

# CAREERS

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## Consensus-building as an energizing experience

### Consensus Through Conversation: How to Achieve High-Commitment Decisions

By Larry Dressler  
Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. \$15

Consensus through conversation or a colonoscopy?

Before dropping our drawers, consider this. Maybe we've yet to experience consensus-building done right.

We've all been summoned to bless done deals and sustain the illusion of inclusion. We've all been sequestered with grandstanders who have nothing worth saying yet just won't shut up. Who wander lackadaisically down tangents while the work piles up on our desks. Who suck all the fun and oxygen right out of the room. Who magically



JAY ROBB

turn simple solutions into something intractably bureaucratic. Who use talk as a convenient cover for inaction.

And yet, it can always be worse. We've all been "voluntold" for those half-baked projects and corporate crusades that lack buy in. Where there's no coalition of the willing. Where miserable hordes of critics and cynics engage in low-intensity insurgency and less-than-civil war around the water cooler.

So would it seem consensus-building is a necessary evil. According to author Larry Dressler, it can actually be an energizing experience with positive outcomes when done right.

"Real organizational change isn't brought about by decree, pressure, permission or even persuasion," says Dressler.

"Sustained change comes when people are passionately committed to a future they've helped shape. When people are invited to come together to share their ideas, concerns, and needs, they become engaged."

We get consensus when we combine our collective wisdom and commit to backing a decision that's in our common interest.

Sounds good. So how do you pull it off without losing your mind?

Dressler sets out four basic beliefs:

1. Consensus is a collaborative search

for common ground solutions and not a competition or turf war.

2. Disagreement is a positive force and actively encouraged. The tension of opposing views gets you creative solutions instead of shaky compromises and mediocrity.

3. Every voice matters. Balance power differences. The best decisions aren't reserved for people with the biggest job titles.

4. Decisions are made in the collective interest of the group.

Before whining about how long consensus-building takes, think back to when you didn't have buy in. How much time did you waste putting out fires, pulling knives out of your back, begging folks to lend a hand and explaining to higher-ups why their pet project went off the rails?

One last piece of advice: Get yourself a really good facilitator.

Someone who has more than just a box of fruit-scented markers, dollar-store props and dreams of doing standup.

"In consensus, good facilitation can mean the difference between people leaving the meeting energized and committed to the future or feeling tired, frustrated and defeated."

Group facilitation is an art, says Dressler. And arriving at rock-solid consensus-based decisions is the Mona Lisa of facilitation.

So while you may have the future all mapped out and your decisions may be right and true, as a leader the most important step you can take is to convene a meeting where bright people sit around a table and come to a smart decision.

Jay Robb, a Hamilton freelance writer who's intolerance for consensus-building is his Achilles heel, can be reached at [robbsclairmont@aol.com](mailto:robbsclairmont@aol.com).