



CHILDREN'S TRUST
OF ALACHUA COUNTY

DATA TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE AGENDA

March 31, 2022 at 9:30 AM

CTAC, 802 NW 5th Ave, Gainesville, FL 32601

Welcome

Roll Call

Meeting Topics

- Our Purpose
- How are we going to work together?
- Our Objectives
- Who are we?
- Topic Selection

Public Comments

Close

Supporting Documents

- Attachments

Virtual Meeting Information

1. Zoom Link to Register: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_19MC_NVnR0CqTqwYZfQJvg
2. View or listen to the meeting: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpYNq_GkCo9FQo3qR5-SOw
3. Public Comments: Submit online at <http://www.childrenstrustofalachuacounty.us/commentcard>.

File Attachments for Item:

1. Attachments



Item 1.

CHILDREN'S TRUST
OF ALACHUA COUNTY

Data Technical Advisory Committee

Children's Trust of Alachua County

March 31, 2022

Our Purpose: What we want to get out of collecting data?

Data will help us to better strategically focus, collaborate, and achieve improvements in child well-being.

How are we going to work together?

- Florida Sunshine Law
- Our Collaborative Process
- About the Trust



How are we going to work together?

- Florida Sunshine Law – presented by Bob Swain, Deputy County Attorney



How are we going to work together?

- **Collaborate** = we are looking to partner with you in formulating solutions and will incorporate the groups advice into the final recommendation.
 - ✓ The final decision on whether to accept our recommended policy is up to the Children's Trust Board.
- **Consensus**-based decision making, whereby members of a group actively participate in finding a decision together that all members can feel comfortable with.

Collaboration and Working Together

- ❖ Think of a group you participated in, that you found to be especially effective, and satisfying to be a part of. What were factors that you think contributed to its success?



Appreciative Inquiry

Discovery: Valuing the Best of **“What Is”**

Dream: Envisioning **“What Might Be”**

Design: Discussing **“What Should Be”**

Destiny: Innovating **“What Will Be”**

About the Children's Trust of Alachua County

- Voter approved independent special taxing district.
- Authorized in November 2018, up for reauthorization in 2030.

Mission Statement

The Children's Trust of Alachua county funds and supports a coordinated system of community services that allows all youth and their families to thrive.

Vision Statement

Facilitate equitable access and opportunities for all children and families in Alachua County to ensure every children reaches their maximum potential.



About the Trust: Our Goals

Children are born healthy & remain healthy.



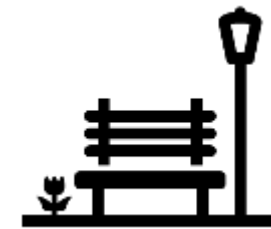
Children have nurturing & supportive caregivers & relationships.



Children learn what they need to be successful.



Children live in a safe community.



About the Trust: Board Members

<p>Dr. Maggie Labarta – Chair</p>	<p>Tina Certain – Vice Chair</p>	<p>Lee Pinkoson – Treasurer</p>	<p>Dr. Karen Cole-Smith</p>	<p>Ken Cornell</p>
				
<p>Dr. Nancy Hardt</p>	<p>Judge Susan Miller-Jones</p>	<p>Dr. Patricia Snyder</p>	<p>Cheryl Twombly</p>	
				

Children's Trust Staff

<p>Kristy Goldwire – Acting Executive Director</p>	<p>Ashley Morgan- Daniel – Executive Assistant & Clerk of the Trust</p>	<p>Mia Jones – Early Childhood Coordinator</p>	<p>Deon Carruthers – Contract Manager</p>	<p>Belita James – Contract Manager</p>
				
<p>Nicole Odom – Fiscal Assistant</p>	<p>Bonnie Wagner – Research, Planning & Evaluation Coordinator</p>	<p>Daniel Douglas – Communications Manager</p>	<p>Elizabeth Cayson – Community Engagement Coordinator</p>	
				

Our Objectives

We are a policy creating committee!

1. The data collection processes and specific data elements that CTAC will need to require to meet the information needs of the Trust contracts (which may differ based on the contract objectives).
2. The data management infrastructure the Trust will need to collect and hold information in compliance with any confidentiality or privacy standards that apply.
3. The type(s) of analytics tools, dissemination procedures, and quality improvement processes the Trust should have in order to make effective use of the data.



