AVT BUSINESS SCHOOL

RADICAL PRACTICALITY · PRACTICE 03

Consent-Based Decision Making

Why replacing "does everyone agree?"
with "does anyone object?" changes everything

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The One-Sentence Change That Halves Your Meeting Time

Consent-based decision making replaces a single question. Instead of “Does everyone agree?” it asks “Does anyone have a principled objection?” The difference sounds minor. It is not. Consensus asks whether a proposal is everyone’s first choice — and it almost never is, which is why consensus-driven meetings drag on indefinitely. Consent asks whether anyone has a reason the proposal would cause harm that cannot be corrected later. Most proposals clear that bar easily, which is why consent-driven meetings move at double the speed.

The practice was pioneered in the 1970s by Dutch engineer Gerard Endenburg, who formalized it as part of the Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method. It draws on cybernetics, Quaker decision-making traditions, and sixty years of practical application in organizations ranging from manufacturing companies and healthcare providers to nonprofits and housing cooperatives. It has since informed both Holacracy (Brian Robertson’s governance framework, adopted by companies including Zappos) and the self-managing team model made famous by Buurtzorg, the Dutch home care organization with 10,000 nurses and no middle managers.

Despite this lineage, most leaders have never heard of it. This white paper explains the difference between consent and consensus, why it matters, and how to start using it in your next meeting.

CHAPTER 1

The Consensus Trap

Consensus is one of the most appealing ideas in organizational life. It promises that every voice will be heard, that nobody will be overruled, and that the group will move forward together. In practice, it delivers something quite different: paralysis, watered-down decisions, and quiet resentment.

The Three Failures of Consensus

First, consensus produces paralysis. When a decision requires everyone's active agreement, a single holdout can block the entire group. The result is a culture of endless meetings, side conversations, and revised proposals. In matrix organizations, the tendency to build consensus can exacerbate analysis paralysis, creating inertia. Each stakeholder requests additional analysis, disagreements lead to repetitive meetings, and by the time everyone is on board, the world has moved on.

Second, consensus produces mediocrity. To accommodate everyone's preferences, groups arrive at the lowest common denominator. Bold ideas get softened. Sharp positions get blunted. The result is decisions that nobody actively objects to but that nobody is genuinely excited about either. Mediocrity by design.

Third, consensus is expensive. The time invested in achieving full agreement — the meetings, the diplomacy, the compromise — carries real costs in delayed action and organizational paralysis. In fast-moving environments, the opportunity cost of waiting months for consensus can dwarf the risks of making a good-enough decision quickly.

> *The pursuit of consensus creates a paradox: the more inclusive you try to be, the less you can actually decide. Consent resolves this paradox by redefining what inclusion means — not "everyone's preference" but "no one's dealbreaker."*

The Hidden Social Cost

There is a deeper problem that consensus advocates rarely acknowledge. Consensus does not actually produce equal voice. It produces the illusion of equal voice while quietly rewarding the most persistent, the most articulate, and the most politically skilled. The person who can hold out the longest in a consensus process has an effective veto — not because their argument is strongest, but because their stamina is. This dynamic breeds resentment, cynicism, and eventual disengagement. People learn that the consensus process is not a genuine exchange of views but a war of attrition that the most stubborn participant wins.

CHAPTER 2

Consent Is Not Consensus

The distinction between consent and consensus is precise and consequential. It is not a matter of degree — consent is not "soft consensus" or "rough agreement." It is a fundamentally different decision-making framework.

	CONSENSUS	CONSENT
Question	"Does everyone agree?"	"Does anyone have a principled objection?"
Standard	Is this everyone's first choice?	Is this safe enough to try? Good enough for now?
Objection	"I don't prefer this" is enough to block	Only a reasoned argument that the proposal would cause harm
Outcome	Lowest common denominator	Good-enough decisions, made fast, revisited often
Speed	Slow — one holdout blocks all	Fast — most proposals clear the bar
Power	Rewards persistence and stamina	Distributes voice equally through rounds

The critical concept is the definition of an objection. In consensus, any discomfort or preference counts as a reason to block. In consent, an objection must be "reasoned and paramount" — it must identify a specific harm to the organization's ability to achieve its aims. "I don't love this" is not an objection. "This would violate our contract with our largest client" is.

This distinction is why practitioners of sociocracy often use the phrase "good enough for now, safe enough to try." The bar is not perfection. The bar is "will this cause harm we can't correct?" Most decisions clear that bar, which means most decisions can be made quickly — and revisited later as new information emerges.

