

## Introducing the Consensus Workshop Method

### ICA/ToP™ methods

Over the years, the Institute of Cultural Affairs has created a *pot pourri* of methods—study methods, training methods, organizational and community methods—to better carry out its work. All these methods have four levels, because they are all built from the same surface-to-depth pattern

The four phases of the pattern go something like this:

Phase	Deals with	Focused Conversation Method	Consensus Workshop Method
1	The objective stuff of life: what is there, factual data, the situational parameters, internal and external observable data.	The objective Level	Brainstorming the Ideas
2	Interior reactions, initial intuitive responses, emotional states or tones, feelings, memories and associations	The Reflective Level	Clustering the Ideas
3	The significance of the data for the individual or group	The Interpretive Level	Naming the Clusters
4	Consensus, decision, implementation and action	The Decisional Level	Resolving

The four-phase pattern can take myriad forms. The Consensus Workshop Method adds a section for contexting and setting the stage at the beginning and is made up of 5 major steps.

1. **The context** sets the stage for what is to follow. It states and clarifies the focus question. It calls the group to attention. It outlines the process and the timeline for the workshop. It explains the product and the outcome.
2. **Brainstorming the ideas** gathers all relevant data from the group and puts it in front of them.
3. **Clustering the ideas** develops clusters of ideas and puts similar items of data together into related clusters.
4. **Naming** gives each cluster of ideas a name. Larger clusters or sub-clusters are identified and given names. The result is a comprehensive picture of the ordered relationship of all ideas generated in the workshop.
5. **Resolving** confirms the group's commitment to the decisions they have made and moves it to action. The leader reads through the named clusters out loud and then holds a discussion to reflect on the workshop, using focused conversation questions. Finally the group decides on the next steps, and how they will document the workshop results.

### An example of the method in action

Let's join the "survivor" mentality for a few moments and imagine that a dozen of us are marooned on a deserted Pacific island. Our flying boat has crash-landed on a reef. We have crawled out of the wreckage, swum or helped each other to shore, and found ourselves basically unhurt, except for a few scratches. You, yes *you*, decide to take charge, to play the role of leader. What do you do? Well, you can stand up like a general and start issuing commands. This is likely to get the group murmuring. "Who in the heck does he think he is?" "What says she knows what's best to do?"—And they're right. The alternative to divisive conflict and competition is to lead the group in a workshop.

### **Step 1 - Contexting**

You summon the group, and get them to sit on the ground in a circle around you. You say something like: “Now folks, we’re in a bit of a jam. We’re on this island together, and it seems there’s no way to get off it. If we all pull together as a team we can survive this experience. We don’t know if anyone has any idea we are here, so we have to fend for ourselves, and presume we are going to be here for some time. It’s no use bemoaning our situation. We have to figure out a way to deal with it. We have to do it all—there is no one beside us to lean on. So let’s see what we have to do. I want everyone to think of two or three things that have to be done towards our survival as a group.

### **Step 2 - Brainstorm**

Individual Brainstorm

The leader says, “Take a minute and think, and then I’ll try to write some notes in the sand to register what we have said.” You wait for two or three minutes then say, “OK, let’s hear what we’ve come up with. I’m going to go round the circle, beginning with Eliza. Eliza, what’s one action we need to take?”

Answers come forth. You write a note on each one in the sand, Here is what the group brainstormed:

1. Explore the island.
2. Look for water.
3. Look for food.
4. Check out the trees for fruit.
5. Survey the plane wreckage for usable supplies.
6. Look at the plane site for luggage lying round.
7. Build a signal fire.
8. Find a place where we can build a shelter.
9. Make a list of our collective resources.
10. Make a list of daily tasks that will need assignments
11. Make a plan of how to map the island.
12. Ensure we keep our spirits up.

Suddenly people become aware that there is more to do than those actions expressed in their own ideas.

### **Step 3 - Clustering the ideas**

Then you read through the list aloud to the group, and ask, “Now, what have we got here? What are some of the threads?”

One says, “Well there are items related to exploration.”

Someone else says, “Yes two kinds of exploration: the wreckage site and the island.

“Looking for water and food” says someone else.

“Building a signal fire and building a shelter” are related,” says one of the men.

“Listing personal resources, making assignments and keeping our spirits up” have to do with daily sustenance.”

This step is covered in greater detail in Chapter 6.

### **Step 4 - Naming the clusters of ideas**

You say: “Folks, looks like we have four clusters of ideas here”

1. Exploration
2. Food and water
3. Fire and shelter
4. Daily sustenance.

### **Step 5 - Resolving**

You are now at the implementation stage. So you say: "Well, it's good to have the big picture. Now it looks like we need teams of people for each of these tasks. Each one of us needs to be on a team. Who will be on the exploration team? The fire and shelter team?" Continue until all the clusters are assigned to a group.

Then you lead the group in a little reflection that confirms their resolve to carry out the plan.

- Let's hear again the names of the clusters. Raise hands for who is in each one.
- Someone in each cluster say what your tasks are.
- What about these tasks will be relatively easy?
- What will be more difficult?
- What will we need to take special care about as we do these tasks?
- What different situation will we be in by the end of the day?

You say, "Let's begin. Let's go to our tasks and report back to this spot when the sun is going down. Each team, take some of the bananas we found for lunch."

