of the proposal are incorporated here.

Caucus: For some proposals, the first week they come around they are only discussed -- there is no attempt to decide on them. This "caucus" provides an opportunity for Board Reps to find out answers to co-ops' questions and relay them back to the co-op before a final decision has to be made. It also allows the proposal's writers to hear feedback and modify their proposal if necessary. The second week the proposal comes, the Board may make its decision. In a caucus, the Board's process ends with discussion. (Caucusing is a recent innovation; it has not been made a formal part of the consensus process.)

General Feelings: Is the beginning of the process of resolution. Usually brief, it is what the group as a whole feels. Often it's as simple as thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

Major Objections: *This is different from regular co-op process!* An objection is where a participant simply cannot live with the result of the proposal and will not accept it regardless of the general feeling of the group with the following exceptions: if the person making the objection is not a regular participant of the Board, and if the regular participants agree by consensus that the objection is invalid, the Board may disregard the objection. (This has only occurred in extreme and unusual circumstances.)

Major objections must be voiced at the time and place that a co-op votes on the proposal and it is recorded by the co-op Board Rep. It is not possible to major object by proxy. An individual who major objects should be present at the Board meeting when the proposal comes to the Board. Once a proposal has been passed by the Board, it is legally binding.

Strong Concerns: This provides an outlet for the group members to register ideas and/or disagreements, but without halting action on the Board. It is also a method of insuring that the policy be implemented within the constraints set by the group.

Results

Consensus: There is general agreement with the decided course of action among those participating. Everybody feels comfortable with the decision; that is, while some may prefer a different course of action, they do not feel that their problems with the proposal are severe enough to justify blockage.

Reconciliation Committee: This committee attempts to deal with a major objection by having a brainstorming caucus and/or developing amendments. The Board may or may not give the committee the power to accept an amended proposal. This committee should consist of one of the original proposers, the major objectors, and some who are interested and neutral.

Rejection: The group as a whole feels that the proposed action is too problematic to act upon, that the concept is not desirable, or the proposal cannot be amended to become acceptable to the group.

Remember that at any point, any person who is confused about the process or wishes to point out that focus has been lost, may state a "process question or suggestion".

Goals of Consensus

Why do we use consensus? What's it supposed to do? The following goals are not always met, but they are generally what people want to get out of consensus.

1. **Cooperation, not conflict.** Using majority vote, the situation is often one of one side against another side, where one side wins, and the minority must lose. But there is almost always a third (and 103rd) way. Consensus aims to approach problems from an entirely different perspective. It's not about winning and losing, it's about understanding everyone's viewpoint and perspective and finding the best solution. Consensus is working things out until everyone agrees on the best course of action under the given circumstances.
2. **Everyone can live with the decision.** Decisions reached by consensus shouldn't have to be "enforced." Things happen because everyone agrees they will happen. The decision reached is one everyone has helped shape, and with which everyone can feel united. No one is forced to follow a decision they can't live with.
3. **No minorities.** Okay, so even if we don't like it, there is often one faction that thinks one thing and one or more factions that think another. But when consensus works right, everyone has a voice, and no one is silenced. Minority viewpoints are kept in the open, because everyone has a chance to speak. The community is forced to deal with everyone's issues, rather than ignore the minority.

Some Problems with Consensus

Things that can keep consensus from working.

- 1. It takes a long time.** Consensus, working things out until everyone agrees the best course of action, can take a lot longer than just voting and going with the most powerful faction. People get tired of dealing with things, especially when most issues are discussed at meals where some people would rather be socializing. Consensus can take a long time, but we arrive at better solutions through it! It's important not to be hurried, to be willing to discuss things for as long as it takes, or even put a divisive issue aside for a while and come back to it.
- 2. Consensus is conservative.** Once you've decided something, it holds until everyone can agree on how to change it. If there's an issue that people are having trouble agreeing on, you can get stuck with a "status quo" that nobody really likes. This is especially bad in OSCA where membership changes every year, as the "status quo" might have been decided upon by an entirely different group of people. But if everyone agrees the status quo is unacceptable, then it must be possible, if difficult, to find a change that everyone will agree is better. Consensus gives individuals the power to hold back group decisions. While this is one of OSCA's greatest protections against insanity, it also serves to keep OSCA from being as progressive and radical as it could be.
- 3. The minority can be silenced.** Because everyone needs to agree on a decision, and because people sometimes don't want to spend the time necessary to arrive at a true consensus decision, there can be pressure against voicing dissent to the majority opinion, because it is seen as causing problems. Sometimes powerful personalities can dominate the process. These are exactly what consensus is meant to avoid! It's important that people respect "dissenting" or "minority" viewpoints, and that people feel comfortable speaking up when they object to the direction things seem to be headed. It's also important that people realize they don't need to agree with a decision 100% to consense to it—the point of voicing a strong concern is to make it clear that you do not agree with a decision, but are willing to go along with it as the best the group is going to be able to agree on. It's important that the facilitator works to make sure everyone feels comfortable talking.