Data Technical Advisory Team Members

- **Lee Pinkoson**, CTAC Board Representative
- **Tina Certain**, CTAC Board Representative
- **Taylor Gilfillan**, Director of Analytics, Evaluation, & Accountability, SBAC
- **Fred Posner**, Director, The Palner Group
- **Shirley Watts**, Director Community Praise Center, dba Heavenly Kids Academy
- **Lauren Levitt**, Parenting Program Coordinator, Project Youth Build
- **Anne Koterba**, Realtor, Bosshardt Realty, Board Chair, Aces in Motion
- **Michael Bowie**, Director, Community Engagement & Diversity Outreach, K-12
- **Janet Bente Romero**, Regional Planner, Florida Department of Children & Families



Who are we?

Opportunity for members to share about themselves:

- Why did you choose to be on this committee?
- Tell us a data story.



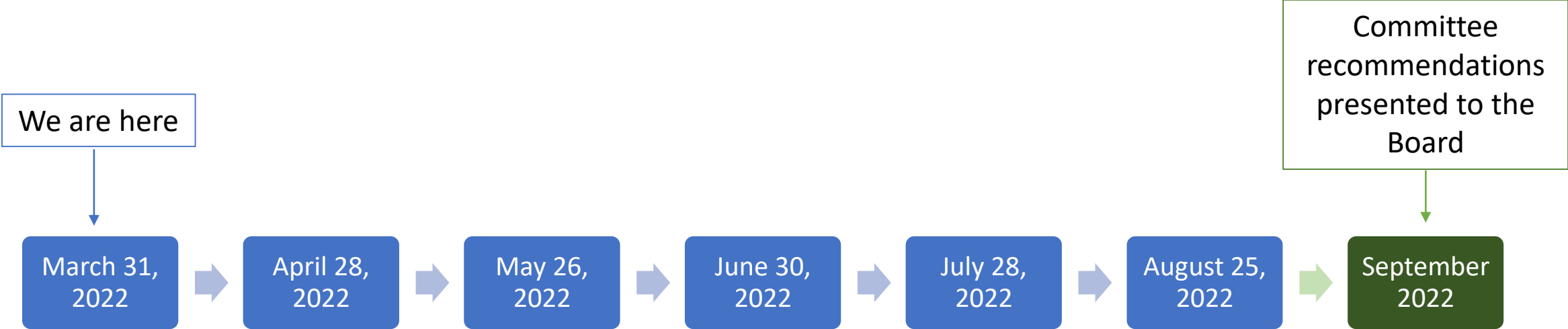
Topic Selection

An opportunity to give input on our topics of discussion for the policy.

- **What is our data strategy?** (i.e., philosophy, intent, and approach)
- **How do we gather information?** (i.e., methods, processes, data sharing agreements)
- **How do we secure information?** (i.e., data system, information management, security, HIPAA compliance)
- **How do we share results?** (i.e., communication, dissemination plan and tools)



What is next?



Public Comment

IN PERSON: Please complete a Comment Card from the registration table.

ZOOM: Please complete a Virtual Comment Card found here:

www.childrenstrustofalachuacounty.us/commentcard



Thank you!



Children's Trust of Alachua County Data Technical Advisory Committee Charge

Background

The Board at its December meeting determined the need for a technical advisory committee to make recommendations about the data needs and collection strategies for the Trust. As a result, staff sought applications for membership in the committee to obtain expertise and recommendations. Subsequently, at its February 23 Retreat, the Board identified the kinds of information that the Trust needs to have to document its effectiveness and community impact. With assistance from the retreat facilitator, the information was categorized as follows:

Outcomes-related – would it be possible to further condense, synthesize these responses?