## **The Uniqueness of the Consensus Workshop Method**

### **The consensus workshop is a universal, human approach**

This method will work in any management system, at any level of technology, at any time, at any place, whether in an African village or a Fortune 500 company. This method is not based on a right/wrong, good/bad dualism. It hardwires open inquiry into the process. Its inquiry is appreciative: it acknowledges the goodness of the reality it deals with. It is value laden with values that fit the working requirements of most groups. This approach affirms and honors the real struggles and hopes of the participants. Rather than the application of a toolbox to a situation, it is an integrated approach to listening to reality and working with it.

### **The consensus workshop has a transformational intent and result**

The workshop method is more than a smart methodological gimmick. Its intent is transformation. It enables participants to let go of their individualized views and allow them to expand with the help of the new insights and syntheses in the workshop. It allows people to respect and understand each person's viewpoint and experience. It allows them to see the relationship between their own and others' ideas. In so doing it opens up and broadens their own thinking. So everyone walks away with a different perspective on reality. This morale-building approach works to bring about depth change in participants' perspectives on life. It empowers groups to listen to each other, go beyond their anger and irritation to pool their wisdom towards making decisions and building models for the future. The proactiveness built into the method breeds proactiveness and commitment in the group. It sidesteps debate and defending viewpoints, and allows participants to contribute to a larger solution, transforming their relationship to each other from protagonist to co-creator.

### **The consensus workshop is transparent, human methodology**

The approach is contentless in that the group supplies the content. The method serves and protects the interests and concerns of the group. It does not merely serve the needs of the client. The approach works with analysis *and* synthesis, but with a bias towards synthesis. The use of the workshop method is grounded and flexible. It is built on how the mind of the human being works. The facilitator remains neutral and transparent to the process. The workshop does not promote experts, but teams in action. The method is not fancy, but effective. It produces sustainable results. It operates with very high ethical standards.

### **The consensus workshop has high respect for the group and its wisdom**

The method has built into it an unusually high degree of respect for the group and the individuals in it. Participants have been known to say, “We have never done planning this way before—we have never had respect like this before.” The multifaceted approach relies on an integrated understanding of group dynamics: it understands how groups think. The method avoids manipulating the group. It acknowledges that all participants have wisdom. The method elicits radical participation. All input is acknowledged, honored and received. In the workshop, the interests of the group are protected and explored. In the process, the group becomes clear on its real limits, so that it can be creative within them. The workshop’s inclusive consensus-building allows groups to have a high degree of consciousness in relation to the decisions it makes.

### **The impact of the consensus workshop method**

#### **It can heal power imbalances**

The methods take down the wall between stakeholders. The methods enable an audience to move from a divisive and negative inward focus to a more harmonious positive focus directed at the future. When people experience ToP™ workshops, they make the journey from protecting their own turf to developing a common group focus. The workshops have been known to heal long-term conflict.

#### **It enables shared power**

The method enables people to really listen to each other. People come to the table as equals and experience the power is at the centre of the table. When the process is taken back home and used, there is also an indirect impact on the community.

#### **It increases the effective use of resources**

One result of using the consensus workshop is that meetings produce decisions, speed up results and finish on time. It stops the endless cycle of planning. It marries planning with doing. Even more practically, the workshop techniques help give credibility to get funding for process work in organizations. At the same time, their use has been known to reduce customer error in making purchases and, in companies, to reduce costs associated with products and service

#### **It provides a structured process for progress**

Without a method that recognizes all contributions from a group, individuals often sit on information because they do not trust the group to honor it. The process used often serves to jumble ideas for greater confusion rather than greater understanding. Consensus workshop methods have the ability to pool and pull participants’ information together into larger, more information-rich patterns. They also provide a forum for recognizing the progress that has been made in an organization. In addition, strong focus questions increase the chances for success in solving issues, while a clear methodological framework guides “hot” discussions past the possibility of group meltdown. “Heat” gets deftly channeled into light to yield a creative consensus.

#### **It distills high-quality outcomes**

The consensus workshop method has a reputation of cutting through participants’ propensities for speechifying to create clear decisions with quality, commitment and satisfaction. Decisions made are more effective and targeted, and have more commitment behind them.

#### **It gives the group courage to risk**

Consensus workshops engage a group. They allow cultures to be bridged, and different views appreciated. Deeper levels of conflict are exposed as the process intensifies. Courage is reborn in the group, the courage to do something new. Such courage is the forerunner of unleashing potential and creativity. Such an environment allows wisdom to emerge. It elicits a depth and wealth of unknown knowledge, and, with it, the group conviction of “can do.”

**It sustains trust and commitment to the process and results**

In the consensus workshop approach, the way in which the facilitator acknowledges and affirms all participant responses without judgment means that participation is greatly enhanced. In the process, competition disappears. The group comes to own both the problem and the solution. It is free to develop a group consensus. A side product is the understanding of the relationship between personal, community and organizational growth.

***It releases freedom for personal transformation***

A value-added dimension of a group's exposure to workshops is an openness toward growth and development. Participants experience somehow that the territory of personal development and interpersonal growth is objectified for them. They experience personal transformation at the intellectual and emotional levels. One can witness a group moving from despair to hope, they are turning on like light bulbs. Perhaps most significantly, there is an increased commitment to improve the current situation.

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*This introduction to the Consensus Workshop Method is adapted from "The Workshop Book – from individual creativity to group action" by R. Brian Stanfield. New Society Publishers – Copyright 2002 – The Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs*