A Guide to the

Consent-Based Decision-Making Protocol

for Teams

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Introduction

Why We Created This Protocol

Who It's For

This protocol is for leaders who are already using consent-based decision-making, or who think this might be what they need. It works best for groups without traditional top-down structures, like impact networks and community-based projects. It works in places where the work is complex and relational. It helps people think about bigger systems while freeing them from getting "everyone in the room" to make decisions.

How It All Started

A small team met regularly with one of the creators in 2020. They were part of a statewide project in Alaska and needed clarity about how decisions are made in networks.

Their main question: *How do we maintain a structure where we include people in decisions that affect them or in which they have an interest -- even those who are new to the Alliance -- while making timely decisions that move us from discussion to action?*

The Practice of Deep Equity

We were also practicing deep equity and bringing our whole selves to the work. One participant was a middle-aged Alaska Native woman in recovery. She would tell us, "Rushing is violence." We spent eight months together in conversation on this one tool. During that time, she went through her adult daughter's death while staying sober. This workgroup became a healing space for her (and for all of us). She reminded us that no matter what we wrote, people would experience whether their voice was really heard in the quality of relationships and care - that's what really mattered. This tool is just a touchstone, a reminder of how we want to be together.

We hope people remember this as you read this Protocol: the map is not the territory. Consent is not a set of checkboxes, it’s an experience.

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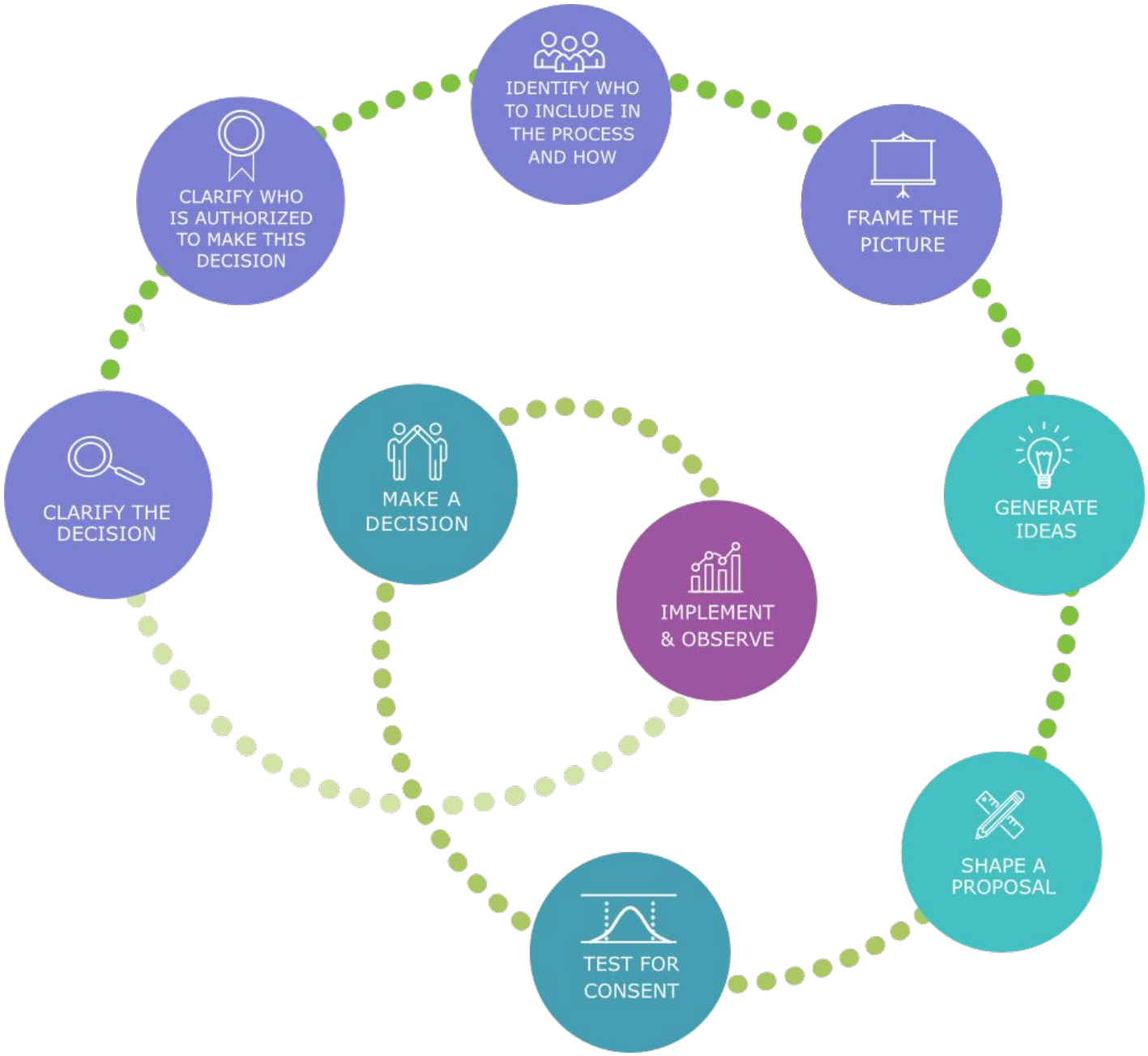
A Consent-Based Decision-Making Protocol for Teams



Why Clear Decision-Making Matters

People Want to Be Included and to Include Others

People who work in collaborative groups often express a strong desire for basic transparency and inclusion of voices. They want to put into practice the value of "nothing about us without us" - meaning people should have a say in decisions that affect them. Many of us first learned of this principle from disability rights activists, who still fight for the right to be included in decisions about their own lives and communities. We want to benefit from the wisdom of people who are impacted by decisions.

The Problem with Unclear Processes

Many people say it's very unsettling to hold this value but not know how decisions are getting made or where they happen. The process isn't visible to them. And because it's not visible, how can they participate? How can they let people know when important decisions are being made?

When working in social impact networks, groups are working on multiple centers of activity with complex coordination. This can turn into what feels like a confused network of people.

Many community groups struggle with how decisions get made. People often feel left out or confused about who decides what and when. This lack of clarity can create significant risks for building trust and also agency.

Benefits of Clear Practices

When there's no confusion and there's transparency about how decisions get made, it helps build trust. It helps people feel more relaxed and more confident that their time and attention are not being wasted or taken advantage of.

People experience more of a sense of agency when they understand better the norms and practices around being able to take action and move work forward.

Clear practices around decision-making are helpful for orienting new people and helping them feel welcome.

So clarity around how decisions are made will bring positive energy and momentum to the work in whatever context.

The Challenge and the Reward

Make no mistake - it takes effort and skill to practice clear and shared decision-making grounded in consent. But it's not hard to understand.

And, over the past 12 years of working with people in communities, organizations and even businesses we've heard consistently that

once people experience working with respect for each other's consent, they don't want to go back!

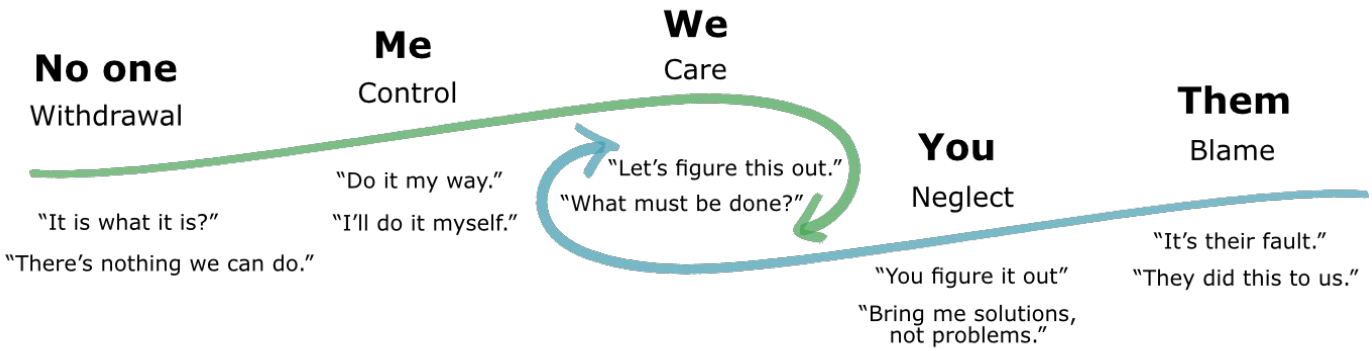
Why Consent as the Basis for Decisions?

A Reflection: the Spectrum of Responsibility

When it comes to [our community]...

When it comes to the equitable use of our tax dollars and community resources...

….who is responsible for the changes this community needs?



Consent-based governance is the natural next step for people who want to thrive. We will learn that in living systems (like communities), agreement through consent — not force, control by a few, or even majority rule — is the only way to govern that lasts. Guiding how we work together toward the principle of consent means feedback can come from anywhere. The stimulus for positive change can come from anyone. So, in consent-based governance, we are all responsible to use the power we have to create a bigger "we." Consent-based governance:

- Treats objections as helpful information and data.
- Makes the system stronger with practices to adapt based on feedback.
- Treats diversity as necessary for a healthy system, not as a problem.

Systems will change when relationships change. Practicing consent deepens commitment to relationships and trust.

In short: governance that works with differences, allows new things to emerge, and adapts to change — is not optional. It is how living systems work. It's what we need to thrive.

Lessons from Network Leaders Using Consent-Based Decision-Making

Over the past few years, Borealis Philanthropy provided funding to subsidize work with community networks focused on social impact. We created opportunities to learn more about the conditions that were needed for leaders to practice consent-based decision-making.

We ran a Community of Practice and a Culture Lab. In 2024, we interviewed 25 social impact network leaders who have been using consent-based decision-making, some for 10+ years.

The main lessons from our conversations with leaders:

1. If we want to accelerate systems change and make power more fair, then **consent is not optional**.

2. Even a little bit of training and practice in consent-based decision-making can provide practical benefits and transformative experiences to both individuals and organizational culture.

3. However, like any change effort, to transform how a group works - whether in a community, organization, or network - three things must be in place:

    - **The group must be ready to change.** We need to see how old patterns are keeping us from living our values or reaching our goals.

    - **Opportunities to learn the mindsets and practices.** We need to learn how consent-based decision-making works and to get help orienting new members.

    - **Ongoing support for leaders.** We need easy-to-use resources like toolkits and videos, plus opportunities where we can get coaching and help when new or difficult situations come up.

The Circle Forward team refined the Protocol and created this guide to support leaders to practice consent-based decision-making in their work.

People Asked for More Help

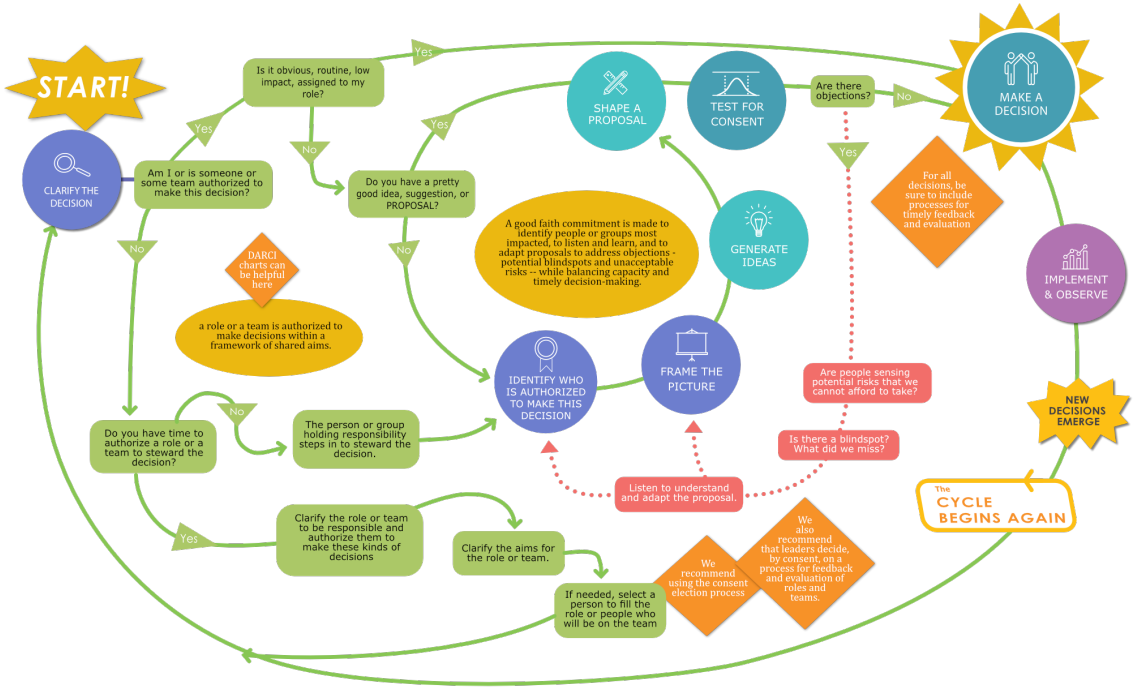
Even with descriptions of each step, people who were being introduced to the Protocol (on page 5) said they needed more guidance to use it. They asked for something like a flowchart to help them better understand their choices at each step, especially for people new to consent-based decision-making. For example, they had questions like:

- **When can someone just make a decision on their own?**
- **Does every decision need to be a consent decision?**

So, We Made a Flowchart

- We showed the pathways where decision-making can be autonomous *and* still be in consent.
- We showed the pathway for situations when decision-makers will slow down to follow all of the steps in the protocol.

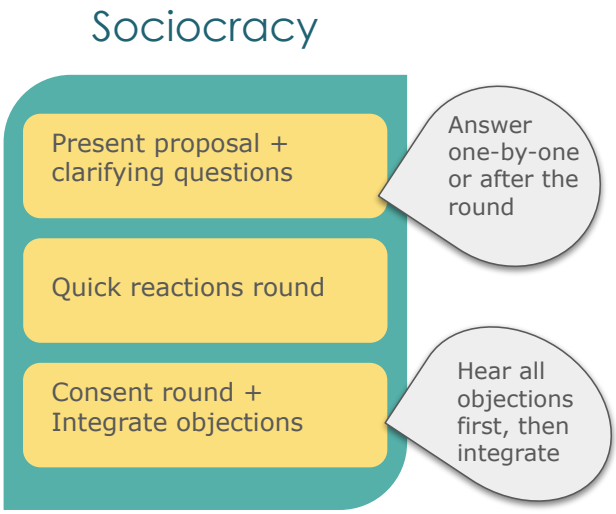
Not surprisingly, people asked us to make the flowchart more simple than this! Still, we learned through this version. It helped us discover the three main pathways of the Protocol that we share later in this guide.



Why Create Another Consent Decision-Making Tool?

What's Similar to Other Work

You might already know about the "consent decision-making process" or "consent method." Thanks to sociocracy, many groups now teach and practice consent as a way to make decisions in meetings. There are great resources from organizations like Sociocracy for All, Sociocracy 3.0, and Teal Organizations that have been tested worldwide.



When most people around the world describe consent-based decision-making, they describe a meeting process like the diagram above. The consent process is like a recipe where people test proposals with other members in their circle or team. This process doesn't have to happen during a live meeting - there are digital tools that give people a kind of virtual roundtable.

These consent processes for meetings can be really effective. They give groups a step-by-step way to include people's voices, make decisions together consistently, and take action toward shared goals. In creating this Protocol, we drew on this wisdom. If you've learned meeting methods from sociocracy, this Protocol will feel familiar.

What's Different and Why It Matters

While these meeting processes are helpful, we've learned that **thinking of consent-based decision-making as a process is too limited**. After years working alongside people in social impact organizations, businesses and networks, we found it valuable to separate the Consent Principle from any specific process.

The Missing Voices

Many people who are most affected by decisions will never be at workgroup meetings. After more than ten years supporting social impact networks, we kept running into the same problem: some of the community members who are most affected by decisions aren't actually members of the team making that decision, or the organization, or the initiative.

