

# Consensus - the method

written by, John Miller

How can you generate a thorough range of diverse brainstorm ideas? How do you make sense out of the huge number of ideas that a group can generate? How can you help a group reach closure on all these ideas they have made sense out of? How can you get dozens of people actively involved in creating solutions for themselves? How can a facilitator enable even a large group of people to learn from each other as they discuss a complex multi-faceted issue? What is the most powerful group process tool a facilitator can use to convert diversity of perspectives into an asset? The short answer is: 5 simple steps.

## 1. Set a context

The context equips participants to understand and explore the breadth of the topic. Put a single open-ended focus question on the wall where everyone can keep it top-of-mind. For example: "What do we really want to see going on in our workplace by this time next year?" "What can we do to deal with our funding pinch?" "What are all the features and characteristics that our customers want to see in the next generation of widget?"

## 2. Brainstorm in layers

Allow brainstorming to occur in layers from silent individual brainstorming, to personally selecting favorites, to sharing the favorites among a small group of participants, and clearly printing a limited number of different answers onto large cards, one idea per card. Gradually share the diversity of answers (on cards) with the whole group. Read each aloud, show them to the group and stick or pin them to a wall.

## 3. Cluster ideas

After you get about 15 different cards on the wall in equal numbers from all the small groups of participants, then ask the group to identify the similarities among the cards. Move those similar ideas/answers/cards into clusters, starting with pairs, then letting 4 or 5 pairs grow into more and longer groupings of ideas. Keep asking for different cards from the group, in rounds, until the only remaining cards are very similar to whatever is on the wall already. Collect the ones that are most similar last.

## 4. Name the clusters

Once all the ideas are stuck to the wall and clustered into bunches or columns, name each cluster carefully (use the Focused Conversation Method for best results).

## 5. Resolve the names

After each cluster of ideas/answers/cards is named, discuss the names together in order to test their resolve; to check if this is what they as a whole group really think, and what their next steps will be.

That is the Consensus Workshop Method at its simplest: Context, Brainstorm, Cluster, Name, and Resolve. The Institute of Cultural Affairs created the Consensus Workshop Method through on-the-ground community development efforts of hundreds of people from the 1950s through the 1990s, coupled with intense ongoing research into how people think, decide, create, innovate, learn, and live.

The Consensus Workshop Method is an amazingly integrated set of flexible procedures that enables groups of people to put their cards on the table, literally as well as figuratively. It seamlessly integrates numerous subtle sub-processes like brainstorming, card-storming, gestalt, Focused Conversations, and more. On the one hand it is a deep and complex life method and on the other hand a novice can follow the basic procedures from a script.

Use it whenever a large group of people need to speak, listen to each other, build on each others ideas, and reach well-considered conclusions that hold enough agreement that the whole group can move forward together. It has become even more useful in recent years to help complex organizations and coalitions to conduct model building exercises and to create frameworks for moving forward through ambiguous situations.

You can learn more about the Consensus Workshop Method in Laura Spencer's book "Winning through Participation" and Brian Stanfield's "The Workshop Book" or by going to ICA's website [www.ica-associates.ca](http://www.ica-associates.ca).