What Is Consensus?

The consensus building approach, or CBA, is not a new concept, and lots of people have at least a hazy idea of what it means. Some readers may be familiar with terms like “win/win,” or “zero-sum.” Some may have read Getting to Yes, one of the many useful books that summarize the basic principles of reaching negotiated decisions through consensual means.

But we still find lots of confusion out there in the world about consensus building. Some of that confusion begins with the word “consensus.”

Defining “consensus”

Our word-processing program’s dictionary defines consensus as “general or widespread agreement among all the members of a group.” This is the kind of definition that should scare a sensible person away from consensus building. Anyone who has ever worked in a group knows how difficult it is to get “all the members of a group” to reach agreement on anything, even when you have fudge words like “general” or “widespread” thrown in. Unless the group is selected very, very carefully, achieving unanimity is like pushing a greased boulder up a hill: usually, something goes wrong along the way, with bad consequences.
So that’s our first major point in this chapter: consensus building is not about achieving unanimity.

For our purposes, Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary does a better job of defining consensus. Webster’s says that consensus is (1) a general agreement, (2) the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned or (3) group solidarity in sentiment and belief.

So the point of this book is to define effective ways to build solidarity and agreement broadly, across your group’s membership, and to get most members of the group to buy into a shared judgment by the end of the process. It’s about building consensus, one brick at a time. Collectively, you work toward a shared solution. You search for something that everybody, or almost everybody, can live with. In some of our previous books, we’ve defined the goal of consensus building as “overwhelming agreement.” Yes, you strive for unanimity, but when necessary, you settle for an agreement that has the support of almost all the members of your group.

This raises one more important definitional point about “consensus.” It’s not just about reaching overwhelming—or, against long odds, unanimous!—agreement. It’s also about that agreement being reached by informed participants. However you structure your deliberations, they have to be conducted in such a way that everyone walks away from the table not just clear about what’s been promised to them but also clear about what they’ve promised to others. So the goal is not just consensus; more accurately, it’s informed consensus. Informed consensus means that the parties involved have agreed (overwhelmingly) that they understand exactly what’s in the proposal or package, and that they can live with that proposed settlement.

The foundations and practice of consensus building

Now that we have consensus defined, let’s move on to the philosophical foundations of consensus building. We have identified six such foundations:
1. In any group or organizational effort to make decisions, it is crucial to clarify the responsibilities the people involved have to others they are presumed to speak for, or otherwise represent.

If the members of a group are really supposed to speak for or represent different segments of a larger community, then they should be chosen (or at least ratified) by those segments. Handpicked or “blue-ribbon” committees—appointed by a central authority and not explicitly accountable to the subgroups they are supposed to represent—are unlikely to produce anything that will be supported by everyone involved. The credibility of any problem-solving or decision-making process depends on getting legitimate representatives to the table. Sometimes members don’t represent a particular segment but can still generate credibility through their positive contributions.

2. Once a group gets together, it should not start work until its members clarify what their mission is, decide what their agenda will (and will not) include, and settle upon the ground rules that will guide their conversations.

Every group needs to assign responsibility for things like directing the conversation and keeping track of what has been discussed. All too often, groups that have been around for a long time forget to do this. Group effectiveness declines when participants are not self-consciously following a set of explicit ground rules and thus have no clear understanding of how to manage the group effort. Sometimes groups get stuck because their leader is not tending to the interests of the group as a whole but is focusing instead on his or her personal concerns.

3. Before a group tries to make decisions on anything, the participants should engage in joint fact finding.

When people are fighting about basic information, including both facts and forecasts, it is hard to reach informed agreement. Therefore, groups have to gather information that everyone accepts as reliable (even if they interpret that information differently). This may involve putting off decisions until the group
has consulted with others, including outside experts, so they can understand the likely implications of taking actions of various kinds.

4. **Groups should try to generate agreements that leave everyone better off than they would have been if no agreement had been reached.**

   This is a crucial point. Most longstanding groups or committees try to get everyone to "be reasonable," and to make compromises so the group can get its work done. Most assume, at the outset, that at some point a vote will be taken, and the majority will prevail. Because they don't seek to "maximize joint gains," they almost always settle for a less desirable outcome than was possible. In our experience, most people find it hard to understand (or believe) that something other than compromise is conceivable when several contending parties are involved. But again in our experience, better outcomes can be achieved with relatively little effort. (Often, however, this requires the help of someone with mediating skills.) Voting is not usually required. Nobody needs to give up anything that they feel strongly about. The key is to engage in effective group problem solving rather than in a test of will.