We focused on consent as a principle and the idea that people should have real influence in decisions that impact their lives.

We needed a tool that would guide decision-makers, when seeking consent, to look beyond just their team members or "the regulars" who show up to participate, to the wider community who are impacted by decisions.

The Consent Principle is what matters

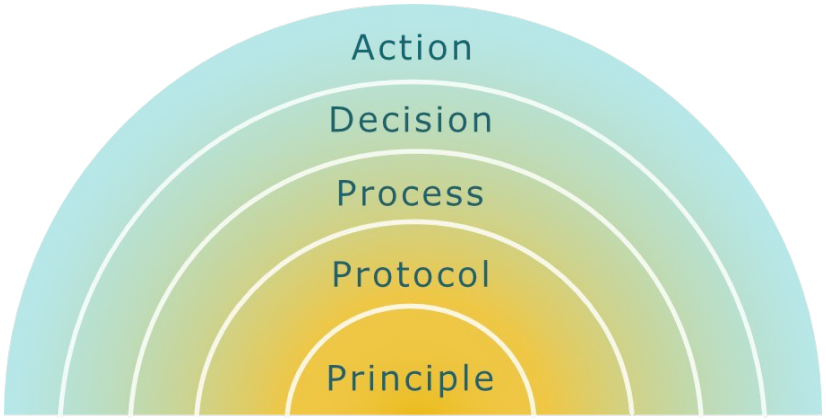
Even good processes can be misused, when people just check off steps instead of truly caring about the consent principle.

And, importantly, consent is an ancient human value. We see many examples of people who operate from what we call the consent principle – even if they don't use those words. The field of dialogue and deliberation has a rich body of work in processes to include diverse voices. And, different communities have their own processes that might work better for them. This adds a richness to the practice of collaborative governance.

As we worked across sectors, geographies, cultures, and networks, we listened to what worked. This Protocol is a result of our own iterative learning process.

Consent is a Principle. What is a Protocol?

Consent is a principle - a core belief about how decisions should be made. We will define this principle more in the next section. This Protocol is a principled pattern that you can use in many different situations. It works like a compass when things are uncertain, complicated, or new.



Understanding Protocols vs. Processes

To understand this decision-making tool, we first need to know what a protocol is and how it's different from a process. We spent a lot of time thinking about this difference. Here's how we understand it.

A protocol is a structured set of guidelines that creates a standard for how something should be done. Think of a protocol as the rules that guide how you choose and carry out your activities. It makes sure you're acting according to your core beliefs and values. This Protocol is a standard for how to apply the consent principle in decision-making.

A process, on the other hand, is the actual series of steps you take to get something done. It's the hands-on workflow you do to reach a specific goal. For example, there are many different processes for running meetings, and which one you use depends on the situation.

Why Protocols Are Helpful

Protocols are especially useful when situations get messy or confusing. That's one of the main reasons this guide was created. This Protocol provides just enough structure - like a container - for work that is naturally relationship-based and often messy.

When you want to make decisions using consent but aren't sure exactly how to do it, the protocol gives you direction. It provides an orientation even when the situation is complex or unfamiliar.

We believe it will help everyone to have standards for decision-making that follow the Consent Principle, while also allowing for many different processes depending on the situation. This gives groups both clear guidelines and flexibility to work in ways that fit their specific needs and contexts. This flexibility is important because every network and every decision is different.

When things get stressful or uncertain, it's easy to fall back into old habits and patterns. We hope this protocol becomes a helpful tool that people can return to as a reference when they need guidance.

Overview of What's in This Guide

The Consent Principle Defined

In this section, you'll learn how we define the Consent Principle:

- as a legal and ethical principle that shows up in many areas of life
- as a Range of Tolerance for conditions living beings need to thrive
- as a commitment for how we work together.

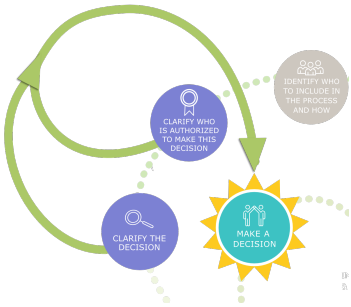
The Steps of the Protocol

In this section, we describe each of the steps in the spiral of the Protocol. Following it encourages relationship-building and ongoing conversations between decision-makers and community members. Instead of a culture focused on attending meetings, this creates a culture of network weaving - building connections and maintaining relationships that help goodwill and wisdom flow throughout the community.

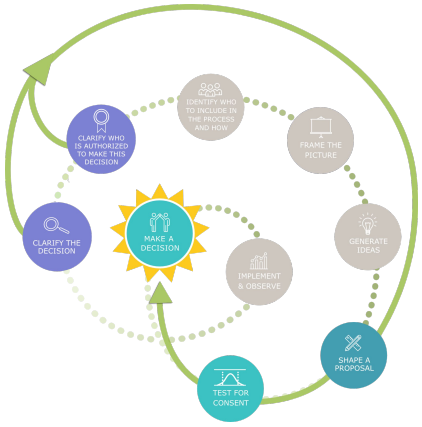
Three Pathways

Here is the heart of this work and the next version of the "flowchart" people have asked for (the thumbnails here are just a teaser!) In this section, we describe three pathways for making decisions by consent, and how leaders discern which pathway to follow for different situations.

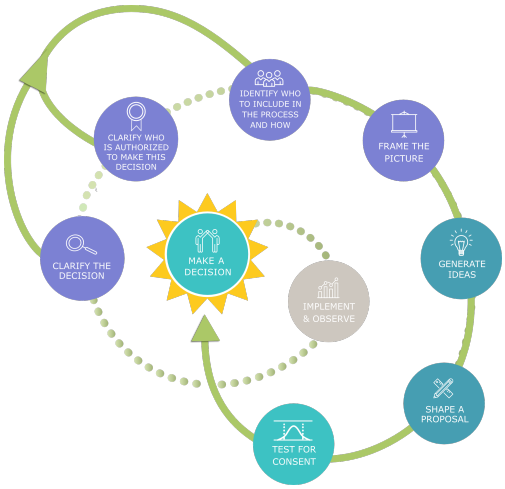
Pathway 1:
Just Decide



Pathway 2:
Check Your Idea



Pathway 3:
Slow Down for Better Results



Objections and Dissent

You'll also learn about objections as part of a cycle of feedback where the best teams learn and grow together. Instead of seeing objections as problems, you'll understand them as helpful information that makes decisions better.

We will share what we've learned about noticing and talking about objections and when people don't consent to decisions. This involves giving and receiving feedback in a respectful way that helps everyone grow – and overcoming politeness but not kindness.

Consenting to Roles

We will explain how the protocol treats discussions about roles and responsibilities as decisions too. The Protocol’s three pathways work here, too, for how decisions are made about roles.

You'll learn about ways people have recognized the importance of having clear roles, and you'll discover tested processes for accepting roles and taking action in group projects.

Using Proposals

You'll learn how to use proposals to make sure everyone has what they need to move forward with actions and decisions.

All of these tools work together to help groups make better decisions while respecting everyone involved. We shift from systems of top-down power to systems of partnership that recognize our interdependence.

About Decision-Makers

In this guide, we call the people who use this Protocol "decision-makers."

In groups that are trying to use power more fairly, when people take on roles, they also get the power to make the decisions they need to do their work well. Another way to say this is that every person or every team with a role becomes a decision-maker for their area of work.

Let's clear up something important. Many people think that having decision-making power means you can “call the shots” and do whatever you want. But that's not how it works in a culture where decisions are grounded in consent. Here, our power serves the whole group's purpose. We look beyond just ourselves.

Decision-makers have three main responsibilities:

- Bring together capacities and resources to get things done
- Communicate and check in with people who will be affected
- Be willing to slow down and change plans for the sake of trust and relationships.

When people and teams accept roles and these three responsibilities, they become decision-makers.

How This Works

Decision-makers act like caretakers of decisions that help the whole group's purpose. When we're clear about who makes decisions, and those people promise to check in with affected people, and adapt when not in consent, we can keep teams small and nimble. We don't need everyone at the table if we follow the Protocol steps to include people fairly. This meets people where they are instead of making them come to meetings. In this way, investing in trust and good relationships let power, care, and resources flow through the community.

Learning with Help from a Guide

Why Guidance Matters

When we practice consent-based decision-making we don't just experience change in our group culture. We also experience change in ourselves. And change is rarely simple or easy.

In our research, we interviewed people who have been practicing consent-based decision-making for the past twelve years. We consistently heard the same thing: training, coaching, and guidance were crucial for success.

Groups that got help from experienced guides were much more likely to actually integrate consent decision-making into their culture and keep using these practices over time. Groups that tried to do it on their own often struggled or eventually gave up.

What This Means for Your Group

Learning these new ways of making decisions together takes practice. Having an experienced guide can help you work through the challenges that come up and adapt the practices to work well for your specific community.

If your group is interested in using consent-based decision-making, consider getting support from someone who has experience with these practices. This might mean:

- Learning opportunities together as a group
- Working with a coach or facilitator
- Getting guidance from someone who has successfully used these methods before.

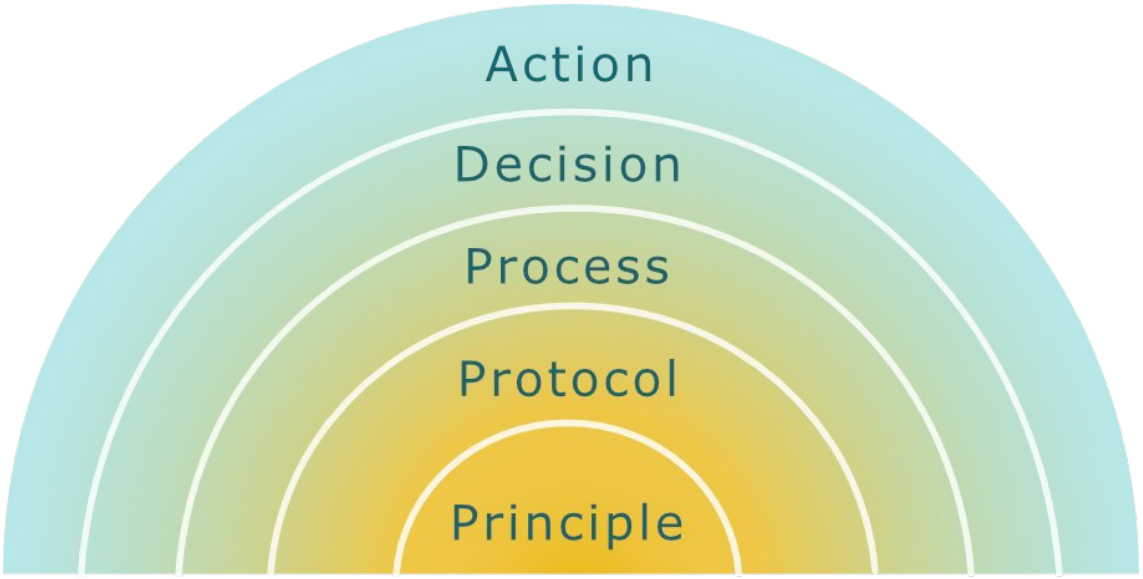
Having a facilitator or coach can help decision-makers work through moments that feel scary or risky, so they can actually experience what consent-based decision-making feels like and understand how it works. With support, they can develop intentional practices.

We also partner with funders and leaders to provide training and guidance that groups who are working on systems-level change in organizations, networks and communities need to successfully transform how they're doing their work.

The Consent Principle Defined

Consent is a Principle

A **principle** is like a core belief that guides your decisions. It points you toward what you believe is right, even when the situation is difficult or confusing.



When you operate from principles, you make choices based on your core values and beliefs, not just on what's easiest or most convenient in the moment. Instead of just reacting to whatever happens, you care about what's most important to you and let that guide your actions. If you're reading this, you probably believe in making decisions based on principles.

This is what we mean by consent-based decision-making — decision-making guided by the consent principle. In this section, we'll share the ways we define the consent principle and talk about how it fits into the bigger picture of community organizing, social impact and systems change.

Principles Take Practice

It's important to understand that living by principles isn't always easy. The systems around us - like schools, workplaces, and even some families - have conditioned us to react in certain ways that might not match our values.

Even when we want to act on our principles, there are times when we might fall back into old habits. This especially happens when we're stressed, scared, or in a hurry. Our bodies and minds tend to react in ways we learned in the past to protect ourselves, even if those reactions don't match what we believe is right.

Some of these old reactions might include:

- Taking control when we feel threatened
- Giving in to avoid conflict
- Shutting down and withdrawing
- Other behaviors that helped us survive difficult situations before

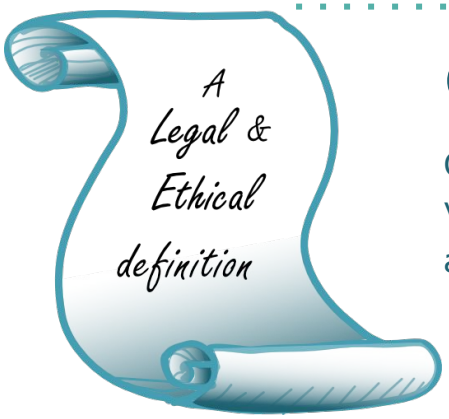
Remember, learning to live by our principles is a journey. For real change to occur in our systems we must be patient with ourselves and with our communities as we practice together.

Defining the Consent Principle

There are several ways that we think about and define the consent principle:

1. Consent as a legal and ethical principle
2. Consent as the Range of Tolerance of a system
3. Consent as a commitment for how we work together

Consent as a Legal and Ethical Principle



CONSENT:

Cornell University defines consent as when "a person voluntarily and willfully agrees to undertake an action that another person suggests."

True Consent Requires Real Power to Say No

For consent to be authentic, you must have the full power and ability to say no or disagree. If you can't really say no, then saying yes doesn't mean much.

The consent principle recognizes that every person has their own authority and full humanity. And, it acknowledges that we're all connected to each other through shared systems and common purposes. Consent is something very old and natural to humans. It's not just an idea we think about - it's something we can feel and experience in our bodies.

Consent Shows Up Everywhere

When we think of consent as a legal and ethical principle, we can see it in many different areas of life:

Healthcare: Doctors can't do tests or treatments without your voluntary willingness. This protects your right to choose what happens to your body.

Education: Schools need permission from parents or guardians for their activities with children.

Personal Relationships: People have the right to choose what they do or don’t do, especially in intimate situations.

Government: The US Declaration of Independence says that governments only have legitimate power with “the consent of the governed.”

The Big Picture

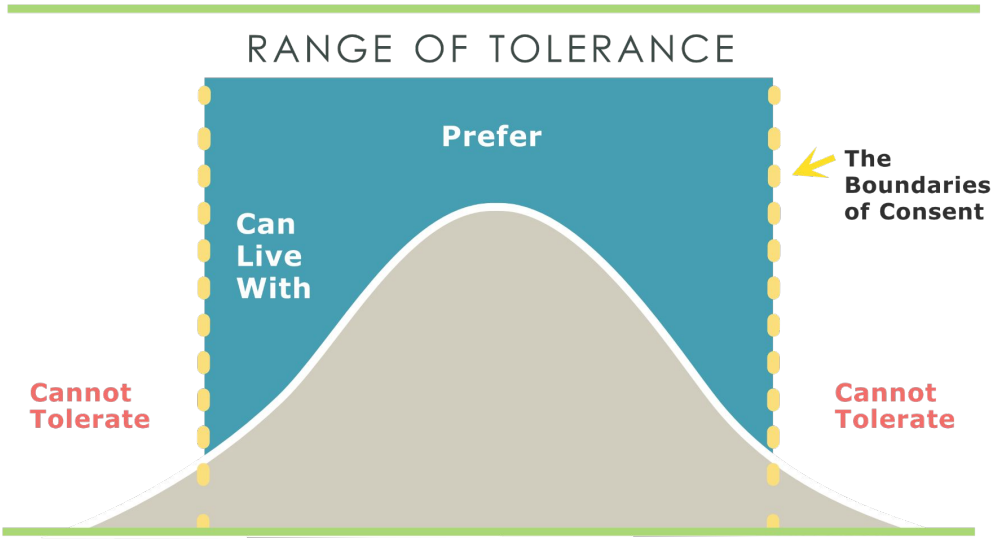
All these examples show us that consent is a fundamental principle about respecting people's dignity, autonomy, and right to make choices about their own lives. When consent is ignored, it creates conditions for oppression, force, and harm.