- **Educational metrics** (i.e., kindergarten readiness, reading proficiency, parental involvement, high school graduation, transition to career and postsecondary achievements)
- **Health metrics** (i.e., RN visits, dental screenings & services)
- **Well-being and Safety** (i.e., DCF hotline calls, verified maltreatment investigations, DCF removals, Baker Acted children, juvenile justice involvement)
- **Impacts, improvements, and results** based on service receipt
- **Increase access** to services

Outputs-related

- **Knowledge of our reach** (i.e., how many children are served, with what service)
- **Who we are reaching** (i.e., demographics, age, race, sex, zip codes/census tracts, income levels, geographic locations)
- **Are services effective?** (i.e., participant perception on service, retention, how much services are received, progress)
- **How are funds being spent?** (i.e., investment per child/family, by category, institution, type of service)

CTAC Processes-related

- Measure of **community engagement** and **trust** in CTAC
- **Evidence of collaboration** with the other partners that support our mission (school board, faith-based, chamber)
- **Stories from across the community**; live testimonials from community members as to how they were impacted (videos, Instagram)

Committee Charge

Using these information categories, the Committee will make recommendations to the CTAC staff and Board as to the following:

1. The data collection processes and specific data elements that CTAC will need to require to meet the information needs of the Trust contracts (which may differ based on the contract objectives).
2. The data management infrastructure the Trust will need to collect and hold information in compliance with any confidentiality or privacy standards that apply.
3. The type(s) of analytics tools, dissemination procedures, and quality improvement processes the Trust should have in order to make effective use of the data.

Ms. Bonnie Wagner, CTAC's Research, Planning and Evaluation Coordinator, will serve as staff to the Committee. Membership on the committee will be capped at nine (9) and include two (2) Board members. Membership is limited to ensure quorum and continuity, but membership will be broad and public comment will be accepted. In addition to the members' expertise, the Committee may invite presentations from others involved with the CTAC or who have particular expertise to share. Committee members will meet for six (6) regularly noticed meetings.

Members:

Lee Pinkoson, CTAC Board Representative
Tina Certain, CTAC Board Representative
Taylor Gilfillan, Director of Analytics, Evaluation, & Accountability, SBAC
Fred Posner, Director, The Palner Group
Shirley Watts, Director Community Praise Center, dba Heavenly Kids Academy
Lauren Levitt, Parenting Program Coordinator, Project Youth Build
Anne Koterba, Realtor, Bosshardt Realty, Board Chair, Aces in Motion
Janet Bente Romero, Regional Planner, Florida Department of Children & Families
Michael Bowie, Director, Community Engagement & Diversity Outreach, K-12

The Committee is expected to report on its recommendations by September 30, 2022.

**CHILDREN'S TRUST OF ALACHUA COUNTY
RESOLUTION 2021-25**

ADOPTION OF CHAPTER 8 - DATA MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

WHEREAS, Florida Statute 125.901 To collect information and statistical data and to conduct research which will be helpful to the CTAC and the Alachua County in deciding the needs of children in Alachua County; and

WHEREAS, The CTAC finds that it is necessary to obtain certain information regarding the participants in CTAC-funded programs; and

WHEREAS, the CTAC recognizes the history and the risk of data being misused to negatively impact marginalized communities; and

WHEREAS, the CTAC desires to protect the personal identifiable information (PII) of children and guardians who participate in CTAC-funded programs,

NOW THEREFORE, be it ordained by the Board of the Children's Trust of Alachua County, in the State of Florida, as follows:

SECTION 1: **ADOPTION** “8 Data Management And Reporting” of the Children's Trust of Alachua County Board Policies is hereby *added* as follows:

ADOPTION

8 Data Management And Reporting(*Added*)

SECTION 2: **ADOPTION** “8.10 Purpose” of the Children's Trust of Alachua County Board Policies is hereby *added* as follows:

ADOPTION

8.10 Purpose(*Added*)

The purpose of this Section is to govern the CTAC's use of data in accordance with F.S.125.901. The CTAC finds that it is necessary to obtain certain information regarding the participants in CTAC funded programs to determine the effectiveness of the program in reaching the goals of the specific program and the overall goals of the CTAC.

SECTION 3: ADOPTION “8.20 Reasons for Data Collection” of the Children's Trust of Alachua County Board Policies is hereby *added* as follows:

ADOPTION

8.20 Reasons for Data Collection(*Added*)

The Executive Director has the authority to collect any data, or require the collection of data from vendors and contractors, that the Board deems necessary to:

- A. inform the Board as to which services are needed to provide for the general welfare of the children of Alachua County;
- B. provide services for children in Alachua County;
- C. accurately count the number of unduplicated participants served by CTAC funded programs;
- D. prevent the overlapping of services;
- E. facilitate intra-agency coordination of services;
- F. evaluate the quality and effectiveness, including cost effectiveness, of programs and services;
- G. ensure the continuity of services for children and families;
- H. monitor contract compliance; and
- I. ensure that the Goals, Strategies, and Objectives of the CTAC are being accomplished.