5. **It is important to hold people working in groups responsible for taking a written version of a draft agreement back to the people or groups whom they represent.**

   This may seem awkward in situations where long-standing committees don't involve people who actually represent the various factions or segments of a community. Even in these cases, however, it makes sense to have every committee member take a draft version of an agreement "out into the world," for discussion with others, before the full group makes a final decision. This helps enhance the legitimacy of the agreement, increases its responsiveness to the concerns and needs of the community at large, and prepares the group for implementation problems that are likely to arise.
6. **Groups should always think ahead about the things that can go wrong as they try to implement whatever decisions or agreements they reach.**

   Consensus building groups should try to anticipate the obstacles to implementation they are likely to face, including possible surprises or changes that could pop up, and design agreements that are flexible and strong enough to withstand such challenges. Sometimes groups cut corners at this stage, either because they believe they have hit upon a good solution already or simply because they are tired. But planning for the unexpected is absolutely critical, because (1) the unexpected will happen, and (2) the group is unlikely to go back and modify the agreement after everything falls apart.

**The five-step model of consensus building**

Now let's translate these philosophical foundations into the specific sequence of steps involved in consensus building: the same five steps that we introduced in chapter 1. Not surprisingly, you will see a lot of overlap between the foundations described earlier and the five steps described here.

In this book, we're going to define and illustrate the five basic phases of consensus building. Each is the subject of one of the following five chapters. You will learn about each phase in some detail—that is, deeply enough to be comfortable with it—and also to be able to use these ideas creatively with your group.

Meanwhile, though, we want to be able to use some of the terms involved. So at this point, we want to provide more details about the five phases introduced in chapter 1. They are:

- Convening
- Assigning Roles and Responsibilities
- Facilitating Group Problem Solving
- Reaching Agreement
- Holding People to Their Commitments
Convening

The first step in any process of consensus building is getting the right people to the table with the right expectations. Sometimes the makeup of the group is set without reference to the particular problem. A long-standing group with a permanent membership usually has to address a wide range of issues, but it doesn’t change its membership every time it has to confront a new issue. In these circumstances, it helps a lot if the standing committee has a way to gauge the detailed concerns and priorities of other relevant stakeholders, if only to know whom to consult. Usually, this requires some kind of preassessment of the interests of the parties likely to be affected by a decision that’s going to be made, or who have a stake in the problem that the group is trying to solve.

Any decision-making group needs to do enough homework to understand the substance and the context of the issue or problem it is trying to address. Why is this important? Because, simply put, you need to know whose interests are at stake, whom to consult, or even whom to invite to meet with (or join) the group. You need to map the situation to identify the categories of relevant stakeholders, and wherever possible, identify people who can speak for each of those categories. You need to figure out which concern is a priority to whom. This is sometimes referred to as a “conflict assessment,” or simply an “assessment.” (There’s not always a conflict.)

More on the assessment below. But here’s a potential rub: in most cases, the person in charge of the group (i.e., the convener-leader) should not do the assessment. The reason is simple: the convener-leader is an interested party. How can the convener-leader be expected to be a passionate advocate for his or her own position, and at the same time, not give that position special weight in sizing up the situation and probing the concerns of all the relevant stakeholders? And even if he or she does pull off that amazing feat of neutrality, there are likely to be people who won’t believe that he or she has pulled it off. They will look for what they consider to be evidence of a stacked deck, and people can usually find such evidence if that’s what they are looking for.
So in most cases, the leader causes the assessment to be done by someone else—ideally, someone viewed as neutral by everyone involved. That neutral party talks to the stakeholders, both obvious and not so obvious, in a confidential, not-for-attribution manner. He or she draws out their concerns and interests, and carries on the work (begun by the convener) of identifying the right spokesperson for each category of stakeholders. The group then has to decide how it wants to ensure representation of all these interests in its deliberations.