Understanding consent as a principle helps us apply it across organizational culture, not just in meetings.

Consent as the Range of Tolerance of a System

One way we practice consent in decision-making is by using something called the **Range of Tolerance**.

This is a framework borrowed from ecology, the science that studies the relationships and interactions between living organisms and their environments. The Range of Tolerance reflects the understanding that all living things — including people — are deeply connected to each other in ecosystems. This way of thinking is helpful for decision-makers working in collaboratives aimed at systems change.



You can get a copy of this framework on our website at circleforward.us/resources

How It Works

Picture a bell curve - a hill-shaped line on a graph. At the top of the hill is your preference - what you would most like to happen. As you move down the sides of the hill, you get to things you can live with, even if they're not your first choice. At the very edges of the curve are your boundaries - the points where something becomes unacceptable to you. Beyond those boundaries, you're "out of consent."

Operating like an Ecosystem

In nature, every living thing has a range of conditions where it can thrive. Outside of that range, it can't survive or reproduce well, and might even die. For example, coral reefs “bleach” white and die when the water gets too hot or too cold. When coral reefs die, whole communities of fish and wildlife lose the conditions they need to thrive, too. The same thing happens with human groups. When conditions are outside what people need to participate fully and work toward shared goals, the group won't thrive either. And when some groups are not thriving, it affects the whole.

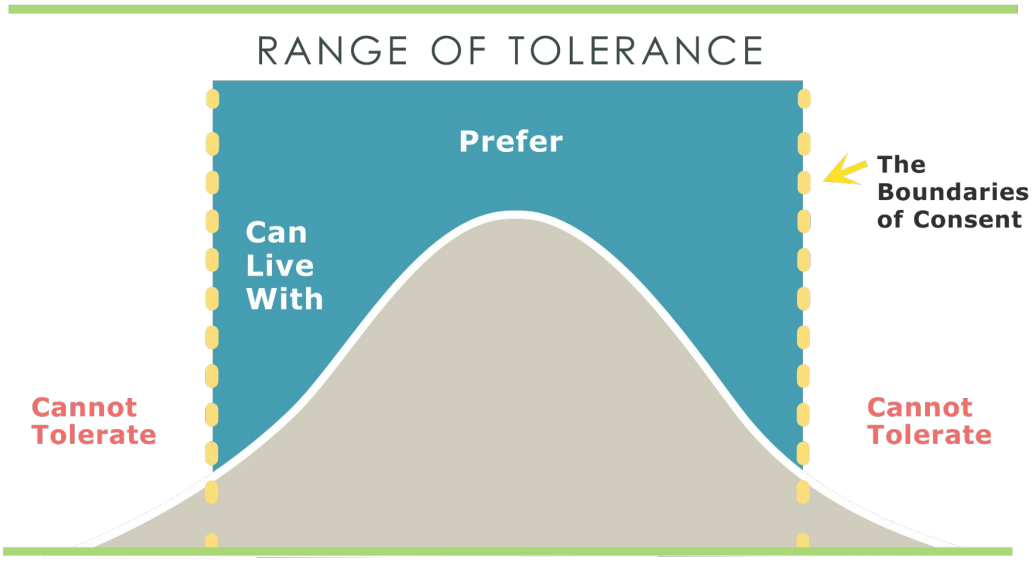
If we want healthy communities, we need to pay attention to what's unacceptable for people from different backgrounds and with different ideas.

Ecologists know that when diverse members of an ecosystem can all live within their ranges of tolerance, the whole ecosystem becomes stronger and better able to adapt to challenges.

Using This in Your Group

Many groups we work with find this framework so helpful that they post it on the wall and refer to it when they're making important decisions. It guides them to find ways to move forward that are acceptable to those impacted by the decision. It can even help balance things that seem opposite at first, like:

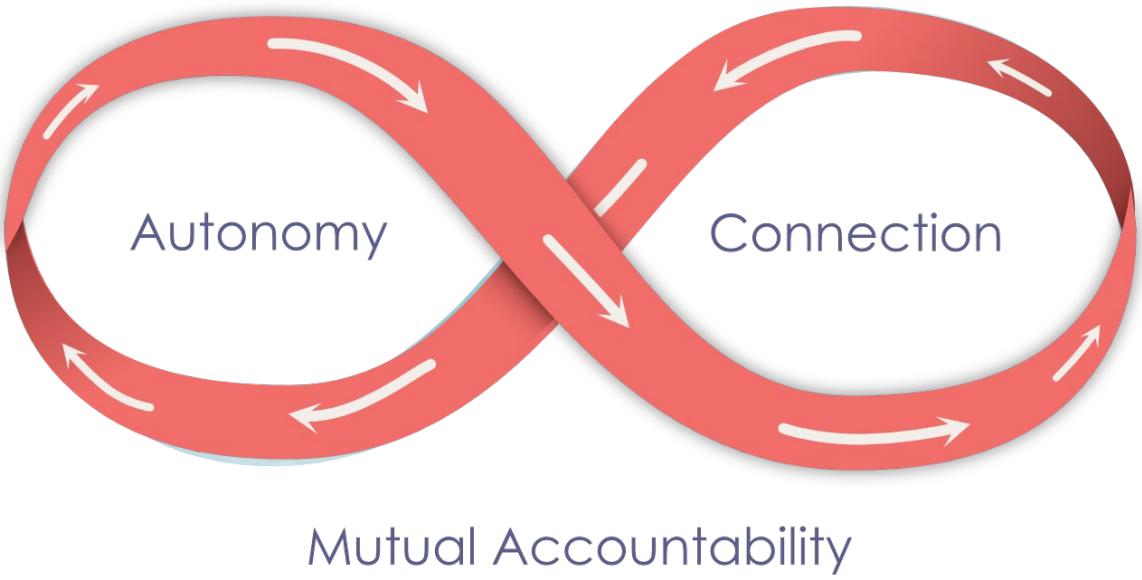
- Being connected to others AND having your own autonomy
- Making your own choices AND working together
- Taking action AND making sure the process is fair



In a later section of this guide, "Objections and Dissent," we will give more guidance to decision-makers about how they can use this Range of Tolerance framework to listen better to people who are impacted by decisions and to adapt decisions to avoid harm.

Finding the Range of Tolerance is like finding our common ground. Over time, this makes the whole community stronger and more likely to succeed.

Consent as a Commitment for How We Work Together



Making a Group Commitment

Another way we define consent in collaborative work is as a commitment to communication and trust among decision-makers and those who are impacted by decisions, **to listen to each other and adapt** activities as needed if there is a sense they could cause harm.

This is in balance with staying on track to make timely decisions, and a respect for decision-makers autonomy. Everyone deserves to act in the way it makes sense for them, as long as it does not create harm.

It’s an agreement the group makes about how they'll operate together. The ongoing tension of autonomy and connection can actually deepen and be felt like wholeness and authentic belonging over time.

What We're Committing To

We're committed to communication between decision-makers and the people affected by decisions.

A culture of consent means decision-makers commit to listen and make changes when someone says they're outside their range of tolerance.

At the same time, there's still respect for autonomy and the many different ways people like to work and think. Too much interference can kill people's motivation and initiative.

It means being curious about people's concerns and objections, because they can help you see important risks that you might have missed. Listening to each other means asking about our own gaps in awareness and adapting when people can't consent. All the while, still making decisions in a reasonable timeframe.

Another way to say this is that we're committed to finding the sweet spot between including everyone and moving forward.

This commitment works in all directions. People with official power positions also get to have their consent respected. Their range of tolerance counts, too, in the whole picture.

We Won't Be Perfect

We know that trying to live by the consent principle means we'll sometimes fall short of what we're aiming for. Transformative work - work that changes systems - requires learning new ways of responding and new practices that will challenge us. So we practice giving each other grace and staying humble as we do our best to follow our principles and learn from our mistakes.

What Consent is NOT

Consent is Not Compliance.

Compliance means abiding by rules, set guidelines, or norms. When someone follows rules, they may do it not from voluntary willingness, but from fear of punishment. You can't achieve consent through threats or pressure. For example, saying "If you don't like it, then you can leave" is not consent - it's coercion.

This doesn't mean compliance never has a place. When restaurants follow food safety rules to stay open, they help keep people safe, for example. Compliance with agreements is necessary for order and stability.

But, we can ask: How were those rules decided? In a consent-based culture, those rules would have been created by including the perspectives of everyone affected - the people following the rules, the experts, the people benefiting, and everyone else in the system working toward the shared goal of food safety.

Consent is Not Compromise.

Consent is also not the same as compromise. Compromise usually means everyone gives up something important to get something else they want. This leaves everyone somewhat unsatisfied when nobody gets what they really need.

When people have to compromise on things that are truly important to them, it often leads to problems later. People might stop participating or work against the decision behind the scenes. True consent looks for solutions where everyone's important needs can be met, not where everyone has to give up something essential.

Story: How a Food System Project Found Consent

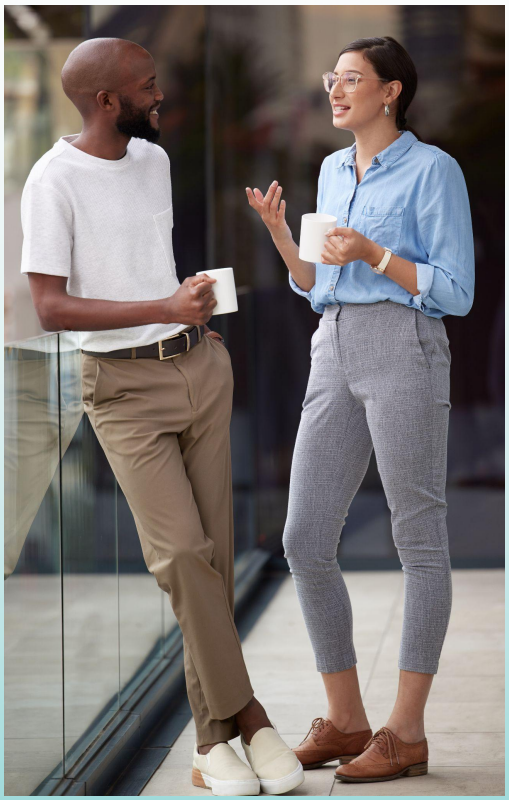
Working Together on Food Grants

The Appalachian Foodshed Project partners were collaborating on systems change. They had a budget for small grants to help people access healthy food in their communities.

The team needed to decide how to give out this money quickly. They were a diverse group of people: some academics, some institutional partners, and some people from community-based organizations who might actually want to apply for the mini grants. This mix of people was good because everyone had different points of view.

But they disagreed about one big question: Should the community-based members help create the grant application? After all, they might want to apply for grants themselves.

A professor said "No." A community leader said "Yes." They couldn't agree in their meeting. So they decided to meet separately to talk about their concerns.



The Commitment to Listen to Each Other

Instead of arguing, they asked each other: "What is the risk we cannot afford to take?"

The professor's concern: He thought it might *look* unfair to others, even if it wasn't actually unfair. If community groups helped write the application and then applied for grants, people might not trust the project team.

The community leader's concern: She was tired of being invited to help make decisions, but then being pushed out when things got hard. This power dynamic happened too often. She said the team couldn't afford to lose trust by treating community partners this way.

The Solution

Once they understood each other's real concerns, they found an answer that worked for everyone. Community partners would help design the grant application as full team members. They would be completely open about this when talking to the public. If anyone applied for a grant, of course, they would not be on the team that chooses who received a grant.

What Happened

The plan worked well. There were no concerns raised about fairness. When they gave out grants the second time, it went even faster because people trusted the process.The key was listening to each other's real concerns instead of just arguing their positions.

Appalachian FOODSHED PROJECT
Cultivating Community Food Security

A version of this blog post originally ran on the Virginia Cooperative Extension: Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems blog. Read about it on Circle Forward's blog.

What's Next?

Since consent isn't just something we do in meetings, what exactly are we learning to do? In the next section, we'll explore HOW to practice consent.

First, we'll show you the “Steps of the Protocol.” Then we'll look at “Three Pathways” for putting the Consent Principle into action. We'll show you ways that decision-making can be faster and more autonomous, while still following the consent principle. And, we'll show you pathways for situations where groups will need to slow down for better results.

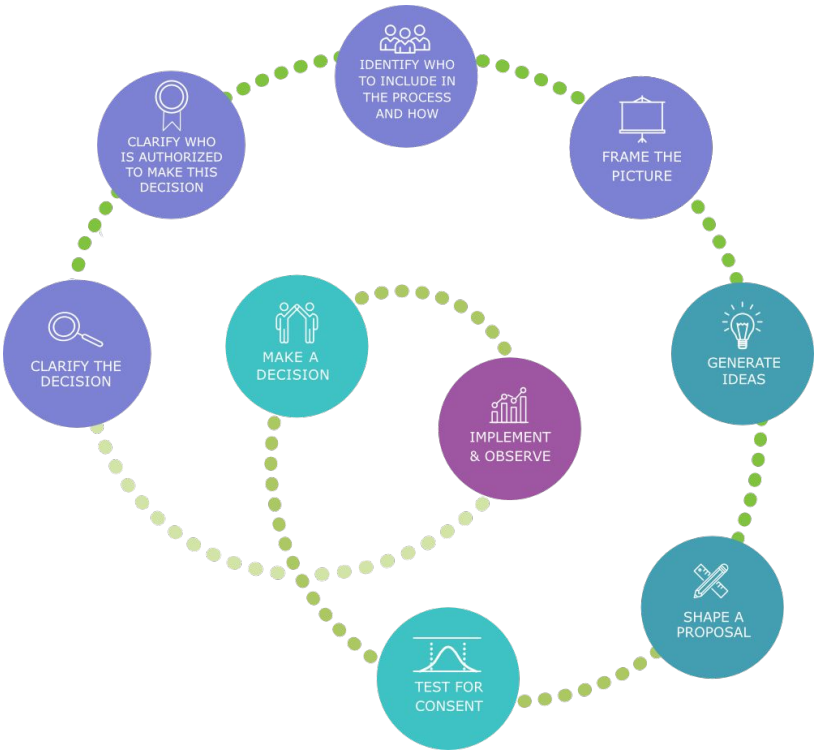
The Steps of the Protocol

The Protocol is Like a Compass

A Tool for Continuous Action-Learning

Rather than thinking of the Protocol as something completely new, some people think of it as a compass for decision-making that is calibrated for good community-based practice. It gives decision-makers a tool to orient to complex projects and to choose processes that keep them on track with their commitment to “nothing about us without us.” At the same time, it respects decision-makers' autonomy and ability to choose activities that make sense to them.

The first thing many people notice is that the pathway doesn't "end." It's a continuous loop. We move through taking action on decisions and learn what worked and what could work better. This leads to new decisions and actions. In that way, it's similar to good human-centered design.



The compass metaphor reminds us that even when the path gets complicated or confusing, there's always a way to get back on track with the principle of consent - making sure people have real influence in decisions that affect their lives.

The Protocol Gives Direction to the Processes You Choose

Choosing how to handle each step of the Protocol helps you get better over time through feedback, learning, and growth.

We know that straight lines on a flowchart would be simpler. But we're working in complex situations. Trying to use simple solutions for complex conditions leads to problems and breakdowns.