Vendors and contractors collecting personal identifiable information (PII) from children and families as required by CTAC as a condition of participation shall obtain consent, from a person legally authorized to give consent, to collect the information and provide it to the CTAC.

SECTION 4: ADOPTION “8.30 Responsibilities” of the Children's Trust of Alachua County Board Policies is hereby *added* as follows:

ADOPTION

8.30 Responsibilities(*Added*)

The Executive Director shall not fail to:

- A. treat all personally identifiable information (PII) collected by the CTAC as confidential subject to disclosure without consent only as required by law;
- B. follow the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and all other state and federal laws as applicable should the agency providing the data be covered by those specific

- acts, or if it is a requirement of a grant received by the CTAC,
- C. obtain consent before sharing PII with other contractors, vendors, or public or private entities, including the purpose for sharing the information,
- D. take every reasonable precaution to protect PII from disclosure, including, but not limited to establishing appropriate administrative, technical, or physical safeguards;
- E. ensure that data provided to third-party evaluators is either de-identified or shared under an appropriate data-sharing arrangement;
- F. ensure that reporting derived from information obtained PII be reported in a manner that does not identify any individual, and
- G. enter into appropriate data sharing agreements as required by law.

SECTION 5: **ADOPTION** “8.40 Public Records” of the Children's Trust of Alachua County Board Policies is hereby *added* as follows:

ADOPTION

8.40 Public Records(*Added*)

Personal identifiable information of a child, or the parent or guardian of a child, held by CTAC, or held by a service provider or researcher under contract with CTAC, is exempt from F.S. 119.07 (1) and Section 24 (a) Article 1 of the State Constitution.

PASSED AND ADOPTED BY THE CHILDREN'S TRUST OF ALACHUA COUNTY BOARD _____.

	AYE	NAY	ABSENT	ABSTAIN
Lee Pinkoson	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dr. Maggie Labarta	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tina Certain	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dr. Karen Cole-Smith	_____	_____	_____	_____
Ken Cornell	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dr. Nancy Hardt	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dr. Carlee Simon	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dr. Patricia Snyder	_____	_____	_____	_____
Cheryl Twombly	_____	_____	_____	_____
Susanne Wilson Bullard	_____	_____	_____	_____

Presiding Officer

Attest

Lee Pinkoson, Chairman, Children's Trust of Alachua County

Tina Certain, Treasurer Children's Trust of Alachua County

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CONSENSUS-BASED DECISION MAKING

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- **What Is Consensus-Based Decision Making?**
- **When to Use the Consensus Model**
- **Necessary Conditions**
- **Developing Participation Guidelines**
- **Procedures for Consensus Decision Making**
- **Optional Stances for Participants**
- **Comments on Facilitation**

**James Madden
London, Ontario**

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WHAT IS CONSENSUS-BASED DECISION MAKING?

Consensus-based decision making is based on a *deliberate process of consensus building*, whereby members of a group actively participate in finding a decision together that all members can feel comfortable with. A consensus decision does not necessarily reflect complete unanimity. However, decisions reached by consensus do reflect the thoughts and feelings of the group *as a whole*¹, rather than just the majority. Effective consensus building results in decisions that have been thoughtfully deliberated, incorporate diverse experience and views, and may produce the best possible decision given the configuration of interests that have come together for a given purpose.

The advantage of consensus-based decisions as compared with majority rule voting is that it avoids a fundamental problem often associated with voting. Voting may unintentionally result in a split or division in a group, a satisfied majority and disgruntled minority, a sense of winners and losers. Moreover, in the interest of efficiency, there may be a propensity to rush to a vote without full deliberation when opinion seems to be going in a certain direction. The consensus-building process is based on thoughtful, respectful, fulsome deliberation and an intention to find the best possible decision that suits the group as a whole.

