Building consensus is critical to effective collaboration, but can be difficult to achieve. Consensus does not mean an absence of disagreement; it means members with diverse views and often competing goals agree to work together towards their shared goals — even when the proposed course of action is not their preferred one.¹

Reaching consensus requires good relationships and communications between members. It requires high levels of respect and trust, and effective dialogue that allows members to explore the issues, consider other members’ interests and challenge assumptions before they reach agreement. As a result, agreements made by consensus are often more creative and more readily implemented than decisions made by vote.

The role of the facilitator is to ‘make easy’ the dialogue that enables different views to be aired and discussed in a constructive way. An effective facilitator knows that a diversity of opinions and perspectives is useful in working towards creative solutions and does not prevent consensus.

Facilitation
Often the facilitation function falls to the collaboration leader as a natural part of their role.

While a collaboration leader can guide the process for consensus — setting the ground rules for dialogue and interaction, reminding members of their common goals and their importance, and helping them reach decisions that are mutually acceptable — they are often constrained by their own membership of the collaboration and personal agenda. Often a professional facilitator (or neutral outsider skilled in facilitation), who has no vested interested in the content of the discussion, is better able to help collaboration members reach consensus.²

The Sacramento Water Forum and the Services Integration Project (SIP) Goodna are two good examples of the use of external facilitation to help collaboration members build the consensus required to work together.³

The ARACY Networks have been established to support our work in building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and youth in Australia. The six Networks focus on exchanging knowledge and facilitating long-term working relationships and collaborative efforts between sectors and agencies.

For more information please contact ARACY on 02 6248 2400.

Independent facilitators manage and guide the processes that enable participants to focus on the substantial issues and goals that need to be addressed. They use group facilitation skills to help participants — especially those who don’t know each other well or have significantly different points of view — to communicate, build relations, and address difficult issues. Facilitators often use these processes to help groups reach consensus agreements although in some cases, where issues are contentious, their role may be only to ensure productive deliberation.

Facilitators are responsible for getting the consensus-building ‘talking-listening-deciding sequence’ right. The facilitator develops an agenda and process for a meeting, ensures ground rules of conduct are developed and adhered to, promotes interaction and communication, and brings issues to closure. Their role is not to voice an opinion or contribute to the content of a discussion, but rather to guide the process. However, while the role of facilitation may be to ‘make easy’ the consensus-building process, it is not an easy role to play. The facilitator does not have ultimate control or ownership of the decision-making process: the ‘job of reaching consensus belongs to the group’. Their aim is to ensure that at the end of the process the members of the group own the process and its outcomes, and the facilitator becomes an almost ‘invisible’ figure.

Facilitators use two key types of processes: ‘preventions’ and ‘interventions’. Preventions are measures a facilitator may take before and during meetings to avoid potential obstacles to success. They plan the process ahead of time to ensure the group can adequately explore the issues and generate relevant outcomes within the available timeframe. Interventions are the actions a facilitator takes to get a group back on track should difficulties emerge during a meeting. Here the focus is on the use of problem solving tools to bring the group back to productive discussion.

Effective facilitators need to be able to:
- create a climate in which participants are motivated and feel confident to participate and share information, sometimes referred to as a ‘safe’ environment for robust discussion
- effectively guide and manage group interactions
- enable and encourage people to fully contribute their ideas
- guide structured activities and processes
- organise, summarise and connect ideas
- give and receive feedback
- manage logistics, including time, materials, etc.

The attributes of an effective facilitator include:
- a sense of humour: Things will not always go according to plan. It is much easier to handle the unexpected if you can do so with confidence and a smile.
- assertiveness: You need to have the ability and courage to speak honestly with participants. The challenge is knowing when to push and when to pull back, when to intervene and when to let the group work things out for themselves. There is a big difference between being assertive and being aggressive.
- intuition: Often there is no ‘right answer’ in terms of what to do in a given situation when facilitating a group. You need to be able to quickly assess the situation and use your intuition to determine the best way to respond.
- flexibility: As a facilitator you need to be able to think on your feet, and accept new ideas from others. Facilitators who are strongly attached to their own view on how things should be done will almost always encounter difficulties.

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• **confidence and enthusiasm:** You need to appear credible, articulate and knowledgeable in front of others from the start, and need to be able to sustain the energy throughout.

• **high self-esteem:** If aspects of a facilitation process don’t go well, the facilitator is likely to be blamed, whether or not it was their fault. It is important you do not take this personally, but accept the criticism without becoming defensive.

• **sincerity:** As a facilitator you need to demonstrate your commitment to the process, and to ensuring participants get as much as they possibly can out of it.

• **sensitivity:** You need to be sensitive to your participants, their needs and how they are feeling. You need to be able to pick up on the cues and respond to them appropriately.

### Conclusion

Collaboration leaders or members who have a natural task-oriented style may find it difficult to be thrust into a situation where they need to facilitate rather than contribute to or control a discussion. It is not always easy to give up the ‘expert’ position in a group. Examine your involvement in group activities, whether as a formal leader or group member, and determine whether or not you have the competencies listed above and can separate your role as group leader and/or content expert from your role as facilitator of a group discussion. If you are unsure, consider undertaking some formal training in facilitation, or engaging an independent facilitator, to ensure group discussions are as constructive, and likely to lead to consensus, as possible.

_The authors acknowledge the generous contribution of Carolyn Peterken and Christine Flynn of Advanced Dynamics in expanding our understanding of the facilitation process._

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8 Adapted from Advanced Dynamics  
http://wateroutreach.uwex.edu/education/facskills.cfm
The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national non-government organisation which focuses on bringing together researchers, policymakers and practitioners, to turn the best evidence on ‘what works’ for child and youth wellbeing into practical, preventative action to benefit all young Australians. We are making this happen by creating collaborative opportunities, through our Networks, events, state convenor activities and regular publications, that work to break down traditional barriers in addressing the major problems affecting our young people.

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