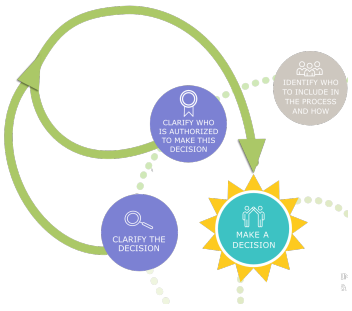
When people feel their concerns have been heard and considered, they're much more likely to support decisions, even if the final solution isn't exactly what they would have chosen. The time and effort you save by moving quickly is often undone by the time and effort needed to fix problems later.

Pathways for Efficiency and Forward Momentum

You may be relieved to know that decision-makers are not required to go through all of the steps for every decision!

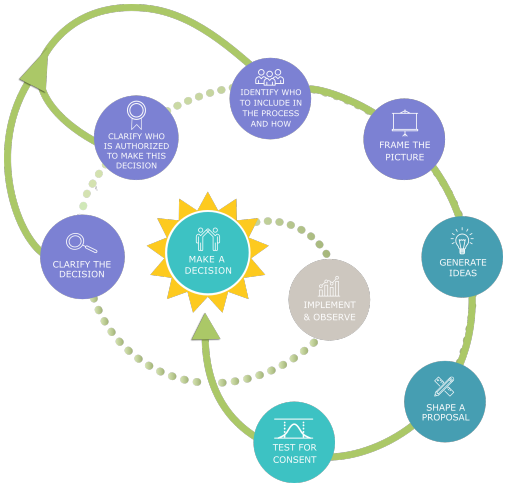
In the section Three Pathways later in this guide we show how this protocol includes pathways to streamline some of the steps of the protocol and provide more autonomy for decision-making in collaborative initiatives, not less.

Pathway 1:
Just Decide



Pathway 2:
Check Your Idea

Pathway 3:
Slow Down for Better Results



In fact, demonstrating these pathways for efficiency is one of the main reasons we wanted to create this guide!

But first, let’s look at each of the steps in the Protocol.

The Protocol has loops within loops - like smaller circles inside bigger circles, similar to how this koru fern unfurls with spirals inside spirals.

The First Steps: Figuring Out What and Who

Clarify the Decision

When using this Protocol to orient, first name the decision. This brings helpful clarity. It seems obvious, but you'd be surprised how often the actual decision itself is not clear!

Clarify Who Is Authorized to Make This Decision

Who decides?
The protocol asks: Do I or we have authority to decide? People can then figure out whether it's their decision to make, or if they should pass it to someone else.

> **YES:** In the next section, "Three Pathways," we assume that roles - and their power to decide - are clear enough for this issue.
>
> **NO:** It's not clear who has authority to make a decision, so the first decision is to clarify who decides. We will cover this in a later section on "Consenting to Roles."

Shared power only works when everyone can see who has what role and what power comes with it.

Identify Who to Include in the Process and How

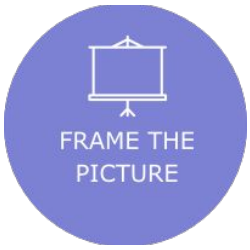
Next, consider how much impact this decision has and who might be most affected by it. This is how the protocol intentionally makes the principle of "nothing about us without us" actually work. We recognize that we impact each other. We are connected by nature.

The process starts by slowing down to think with empathy about who might be affected by your decision, not just humans but potentially other living things too. This step involves asking:

- Who would be most impacted by this decision?
- Who must we include in order to make progress?
- How can we reach those we don't already know, but who should have voice?
- What's the best way to involve them given our time, energy, and resources?

Once decision-makers discern they have identified enough different viewpoints – "good enough for now" – they can move on. They know that more viewpoints might come up in later steps.

See the Big Picture, Not Just One Part



Frame the Picture

"Frame the Picture" is a sense-making step that happens before jumping into solutions. There are many helpful tools, templates, and processes for making sense of the whole context from different viewpoints. This approach is consistent with systems thinking.

This can happen through meetings, conversations, reading reports, systems mapping, or surveys, for example. Decision-makers ask people who will be affected questions like:

- What do we need to know about this situation or context?
- What matters to you?
- What's important to address?

Decision-makers do not ask for ideas for solutions. We don't have the whole picture yet!

They make sure to document everything so people can share a fuller picture of the context before starting to brainstorm solutions. Taking time for this step early on prevents bigger problems later and leads to better decisions that work for more people. Once they feel they've captured the context "good enough for now," they move on.

Generate Ideas

The "Generate Ideas" step asks "given everything we now understand, what should we do?" Again, the choices for processes here depend on the decision-makers and on the situation. Sometimes the decision-makers come up with ideas themselves and bring draft proposals back to the group. Other times, they work together with the people who helped to frame the picture, to brainstorm options.

When parts of the situation seem to conflict - like it has to be one way or the other - decision-makers can ask "How can we have both?" This question often leads to unexpected creative solutions that work for everyone.

Circle Forward's team created this short video that demonstrates the power of asking the question of "how can we have both?"

https://circleforward.us/a-real-life-demonstration/

At this stage, it's important to remind everyone that no decisions are being made yet - this is just about gathering possible solutions before moving to the next step.

Shape a Proposal

What is a Proposal? A proposal is simply a plan or suggestion, especially a formal or written one, put forward for consideration or discussion by others.

More guidance about proposals is in a later section, “Using Proposals.”

You will know when you are ready to start shaping a proposal when you can answer "yes" to this protocol question: "Do you have a good idea or plan?" By this point, you've listened to people's interests, gathered their ideas, and now you're ready to put together a specific proposal that addresses what you've learned. You take all the understanding and ideas from the previous steps and turn them into a clear, concrete plan that people can review and respond to. This makes it much easier for people to give meaningful and informed consent.

Testing for Consent is Different From Making a Decision.

Test for Consent

This step recognizes that decision-makers don't know everything, so they need to check their proposal with people who will be affected by it. This helps catch problems before taking action.

Because testing for consent is not the decision point in this Protocol, when you're testing for consent, you can test it *widely* to get reactions from different people.

When testing for consent, people are asked to share any objections - which means real concerns about risks that could lead to bad consequences, not just personal preferences about what they like or don't like.

Testing for consent is not the same thing as "asking for permission."

The commitment decision-makers make is that if someone has an objection, they will adapt the proposal to address the concern.

The Right Attitude

When you offer others the chance to express objections, seek to come from a place of humility, not defensiveness. Learning how to give and receive feedback with grace is essential for thriving cultures of consent.

In fact, what happens in this step is so central to consent-based decision-making that we gave it its own section: "Objections and Dissent"

Meet People Where They Are

Testing for consent doesn't always happen in one meeting. Sometimes the people most affected by a decision aren't in the room, so decision-makers need to find ways to reach them where they are. This might mean

- Sending the proposal by email and asking for feedback
- Having one-on-one conversations
- Using surveys or polls
- Going to places where people already gather
- Using social media or community bulletin boards

Sometimes everyone who matters can be in one meeting. When that's the case there are good processes for testing objections right then and there. If the group missed something important while making the proposal, this step will reveal it, and they can go back and fix the proposal until everyone can live with it. The key is to make it easy for people to respond and to give them enough time to think about the proposal.

Make a Decision

The "Make a Decision" step happens when no one has major objections and the proposal is "good enough for now, safe enough to try." At this point, decision-makers consider all the advice and feedback they received, finalize the decision, and write it down so there's a record. They also make sure to communicate the decision clearly to everyone who needs to know about it and set up ways for people to give feedback as the decision gets put into action.

In complex situations, **every decision is treated like an experiment**. This means decision-makers don't expect to get everything perfect the first time. Instead, they make the best decision they can with the information they have, then pay close attention to what happens and stay ready to make changes if needed. The decision becomes a starting point, not an ending point. People keep giving feedback as things move forward, and if unintended problems come up or circumstances change, the decision can be revisited and adjusted. This creates a learning cycle where decisions get better over time based on real experience rather than just hoping things will work out.

Learning Through Action

Implement and Observe

This final step is about putting the decision into action while staying alert to how it's working. Those who've taken initiative and responsibility for this decision are free to get started. The key is to **set up ways for people to give ongoing feedback** so we can learn from what happens when we actually try the decision. As people take action, new decisions will come up and the cycle starts over again.

This step isn't really an ending - it's the beginning of a new cycle. Those responsible for the the decision

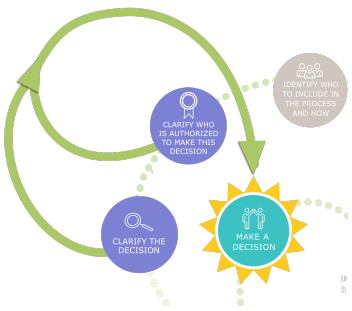
- pay attention to what's working and what isn't,
- stay ready to make changes when needed, and
- review decisions on a planned schedule or when someone spots a problem.

When people feel heard throughout the process and see that their viewpoint matters, they're more likely to support putting the decision into action and speak up if issues arise. Over time, this builds trust and creates a culture where people feel both autonomy and connection - they can act on their own while also being part of something bigger. Remember to stay open to new perspectives, especially when new people join who might see the situation differently.

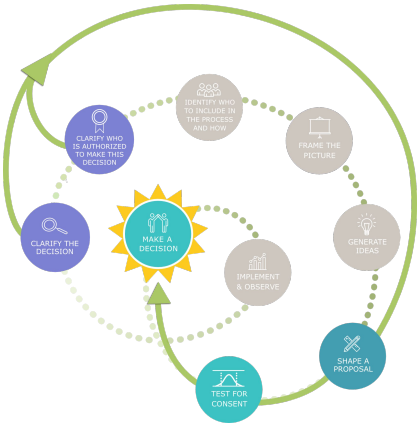
Three Protocol Pathways

The Three Pathways of the Protocol

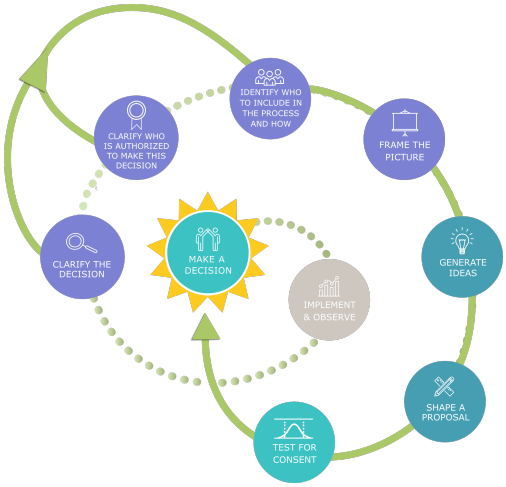
Pathway 1:
Just Decide



Pathway 2:
Check Your Idea



Pathway 3:
Slow Down for Better Results



All Paths Lead to Consent

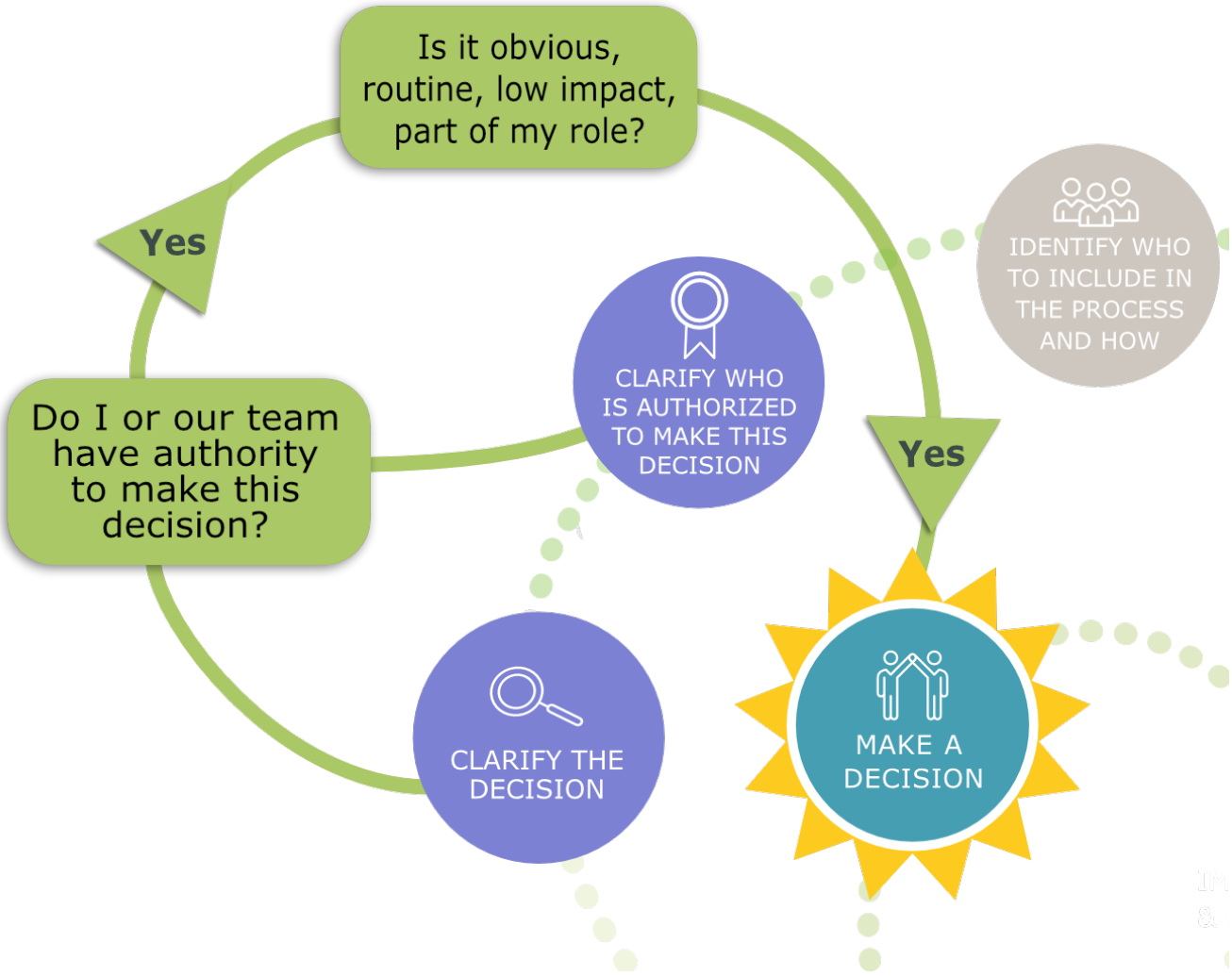
In this section, we'll look at the three pathways that make up the protocol. We're going to address those questions that keep coming up: **"When can I just make a decision myself?"** and "**When do we need to use consent for decision-making?"**

There's no single "right" answer to these questions, of course. Discernment - the ability to make good judgments - is an important skill in decision-making. We offer this guidance to help decision-makers be clearer, more confident, and make better decisions, while respecting everyone's time and concerns.

The Three Pathways are like three different patterns – all grounded in the consent principle – that address different conditions. **For us, the consent principle is not optional.** This Protocol puts the responsibility on decision-makers to include the wisdom of people who are impacted by decisions, as a matter of principle.

Please note: The Three Pathways end as decisions without objections. In the next section, "Objections and Dissent," we show the pathway when objections arise.

Pathway 1: Just Decide



When You Already Have Consent

Pathway 1 happens when there is already consent to just make a decision. The decision might be routine, something that's been worked out well in previous situations, and trust is already there.

When we take on a role or job, we make many choices that we might not even think of as decisions - it's just part of what we do. Maybe you've been lucky enough to experience a project where everybody does their part, and everything comes together like a well-coordinated dance.

The Most Autonomy—Different from Consensus

Pathway 1 gives the most autonomy. Pathway 1 is designed to free people who felt like every consent-based decision had to be a group decision.

This is one place where consent is different from consensus - it includes the promise of respect for autonomy, especially when you've put in the work to build relationships and trust. For example, people might say, "you don't need to check back with me, I trust whatever you want to do."