Reconciliation Committee

On the consensus process flow chart, you will see a "reconciliation committee." If there is a major objection to a proposal, it is possible to move to a reconciliation committee rather than simply throwing the proposal out. When a reconciliation committee is used, good solutions can result; not just "compromise" solutions that everyone can agree on, but solutions actually better than the original proposal because of the additional time spent working through problems. With proposals before your individual co-op, a reconciliation committee might be more time and trouble than people are willing to spend. But with all-OSCA Board proposals especially, the reconciliation committee can be a valuable method of working through differences to arrive at the best proposal possible.

A reconciliation committee is NOT the proper place to attempt to change the major objector's mind. It is an opportunity to amend a proposal so that it is acceptable both to the original proposer and to the major objector. To reach this goal, a reconciliation committee should consist of the major objector(s) and a proponent of the original proposal. There should be an even number of representatives of both sides so that no one feels that they are being ganged-up on. A neutral facilitator should also be present. This need not be an LEC, but should be

someone that both sides feel comfortable with. It is suggested that the committee meet somewhere private and quiet where the issue can be discussed without disruption. If a compromise is reached, the new proposal must be introduced and decided on by the whole co-op before it goes into effect. A reconciliation committee is not the natural outgrowth of a major objection. It is only useful if both sides are willing to talk. If someone wishes to form a reconciliation committee (anyone in the co-op may make this move) then they should inform the LEC. It is the responsibility of the LEC to notify the entire co-op that a reconciliation committee is forming. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to organize the committee. A reconciliation committee cannot take more than a semester. Remember, you can always reintroduce a proposal without a reconciliation committee.

Some Guidelines for Reaching Consensus

1. Present your position as lucidly and logically as possible, but listen to the other members' reactions and consider them carefully before you press your point. Avoid arguing solely for your own ideas.
2. Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate. Instead, look for the next-most-acceptable alternative for all parties. Be creative.
3. Distinguish between major objections and discomfiture or amendments. A major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal.
4. Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony. When agreement seems to come too quickly and easily, be suspicious, explore the reasons and be sure that everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons. Yield only to the positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.
5. Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, and bargaining. When a dissenting member finally agrees, don't feel that they must be rewarded by having their own way on some later point.
6. Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements can help the group's decision because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance that the group will hit on more adequate solutions.
7. Decision making through consensus involves discussion and accountability of viewpoints as opposed to power struggles. Postponement of decisions to give time to reconsider and recognize that all people participating are able to accept and work with the decision is vital to the consensus process.
8. Remember that the ideal behind consensus is empowering versus overpowering, agreement versus majorities/minorities. The process of consensus is what you put into it as an individual and a part of a group.
9. Think before you speak; listen before you object. Through participating in the consensus process, one can gain insight into not only others but also one's self.

Consensus on the Board: Representing Your Co-op

When the consensus process is used in an individual co-op, everyone is speaking mainly for themselves. The consensus process on the OSCA Board is more complicated in that many Board members are Board Reps not speaking for themselves, but speaking on behalf of the co-op they represent. How can a Board Rep best discuss and vote on behalf of their co-op? Here are a few issues involved.

Delegate vs. Representative

Some people have drawn a distinction between a “representative” and a “delegate” of a group. A representative, like a U.S. senator for example, is empowered to make their own decisions on behalf of their constituency. A delegate, on the other hand, is more tightly tied to their constituency, mainly relaying their decisions and beliefs rather than making decisions for them. The Green Party, for instance, tries to make all of its functionaries delegates rather than representatives. There is seldom discussion of this issue within OSCA, but people seem to assume that Board Rep should be a “delegate” rather than “representative” role. Perhaps because the cooperative principles and consensus process imply this sort of representation.

