Board Decision-Making: An Alternative Approach

- Most boards do not want to resort to strict voting, since all opinions are valued.
- But the challenges of using a "general consensus" model are real – it is easy for discussions to go on too long, and for decisions to be held up by a single person's concern.
- The **Consensus Decision-Making Framework**, developed by facilitators affiliated with the Journal of Extension, offers an alternative that allows for robust discussion and more efficient decision-making.

The Consensus Decision-Making Framework

Each participant "rates" their current opinion of a decision using this scale:

1. I can easily support the decision or action.
2. I can support the decision or action, but it may not be my preference.
3. I can support the decision or action with minor changes.
4. I support the will of the group, but I don't necessarily agree with the decision or action.
5. I cannot support the decision or action.

When using this model:

- Each participant is responsible for giving a true rating each time one is called for, and indicating this by holding up the number of fingers that corresponds to their feeling.
- Each participant is also responsible for explaining why they have chosen their response if asked to do so, in order to advance the discussion (i.e., you cannot say, "that's just how I feel"). Each person agrees to explain their reasoning so others can understand their choice, which may help build consensus.
- Facilitators are responsible for bringing out points of tension and trying to resolve them.
- In advance of starting the discussion, the group is responsible for deciding what will constitute "consensus" and allow a decision to be made. For example, if 75% of the group is at a 1 or 2, that may be enough to say that a decision can be carried.
- Situations that require 100% enthusiastic consensus are rare, and should generally be reserved for serious issues related to mission, long-term financial sustainability, and personnel.