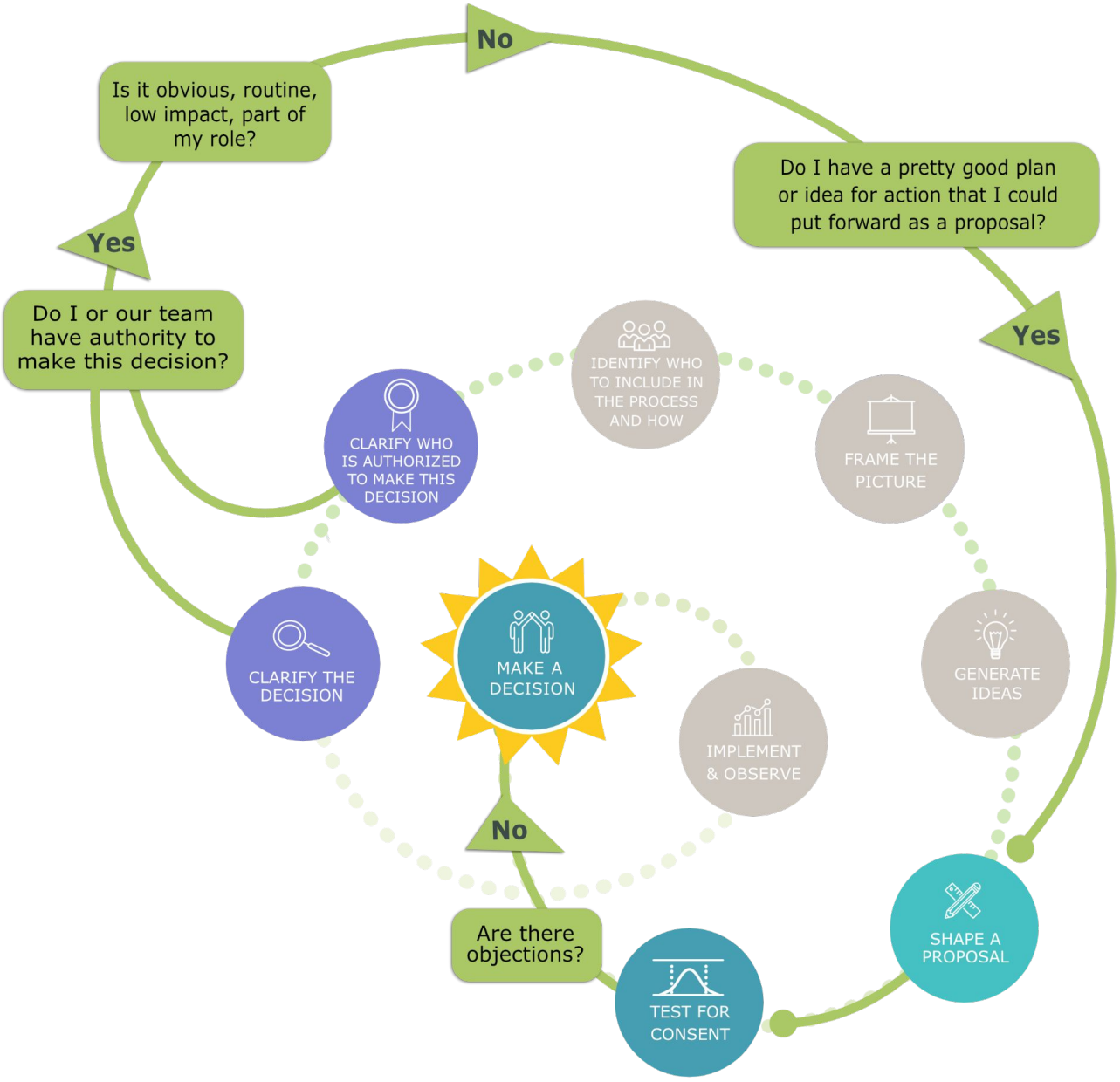
Ironically, as one Executive Director told us, consent actually gave her more freedom to make decisions on her own, not less. This was because her staff knew she would slow down to address concerns when they came up.

Still Consent-Based

Pathway 1: Just decide. It's still consent-based decision-making. You just already have consent.

This pathway recognizes that in healthy, trusting relationships and organizations, people can have the autonomy to make many decisions on their own because others trust their judgment and know they'll be heard if there's a problem.

Pathway 2: Check Your Idea



When You Need Some Input

Pathway 2 is for situations where this is your decision to make - but it does have potential impacts on others and is not a routine decision.

Pathway 2 still gives you quite a lot of autonomy. It's very similar to the advice process used in Teal organizations, as described by Frederic Laloux in the book "Reinventing Organizations." You're checking things out and communicating with others.

The Key Question

The question you ask yourself in Pathway 2: "Do I or we have a pretty good idea or plan?"

If YES: Then **test your idea for consent** with people who are most impacted by your decision.

Start talking to them about your pretty good idea or plan. Depending on the situation, this might be a quick email, a phone call, or a conversation over a cup of coffee. It might include reviewing past reports or evaluations where community members expressed their concerns and desired actions. Of course, bringing it up at a meeting can also be part of your strategy to hear from the people who will be affected. Testing for consent can happen many different ways.

The Purpose

This pathway recognizes that you're still the decision-maker, but you want to make sure your decision won't cause problems for others or that you haven't missed something important. By listening to the people who will be most affected, you can get valuable insights that might improve your idea or help you avoid potential problems.

It's a way to maintain your authority to decide while still being considerate and getting the benefit of other people's perspectives and concerns.

The Efficiency of Pathway 2

People have the autonomy to make the decisions they need to make because their authority is built into their role. It comes with the responsibility they accept to use their power on behalf of the whole. This makes things more efficient. People who are responsible for decisions don't have to wait for a meeting to test their proposal or for the decision to get made. They can check with people, address objections, and move forward at the speed of trust. This separation of testing and deciding helps the whole process work better and faster.

Ultimately, if there are no objections, the proposal IS the decision. That is part of what makes Pathway 2 efficient. This means you don't need a separate meeting or formal process to "make" the decision after testing for consent. If people are okay with your idea, you can just move forward with it.

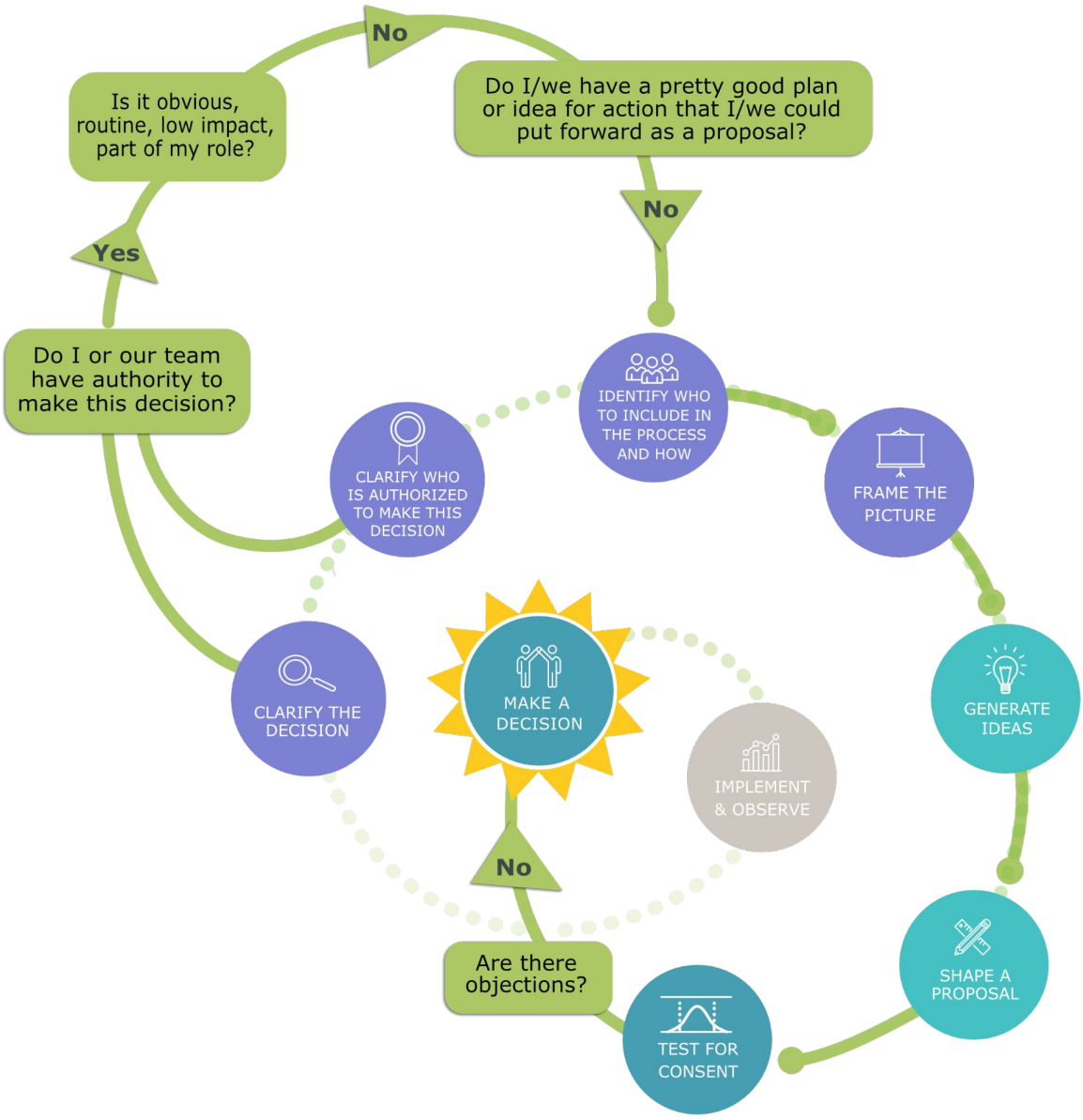
Builds Trust for New Leaders

Pathway 2 works well when projects or leadership roles are new. It helps build trust while working toward more autonomy. When working with a new team, let people experience you checking in with them and letting them help shape your plans.

The familiar "heads up" builds trust without weakening your role as a decision maker. People trust your judgment more when they've had good experiences with you asking for their feedback. Research shows that keeping trust and good relationships helps long-term productivity and collaboration. This approach recognizes that trust isn't automatic - it's built through consistent actions that show you care about how your decisions affect others.

Work moves at the speed of trust. By using Pathway 2 when you're new, you invest in relationships that let you use Pathway 1 (deciding on your own) more often later. Trust, humility, and humor show your practice is going well.

Pathway 3: Slow Down for Better Results



When You Don't Have a Plan Yet

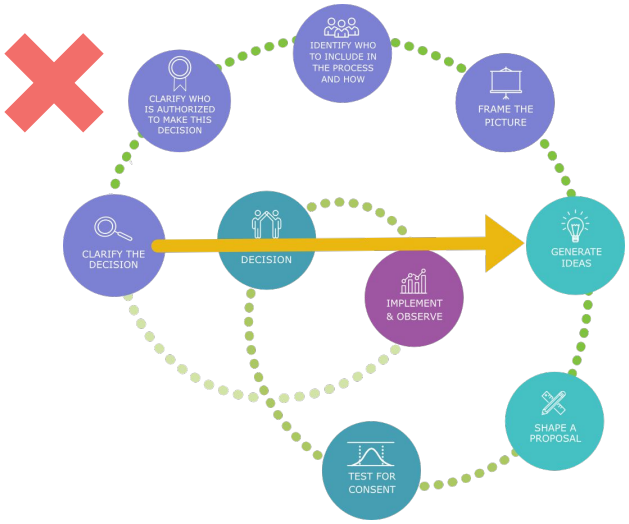
Remember the question: "Do you have a pretty good idea or plan?"

Where Pathway 2 is YES, Pathway 3 is NO - there's not a good idea or a plan for action. It's not really routine. It's not something that you're just checking out with people. It's actually complex. Maybe you need more buy-in and cooperation. Maybe it's something that requires a lot more collaboration. Maybe conditions are ambiguous and uncertain. You may not really have an idea yet for how to approach this. And people will be playing different roles.

Different Levels of Complexity

Pathways 1 and 2 streamline some of the steps of the protocol and can happen more smoothly. Trust, clarity about roles, and the context of the decision allow more efficiency.

Pathway 3 takes you through the full protocol. It is in these conditions when decision-makers slow down. Pathway 3 may be the most similar to good community organizing.



The Nature of Resistance

Usually, when people have a decision to make, they identify an issue or problem and then immediately start coming up with ideas or strategies to deal with it. That works fine until it doesn't. But notice: in Pathway Three there are three steps between "Identify the Issue" and "Generate Ideas."

Too often we are taught to jump straight into coming up with ideas and taking action without understanding the whole situation - without getting a good picture of how complex an issue really is and all the different points of view. Decision-makers may be genuinely confused about why people dig in their heels and fight against their ideas, or why whole communities feel like their concerns have been left out. Unfortunately, decision-makers may dig in *their* heels and push their positions even harder.

This creates a cycle where people feel unheard and decision-makers feel frustrated. When people's concerns aren't understood from the beginning, the solution that gets proposed is not designed to address them. And when decision-makers face resistance, they might think the problem is that people just don't understand their good idea, so they push harder instead of stepping back to listen.

"Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast." "A stitch in time saves nine." "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." This is the territory of Pathway Three.

When to Use Pathway 3

Use this pathway when the situation is complex, when you need input from many people, when the decision will require different people to take on different roles, or when you're not sure yet how to approach the issue. This pathway recognizes that some decisions are too important or complicated to rush through, and they need the full process to work well.

Story: Consent is Respect for Autonomy

Taking Responsibility

A group of people were working together to help economic development in their region. They held events to bring people together, but a few members wanted to do something more. Two people had an idea for a marketing campaign that would help local businesses and attractions get more customers. They took responsibility to check in with people who would be affected by the campaign, people who knew about marketing, and business owners who might benefit. They listened to all the feedback. They changed their plan based on what they heard. They kept adjusting until people said it sounded like a good idea. Then they built a basic website and made some materials.

Presenting to the Group

At the next quarterly meeting, they asked to present their work. The whole group listened to their plan. Most people liked what they heard. The campaign seemed safe to try. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to try. Then a newer member spoke up. He had a lot of influence in the community. He didn't think the marketing campaign was the right approach. He started suggesting a completely different strategy. Suddenly, the two people who created the campaign felt like they had to defend all their work. They felt attacked and discouraged from taking initiative.

What Happened

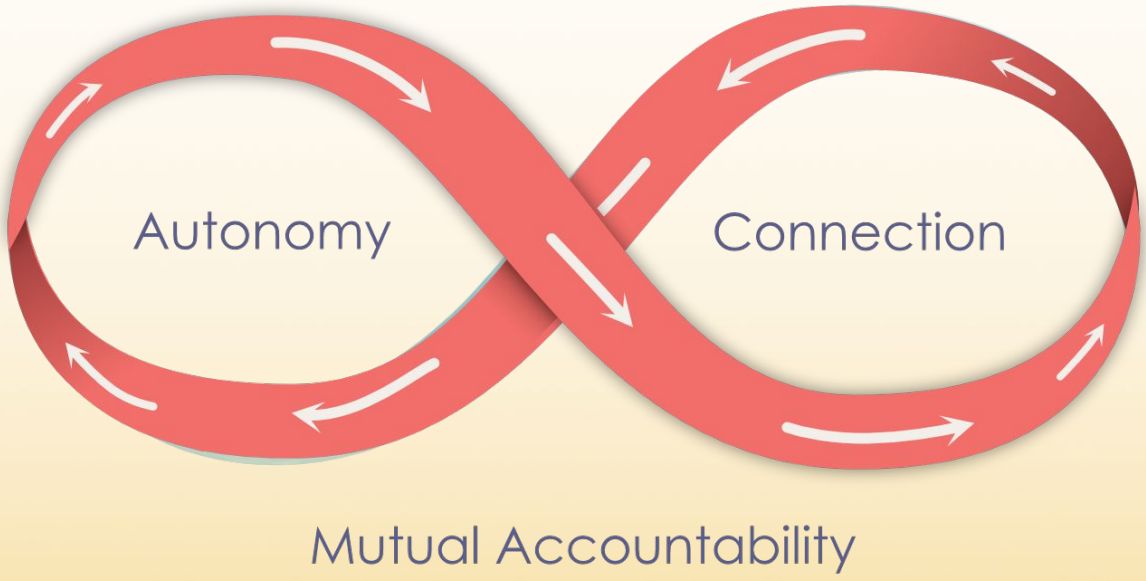
Luckily, a trained facilitator was at the meeting. She reminded everyone what they were really doing. She said: "We're not here to approve this campaign. We're here to check if it's safe to try. Is there any major risk? Could this hurt our community? If not, then we are within our range of tolerance."