Trustee vs. Delegate

In addition to being a delegate of their co-op, a Board Rep is also a member of the Board of Directors of the legal corporation OSCA, and as such has certain legal responsibilities as “trustee” of the organization. See the appendix to the Board Manual for some information on an OSCA director’s legal responsibility toward the organization. As trustee, you must carry out your duties with prudence and care acting in the best interest of OSCA, even sometimes against the decision of your co-op when it decides something you think is illegal or seriously against OSCA’s best interests.

Representing your Co-op

An issue that has come up often is not related to legal liability of a trustee, but with how a Board Rep should vote on the Board to best represent their co-op.

When discussing a proposal in your co-op, you should be aware that when you are done, you need to know what your co-op wants you to do on the Board. Should you put your thumb up, down, or in the middle? Should you major object, or voice a strong concern?

If your co-op is predominantly in favor of a proposal, and passes it, obviously you should put your thumb up. Likewise, if your co-op is predominantly against the proposal, and does not pass it, you should probably put your thumb down, vote against the proposal – although if it failed because of specific concerns, you might decide those concerns were dealt with adequately in Board discussion, and then go along with the proposal.

But what if about half your co-op is in favor, and half is against? Does this mean you put your thumb in the middle position? Or, because the proposal did **not** pass in your co-op, does that mean you should put your thumb down? Or are you free to do whatever you want as Board Rep in this situation?

Major Objections

Under the consensus process, a proposal cannot pass if there is a major objection *from a Board member*. If your co-op was almost unanimously in favor of a proposal, but one member major objected, are you as Board Rep obligated to major object on the *Board* on their behalf? You are not obligated to do so by the rules of OSCA, but in what circumstances are you ethically obligated to major object in order to best represent your co-op's members?

If your co-op can agree by consensus that you should major object on their behalf, that's easy. But what if most of your co-op is in favor of the proposal, but it did not pass in your co-op because of one major objection? Two major objections? Three? If there are more than one, perhaps you should major object. If there are only one or two major objections, does it matter why the member is major objecting? What if they were to admit they were doing it just to make trouble? What if it's a proposal carrying out a mission already agreed on in a former proposal, and the member says they are objecting to the whole mission on principle? If the proposal would have passed in your co-op without the major objection, might it be right to put your thumb down on the *Board*, but not major object?

You should always encourage members with major objections or particular concerns about a proposal to attend the part of the Board meeting where that proposal is discussed. This can be vital – if you come to the Board and say you are major objecting on a member's behalf, but the member is not there, that basically ends the discussion. There is no possibility of compromise, or of working through to a better solution that everyone agrees with, because the person who doesn't agree isn't even there.

Some Scenarios

As representative of co-ops on the Board, one is constantly in the position of trying to gauge one's role: Should I be a trustee of the corporation, guarding OSCA against the intentions of some members? Is it more important for me to see the Board does the "right" thing according to my conscience or the "right" thing as defined by the people in my co-op?

Here are some scenarios. Consider how you would act keeping in mind both your role as delegate and trustee:

- 1) In the course of discussion, you come to learn more about an issue than you knew when presenting this issue to the co-op. Some people in the co-op had expressed strong feelings against the proposal, and you had agreed with them – until the meeting. Now you are no longer sure. Do you continue to represent those members' opinions?
- 2) A fairly routine proposal comes to the Board regarding a fund transfer the Treasurer wishes to make. The members of your co-op couldn't care less. Are you still obligated to present this proposal to your co-op? Can you legitimately decide what the people in your co-op need to hear about the Board and its actions?
- 3) The President of OSCA is approached by the College and told that Pod C is being considered as an additional dining co-op. The College is firm, however, that she can mention this possibility to no one due to the sensitive nature of the campus politics involved. Specifically, the College will withdraw the proposal from consideration if word gets out. Should the President divulge the information, or work on the 10th co-op without talking to anyone else?

- 4) A proposal is being discussed to divert what amounts to \$40 per person from refunds to a scholarship fund. Your entire co-op is strongly in favor of the proposal, except for one person. That one person says that she is major objecting just because she wants the \$40 back in her pocket, she doesn't care about OSCA's future. **Or** he is major objecting because he objects to scholarships on principle, even though the principle of giving scholarships was already passed in a previous proposal. **Or** she is major objecting because she thinks the money would be better spent by OSCA on something other than scholarships. **Or** because he thinks as a general principle refunds should never be used for anything but refunds. Does it even matter what the reason for the major objection is? Would it matter if the rest of your co-op was not so strongly in favor of the proposal?