Over the past several decades, facilitation and its more formal cousin, mediation, have become recognized professions. People go through special training to become facilitators, and as in all professions, the good ones are very good at what they do. Depending on the task that’s in front of you, you may well want to seek this kind of professional assistance for your group. In chapter 3, we talk about the cost of hiring a professional neutral and how such costs should be covered.

There are circumstances in which a professional facilitator is not needed in the convening or assessment phase, although in most of these cases you still need some sort of neutral help from someone who is not a party. Remember that “neutrality” is really in the eyes of the beholders. Suppose there’s a relatively small group that’s been operating for several years and finds itself unable to move forward. The head of the group—who by all accounts is not the source of the problem—is retiring. It’s conceivable that this outgoing head could serve effectively as a neutral party, and “map” a new problem that the group needs to deal with. But note that in this case, the interested parties are already more or less at the table, and the convening challenge is a relatively small one.

Assigning Roles and Responsibilities

Let’s assume that one way or another you’ve talked to or invited the right people, and they’ve agreed to participate in one way or another. Or, in many cases, you are just confronted with a group that has self-selected or been assigned by someone higher up in the organization. Now what?
What Is Consensus?

Now the people at the table have to (1) agree upon the ground rules that will govern their problem-solving process and (2) define the kinds of responsibilities that they are each willing to accept. We summarize this phase as “signing on.” Sample ground rules that might provide a good starting point for almost any kind of group meeting are included in appendix B.

Some of the signing-on issues have to do with group responsibilities. Who’s going to facilitate? Who is going to draft the ground rules for the group to consider? What’s the scope of the effort (which is sometimes captured in a mission statement)? What’s the timetable? If technical advice is needed, where is that going to come from? Who’s going to pay for what? What’s the overall budget? Who’s going to commit what amount of time to the effort? Who’s going to keep track of the key points of agreement and disagreement that come out of the discussion?

Other issues have to do with individual responsibilities. The people at the table are there because they represent something. Well, how literally do we mean that? For example, is Joe at the table simply because he seems typical of the people who live in the Mill Pond Road neighborhood immediately adjacent to the high school football field, and who generally have strong feelings about the proposed lighting of that field for night games? Is Joe in some way authorized to speak for that neighborhood? Is he willing and able to take ideas back to his neighbors and get a good reading on their reactions?

What if Joe can’t come to a particular meeting? Does he have—should he have—an “alter ego,” so that Mill Pond Road doesn’t feel left out? Should both Joe and his alter ego attend every meeting?

In a sense, it’s all about defining roles and getting everybody at the table to agree to those roles. They have to agree on the role of the group and also on their own roles within the group. They have to agree to a common definition of “representation,” and then act according to that definition.

A lot of this depends on the size of your group, and the scope of the issue or problem that your group is trying to address, but even if your
group is small and your challenge seems manageable, it makes sense for you to look through the ideas listed and think about which ones pertain to you. Would you benefit from a clearer mission statement, for example? How about a timetable? (If you don’t have an external deadline, it’s often very helpful to impose an internal one.) Presumably, there is a range of possible actions you can take. Who’s going to keep track of what you’ve looked at, what you decided, and how you got to that decision?

If your decision ever gets challenged—and a surprising number of decisions do get challenged, out there in the world—you’re going to be happy that you have that kind of record of all your good work.

**Group Problem Solving**

Although the next two phases—group problem solving and reaching agreement—inevitably blend into each other, we’ll describe them as if they are separate.

We’ve already talked about the dynamic at most meetings, where—according to Robert’s Rules—the proponent of a certain action puts his or her idea forward and looks for an up-or-down vote on that idea. Maybe he or she speaks in favor of the idea. Maybe other people in the room speak for or against it. Maybe there are even a few amendments or improvements offered around the margins of the idea. (In a formal town meeting, significant changes are likely to be ruled “beyond the scope” of the original motion.)

Among the many problems with this approach is the fact that no one is taking responsibility for coming up with proposals that are substantially better for everyone, in the sense of making larger numbers of people more comfortable with them. The whole field of “mutual-gain negotiation” (informally known as “win-win” negotiation) assumes that if people put their minds to it, they can almost always come up with trades that produce a “package deal,” which is better for everybody.