The group realized the campaign wasn't harmful. It was worth trying. They respected the pair’s autonomy to keep moving forward. The newer member's ideas were noted as preferences, and the two could decide if they wanted to use them or not.

The Results

Without the facilitator's help, things could have gone badly. The group might have spent hours arguing, treating one person’s first ideas as important as the ideas that had been worked on for months. The two people who worked so hard might have felt defeated and quit. Instead, they felt supported. They kept working on their campaign. Today, that marketing campaign is one of the most successful parts of the whole initiative.

There's a difference between "everyone must agree" and "no one objects." Sometimes good ideas get stopped because we think everyone has to love them. But really, we just need to make sure they won't cause harm and are worth trying.



What's Coming Next

What If There Are Objections?

These Three Pathways show us moving toward decision without objection. But of course we know that's not always the case.

What if someone does express an objection? That's actually a good thing - we're not afraid of objections in a consent culture. In fact, responding and adapting to objections is a defining characteristic of consent culture.

Responding to Objections

In the next section "Objections and Dissent" we share what we've learned about sensing, naming, and responding to objections when they show up. This is the deeply humanizing work of overcoming politeness but not kindness; of giving and receiving feedback gracefully.

Objections + Dissent

Understanding and Working with Objections

What Happens When People Have Objections

In the previous section, we looked at the Three Pathways for making decisions with no objections, when no one is out of consent. But we know that objections do come up. And that's actually a good thing! In a consent culture, we want to know when people are sensing a risk.

How we respond to objections defines consent culture. This is where it all really comes alive, and where genuine change happens. In a consent culture, we accept dissent - both our own feelings and other people's concerns. Instead of just trying to keep everyone happy, we learn a mindset that respects consent and practices that help us work through conflict very differently than what we see in politics.

A Different Approach to Dissent

We're not trying to overcome objections by getting more votes. We're not trying to argue and convince people to give up their concerns. Instead, we're actually inviting dissent. We work with objections and use them to make our decisions better.

But this approach raises two common questions:

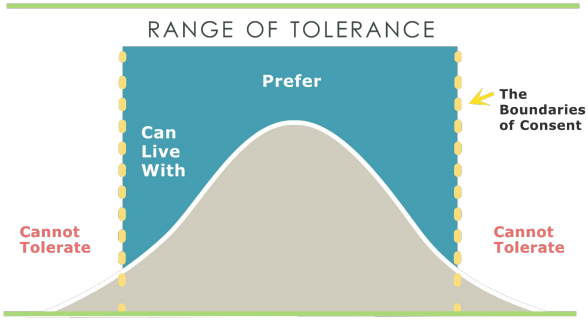
- First, **what exactly is an objection?** What counts as a real objection?
- Second, **what do you do when someone just refuses to budge and "won't consent?"**

What is an Objection?

Understanding Objections as Risks

Let's define objections in consent-based decision-making. We think about an objection as what you sense internally when a proposal is outside the boundaries of your consent. The feeling can be described as a risk. We say you are sensing "a risk that we can't afford to take."

And, that unacceptable risk is defined by two clear conditions.

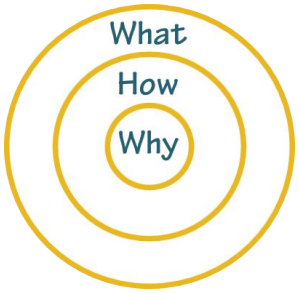


The Two Conditions of an Objection

We ask people to clarify their objections, so they can be addressed, by pointing to a risk in one of these two areas:

Risk to Shared Purpose

How will this proposal, or part of this proposal, hurt our ability to accomplish our shared purpose or goals?



Risk to Participation

How will this proposal hurt people's ability to participate or to fulfill their roles in working toward our shared purpose?

Objections Help Us See a Bigger Picture

When someone objects, they're sharing important information about risks the decision-makers might not have considered. Their job is to listen and ask questions like:

- "Tell us more about your concern"
- "What is the risk we cannot afford to take?"
- "What harm might we cause if we do this?"

The objection shows there is likely a gap in awareness, knowledge or understanding. Consent becomes feedback about potential unintended consequences. By having the humility to accept and use this feedback, decision-makers can learn more about a bigger picture, to improve their ideas and plans.

The goal is to keep working on the idea until it's "good enough for now and safe enough to try." This means the plan doesn't have to be perfect, but it can be solid enough that if something goes wrong, the group can handle it.

Two Important Commitments

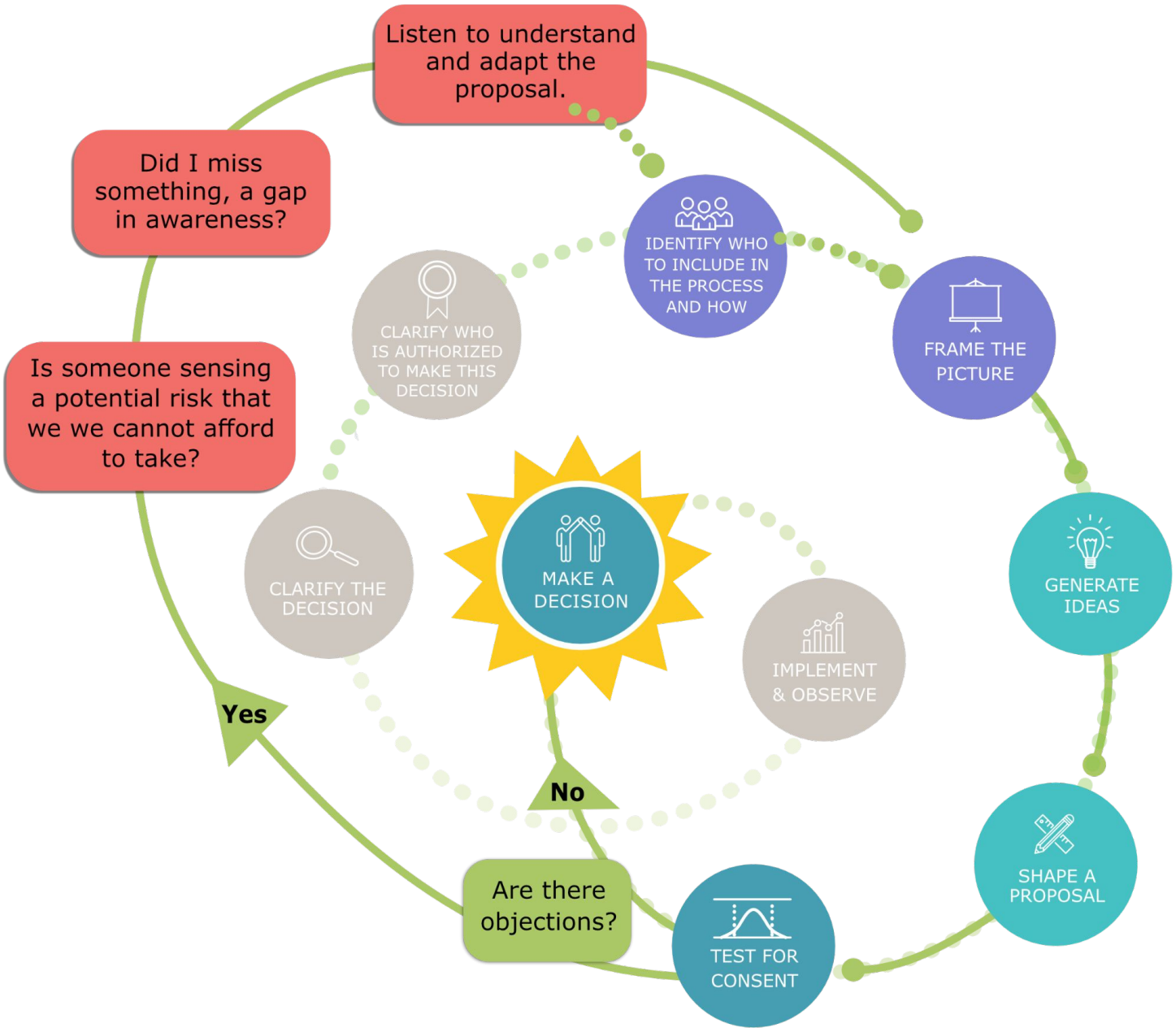
Groups that handle objections well make two promises to each other:

1. We will listen to objections and adapt. When someone who shares our goals raises an unacceptable concern, we work together to find creative ways to address it.

2. We will share our objections. We promise not to just "go along to get along." If something feels risky or wrong, we'll share our concerns.

The Pathway for Objections

Let's look at the pathway in the protocol for when we encounter objections. This image illustrates something about how we practice holding objections in a consent culture.



What Happens When Someone Objects

In a consent culture, when someone raises an objection, we don't fling ourselves out of our principles or Protocol. Instead, we see the objection for what it is: valuable data about potential risks to a course of action.

The objection is like a warning light on your car dashboard. It's telling you there might be a problem that could cause trouble later. This feedback helps the group see something they missed the first time.

An objection always circles us back to an earlier step in the protocol to Frame the Picture.

Because there's something that needs to be made visible. There's something to learn. The key is understanding that objections aren't obstacles to overcome - they're valuable data and information that can help make better decisions for everyone involved.

If you missed something important in the big picture, no worries, objections will bring you back around to thread it through.

Objections vs. Preferences

Here's something really important to understand: we do not promise to address everyone's preferences. That would be impossible!

In practice, when making decisions, we might try to include as many preferences as we can within reason, in a spirit of working together and making everyone feel like they belong. But we can't promise to make everyone happy about every detail.

However, we DO promise to make changes when people are truly not in consent - when there's a real objection based on the two conditions above – a risk to our purpose or to someone's participation.

It's Simple But Not Easy

This approach sounds straightforward, but it takes practice. People aren't used to seeing objections as helpful, and it can be hard to speak up when you sense a risk. It can take time and patience to work through concerns together instead of just voting and moving on, especially when we're beginning this practice.

However, when groups learn to handle objections this way, they make better decisions and build stronger relationships and trust with each other. The work moves at the speed of trust. As the Navy Seals know, "Slow is smooth and smooth is fast."

> "The kind of measurement of: are there objections? Are there risks that we can't take? Really asking those questions that the consent principle lays out has invited people to be more self-reflective about how they make decisions in general."
> *– a Director*

Sensing an Objection in Myself

Sometimes when we hear about someone's proposal, we get a strong feeling that something is wrong. Our body might react before our mind figures out why. We might feel our muscles tense up, our heart beat faster, or get a sick feeling in our stomach.

This is our nervous system responding to something that feels risky or wrong. We might feel like we want to argue, leave the room, shut down, or just agree to avoid conflict. Often we just feel a big "NO!" inside us, but we can't explain why.

These reactions happen because our brains are always trying to protect us. When we sense anything that might be danger, our bodies automatically prepare to fight, run away, freeze up, or try to please others to stay safe. This happens so fast that we often are reacting before we understand what's bothering us.

This happens to everyone. We might not be sure right away what the uncomfortable feeling means. Is it really an objection to this proposal?

Taking Time to Figure It Out

Many people say things like "I'm not sure if this is really a problem or if I'm just being picky." This confusion is completely normal.

Sometimes we react negatively to something simply because it's not our preferred approach, or it's unfamiliar, or it's personally risky. Other times, we're sensing a real problem that could interfere with our role or derail the project.

For example:

> You might not like meeting on Saturday mornings (preference)
>
> But you might object to a plan that leaves out certain community members (real problem)

Understanding Your Own Objections

To understand the objection better, we slow down and take a moment to consider the concern we're sensing. We can ask questions like:

- "Why don't I like this idea?"
- "What am I worried might happen?"
- "What bad outcome are we risking that I can't accept?"

Coming back to the Range of Tolerance and the two Conditions can help us tease out whether what we sense is an unacceptable risk to our purpose or participation or a preference. Maybe even a strong preference. Maybe it created strong feelings in you, like maybe you are mourning the loss of how things used to be.

When you feel that strong "no" reaction to an idea or suggestion, take time to ask yourself: "What can I absolutely not live with, and what could I let go of without any resentment – even if I don't like it?"

Learning this difference takes practice. We learn to separate our personal preferences and risks to our ego, from things that could actually hurt our community or go against our values.

There's a difference between things we really can't accept and things we just don't prefer.

Getting Help From Others

A facilitator or supportive group member can help by asking simple questions like: "Can you tell us more about what you're concerned about?" Sometimes just having someone listen and ask questions helps us get clear.

Communicating More Clearly

Once you understand your own reaction better - once you've separated your personal preferences from genuine concerns about the project - you can explain your worries and your longings more clearly to others.

Sharing Your Objections

The Inner Work of Consent

People tell us over and over again that practicing consent involves moments of looking inward and reflecting on ourselves.

People often start to ask themselves: "How often in my life have I just been accepting things and living outside my consent?" In other words, how often do I go along with things that I'm not really okay with?

When we begin practicing consent, we start to become more aware of how we respond when we have an objection or dissent. You might think about these questions now:

- Do I avoid conflict and stay quiet?
- Do I stop participating or showing up?
- Do I dig in and fight?
- Do I secretly gossip or even sabotage?
- How do I respond?
- What is my pattern when I'm faced with something I find to be an unacceptable risk?

Our Side of the Agreement

This is one side of the agreement for consent-based governance: we're going to share our objections as best we can. We're not going to "go along to get along" when we're not in consent.

The Importance of Speaking Up

Learning to share objections constructively is a key skill in consent-based decision-making. It means being honest about our concerns while also being respectful and helpful. Instead of just complaining or causing problems, we learn to voice our objections in ways that can actually improve the decision or situation.

This takes practice and courage, but it's essential for consent-based systems to work well. When people feel safe to speak up about real problems, better decisions get made and trust grows stronger.

Listening to Objections

When someone disagrees with our idea, especially an idea we really like, our first reaction might be an old patterned response. We might get upset, frustrated, or try to convince them they're wrong.

To work in collaborations aimed at systems change, we must be willing to practice this vital skill of learning to listen to objections – others and our own – with empathy.

Growing Up Without Consent

Learning to listen to objections isn't easy. Many of us grew up in families, schools, or communities where adults didn't always ask for our permission or listen to our concerns. We learned that people with more power can just decide things for us. This taught us patterns that can make it hard to care about others' consent. We take those patterns with us into our work spaces and collaborations.