Some Suggestions for Being a Better Facilitator on the Board and in your Co-op

1. Your job is to encourage interaction among others, not interaction with you. Look at other people while someone is speaking rather than at the speaker. You are neither expected nor supposed to give some response to each person.
2. Put yourself on stack if you wish to reply to a point.
3. Keep to stack. Use your judgment when allowing for "direct responses"; they tend to be abused. Remember, you cannot direct respond to a direct response.
4. You don't have to be totally neutral, but be wary of pushing your own agenda. Avoid making comments or motions that indicate approval or disapproval.
5. If someone talks overly long, don't hesitate to interrupt and ask the person to conclude their point.
6. If there are clearly two sides, and one side is dominating discussion, suggest that speakers alternate from one side and then from the other for a brief period of time.
7. Write down the major points people are making, and summarize periodically what has been said. Use a chalk/white board if you like. This helps cut down on repetition.
8. Organize complex discussions by handling the major issues separately. Separate stacks are often useful.
9. Keep the discussion focused. Don't be afraid to interrupt and suggest that the person save their point for another discussion, or ask how the point relates to the question at hand.
10. Keep a list of questions that ought to be resolved by the end of the discussion, and make sure that they are.
11. The Board sometimes has a tendency to micromanage, and it's the tiniest questions that often take the most time to resolve. If you feel an issue could be handled by staff or a committee, suggest that, and see what their response is.

12. In a long discussion, take "straw polls" (non-binding general feelings) from time to time to see how people are feeling.
13. Watch the group dynamics. If it seems that one group/category of people are speaking more often, at greater length, or with more of an air of authority than others, mention it so that all are conscious of what's happening.
14. If the discussion seems to reach a roadblock, try taking a break or switching facilitators.
15. You might be scared of participating too much as facilitator, being too pushy. But in OSCA, facilitators tend to participate too little *as facilitator*. Don't be afraid to do all of the above stuff if it seems necessary – it's the job of a good facilitator. At the same time, be careful to act only as facilitator, and not talk on the issue without getting on stack or clearly favor one point of view. Then you *can* act as facilitator with credibility and respect.

Suggestions for Participating in Better Board Discussions

1. LISTEN. LISTEN. LISTEN.
2. Ask questions if you have them. "There's no such thing as a stupid question" (unless asking it demonstrates that you've violated rule #1).
3. Indicate agreement with someone by motioning with your fist or fingers (ask for a demonstration of how it's done), instead of by placing yourself on stack and repeating what was already said.
4. Write down ideas as they come to you. The most brilliant thoughts are often lost between conception and vocalization.
5. When it is your turn, be prepared to speak concisely and precisely. Avoid droning on and on and on and on.
6. Distinguish between people and issues. Challenge sloppy and unwise thinking, but don't attack the speaker on a personal level.
7. Condescension, sarcasm, and intimidation are not appropriate tools of argument.
8. Unless the discussion is about a particular person, for a legitimate reason, expressing or insinuating your opinion of someone's character is very out of place in a Board meeting. Also, Board discussions are not places to air gossip.
9. Even if you find a proposal absolutely offensive, please don't attack the facilitator. They have probably done nothing to deserve your wrath.
10. Remember that body language can speak as loudly as words.
11. Refrain from dropping references only a few people will catch. If you are bringing up an unfamiliar point, ask if anyone needs it explained.
12. Speak as often as you wish, but don't feel you must say something about every issue.
13. Respect the stack. You will get your turn to speak. "Direct responses" should only be offered when requested by the speaker or facilitator.

A Brief Discussion of All-OSCA Votes

At times in the past, there has been a great deal of controversy on the OSCA Board about the role of All-OSCA votes. Any OSCA member at a board meeting can call for an all-OSCA vote (see continuing policy). OSCA can only have so many a semester before the membership burns out and quorums are impossible to reach. This frustration has caused debate on the philosophy behind OSCA votes. Opinions range from only having votes when the By-laws demand it (the rest is the responsibility of the board, that's why the membership elects them so they don't have to be bothered) to OSCA is based on participatory democracy (which is what the members want) and any effort to restrict or discourage that would be detrimental to OSCA.

Sometimes people argue that having a vote is the only thorough way to educate the membership on an issue. Are votes good simply for their "side effect" of educating the membership? Should an All-OSCA vote be used with an issue simply because it is controversial? or because consensus on the board isn't working?