Consensus decision making is based on the premise that everyone's voice is worth hearing and that all concerns that come from a place of integrity are valid. If a proposal is deeply troubling to even one person, that concern is respected; if it is ignored, the group is likely to make a mistake. Various practical procedures and optional stances that group members can employ in navigating the sometimes unsettled waters of consensus-building are discussed in this document.

A group committed to consensus may utilize other forms of decision making (e.g., executive decision, majority rule) when appropriate; however, a group that has adopted a consensus model will use that process for items of strategic importance, related to core values, or around which there is a common perception that "the stakes are high."

WHEN TO USE THE CONSENSUS MODEL

Making decisions by consensus may be more or less appropriate depending in part on what's at stake with a given decision.

¹ What makes a coherent group different than a mere collection of individuals? Complexity theory suggests that when individuals come together for a common purpose, under favorable conditions a qualitative "phase shift" may occur. The whole becomes greater than the sum of parts. This phenomenon is called "emergence." A collection of individuals becomes a community, as problems are solved, work is accomplished, relationships deepen, common values are affirmed, trust builds, traditions develop, and a story is told. Community members are willing to set aside certain vested interests based on a more encompassing set of values or interests, without sacrificing their core values or individuality. This is neither "collectivism" (in which individuals unthinkingly surrender themselves) nor "individualism" (in which self-interest always remains the overriding consideration).

A full consensus-building process may be most appropriate for:

- Strategic² decisions
- High stakes decisions
- Decisions for which a strong, united front is important

A full consensus-building approach may be unnecessary or less appropriate for:

- Operational or tactical³ decisions
- Decisions which have relatively minor impact and affect relatively few

NECESSARY CONDITIONS

Certain fundamental conditions need to be met in order to conduct an effective consensus-building process, including:

- Agreement on core values
- Willingness of members to both express interests as well as assume a “disinterested”⁴ stance
- Willingness to make it work – belief in the value of consensus-building
- Active listening
- Sufficient time
- Patience
- Trust
- Succinct expression of views and concerns
- Skilled facilitation
- Conducive setting – properly bounded

A group intending to employ consensus-based decision making would do well to carefully consider the extent to which it can meet these conditions. Most formal groups go through foundational exercises when forming, such as

WHAT CONSENSUS-BUILDING IS NOT:

Having worked as a Community Developer in various settings for more than 35 years, I have been part of many groups, teams, and organizations that have nominally adopted “consensus” as their decision-making procedure. Very often when a group decides to use a consensus model, there is little or no discussion of what that means, and little knowledge about how to conduct an effective consensus-building process. What tends to happen in such cases is that the voices of the most assertive individuals or those with the most power (informal or formal) dominate and shape the discussion, often with many voices unheard, and without careful deliberation or full consideration of alternatives. This is especially likely when organizations have full agendas and feel pressure to move quickly to get things done. After brief discussion, a decision is proposed by the chair or other powerful member, who, after glancing around the room asks, “Do we have consensus then?” Showing little receptivity and giving scant time for alternatives to be voiced, “consensus” is quickly declared. At the other end of the continuum are groups that, though seeking to follow the true spirit of consensus, are rudderless and seem to get bogged down in endless conversation loops, rehashing the same material over and over, with little sense of progress or movement to a fruitful decision. This primer seeks to assist groups to avoid these of kinds of *pseudo-consensus* traps, and to practice more effective consensus-based decision making.

² Strategic: of great importance within an integrated whole or to a planned effect.

³ Tactical: of or relating to small-scale actions serving a larger purpose; made or carried out with only a limited or immediate end in view.