The goal of problem solving, in a consensus-building context, is to generate packages, proposals, and ideas that can help all the parties do better than they would in the absence of an agreement. Typically, this
happens in several steps. The first might be described as “venting”: each party is asked to state any concerns that it may have about other parties, or about what has gone on up to that point. The next step is a round of statements (describing interests or priority concerns) by the various individuals or group representatives. And finally, there’s a period of what has been called “inventing.” People take what they’ve heard about each other’s interests and try to come up with packages that meet everybody’s needs. In general, these various packages are produced in a written form (sometimes called a “single text”). They often include a restatement of the reasons that each party has put forward to explain why it is committed to a particular course of action.

The point of such brainstorming is to keep multiple options alive, so that a full range of combinations can be “tried on for size.” Again, the contrast is with Robert’s Rules or majority rule in general, in which motions (1) have to be voted up or down, one at a time, and (2) can’t be revisited except under extraordinary circumstances.

Sometimes this step in CBA requires multiple sessions. People may need extra time to figure out the relative attractiveness of various packages. Sometimes people need time to discuss the various packages with the people whom they’ve agreed to represent. Such efforts can only work if everyone agrees to put off making commitments until the group has gone as far as it can in considering options. Thus, the most effective deliberations are those that involve what has been dubbed “inventing without committing.”

The facilitator’s role varies, depending on the needs of the particular group. In some cases, the facilitator mainly keeps the conversation on track. (If the group is large enough, and involves subgroups responsible for generating ideas across a range of issues, process management can be a complicated job.) In other cases, especially if the parties find themselves stuck—out of options, with nothing much left on the table to trade—the facilitator may get involved by suggesting radically different proposals for consideration by the group. Some hints on being a good facilitator, in case you should ever be assigned that task, are included in appendix B.
Reaching Agreement

The key point here is that in CBA, deciding does not mean voting. Instead, it means agreeing to agree.

Whether the facilitator has focused mainly on keeping the conversation on track up to this point, or has been involved in putting together packages for consideration, he or she is in close enough touch with the group to know when the participants are approaching consensus. And here's where the clearly established ground rules from the "signing on" phase can become extremely important. In most cases, the facilitator delivers to the group a statement something like the following: "O.K. Let me summarize where we are. Can everybody live with the following proposal?"

The members of the group know the rules. After hearing the proposal, they are expected to say yes or no. In both cases—but particularly in the case of somebody saying no—they are asked to explain their position. (This is something that never happens when a group is operating under Robert's Rules.) The goal in CBA is to get people to be very clear about their reasons for liking or not liking the package. Here, again, a skilled facilitator earns her keep. She asks the people who are objecting what specific changes they require to make the package acceptable to them (i.e., better for them than no agreement). But beyond that, she may ask questions to shed even more light on where they stand. "Why is it," she might ask, "that among all these people at the table, you're the only one who doesn't like this package? What isn't the group understanding about your concerns?"

The point is not to put people on the spot. In fact, it's just the opposite. Unlike majority rule, the point throughout CBA—and certainly in the deciding phase—is to build effective communications and positive relationships among the parties. People have to be willing to say what's on their minds, though, even if it's unpopular with the rest of the group. The larger group has to be willing to listen hard and respond to the concerns of the unhappy party, usually by trying to invent some modification that will bring them on board.
When the stakes are high, and emotions are in play, skilled facilitation is invaluable. A skilled facilitator disciplines the ways in which people express their disagreements. The facilitator keeps people from saying things in the heat of the moment that might slow down, or even thwart, the effort to reach a consensus.

**Holding People to Their Commitments**

The final phase in CBA is implementation. Lots of people assume that once the decision is made, the group gets to pack up and go home. Not true! In some ways, the hardest work is yet to be done.

Implementation usually takes time and effort . . . and some times even money. As time passes, things change. People watching the early stages of implementation but who weren’t involved in the consensus-building process start to question how *this* particular solution got OK’d. When people start to see real money being spent, especially real public money, they get focused on things in a new way.

In the real world, surprises are inevitable. New people arrive on the scene. The political or economic context changes. A new law makes something possible or impossible. Someone points out that a new technology makes the agreed-upon package a less-than-optimal solution and suggests that the package be revisited.