CHAPTER 3

From a Dutch Schoolroom to a Global Movement

The intellectual roots of consent-based decision making stretch back further than most people realize. The word "sociocracy" was coined by Auguste Comte in 1851. American sociologist Lester Frank Ward expanded the concept in the 1880s. But the practice as we know it begins in a schoolroom in the Netherlands.

Kees Boeke: Democracy as It Might Be

In 1926, Dutch pacifist and educator Kees Boeke, a Quaker, established a residential school in Bilthoven, Netherlands — the Children's Community Workshop. Staff and students were treated as equal participants in governance. All decisions needed to be acceptable to everyone. Boeke described this in his 1945 essay "Democracy as It Might Be," framing sociocracy as an evolution of democracy that replaces majority voting with decisions where no one has a reasoned objection.

Gerard Endenburg: From School to Factory Floor

Endenburg, a student at Boeke's school, became an electrical engineer. After working at Philips (where he invented the small speakers still used in mobile devices), he took over his family's electrical engineering company, Endenburg Elektrotechniek, in the late 1960s. Frustrated that he could design brilliantly functioning electrical systems but could not produce satisfactory results managing people, he set out to formalize the decision-making principles he had experienced as a child.

Over ten years of planning, testing, and correcting, Endenburg developed the Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, built on three principles: consent decision making for policy decisions, circle meetings where working groups meet as equals, and double-linking of circles to form a feedback structure. He turned a failing company profitable within a year and ran it successfully for decades. Endenburg died in Rotterdam in July 2025 at the age of 92.

Holacracy, Buurtzorg, and Beyond

Brian Robertson's Holacracy, introduced in 2007, drew heavily on Endenburg's work, formalizing consent-based governance into a written constitution adopted by companies including Zappos. Frederic Laloux's 2014 book *Reinventing Organizations* brought the ideas to a wider audience, profiling organizations like Buurtzorg — where 10,000 nurses self-manage in teams of 10–12 with no middle managers, making collective decisions through structured rounds. Today, Sociocracy 3.0, an open-source evolution of Endenburg's method, is used across dozens of countries in settings from corporations to Buddhist monasteries.

CHAPTER 4

How Consent-Based Decision Making Works

The protocol is deliberately simple. Complexity would defeat the purpose. The power of consent comes not from an elaborate process but from a single shift in the question asked.

The Protocol

STEP	WHAT HAPPENS
1. Proposal	Someone brings a written or verbal proposal. It should be specific enough to act on: not "we should improve communication" but "I propose we replace the weekly all-hands with a written update sent every Monday by 10 AM."
2. Clarifying	A round of clarifying questions only. No reactions, no opinions. The purpose is to ensure everyone understands the proposal before evaluating it.
3. Reactions	A round of reactions. Each person speaks once, sharing their response to the proposal. This is not a debate — reactions are received without discussion.
4. Amend	The proposer may amend the proposal based on what they heard in the reactions round. They are not required to incorporate every piece of feedback.
5. Consent	The facilitator asks: "Does anyone have a principled objection — a reason this proposal would cause harm to our work that we cannot correct later?" Each person responds in turn.
6. Resolve	If objections are raised, the group works to integrate them — not by diluting the proposal but by finding a version that addresses the objection while preserving the proposal's intent. The amended proposal is then re-checked for consent.

The Magic Phrase

The entire practice can be reduced to one sentence that any leader can try in their next meeting:

> *"I'm proposing X. Does anyone have a principled objection — a reason this would cause harm that we can't correct later?"*

If no objections: proceed. If an objection is raised: amend the proposal until the objection is resolved, then check again. The process rarely takes more than fifteen minutes. Most decisions that would consume an hour of consensus-building can be resolved in five minutes of consent-based process.

Why Rounds Matter

Notice that every step uses rounds — each person speaks in turn, once, before anyone speaks again. This is not an incidental design choice. It is the structural mechanism that prevents the loudest or most senior voice from dominating. In a conventional meeting, the first person to speak anchors the discussion. In a consent round, every person's input is heard before the group moves forward. The result is dramatically better information flow and dramatically more equal participation.

CHAPTER 5

Where It's Already Working

- **Endenburg Elektrotechniek:** The original test case. Endenburg ran his manufacturing company on consent-based governance for decades, demonstrating that the method works in a competitive, results-oriented business. The company is still operating successfully today.
- **Buurtzorg:** 10,000 nurses in the Netherlands self-manage in teams of 10–12, using structured rounds and consent processes for everyday and policy decisions. No middle managers. A 2024 paper in the Journal of Organization Design examined how Buurtzorg scaled to hundreds of self-managing teams, concluding that its success depends on specific supportive structures rather than the absence of hierarchy alone.
- **Zappos:** The online retailer adopted Holacracy's consent-based governance in 2013. The transition was challenging and controversial, but it demonstrated that consent processes can operate at scale in a large American corporation.
- **Nonprofit and cooperative sectors:** Sociocracy has become what practitioners call the "gold standard of governance" for co-housing projects. It is used across schools, activist networks, nonprofit boards, and community organizations worldwide.