⁴ Disinterested: Free from selfish motive or interest: unbiased. (See also comment in footnote ¹.)

developing vision and mission statements, and undertaking exercises to build trust. There are many resources readily available to assess a group's readiness along these lines, and to assist groups with such processes. When consensus-building breaks down, it usually points to an absence or shortage in one or more of these conditions. Further comment with respect to some of these conditions is offered throughout this guide.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING A CONDUCTIVE SETTING

I have on occasion quipped after an unsatisfying meeting that community development training programs should include a required course solely devoted to how to arrange chairs for a meeting. The point is to highlight the importance of careful attention to conditions that are conducive to good group process. Just the impact of the type of room and seating arrangement on group dynamics are often overlooked and underestimated. Seating should be arranged so that all participants can make good eye contact and readily hear one another. It is amazing to me how much this one factor affects meeting process. Long, narrow boardroom tables are not conducive. Like good hosts at a dinner party, meeting conveners should welcome and encourage participants to connect informally as they begin to gather. Refreshments help. If participants aren't well known to one another, name tags are important, and newcomers should be introduced and warmly welcomed. Extraneous distractions should be minimized so the group can focus. Almost like a formal ceremony, the facilitator should signal a clear opening to the meeting, which includes welcome and introductions, an overview of the purpose/agenda, and in early stages at least, a reminder about process guidelines. The idea is to deliberately create a "container" of dedicated time, space, and purpose, devoted to evoking the emergent process of consensus building.

Making decisions by consensus can be challenging. It asks participants to be mindful and bring their best intentions to the process. When a group begins to work together in this way it may feel awkward at first and take time to develop a group culture conducive to the process. When it works well, it is a very satisfying and energizing process. As group members begin to experience the difference it can make in terms of creativity, quality, commitment to and enthusiasm for decisions and planned actions, it builds the confidence and strength of the group.

DEVELOPING PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES

Developing participation guidelines is a very useful exercise for any group to undertake when forming itself. When a group collaboratively develops guidelines for how it wishes to conduct itself, intentionality and commitment to the group's efforts increases. Here's a suggestion for how to conduct such a process. Pose the following two scenarios, asking each group member to jot down their ideas individually. 1) *Think of a group you have participated in, that you found to be especially dysfunctional or unproductive. What were the factors that you think contributed to the dysfunction.* 2) *Think of a group you have participated in, that you found to be especially effective,*

productive, and satisfying to be part of. What were the factors that you think contributed to its success? Facilitate a group discussion, seeking to build consensus around a set of participation guidelines. Revisit these guidelines regularly, especially when the group is about to undertake a challenging consensus-building process.

I have distilled the following participation guidelines from many years of experience.

In order for the group process to be:

- Enjoyable
- Constructive
- Productive
- Cooperative
- High Quality

Each member agrees to:

- Take responsibility for helping group achieve a positive outcome
- Listen very carefully to what others are saying
- Monitor his/her level of participation (neither dominate nor withhold)
- Be aware of the purpose, stay on topic
- Engage with, build on, respond to the ideas of others
- Express disagreement or concerns constructively and with respect
- Be aware of how both verbal and non-verbal signals impact group dynamics
- Avoid side conversations when we are conducting business in the group as a whole
- Be fully present, for example avoid unnecessary use of smart phones.

PROCEDURES FOR CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

Consensus-building does not follow a recipe. It is not a mechanical process – there is no algorithm to guide it. It is a quintessentially *dialogical*, emergent human process that incorporates thought, feeling, knowledge, imagination, and lived experience. Nonetheless, it is a process that can be undertaken deliberately, mindfully, and whose broad contours can be mapped and navigated as follows.

1. An issue will emerge, in a meeting, from an agenda item, from a general discussion, or from a member. First, the people connected with the issue explain it. The facilitator ensures that the issue is stated in clear and positive terms.
2. Those present discuss the issue. The facilitator ensures that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and that the discussion stays focused on the issue at hand. (See *Comments on Facilitation* section.) Members express their thoughts and feelings honestly and succinctly; rather than repeating what has already been well-expressed, a member can simply indicate agreement with others.
3. A common answer to the issue may emerge during discussion with a self-evident decision presenting itself. The decision is stated in positive terms and the facilitator *canvasses each member* to see whether all questions and concerns have been satisfied to the point that all can agree. If so, consensus has been reached and is noted in the minutes (together with an indication of who will take what actions and when, if appropriate).
4. If consensus is not reached, a round may be initiated by the facilitator. In a round, each member in turn has an equal amount of time to comment on the issue, without interruption and without comments from the others (although questions may be asked for clarification only, when the person is finished).⁵ When the round is over, the facilitator summarizes what was said and clarifies the current status of the issue.
5. Individual differences may have merged during the round into a common answer. If so, the facilitator canvasses the group for agreement and the consensus is noted in the minutes.
6. If consensus is still not achieved, a second round may be undertaken.
7. If consensus is still not achieved, the group has to decide:
 - a. Whether progress is being made and further rounds may result in consensus, or
 - b. Whether one or more of the necessary conditions for consensus are not currently being met and if so whether an adjustment can be made to accommodate, or
 - c. If there is some fundamental split in the group, such as a divergence among some members around core values. The matter under contention would likely point to the value(s) in need of clarification.