A good package builds in two contradictory ingredients. One is a strong commitment on the part of the participating parties to stick with what they have promised, often over an extended period of time. The second ingredient is some mechanism for anticipating and dealing with the unanticipated.

In cases where the “wild cards” can be anticipated, it’s possible to include contingencies in the package: If X happens, we agree to do so-and-so, but, if Y happens, we agree to do such-and-such. When X or Y actually happens, the group doesn’t need to reconvene; the implementing body simply follows the prescribed path.

In most cases, however, the unexpected is going to remain just that: unexpected. The package therefore needs to add up to what we usually call a “nearly self-enforcing agreement.” Note the combination of tight
(self-enforcing) and loose (nearly) language. Make it as tight and tough as possible, extracting the maximum commitment from all the participants, but also leave the wriggle room necessary to come back and make the agreement even smarter, if necessary.

**How is CBA different from majority rule?**

Now that you’ve gotten a feel for the philosophical underpinnings and the mechanics of CBA, let’s take a minute to contrast this process with the “majority rule” approach described in chapter 1, which is often governed by Robert’s Rules.

The first major difference between CBA and majority rule is the way ideas are put forward. In majority rule, any member of the body can put forward almost any idea he or she wants, as long as he or she follows Robert’s Rules. (In some cases, motions are not accepted unless they are presented in writing in advance, through a moderator, or are included in a preprinted agenda.) The sponsor of a motion is not asked the reason behind it, although he or she may choose to speak in support of it. It’s relatively hard to change a motion once it is introduced. Amendments (even so-called friendly amendments) may be perceived as hostile or counterproductive by the original sponsor of the motion, who is then likely to oppose them, again without necessarily saying why. And although there may be debate—even passionate, far-ranging debate—about the subject at hand, the members of the group are essentially asked to vote the original idea (or perhaps a slightly amended version) up or down.

Henry Ford once told his customers they could have any color car they wanted, as long as it was black. Majority rule (as structured by Robert’s Rules) has the same kind of rigidity. The motion is more or less a given; the deliberations are triggered by that motion and largely stay within its boundaries. If someone tries to amend the motion in some significant way, there’s a good chance that such an amendment will be ruled “beyond the scope” of the original motion.
There is no incentive in the process to put forward motions that will win support of more than the magical 51 percent. Conversely, there’s nothing to prevent somebody from putting forward a blizzard of motions, all done up in procedurally correct ways, which everyone knows have absolutely no chance of passing. Sometimes this happens because the sponsor wants to make a symbolic point. ("Stop the war!" "Bike paths are the future!") Sometimes “it’s all about me”: I like the sound of my own voice; I like seeing myself on the reruns of the local cable show; I like having people stop me in the supermarket and encourage me to “give ’em hell!”

In other words, the content of the motion often gives way to tactics, or ego, or other things that have little to do with actual problem solving. CBA is very different. In consensus building, the “motion” (1) takes the form of a statement or proposal that in many cases is framed by the person responsible for helping the group reach agreement, and (2) is formulated in a way that is designed to bring as many people as possible on board. The process manager or facilitator has been in on the deliberations; now he or she comes up with a proposal or package that reflects all of that debate and the concerns that have been expressed throughout.

We’ve already alluded to the second big difference between CBA and majority rule, which is the vote. Majority rule presupposes an up-or-down vote on a proposal, again with no explanations required or expected. (By the way, note all these junctures in majority rule where “reasons why” are not required.) Consensus building, by contrast, almost never involves voting. It involves dialogue and deliberation that lead to cumulative proposals put forward by the facilitator or a group leader. The arrival of such proposals, which almost never comes as a surprise, prompts a whole new round of discussion: Can you live with this? If not, what would you change so that you can live with it?

This is the third major difference between consensus and majority rule: people engaging in CBA have a positive obligation to improve the package that is put on the table, if they don’t like it. The disaffected person doesn’t have the luxury of just sitting around being disaffected.
If that person is unhappy, then he or she has to come up with proposed modifications that will make the package go from unacceptable to acceptable—not just for them but for everyone in the group. For example: a facilitator is helping a local citizen task force engaged in updating the local signage bylaws, which govern how businesses can advertise themselves in the community. Most of the members of the task force, which consists mainly of downtown lawyers and local merchants, like the draft that the group leader has put before them. But there’s one notable exception. A woman who owns a home adjacent to the business district announces that she believes that the five-person review board (which will approve or disapprove proposed signs) is likely to be dominated by the local retail community. The group leader asks her how she would change the draft to address her concern. Because she understands the process, she has come prepared. Reserving one seat on the five-person board for an architect or graphic designer, she says, would satisfy her objections. This idea is added to the mix of ideas on the table for review and discussion by the entire task force.

To summarize: under Robert’s Rules, you put finished motions on the table, then you debate them in a process that works against significant alterations, and then you vote them up or down. In consensus building, you put lots of ideas and interests on the table (prior to anyone making any firm commitments), debate those ideas and interests, and then a group leader or a neutral facilitator formulates a package designed to meet all the interests of everyone involved to the greatest extent possible. This, in turn, generates more ideas. If there’s a vote at the end of the process, it’s mainly to acknowledge the “overwhelming agreement” that has been reached.

Three leadership models

The matter of group leadership could have been included in the previous section on the differences between CBA and majority rule, but it’s important enough that we wanted to call it out on its own. These two
processes demand very different kinds of things from their respective group leaders. We can describe three models of leadership, which sit on a spectrum from majority rule (Robert's Rules) to CBA.

In majority rule, the assumption—either stated or unstated—is that the leader's role is to take personal responsibility for the group's success. The leader sets the agenda for the meeting. The leader tends to formulate the motion and puts it in front of the group, sometimes directly and sometimes through a handpicked proxy. The assumptions behind this approach are that (1) the leader can somehow stretch her thinking to figure out what everybody else at the table wants, and (2) that she can come up with a proposal that will be in the best interests of the assembly as a whole. We are especially used to seeing this approach to group leadership in business settings.

It's not too much to say that in majority-rule situations, we cast the leader as the savior of the group. He gets the group together, establishes a formal or informal hierarchy within the group (with him at the top, of course), sets the agenda, comes up with a solution, and assembles enough support for that solution—51 percent, or maybe more—to get it approved by a vote. He's the person who comes to the table with some personal clout, and doesn't hesitate to use it to exert pressure on the other participants as necessary.

The implicit assumption in this model of leadership is that the group is not capable of arriving at a good solution on its own: it needs a strong personality to serve as its shepherd. The shepherd uses her influence to extract compromises from the other members of the group and thereby saves them from themselves.

Needless to say, this is a lot of responsibility to put on the leader's shoulders. The pool of people willing and able to serve as "leaders" of this type is fairly small. That's why in a business or community organization, you tend to see the same faces over and over again. It's also why you tend to get leaders who are accustomed to getting their way, often by simply steamrolling the people who appear to be obstacles to that end. They tend to be very aggressive. They are prone to say things
like, “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” Or, “If you can’t take the heat, stay out of the kitchen.”

The second model on our spectrum of leadership is the leader as process manager. This model assumes that with the right amount of procedural support from the leader, the group will get its work done.

The classic example here is the moderator at a New England town meeting. The moderator is exclusively a process person, or at least she tries to be. She keeps order. She reminds everybody of the rules. In some cases, the moderator may have a parliamentarian helping her with the more obscure aspects of Robert’s Rules, but she’s generally expected to be enough of a procedural expert to keep the meeting on track. She is also expected to be a forceful enough personality to be able to “ride herd” on the group when it starts to get rowdy.

The process manager, like the savior, is definitely protecting the group from itself. Instead of throwing substantive life preservers, like a lifeguard, she throws procedural life preservers. The assumption, again, is that the group is not capable of performing effectively on its own.

To switch metaphors: Picture the lion-tamer at the circus. If he’s not there with his whip, keeping the lions up on their stools, what’s likely to happen? Chaos! Somebody has to be there, on the alert, cracking the whip.

Like the lions up on the stools, the group invests authority in the process manager. (This is reinforced by the dominant style that is usually exhibited by the process manager.) And, by extension, the group invests authority in the process: if we just pay scrupulous attention to the process, we’ll get to a good solution.

