

# Negotiating Skills

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## Working It Out

“Let’s go see a movie,” Jay said. His three closest friends were all at his house trying to decide how to spend Saturday afternoon.

Philip yawned. “There’s nothing good on.”

Mohammed, who was lying on the floor, turned over and started doing push-ups. “What about a bike ride uptown?”

“Oh, man,” Marshall groaned as he watched Mohammed perform his fifteenth push-up. “Will you give up on that stuff? It makes me tired just watching you. Anyway, a bike ride would be okay, but my bike needs a new tire.”

“What about calling Neil?” Jay said. “He’s got that new computer game.”

Marshall shook his head. “Neil’s gone shopping with Judy for her Mom’s birthday. How about that new video arcade?”

“Okay,” Mohammed said, sitting up.

“Great idea,” Philip said.

But Jay shook his head. “I hate that place.”

Does this conversation remind you of anything? Maybe your family disagrees about when to watch television. Maybe your class project group is unable to decide who should do what.

We can’t all agree, all of the time. But what happens when something has to get done and people aren’t agreeing? One answer is **majority rule**, where more than half the people get what they want, and the rest lose. This is called a “win-lose” solution. It doesn’t feel good to be on the losing side.

A better, but more difficult, way is to work toward agreement among all the members of the group. This is called a **consensus**, a unanimous agreement among a group of people. It is a “win-win” solution. Everybody wins; nobody loses.



## Consensus Building

Jay and his friends are all bored, and nobody can figure out what to do. How can Jay and his friends reach a consensus? First, specify everyone's position. If you put it in a chart, it will look like this:

	Movies	Bike Riding	Video Arcade
Jay	yes	no opinion	no
Philip	no	no opinion	yes
Mohammed	no opinion	yes	yes
Marshall	no opinion	no opinion, but bike needs a new tire	yes

What this chart reveals is that there are two options with a definite “no” attached to them: going to the movies, and the video arcade. No one is totally against bike riding, and Mohammed is enthusiastic about it.

How can these friends build consensus about bike riding? Here is one possible scenario:

- Mohammed points out that there's a great bike riding trail they haven't tried.
- Jay has an extra bike tire in the garage; he suggests they fix Marshall's bike.
- Philip points out that it could be their last good bike ride before winter hits.
- Marshall likes the idea of getting help with his bike, so he agrees. Besides, he has heard that the trail is pretty neat.
- Mohammed says there's a good pizza place at the end of the trail.

Pretty soon, they're heading out the door with a plan of action that everyone has agreed to.

This group was keen to agree: they were friends and they wanted to do something together. But other factors also made it a win-win situation.

### ACTIVITY

#### *Saturday afternoon consensus building*

As a group in class, examine how Jay and his friends reached consensus. Then answer the following questions:

1. How did it help the group that everyone made suggestions?
2. How did it help the group that no one gave up and left?
3. Do you think *how* they spoke to each other was important? When you answer this question, think about respect and the ability to listen.
4. What kind of “working it out” skills did Mohammed demonstrate? What about Jay?
5. How did mentioning the positive factors help to build consensus?
6. How was each boy's needs and wants met through the conversation? You know how Marshall's needs were met. Can you guess about the others?

**Create your own win-win solution**

Working in groups, your task is to answer this question and come to a consensus:

*What is the best and fairest way for your teacher to assess how well each of you has learned and used the communication skills discussed in this unit, and give you each a mark for this section of the course?*

What answer did you agree upon? Why did you choose that method? What did you do within your group that helped you reach a consensus? Be prepared to report to the whole class on your discussions.

Here are two other terms often used to describe ways of reaching a consensus.

- A **negotiation** is a discussion designed to result in an agreement. Examples of negotiations would be: the United Auto Workers negotiating a new contract with General Motors, Israel and Syria negotiating control of the Golan Heights on their border, or you negotiating with the Vice-Principal about when you will serve your detention.
- **Conflict resolution** is a process designed to bring together people or groups who have disagreed and been hostile. Often there is a mediator involved, someone who is not part of the dispute, whose job is to help the others reach some agreement.

**Mediators** can be used in negotiations as well. Some schools have conflict resolution or **peer mediation** programs where students act as mediators to help other students work out their differences. Does your school have such a program?

**Getting to a Win-Win Solution**

- Use active listening.
- Find out what is really important to the people involved.
- Get the people to talk, and listen, to each other.
- Make sure everybody gets a say in the discussion.
- Look for solutions no one has thought of yet.
- Make sure everybody agrees with the solution.