CONSENSUS

Using Influence Skills to *Build Consensus*

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

"Broad unanimity" is rare in real organizations. Here is a more pragmatic definition — and the influence behaviors that get you there.

The dictionary definition of the word "consensus" is "broad unanimity." In the real world of organizations, that's a rare experience. A more pragmatic approach to gaining the maximum support for a decision or agreement uses the following definition and process:

> DEFINITION
>
> Consensus means the commitment of all members of the relevant group to publicly support a decision.

Process

Each person has an opportunity to express an opinion about a proposed option; the group is then polled. If everyone agrees, the decision is made. If a member of the group or team does not agree, he or she states concerns or preferences. The group makes a good-faith effort to deal with these concerns or suggestions and to modify the proposal to make it acceptable to all. After this, members agree that the proposal should be implemented and that they will accept and participate — or disagree, but commit to supporting the decision outside of the group. If everyone in the group can take one of these positions, the group has built consensus.

Reaching consensus depends a great deal on your skills as an influencer.

Although all influence skills can be used in these conversations, some of the most useful ones in building consensus include:

Expressive behaviors

- **Suggest:** State a clear proposal for others to consider.
- **Offer Reasons:** Support the proposal with a few strong reasons.
- **Refer to Goals and Benefits:** Show how the proposed decision or action can benefit individuals, the team, or the organization.
- **Offer Incentives:** Say how you could modify or improve the proposal or decision in exchange for agreement or support.

Receptive behaviors

- **Ask Open-ended Questions:** Ask about any concerns or issues that may be getting in the way of agreement.
- **Draw Out:** Drill down to go deeper in understanding another's concerns or issues.
- **Check Understanding:** Paraphrase the other's concerns, issues, or suggestions.
- **Test Implications:** Read between the lines to identify deeper concerns that need to be addressed.
- **Clarify Issues:** Summarize areas of agreement and disagreement with the proposed decision or action.
- **Pose Challenging Questions:** Learn what it would take for the other to join in supporting the decision or action.

As with any influence effort, building consensus requires you to stay conscious of your goal and flexible about your means of getting there. You'll probably reach consensus sooner if you spend most of your time using the Receptive tactics of Inquiring, Listening, and Facilitating. The more you focus on understanding what the other needs in order for him or her to agree, the easier it will be to revise your proposal in a way that honors everyone's requirements.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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