⁵ In larger groups (e.g., more than 12 to 15), members need to be particularly disciplined and attentive to good group process. Members need to be as economical as possible in their comments, while still expressing what is essential in their view. Members are encouraged to simply indicate agreement if another member expresses well their view, or briefly qualify a viewpoint previously expressed. If issues arise that seem to require more deliberation, one option is to table the item, and charge a working group to go away and further deliberate and bring options back to the larger group.

THE POWER OF THE ROUND

A “round” (as described in the *Procedures* section) is a simple and amazingly powerful technique that, when utilized at an appropriate moment, can help open-up and move along a discussion that has bogged down, or seems to be bouncing around between just a few of the more assertive members of the group. It is especially useful for bringing into the discussion the perspectives of more introverted group members. Whereas more extraverted individuals develop their ideas and get energized by “thinking out loud,” introverts work their ideas through on the inside. Their thorough internal processing often results in more fully formed, richly nuanced perspectives. Introverts tend to need to have some space deliberately opened up for their views to be expressed in the group discussion. More introverted participants can be encouraged to assert themselves and extraverted members reminded to contain themselves as part of the general process guidelines, but it is also incumbent upon the facilitator to be attentive to this dynamic. This is not to disparage extraverts. Both energies are needed, but without deliberate attention to this dynamic, extraverts tend to dominant, and introverts’ contributions are often lost. I have found that deliberately slowing things down and making space for quieter voices by using a “round” has introduced the new idea or creative element that breaks the logjam, synthesizes divergent threads of the discussion, and reconciles apparent contradictions.

OPTIONAL STANCES MEMBERS CAN TAKE

A critical ingredient for success in consensus decision making is the conscious intention of members to participate in a spirit of consensus building. This process is greatly facilitated when members keep in mind and deliberately express themselves in terms of the following optional stances.

Expression of concern: Rather than taking a hard-and-fast negative position, members express their concerns and the reasons for them. This allows room for proposals to be modified to meet the concerns.

Reservations: After fulsome deliberation, one or more members may find a concern has not been satisfactorily addressed, but that they consider that concern relatively minor. The member(s) would then indicate that they have reservations. They might say “I still have some unresolved concerns; I have reservations but I can live with it.”

Non-support or standing aside: This stance allows a member to be clear that they do not agree with or support the proposed decision, without leaving or blocking the group from proceeding. The member might say, “I personally don’t support this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.” The member explicitly states that they are *standing aside* and this is noted in the minutes. If two or more members stand aside, perhaps additional work is required to conceive a more mutual solution.

Blocking or withdrawing from the group: Blocking means "I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. I perceive it to be in contradiction of our core values and/or unethical or immoral." Blocking can only be used very rarely without threatening the viability of the group. It should be a last resort. For blocking to be a viable option, an individual taking such a stand must be very clear, operating from deep conviction, and enjoy the trust and respect of the group. An individual may decide they do not feel justified in blocking the group, but neither can they continue to be a member based on the direction the group has taken.

If consensus breaks down: If several people express non-support, stand aside or leave the group, it may not be a viable decision even if no one directly blocks it. Some groups decide to take "blocking" as an optional stance off the table, and instead opt for a steep super-majority decision rule, such as two-thirds or three-quarters majority, in the event the consensus process seems to have become intractable. Some practitioners of consensus-building argue that to allow this option negates the spirit of consensus. In some situations (e.g., a group or team operating within a hierarchical organizational structure), failure to achieve consensus may result in the decision-making authority defaulting to a "higher authority." Either way, the group needs to decide what they will do if it is unable to achieve consensus. It must be emphasized however, that if the necessary conditions are met, and procedures described in this guide are followed, the prospects for success are very good!