This, as we’ve already seen, is an illusion. The better the process manager is at playing by Robert’s Rules, the harder it is to get good ideas on the table, to build consensus around those ideas, and to implement a solution effectively.

Which brings us to the third model of leadership: facilitative leadership, in which the leader serves mainly as the convener of the process. This is the model used in CBA, and it is at the far end of the spectrum from the leader as savior, shepherd, or lifeguard.
This kind of leader focuses almost entirely on getting the right people to the table, or at least getting their ideas represented in some meaningful way. The leader-as-convener gets the process going, and then steps back and lets the group take responsibility for finding the right solution.

If your head is full of traditional visions of leadership, you may be astonished at this notion. Let the group take responsibility? Isn’t that like letting the sheep run away, or the swimmers drown, or the lions jump down off their stools?

Of course not. We’ve already introduced the additional role of the facilitator. This person can be a skilled technician or someone selected by the group (and seen as neutral) who can take responsibility for managing the process. The members of the group work with the facilitator to establish procedural ground rules, and then use those rules to generate a shared solution. Keep in mind that these ground rules are the group’s own invention, which in most cases means that the members of the group are more likely to honor them, in spirit and letter, than they are to honor someone else’s rules. They own the process, and therefore, they’re less likely to abuse it. At the same time, once they have their own rules in place, they’re more likely to focus on issues of substance.

One way to contrast these three leadership models is to ask the question, where is the creativity?

In the leader-as-savior model, obviously, the creativity resides almost entirely in the leader. This leader is the be-all and end-all. In the process-manager model, the creativity resides in the artful enforcement of a set of rules (and to some extent, in the rules themselves). In the facilitative leadership model, the creativity is presumed to reside in the group. The leader, and the rules, are simply tools for getting the right group working effectively on the right problem in a constructive fashion.

We know which model General Robert endorsed. Based on what you’ve read so far, which model do you want to bet on?
Revisiting the soccer league

Think back to the first incident described in our introduction, in which a group of parents decides to try and get rid of a coach who has gotten into a (profane) shouting match with one of them.

Let’s review the circumstances in which the president of that league found himself, in the days leading up to the dramatic emergency meeting:

- The group has no effective leadership. Leadership jobs in the league are thankless tasks, and the league’s president, vice president, and treasurer tend to be chosen by means of the “short straw.”
- The membership of the group is not well defined. In the past, voting privileges have been extended to just about anybody who showed up at a given meeting.
- Some people are convinced that at one time the league adopted written bylaws, but no one can find a copy. Apparently, the bylaws stated that the group would follow Robert’s Rules of Order.
- The facts of the original shouting match are still in question—at least, up to the point when the referee stepped in and ended the game.
- At the “emergency meeting,” tempers are running high. One faction is eager to take a vote, most likely because that group believes that they can get the result they want.
- At the climactic moment, the coach himself walks into the room, and—in a dramatic flourish—threatens to sue.

The best you can say about these circumstances is that the coach and his lawyer may have done the crowd a huge favor. If they have broken the momentum toward judgment, that is, if they have defused the “lynch mob” mentality, they may have created an opening for consensus building to occur.

What should the soccer league do now? Let’s review the six foundations of CBA, and suggest some specifics:
1. In any group or organizational effort to make decisions, it is crucial to clarify the responsibilities of the people involved to others they are presumed to speak for, or otherwise represent.

The soccer league has to figure out who will speak for whom, and how. Who are the contending groups, and how will they be represented?

2. Once a group gets together, it should not start work until its members clarify what their mission is, what their agenda will include (and not include), and what the ground rules are that will guide their conversations.

The league has to straighten out its leadership and governing structure. It needs to find and understand its bylaws. It needs to decide whether it will limit the scope of its efforts to this one case—the coach in question—or to broader issues of hiring, firing, and so on. It needs to define how these discussions will be conducted, so that people can disagree without being disagreeable.

3. Before the members of a group try to make decisions on anything, they should engage in joint fact-finding.

It would be very helpful to have all parties agree on a set of facts regarding the incident in question. It might also be helpful to investigate how other leagues address these kinds of issues. If legal actions are a concern, the group should find out exactly what it can and can’t do.

4. Groups should try to generate agreements that leave everyone better off than they would have been if no agreement had been reached.