Checking Our Own Response Patterns

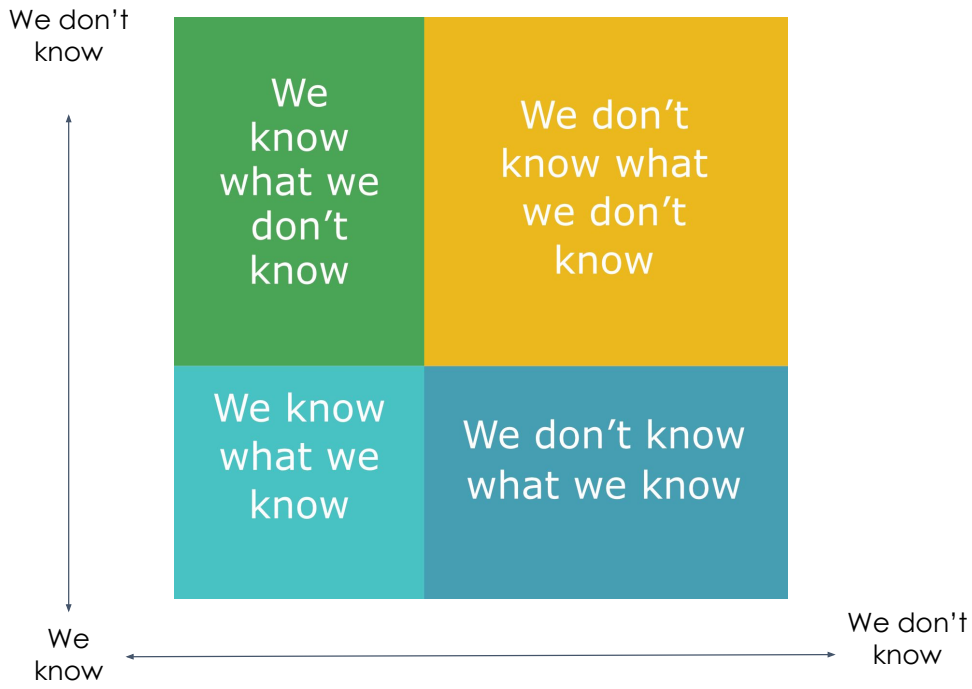
It helps to think honestly about how we've tended to react in the past. Ask yourself these questions:

- How many times have I ignored, cajoled, pressured, or tried to persuade someone when they said "no" to me?
- Have I ever felt like I deserved someone's time or help, even if they didn't want to give it?
- Have I done this with kids, coworkers, or people who have less power than me?

These are hard questions, but being honest helps us become better collaborators.

What if I Don't Believe It's Really “a Risk?”

Sometimes when someone objects to an idea, you might think, "That's not a big deal" or "They're worrying about nothing." Humility is key. The important thing to remember: we don't know what we don't know.



We All Have Gaps in Our Awareness

Everyone has gaps in what they understand or notice. By definition, if there's something we don't see as a problem, we may not have all the information. The person objecting might see risks or problems that we genuinely cannot see from our perspective.

Don't Waste Time Arguing

We can all probably recall times when someone has noticed risks in things that seemed insignificant or unimportant to others. When this happens, the least efficient thing you can do is spend valuable time and damage trust by arguing about whether their objection is "really" valid or "technically" counts as a real objection.

Adapt by Default

In a consent based culture, we're strengthening our psychological flexibility to be influenced and to adapt when we hear others' objections.

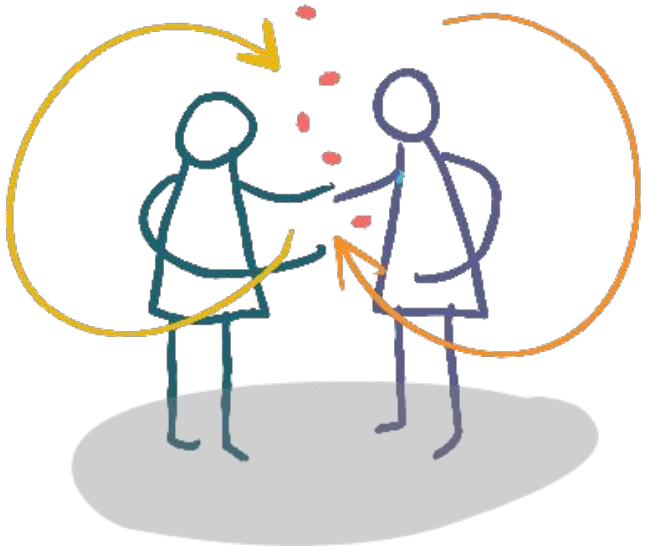
If your practice can make seeking an adaptation the first response - instead of debating whether a concern is legitimate - you'll work much more efficiently. This means letting go of the habit of trying to create the perfect plan that everyone agrees is "best."

Sometimes we need help from trained facilitators or mediators who are skilled at helping groups work through complex situations.

Learn And Improve Over Time

When we test for consent with people who are impacted, and practice adaptation as our default, the solution only has to be "good enough for now, and safe enough to try." We can learn from it and make changes later if needed.

This doesn't mean we change our plans every time someone complains. It means we take real concerns seriously and work together to find solutions that work for everyone who will be impacted by the decision.



Why This Works

Often we'll notice when someone hears that their objection is understood, their body language changes. They might nod, relax their shoulders, or look relieved because they feel heard.

The key is accepting that there are multiple good ways to approach most challenges. And, we don't know what we don't know. Learning, adapting, and improving become a practice.

When It Gets Complex

Sometimes we might sense an objection to somebody else's objection! Meaning, we might sense risk to the group's purpose or our role if we *cannot* take action in the way proposed.

We often have different yet connected challenges at once. The Protocol is the same: circle back to Frame the Picture. Generate Ideas. Ask "given everything we now understand, what should we do?"

When We Feel Challenged

Sometimes when people object to our ideas, we feel threatened or scared. Disagreements can get emotional fast. People feel their most vulnerable when they care a lot. Past bad experiences can make these feelings even stronger. Someone might react strongly not just because of what's happening now, but because of what happened to them before.

When Things Get Difficult

It's important to recognize that conflict can be really painful, scary, and expensive in terms of time and energy for the whole group. We're not here to say "Oh, that's easy! You just do this simple thing and the problem goes away!" That wouldn't be honest or helpful.

However, there are some valuable things to think about in your group agreements and practices that can help when these difficult situations arise. Skills like psychological flexibility, compassionate communication, restorative conflict practices, and emotional intelligence are critical skills to develop in yourself and in your teams.

Working through objections takes patience and skill, but it's possible to do it in a way that strengthens relationships rather than tearing them apart.

Objections are Treasure

Objections Help Us Grow

We call objections "treasure" because when we welcome feedback, several good things happen:

- **We learn to see things from a wider perspective.** An objection reveals gaps in our awareness. Many times, someone brings up an issue that nobody else had considered until that moment.
- **We grow as people.** Objections help us question our assumptions and disrupt unexamined bias.
- **We take wiser action.** Objections help us avoid mistakes that could harm our purpose or waste time and money.
- **We strengthen relationships and trust.**

The Trust Exchange

When you listen to someone's objection and adapt your plan because of it, something powerful happens. You're basically saying, "I may have a gap in my awareness. I trust your judgment more than my own right now." This is the actual trust that is created. You're giving them your trust.

This is especially meaningful for people who have been left out of important decisions in the past. When someone who usually gets ignored suddenly has their concerns taken seriously, it can be life-changing. Receiving someone’s trust meets important needs for us, like needs to contribute, to be seen, and to matter.

And something good happens for you, too. When you show that you trust someone else's perspective, they start to trust you more as a leader or decision-maker.

The Objection Belongs to Everyone

When someone raises a concern, it's not just their personal problem to solve. The objection belongs to the whole group, to all those who will be impacted by the decision.

This makes room for the adaptations. As a decision-maker, we cultivate a willingness to give space for a way forward to emerge that no one has thought of yet. The solutions can come from unexpected people or in ways no one thought of at first. It can feel kind of magical when this happens.

How This Changes Relationships

There is a kind of alchemy when we're working to shift cultures. Practicing consent-based decision-making transforms relationships.

We heard in interviews with about 25 leaders and former clients from the last decade, that once people get familiar with the practices of consent, they don't want to go back.

> *"Now I feel like it is a part of the fabric of who I am and how I approach things. It's part of the toolbox that I have in my mind—both as a team member and in situations where I need to be a leader on a team—to bring us along and inform how I do it."* JM - Executive Director

> *"The concepts of consent are very much a part of how I work across all the work that I do in making decisions as a community. It comes up a lot in the way I culturally engage people around decision-making."*
> -NDD, network coordinator

Even though it can be challenging, frustrating and slow us down at times, authentic commitment to finding consent creates the conditions for more dignity and trust to flourish, which then creates more buy-in and forward momentum.

So, coming back around:

“What do you do when someone just refuses to budge and ‘won't consent’?"

How This Consent Protocol is Different from Consensus

Many people ask about the difference between consent-based decisions and consensus. While they share common roots,

one key difference is: an objection is not a block.

In consensus, one person can technically stop the whole group from moving forward. We’ve seen blocking be weaponized and destroy trust. Which is a clear sign you’ve lost the consent principle.

Here is the difference: sometimes not moving forward also creates risks. If problems don't get addressed, that can harm the collaboration too. In consent-based decision-making, an objection is data to guide decision-makers back to Frame the Picture, to adapt or change the plan, for the good of the whole.

"I think that's one of the many things that differentiates it from consensus—it almost encourages disagreement. It encourages the wide range of perspectives in the room to really be revealed, and through that, it brings conflict and tension, but in a way that is generous and generative. This is versus my experiences with consensus, where somebody blocking a decision was a really big deal that threw everything off, and it happened very rarely. Whereas I think this methodology encourages people to bring up when they're outside of their range of tolerance." BS network member

"We made a very conscious decision at a certain point to adopt consent instead of consensus after having had a bunch of years with various instances of problems and blockages and failure to move forward when people blocked things. And certain individual organizations were perceived to have more power than others, because they would do that more often, and they were also kind of bigger than other organizations in the group already, and so we had challenges with the consensus format." ET network coordinator

Some people worry: "What happens when someone just refuses to agree with anything?"

It doesn't happen very often that someone has mental health problems or is truly trying to hurt the group's work. We have seen that when decision-makers practice consent the way we describe here, one person is not given the power to control or stop everyone else.

This problem usually goes away when groups get good at making changes based on feedback. When people know their concerns will be heard and dealt with, they become much more willing to work together to find answers.

Pro Tips for Facilitating Consent-based Decision-Making

Here are few recommendations that we offer when we're coaching people who are facilitating consent-based processes.

1. Ask a Different Question

When people are new to this approach, they often share a proposal and ask, "Do you consent?" When you ask "do you consent?" people often just go along with the plan even if they have worries. They might not want to cause problems or they might think their concerns aren't important enough.

Also, if autonomy is a strong need, or if time is short, we urge you not to ask the question this way: "How do you like this idea?" That question can lead to lots of suggestions for what to do differently, or even to completely different proposals.

Instead, try asking:

- "Is there anything you can't live with or outside your range of tolerance?"
- "Is this good enough to try?"
- "Do you see any risks we cannot afford to take?"
- "Do you have any concerns?"
- "Is there anything you couldn't live with?"

These questions invite a more concrete response. When you ask about objections or risks, people give more honest answers. The person making the decision can find out what is actually outside the Range of Tolerance of those who will be affected. You're less likely to miss the wisdom people are holding while also staying on track.

2. Make Adaptation Your First Response

When someone senses potential harm, adapt your approach to address it rather than spending energy trying to convince them the problem doesn't exist. When someone raises a concern, practice: "How can we address this risk?" or "How might we have both, or all, these concerns included?"

We can adapt without needing to agree that something's a risk. There are usually many ways to approach any problem, and small changes often solve big concerns.

One of the most valuable lessons from experienced facilitators is this: don't waste time and trust arguing about whether someone's objection "counts." Instead, focus your energy on finding ways to modify the proposal to address their concerns. If you make looking for solutions your first response instead of trying to make perfect plans, your group will work much more efficiently.

3. Confirm that you have shared purpose

The third tip is to make sure your group actually has a clear, shared purpose that everyone understands and has consented to.

Many groups assume everyone knows why they're working together and what they're trying to accomplish. But often people have different ideas about the group's purpose, or new members join without understanding the goals.

Take time to:

- Write a statement of purpose together and use the Protocol to find consent.
- Keep talking about it regularly, especially when new people join
- Post it somewhere visible so people have it top of mind while their working together.

If your group is having trouble making decisions or moving forward, check to make sure everyone is clear about and committed to the same purpose.

A Transformational Practice

Many people we've worked with tell us that learning to listen to objections completely changes how they think about leadership and decision-making. This is especially true for people who are used to having power and are very goal oriented.

At first, some leaders resist this approach. They're used to making decisions fast and moving forward even when people disagree. But we've watched many of them have a breakthrough moment when they're willing to practice listening to understand someone's objection.

You can see it happen on their faces. Suddenly hey realize, "Oh wow, I hadn't thought of that. That really is important." They feel touched by the other person's insight and grateful that someone helped them see something they missed.

From Lonely Leadership to Shared Wisdom

Leaders often feel like they have to carry all the responsibility alone. They think their job is to push forward no matter what concerns people raise. This creates a feeling of "It's lonely at the top" because they're making all the hard decisions by themselves.

But when leaders learn to test their ideas for objections with people who are affected and adapt their plans, something amazing happens. They don't just get excited about this new approach - they also feel relieved.

This way of making decisions is actually smarter than what any one person or one team can figure out alone. It's the wisdom of whole living systems. As the authors describe in this article:

> *"At its core, "systems that sense" is a simple but radical idea: in complex human systems, governance is about sensing what's alive in the system. Every community, organization, and network is a living system—not a machine to be managed, but a body to be nourished. And like all living systems, they thrive through their ability to sense and adapt to their environment."*

Leaders realize they don't have to hold all the answers. They can trust the wisdom that is larger than themselves.

Story of the Blue Moon Group

"We gather together in dialogue realizing that while our views about abortion and religion may differ, we bring to the table a unified desire to find common ground and to lessen the chance of violence in our community."

Background: In 2002, after serious harassment of the Femcare women's clinic in Asheville, NC, pro-life and pro-choice proponents began meeting monthly to lessen the chance of violence in their community. The participants included ministers of a local fundamentalist Christian Church, nurses from Planned Parenthood, the doctor performing abortions at FemCare, a pro-choice activist and volunteer, and a pro-life activist for adoption alternatives.

They called themselves the Blue Moon Group because they first met at the Blue Moon Café and because one member thought the opportunity for such a discussion comes around only "once in a blue moon." To set the tone for their meetings, they developed a set of Purposes/Traditions and Closing Words which are read aloud at each meeting.

The group has a working Common Ground Statement which describes the "common ground" they hold in approaching the issue of abortion. They regard this statement not as one set in concrete, but rather as a living document that may be modified as their discussions continue.

This is an example of people who are using the consent principle to find ways forward together, without calling it that. It is another case example that these skills and practices can work for the most polarizing of issues.

One concrete action that came out of these conversations was that the abortion doctor put a poster and pamphlet about adoption in the waiting room of the abortion clinic. So that women knew they had that option.

One of the most interesting aspects of this story was that this group never tried to recruit lots of people. They stayed small and inclusive to the people who were most passionate about this issue from all the different points of view. They didn't run campaigns. They had conversations and wrote up their agreements and a statement of common ground. But the violence that had been escalating went away and did not come back. What they were doing was mostly invisible. So, it is a powerful example that small actions in a system can have big effects.

Common Ground Statement of Blue Moon Group

-We agree that talking with each other and forming relationships with each other help us to see the common ground we share as fellow citizens of this community in our discussion of abortion and surrounding issues.

-We agree that decreasing abortions is a goal toward which we all strive.

-We agree that relieving the socio-economic and other conditions that lead women to consider abortion is a common goal.

-We agree that adoption should be more encouraged and accessible.

-We agree that information provided to women should be accurate and that the references for the information or statistics be available.

-We agree that contraception and abstinence play important roles in lessening unplanned pregnancies, and, thereby, abortions, however we differ on methods and when and with whom to initiate discussion.

-We agree that physical or verbal violence has no role in opposition to or support for abortion and that our participation in such violence would hurt our respective causes.