COMMENTS ON FACILITATION

The role of facilitator is very important in consensus-based decision making. Facilitation is a learned skill that can be cultivated with practice, though some people seem to have a knack for it. Personal characteristics of good facilitators may include: experienced with group process, strong intuition, sensitivity and empathy, ability to summarize and synthesize elements of the discussion in clear and succinct terms, humour, and appropriate assertiveness.

The group may have among its membership, and choose to call on to serve the group, someone who is a highly skilled facilitator. If a number of members are skilled facilitators, or if the group wants to assist members to cultivate facilitation skills, it may want to experiment with co-facilitation or rotating the role.

The Role of Facilitator:

- Create a safe and conducive environment for group process – physical space, opening the meeting, providing context, setting tone, establishing participation guidelines.
- Use the agenda to frame discussion points, manage time and help group achieve the meeting's objectives.
- Facilitate the process without unduly influencing the content of the discussion.

- Moderate the discussion as necessary with the “right touch” to ensure everyone has a fair opportunity to participate.
 - Use a “lighter touch” in earlier or emerging phases of a discussion
 - Use more assertive interventions as discussion gets more energetic
- Track and periodically articulate the terms of the discussion as it evolves, seeking validation from the group that the issue is being framed accurately.
- Notice and articulate for the group at opportune moments, points of convergence and divergence in the ongoing group deliberation.
- Stay aware of and remind the group if necessary about consensus procedures, optional stances members may take, and participation guidelines.
- Make appropriate use of the “round” or other instant feedback techniques⁶ as a means of getting a reading on the developing sense of the group.
- Keep the meeting focused and moving at an appropriate pace –
 - Use intuition, pay attention to the energy associated with a discussion point.
 - Make group aware of time, check in to determine whether to continue on a point, table it for later discussion, or move on.
- Reinforce and support both “expression of concerns” and efforts by members to accommodate concerns through propositions that incorporate and synthesize divergent threads.
- Articulate and test for elements of consensus as it begins to emerge.
- If necessary, conduct one or more “rounds,” reminding members to speak economically while encouraging them to express all views relevant and essential to the decision.
- At the decision point, summarize the discussion, formulate the consensus statement in positive terms, and test for consensus.
- If the facilitator feels too emotionally involved in a particular discussion and has difficulty remaining neutral, s/he should ask someone to take over the task of facilitation for that agenda item. (Any group member may suggest that the facilitator consider yielding the chair for a particular discussion or decision point if the facilitator is perceived to be too personally invested in the outcome.)

⁶ For example, ask participants to indicate how they are leaning on a question using by show of hands for pro, con, or noncommittal; thumbs up/down; “clicker” polling technology, etc.

LEARNING THE SKILL OF FACILITATING CONSENSUS BUILDING

Probably the best way of becoming a skilled facilitator of consensus building is to attentively observe the process being conducted by an already experienced and skilled practitioner, while vividly imagining oneself in the role. And then, practice, practice, practice. Early in my career I had the good fortune of observing several skilled consensus builders. The most memorable instance was at the North American Bioregional Congress, which was held in the Grand Traverse Bay area of Michigan in August 1986. A group of about 80 ecological activists from across North America met daily over the course of a week to deliberate and come to consensus on a set of principles and actions to advance the Bioregional movement. Our facilitator was Caroline Estes, who had learned consensus building over the course of 25 years as a practicing Quaker and social activist. In an article published about that time that is still available on-line (<http://www.context.org/iclib/ic07/estes/>), Caroline describes the origins and history of the practice, including a long history and ongoing tradition within indigenous communities. Another excellent practical guide to assist in learning consensus building can be found on the website of the Wiccan social activist Starhawk (<http://starhawk.org/short-consensus-summary/>).

CONCLUSION

In this guide I have tried to offer practical suggestions as well as some more philosophical reflections on the process of consensus-based decision making, based on 35 years experience as a Community Developer.

Whereas a full, formal, consensus-based decision making process is not always necessary or appropriate, the spirit underlying consensus building can be brought by any individual to any group process. In my experience, these attitudes, skills, and stances applied in virtually any setting tends to help a group move in a more creative, inclusive, and healthful direction.

Please direct any comments or feedback on this guide to j.madden@sympatico.ca.