

Guidelines for Consultation, a Bahá'í Approach

Bahá'ís didn't invent consultation or corner the market on it. However, [the Bahá'í Writings](#) provide spiritual guidance and insights that elevate consultation among many other practices to a new level. The following is a collection of thoughts, ideas and practices gleaned from those Writings.

[Bahá'í consultation](#) isn't simply a discussion or airing the views of those participating. It's a collective, objective investigation of reality, whose purpose centers on achieving clarity and truth.

The Purpose and Spirit of Consultation

Consultation is all about coming together, valuing each voice and embracing our differences. The idea is simple: multiple perspectives work to reach a unified viewpoint, and the collective power of a group is greater than any individual's strength.

When you share your thoughts, it's not about claiming to be right; it's about contributing to a shared understanding. Picture it like a spark created when flint and steel meet. Approach your opinion with serenity and composure. Before jumping in, take a moment to consider what others have already said. If someone else's idea resonates more, be open to accepting it. After offering an idea, release any ownership to it. Allow the idea to be supported and shaped without feeling the need to sell or defend it. If the idea is criticized, be detached. Remember someone is being critical of the idea, not you. This approach leads us to unity and truth.

In the process, participants need to engage in open, objective dialogue to avoid any negative vibes. Everyone should freely express their opinions. If or when there's disagreement, it's essential not to take it personally. Only through thorough discussion can we find the right path. Truth often emerges from the clash of differing opinions.

The key is to seek the truth in every matter, setting aside personal attachments to our views. Insisting on our opinions too strongly can lead to discord. Flexibility and a willingness to explore differing perspectives are crucial; otherwise, the truth might remain hidden.

A Backbiting-Free Zone

Speaking ill of someone who isn't present leads to disunity and distrust. From a spiritual perspective, it darkens the soul of all involved. Backbiting has a divisive nature, often causing individuals to withdraw.

If someone starts badmouthing an absent person, it's our responsibility, in a friendly manner, to put a stop to it. Ask, does this criticism serve any constructive purpose? Does it contribute to our shared goals? More often than not, the answer is no. Instead, it just clouds our minds with dust, making it hard to hear and see the truth. Let's focus on what brings us together rather than spreading negativity.

The Goal of Consultation

The aim of consultation is simple: reach a decision that everyone can get behind. If unanimity isn't possible, the majority's view will take the lead while being mindful of the minority's needs. Once a decision is reached, it's crucial that everyone stands behind and supports it; otherwise, success becomes unlikely.

If, by any chance, the decision turns out to be off the mark, only collective action in pursuit of that choice will reveal its shortcomings. In such cases, participants can come together later to revisit and correct the decision with harmony and unity. It's all about learning and adapting together.

Guidelines for Consultation

- **Everyone participates:** Different perspectives contribute to diversity of thought that opens the door to new ideas and increased understanding. Fostering inclusion also contributes to increased trust and a greater sense of belonging.
- **The purpose is to find the best solution:** Participants are welcome to bring their own ideas. However, the goal of consultation isn't to advance your idea; it's to find the best solution.
- **No hierarchy:** This guideline levels the playing field and demonstrates that the team values every voice. Ideally, participants are sitting at a round table where no one is at the head. Since most conference rooms aren't designed that way, the leader can signal that there's no hierarchy by sitting along one side.
- **Listen to understand, not to respond:** Most of us are eager to make our point. So much so that we often fail to listen to what others have to say.
- **No put downs in words or body language:** Avoid dismissing ideas with words or a wave of the hand. No eye rolls or shaking your head indicating that you don't agree. This one requires work. However, being patient and remaining open often reveals new insights.
- **One meeting... avoid side conversations:** This guideline demonstrates respect to the person speaking. If you need to have a sidebar with a colleague, ask the facilitator for a short break.
- **Wait to be recognized by the facilitator:** Wait... what? I can't interrupt? No, see "Don't interrupt" below. Instead, signal to the facilitator with a hand raise or a nod that you'd like to share. You'll get your turn.
- **Don't interrupt:** Interrupting someone while they're talking is disrespectful. Just don't do it.
- **Be detached from your idea once presented:** In a society where individuals are rewarded for their ideas, it requires a level of maturity mixed with a healthy dose of humility and selflessness to offer an idea and then release ownership of it. By doing so, others can build on and shape the idea into something that is often even better than the original. And the fact is that everyone in the consultation knows who offered the original idea, so there's personal satisfaction in that.
- **No cell phone use except in emergency:** This guideline is closely linked to 'no side conversations.' It's important to be present during a consultation. Cell phones present huge distractions.

3 Important Roles

In addition to the participants themselves, there are three important roles that help everyone stay on topic, ensure every voice is heard and ensure the decisions and actions to be taken are captured. They are:

1. **The facilitator**, often the team leader, sets the agenda and guides the meeting following consultation guidelines. This individual has a dual role since they may contribute to the consultation as well. During the consultation, the facilitator scans the room to take note when someone indicates they have something to share and keeps track of the order so that each person gets their turn to contribute.
2. **The monitor** observes the meeting, intervening if deviations occur. This person may also contribute to the consultation, but they maintain a higher level of attention to the guidelines. The monitor isn't the consultation police. Their role is to offer friendly reminders when someone strays from one of the guidelines.
3. **The recorder** manages the software or takes written notes, documenting action plans and commitments. This is also a dual role because they not only capture a general consensus and any decisions taken, but they also share their thoughts and ideas.

To be sure that everyone understands who is playing a specific role, identify them at the start of your meeting. These roles aren't the 'consultation police;' their purpose is to both serve the group and participate. It's everyone's responsibility to be open, thoughtful, humble and kind.