-We are committed to ongoing discussion in order to accomplish the goals and maintain the agreements outlined here.

For more see: https://www.main.nc.us/wncceib/CHOICEact31305.htm

Consenting to Roles + Responsibilities

Who Gets to Decide?

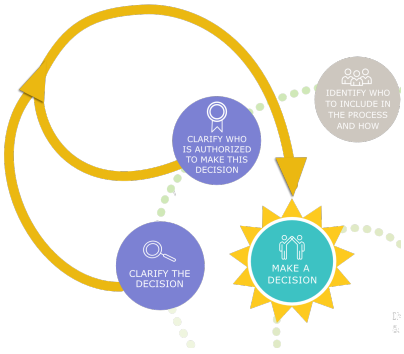
Who Gets to Decide? A Guide for Community Groups

When your group needs to make a decision, the first question should be: "Who has the authority to make this choice?" This might seem obvious, but it's not always clear.

Sometimes unexpected problems come up or new opportunities appear, and it becomes unclear who should decide what to do. When no one knows who should decide, groups waste time, people argue about the wrong things, good ideas get stuck, and trust breaks down. But when roles are clear, decisions happen faster, people know what to expect, and the group moves forward.

When it's unclear who should make a decision, figuring out the decision-maker becomes the first choice the group needs to make. The Three Pathways work here as well, to choose who decides. And each works better in different situations.

Pathway 1: Just Decide



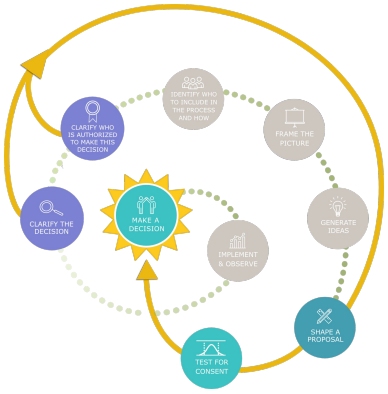
1. **The first path** happens when someone steps into a role that seems obvious to take on, even if it wasn't planned. This path works well for keeping work moving. Action is very fast and people can "just do it."

It can be because there is implied consent for a role. No one would reasonably object. It's common sense. For example, if the dishes are stacked up in the sink, someone might take a "role" to wash them without asking if it is okay.

This is often the path to leadership roles in a crisis or chaos, where there is no crisis plan. People may take a leadership role without testing for consent and other people may follow them because the situation is urgent.

Be aware it might bring up objections if the decision turns out to be bigger than expected.

Pathway 2: Check Your Idea



2. **The second path** involves proposing someone or some team to accept a role. This could be yourself, another person, a small team, or even random selection like drawing names from a hat.

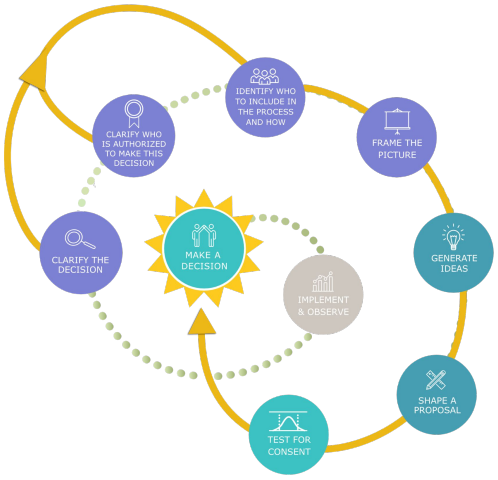
We check-in with people who will be affected to ask if they have any objections to this person (or team) having this role. The other way we say this is, is it in your range of tolerance that they become the decision-maker for that area of work?

For instance, someone might say "I think Maria should decide about the fundraiser since she has the most experience. Does anyone object to Maria making this choice?" This approach works well for decisions where you want some group input but still need to move quickly. It's still efficient but includes a safety check, though someone might object.

If people are okay with – and that includes the consent of the person or team who would be accepting this role – then they are given the role. They become the decision-maker.

If there is not a clear suggestion, or there is not consent for who is suggested, or, this role seems to need more formal consent, move on to Roles Pathway Three.

Pathway 3:
Slow Down for Better Results



3. **The third path** uses a more careful group selection process when the second path doesn't work - maybe someone objects or the decision is really important.

The Sociocracy Election Process (next page) has been used by groups around the world for decades and helps tap into the group's wisdom when choosing who should have a role in Pathway Three.

The steps include clearly describing what the role involves, letting people nominate candidates, having each person explain their nominations, discussing the options, and testing for agreement on the final choice. While this path takes more time, it creates broad support and brings up concerns that might otherwise stay hidden. We suggest having an experienced practitioner take you through this process the first time or so. It really is different from what most people expect!

Before using any path, make sure everyone understands what decision needs to be made and what the decision-maker's role will include. Focus on finding someone who is "good enough" rather than perfect - you need someone who can do the role well enough and who people trust. Remember that if a role isn't working out, someone can object. The Protocol provides this pathway for revisiting decisions about roles.

Consent-Based Election of Leadership Roles

Some of the steps and their order may seem surprising, but experience has shown this process does lead to results that best meet the needs of everyone involved. Please follow the process precisely – allow it to do its work to support you.

DO NOT:
– Elect for an unlimited term
– Ask for a volunteer
– Inquire who is interested or who is not
– Have dialog during a round
– Seek the perfect candidate: recall that each candidate has strengths and weaknesses

STEPS:

1. Review Role & Term
   - ➔ Describe responsibilities, qualifications, and how long the person will serve (term), as they have been consented to.

2. Submit Nominations
   - ➔ Write on a piece of paper, "I, ___[your name]___ nominate ___[name of candidate]___" and submit to facilitator.
   - ➔ You can nominate yourself or another person (in the room or not); or, write, "abstain" if you do not wish to nominate anyone.

3. Round 1: Share Reasons
   - ➔ Facilitator collects the slips of paper and reads the first one on the stack. For example,"Sonia nominates D.J."
   - ➔ The facilitator then asks the nominator (in this case, Sonia) to identify the reasons that they believe the person they have nominated is the best person to fill the role. No crosstalk or dialogue.

4. Check for Relevant Information
   - ➔ Before the next round begins, the facilitator can ask the persons nominated if there is any relevant information they have to share before the "change round."

5. Round 2: Invite Changes
   - ➔ Each person has the opportunity to change their initial nomination based on the reasoning they have heard. If they change the nomination, they give the reasons.
   - ➔ Very occasionally, an open discussion might be helpful, too.

6. Consent Round
   - ➔ Facilitator proposes the candidate with the strongest fit and asks for the candidate's consent last. If there are objections outside the range of tolerance, have each objector state their reasons without discussion until the round is completed.
   - ➔ If necessary, amend the proposal and repeat the consent round.

Using Proposals

How Proposals Work in Consent-Based decision-making

In consent-based decision-making, proposals are how you start the process when your group wants to do something. A proposal is a tool that helps you take your ideas and turn them into clear descriptions of actions your group might take.

Once you have a proposal, your group can test it by looking for any objections or problems. This testing helps you improve the idea before you commit to it.

Think of proposals as a way for your group's collective wisdom to come out. When you put an idea forward as a proposal, everyone can contribute their thoughts and help make it better. The final decision becomes smarter than what any one person could have thought of alone.

What Are Proposals?

A proposal is simply an idea or suggestion for action that someone puts forward to help with a current situation or problem. It can address the whole issue or just part of it.

Proposals can be formal or informal, depending on what your group needs

Informal proposals are simple suggestions that don't need to be written out in detail. For example, someone might informally propose, "I could contact the neighborhood churches and ask them to put a notice about our event in their weekly bulletin."

Formal proposals are usually written down and include detailed information. For example, a formal proposal might be a complete plan for organizing a community event, including the date, location, budget, and who will do what tasks.

If you've ever seen grant proposals, those are a specific type of very formal proposal. Organizations write them to ask for funding, and they usually require detailed written information about their ideas and plans.

How Much Detail Do You Need?

The amount of information you include in a proposal depends on your situation. Consider:

- How complex is the action you're proposing?
- How much does your group need to know to make a good decision?
- What are the consequences if something goes wrong?
- What does your group usually expect?

Simple actions might only need informal proposals, while bigger decisions that affect many people or involve significant resources usually need more detailed formal proposals.

The key is to provide enough information so your group can understand what you're suggesting and identify any potential problems or concerns.

What is the Purpose of a Proposal?

The main goal of a proposal is to make your idea clear enough that others can understand it and give you feedback. We want to find out about any problems or concerns before we start taking action, so we can avoid bigger issues later.

Finding Problems Early

When you share a proposal with your group, you're trying to surface objections - meaning you want people to tell you about any risks or concerns they see. It's much better to discover these problems early, when you can still change your plan, than to find out about them after you've already started.

Don't Get Too Attached

Here's an important point: proposals aren't precious. This means you shouldn't get too emotionally attached to your original idea.

The whole purpose of putting forward a proposal is to get input that will help you improve it. If people point out problems or suggest changes, that's actually a good thing - it's the process working the way it should.

Your proposal is just a starting point. The goal isn't to get everyone to accept your idea exactly as you first thought of it. The goal is to use your proposal as a way to work together and create a better plan that addresses everyone's concerns.

When you think of proposals this way, getting feedback and objections becomes helpful rather than threatening. Each concern someone raises is an opportunity to make your idea stronger and more likely to succeed.

What to Include in a Proposal

Whether your proposal is formal or informal, including these basic parts can help your group work more efficiently and make better decisions.

1. Context - Why This Matters

This is the background for your idea, the reason you're bringing this up. It is sometimes called the "driver" or "tension":

- Why are we considering this proposal?
- What's the current situation we're trying to address?
- Who will benefit from this idea?
- How does this help us achieve our shared goals?

2. The Actual Idea or Suggestion

Of course, you need to clearly describe what you're proposing. Try to think about what questions people might ask when they hear your idea, such as:

- What is the objective, and how is it aligned with other objectives?
- Who will be responsible for making this happen?
- How long will this take?
- What will it cost? What resources do we need?

3. Evaluation: How We'll Know If It's Working

Always include a plan for checking in and getting feedback. No matter how simple or complex your proposal is, the group should always be learning together. Think about:

- How will we know if this idea is working?
- What does success look like? What will we see, hear, feel, or experience differently when we put this idea into action?
- Who should be involved in deciding how we measure success?
- When will we check in to evaluate how things are going?

Making Decisions About Proposals

When your group considers a proposal, there are several decisions you need to make.

Accept or Not Accept

The most obvious decision is whether to accept the proposal or not. But there are other important decisions too.

Who Will Be Responsible?

Make sure to decide who will be responsible for actually carrying out the ideas in the proposal. Don't assume this will just work itself out later. Be clear about who is taking on which tasks and roles.

How Will We Remember This Decision?

Another important part of working with proposals is keeping transparent records so everyone can remember what was decided. Write down the decisions that came from discussing the proposal so people can easily look them up later.

Creating Good Communication Systems

This points to the need for a well-designed way to share information with your group. Participants should be able to find and access information that is:

- Timely and up-to-date
- Accurate
- Meaningful and relevant
- Complete enough for decision-making
- But not overwhelming with too much unnecessary detail

Why Evaluation Matters

Often, just knowing that there's a timeline for checking in and evaluating the results is enough for people to give consent trying out a new suggestion or idea. It gives everyone confidence that if something isn't working, the group will notice and make changes. It shows that you're committed to adapting and improving based on what actually happens, not just hoping for the best.

Important Point: When the Proposal IS the Decision

If there are no objections to your proposal, then it becomes the decision. You don't need additional approval.

You Don't Have to Wait for Meetings

Some people get frustrated because they think they have to wait for "the meeting" to share their proposal. But there are many ways decision-makers can get reactions to proposals and test for consent with people who might never attend a meeting. You can:

- Sending the proposal by email and asking for feedback
- Having one-on-one conversations Make phone calls to trusted community members
- Using surveys or polls
- Going to places where people already gather
- Using social media or community bulletin boards
- Use a decision-making app like Loomio
- Use other methods that work for your community

You might bring a proposal to a meeting, but that's just one option among many for getting the input you need.

Preparing for Formal Meetings

If your proposal will be discussed in a formal meeting, share it ahead of time with the person who will be running the meeting. This helps them plan enough time for discussion.

If you've already shared drafts with people who will be affected by your proposal, listened to their concerns, and adapted based on their feedback, the discussion will go more smoothly.

Avoid Communication Chaos

Is there anything worse than those endless email chains that change topics in the middle and start completely new conversations that have nothing to do with what you were originally discussing? Ugh!

Good record-keeping and communication systems help your group avoid this kind of confusion. Everyone can find the information they need without getting lost in irrelevant details or confusing message threads.

When you make decisions about proposals, always think about how you'll keep track of what was decided and who is responsible for what. This helps your group stay organized and follow through on the actions you agree to take.

About Us

About Circle Forward

Experience Behind the Protocol

We have been researching, practicing, and teaching consent-based decision-making for more than twelve years, with teams in many different situations and contexts. There's a growing amount of work being done on consent-based decision-making in community-based initiatives, and this practice continues to spread around the world. We feel proud and grateful to be able to contribute to this body of knowledge.

Circle Forward equips collaborative leaders and social innovators with the skills, tools and practices to collectively navigate “VUCA” conditions (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) toward a regenerative future. When we work with groups to help them use this protocol, we often help them design decision-making processes and communication strategies that fit their specific situation and needs.

Our services include governance co-design, facilitation & strategy, cultivating a culture of consent, and leadership coaching for social impact networks, coalitions, collaboratives, cooperatives, DAOs, alliances, and funders. We also provide beautiful, clear, and accessible "touchstones" - tools for governance that people can return to again and again for guidance and reminders.

We support collaborative leaders and social innovators to live into their values of equity, dignity and thriving by grounding governance in consent.

Learn more at CircleForward.us

Please help our learning to continue!

We’d be grateful to hear about your experience engaging with this guide. We plan to continue iterating this guide so please share any feedback or suggestions here

About the Creators

Tracy Kunkler, MSW, is a Co-Founder & Co-Director of Circle Forward. Tracy describes her role as a governance guide. She provides accompaniment to collaborative leaders on the leading edge of regenerative governance; to support them to put into practice principles of mutuality and consent, distributed leadership and decision-making, and emergent strategy. She draws on 20+ years consulting with nonprofits, networks, and communities at local and national levels. Circle Forward and Tracy's work have been featured in research publications, blogs, and podcasts.

Rev. Michelle Smith is a Co-Founder & Co-Director of Circle Forward. For 25+ years Michelle has worked with groups working for a regenerative future for the whole community. She provides training, coaching, facilitation and strategic co-design. She specializes in ProSocial methodology, Convergent Facilitation and NVC to help groups become more cooperative, adaptable, and resilient, with an equity lens. She hosts the weekly Regenerative Governance online session of the Global Regeneration CoLab and a bi-monthly online NVC practice group.

Dee Washington, is a Co-Director of Circle Forward. She is a facilitator, trainer, and coach with 20+ years advancing liberatory practices through community development, cooperative development, and Grounded Governance. Her work supports collaborative leadership in food systems, research collectives, cooperatives, and philanthropy, building governance rooted in shared power and accountability. She serves on cooperative boards and co-designed Culture & Consent initiatives with Circle Forward.

Kara Brown is Circle Forward's Visual Alchemist.
Her work speaks for itself. She invites collaboration and co-creation via graphics, illustrations, paintings and commissions - see more at karabrownlovesart.com

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The concepts in the protocol are not new, but rather owe deep gratitude to both indigenous traditions and the long traditions of community organizing. One intent is to operationalize the principle "Nihil de nobis, sine nobis," or "Nothing about us without us," a motto many people recognize from disability justice movements.

The way of thinking about objections as "A risk we can't afford to take" comes from Nathaniel Whitestone, a colleague from the UK

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Koru (fern) photo by Jon Radoff Creative Commons Attribution 2.5

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