A common thread: these are not experimental fringe organizations. They include one of the largest and most admired healthcare providers in Europe, a billion-dollar American retailer, and hundreds of functioning cooperatives and nonprofits. The method works. The question is why so few traditional organizations have adopted it.

CHAPTER 6

The Mistakes That Undermine Consent

Treating “I Don’t Like It” as an Objection

The single most common failure. If any discomfort counts as an objection, you have not moved from consensus to consent — you have simply relabeled the same process. A valid objection must identify specific, articulable harm to the organization’s aims. “I would have done it differently” is a preference, not an objection. The facilitator’s job is to help the group maintain this distinction kindly but firmly.

Skipping the Rounds

Without structured rounds, the process degrades into a conventional meeting where the most powerful voices dominate. The round is not a formality — it is the mechanism that ensures equal voice. Every person speaks once, in turn, before anyone speaks again. Skipping this step eliminates the practice’s most important structural advantage.

Bringing Vague Proposals

Consent works on specific proposals, not open-ended topics. “We should talk about our marketing strategy” is a discussion item. “I propose we redirect 30% of our paid advertising budget to content marketing for Q3” is a proposal that can be consented to or objected to. The more specific the proposal, the faster the process.

Forgetting to Revisit

Consent decisions are explicitly understood as temporary. The phrase “good enough for now, safe enough to try” implies that decisions will be revisited as new information emerges. Organizations that adopt consent without building in review cycles lose one of the practice’s most powerful features: the freedom to decide quickly precisely because you know you will reassess later.

CHAPTER 7

A Practical Guide to Starting

Week 1: Try the Magic Phrase

You do not need to restructure your organization, train your team, or read a book. In your next meeting where a decision is needed, try this: instead of opening the floor for general discussion, state your proposal clearly and ask: “Does anyone have a principled objection — a reason this would cause harm that we can’t correct later?”

Notice what happens. In most cases, there are no objections. The decision is made in two minutes. The room is slightly surprised. The meeting moves on.

Week 2: Add Rounds

For a more substantive decision, add the structured rounds: clarifying questions (one round), reactions (one round), then the consent check. The rounds feel slightly formal the first time. By the third meeting, they feel natural. The key discipline is enforcing the round: each person speaks once before anyone speaks again.

Month 1: Set Review Dates

For every consent decision, set a review date. “We’ll try this for 90 days and reassess.” This does two things: it lowers the stakes of any individual decision (which makes consent easier to give), and it builds a culture of learning rather than a culture of getting it right the first time.

Month 2–3: Expand Gradually

Introduce the practice to your team explicitly. Share the distinction between consent and consensus. Invite someone else to facilitate a consent round. The practice spreads best when people experience it rather than hearing about it. One well-run consent meeting converts more people than any amount of explanation.

CHAPTER 8

The AVT Challenge

Consent-based decision making is Radical Practicality at its sharpest. It requires no budget, no technology, no consultants, and no permission. It can be tried in your next meeting. It challenges one of the deepest orthodoxies in organizational life: that good decisions require consensus.

They do not. Good decisions require the absence of principled objections. That is a fundamentally different — and fundamentally more achievable — standard. It is why organizations that adopt consent report halving their meeting time while improving the quality and speed of their decisions.

Our challenge to every AVT member:

1. In your next meeting, replace “Does everyone agree?” with “Does anyone have a principled objection?”
2. If an objection is raised, work to integrate it — don’t dilute the proposal. Find a version that resolves the concern.
3. Try structured rounds: each person speaks once, in turn, before anyone speaks again.
4. Set a review date for every consent decision: “We’ll try this for 90 days and reassess.”
5. Share one observation with the AVT community.

The practice was born in a Dutch schoolroom in 1926, formalized in an engineering company in the 1970s, and adopted by some of the most adaptive organizations in the world. It takes one sentence to try. It costs nothing. And it might be the most important change you make to how your team works together.

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This white paper is part of AVT’s 25th Anniversary Program: 25 Practices Nobody Uses (But Should). Consent-based decision making is Practice 03 because it addresses the structural root of the most universal complaint in organizational life: meetings that take too long and produce too little.