The question is, how can the league broaden the range of issues on the table so that the outcome won’t simply be a win/lose? (The coach stays; the coach goes.) Is there a deal that could be struck between the two aggrieved parties that would satisfy them both? Is there a set of “going-forward” rules that, if adopted, would make all parties feel like something good had come out of the conflict?
5. It is important to hold people working in groups responsible for taking a written version of a draft agreement back to the people or groups whom they represent.

The people involved in the discussions have to be prepared to go back to the groups they represent, explain the process, and explain why the result is the best possible outcome.

6. Groups should always think ahead about the things that can go wrong, as they try to implement whatever decisions or agreements they reach.

The people involved in the discussions have to figure out who might object to the proposed deal, and why. Is there a regional, state, or national soccer organization that might claim some sort of jurisdiction? Is there any chance that someone who hasn’t been involved will take legal action anyway? How should next year’s schedule be adjusted to minimize the chance of accidental confrontations, and maximize the “healing” period?

Now let’s get back to your meeting. If you’re in a situation like the president of our fictitious soccer league, the first thing you should do is find your bylaws and figure out whether your meetings are subject to Robert’s Rules.

If they are, your group will have to decide what to do about that. In some cases, groups simply ignore that fact and try to do their business informally, in a less rule-driven way. The problem with that strategy is that someone may try to hold you to your own rules. Is there a lawyer on your board? This person may point out (accurately) that if your articles of incorporation cite Robert’s Rules as your procedural guide, then you have a legal obligation to follow those rules. Worse yet, someone may show up at your first meeting—or your second or third meeting—and insist on playing by those rules. If he or she is steeped in Robert’s Rules and no one else is, you will have a problem.

One solution is to use Robert’s Rules to suspend Robert’s Rules. (Parliamentarians may object; it’s worth sounding out a few people in advance of such a move.) Once the group’s consensus building efforts are
complete, you can reinstate the parliamentary process. Or, if it's not too onerous, simply take the steps necessary to change your bylaws and do away with Robert's Rules. (You can adopt the CBA procedures outlined in part 2 of this book instead!) One school committee that we worked with simply followed its normal policy-review process (i.e., first reading at meeting A, second reading and a vote at meeting B) to get rid of Robert's Rules entirely, thereby opening the door to consensus building.

**On to the specifics**

In this chapter, we've tried to present a snapshot of consensus building. As a group, you convene, sort out responsibilities, engage in problem solving, clarify the consensus you have reached, and then implement it. You try hard to make the original agreement stick, and under circumstances agreed upon in advance, you reconvene to make the original agreement conform to any changes or unanticipated events.

Maybe this still strikes you as too complicated: mission statements, outside helpers, money, lots of back and forth among the concerned parties, packages in writing, and so on. Maybe you're tempted to side with General Robert, at this point: make sure you've got 51 percent or better, put your best idea on the table, get your yes vote . . . and try to get out of the meeting alive.

Stick with us. CBA is (sometimes) about going slowly at first in order to reduce the overall amount of time it takes to reach an agreement that satisfies everyone and that actually sticks. As you read the following chapters, which dig deeper into each phase of CBA, and which track the experiences of the imaginary Blaine Bicentennial Committee, keep thinking about the *end-to-end* consequence of siding with General Robert. How will you feel when at the next majority-rule session, some group surprises you with its own 51 percent and undoes your previous triumph? What's your next move going to be? Sway a vote, get back your majority, and throw the engines into reverse again?

Wouldn't it be better—and take less time, end to end—to get it right the first time, and have the results stick?
Key Terms Explained in Chapter 2
(For further clarification, see Part 2:
The Five Essential Steps in the
Consensus Building Approach, page 167)

Consensus
Informed agreement
Philosophical foundations of consensus building
The five-step model
Convening
The convener
Assessment
Assigning roles and responsibilities
Representation
Facilitation
Neutrality
Facilitating group problem solving
Ground rules
Mutual gains negotiation
Venting
Inventing without committing
Single-text procedure
Reaching agreement
Alternatives to voting
Holding people to their commitments
Nearly self-enforcing agreements
Contingent agreements
Three models of group leadership
The leader as savior
The leader as process manager
Facilitative leadership
Using CBA in a Robert’s Rules environment