

# How Much “Yes” Do You Need?

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## INTRODUCTION

Organizations are essentially agreements plus the stuff people need to implement the agreements. Without agreements, no strategy can get implemented, no decisions can be made or carried out; even the smallest business cannot operate. Without agreements we have stuff and arguments.

But what does it mean to “get agreement”? Do you mean the same thing I do when you say “We’re agreed”? In this paper, we’ll see how degrees of agreement vary, and we’ll examine the importance of understanding how much agreement is necessary for different situations. We’ll also look at some ways to get a higher degree of agreement, and better understanding of what we can expect from those with whom we’ve reached an agreement.

## THE TROUBLE WITH AGREEMENTS

We are often surprised and frustrated to learn that team members who had agreed to do something miss a deadline or simply ignore what we took to be a commitment. Our first impulse is to focus on the individual who disappoints us. We rationalize the broken promise: she’s been very busy lately, it must have slipped her mind; or we pass judgment on the individual: he’s just not trustworthy. Rarely do we look at our own contribution to the lack of follow through. Agreements fall apart for various reasons. One has to do with the vast differences in what each of us means when we say, “I agree.”

Agreement is the outcome of a process two or more people undertake in consideration of a proposal. Agreements matter because they imply action. We reach a conclusion with others and either take an action or commit to an action under a certain set of conditions. Agreements can be tacit: we’ll stop at red lights or explicit: let’s go to the Italian restaurant tonight. Even the most disagreeable amongst us show up for meetings, meet deadlines, and wait their turn in line at the movie theater. Society doesn’t work without agreement.

We use the word agreement to cover a lot of territory. Everything from “Alright, I’ll take the garbage out before I sit down to watch American Idol” to “That’s a fantastic idea! Let’s extend our vacation through the weekend so that we can watch the running of the bulls.” In each case, we take a cooperative action. In the first case, begrudgingly and in the second, enthusiastically. In organizations we often behave as if enthusiastic support is the only kind of agreement worth getting. In the end, we don’t always need the fervent accord we aspire to and worse, our attempts to achieve it are counterproductive.

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### LEVELS OF AGREEMENT

Think of agreement on a continuum from compliance to consensus. Let's compare and contrast the possibilities from the perspective of how I think about the actions I'm committing to when I say, "I agree."

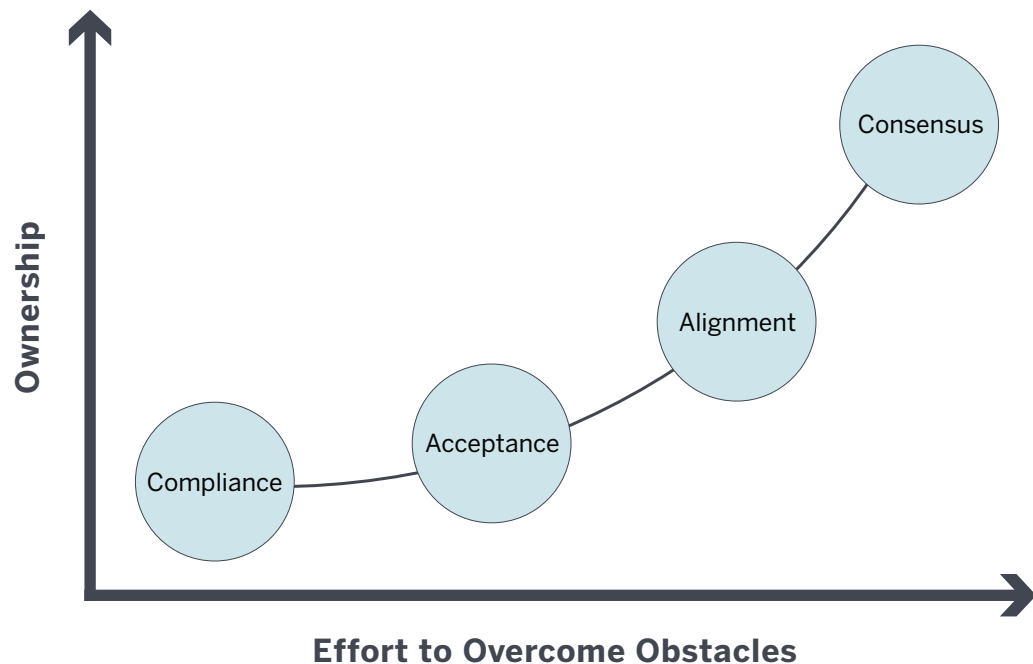
**Consensus** – *I'll actively support the agreement. I'm committed to implementing what we've agreed to. I've been influenced by our discussion and even though I might have reached a different conclusion on my own, I'm good with where we ended up.*

**Alignment** – *We share a similar perspective. The agreement takes into consideration my interests. I prefer other options, but I can live with the outcome and I'll cooperate with our efforts to implement.*

**Acceptance** – *I concede. I won't undermine or block implementation nor will I resist. I see it differently, but I recognize the importance of appearing unified.*

**Compliance** – *I'll do as I'm told. I'm not happy about it and I'll tell anyone who asks that I would have done it differently.*

The distinctions between each level of agreement matter because clarity about the level of agreement tells us how the person feels about the agreement and what they're likely to do about the agreement. Think of these two aspects of the agreement as ownership and effort.



**Ownership:** *The degree to which each person feels that the agreement represents something important to him or her.*

**Effort:** *The degree to which each person will endeavor to overcome obstacles that impact the successful implementation of the agreement.*

The degree of ownership predicts how much authenticity and accountability will emerge when speaking to others about the agreement. “After a rich discussion, we concluded that committing to one more client meeting before the end of the week, might just put us over the target,” says a member of a consensus to his team. “They decided that we each need to meet with our clients by the end of the week” complains the team leader who accepted the outcome.

The degree of effort predicts how the person will react when the going gets tough. “I tried to meet with the client, but her calendar was insane,” grumbles the person who complied with a proposal to call on a client by the end of the week.

Level of Agreement	When to Use it
<b><i>Compliance</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team members are not invested in any particular outcome</li> <li>• A trusted leader needs fast action</li> <li>• Nobody on the team sees the situation the same way and the team would prefer any conclusion to a continued discussion</li> </ul>
<b><i>Acceptance</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most of the team is aligned, one or two are holding out and further discussion is making matters worse, not better</li> <li>• There’s no need for significant action to support the conclusion</li> <li>• The differences are theoretical and have little bearing in terms of next steps</li> </ul>
<b><i>Alignment</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We need team members to cooperate with each other</li> <li>• We want a unified approach that represents a shared perspective; it doesn’t look to others like the leader simply got his or her way</li> <li>• We want the outcome to reflect team members’ key interests</li> </ul>
<b><i>Consensus</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We want active support for the conclusion we reach</li> <li>• We want an outcome that has been shaped by team members influencing each other’s thinking</li> <li>• Individual team members are expected to publically endorse the outcome</li> </ul>

Understanding and using the Levels of Agreement yield several benefits. At one level, the team gets efficiency from a small investment of time in a conversation about the level of agreement required for a particular topic. After all, if we don't really need consensus, why force it? At another level, the team matures through conversations about levels of agreement, because it requires openness and candor to talk about what each person is thinking as the team closes on a discussion. Perhaps most importantly, team leaders can come clean about how patient they're willing to be and talk openly about the trade-offs they're willing to accept in the interest of getting closure.

For those in the role of coaching or facilitating on behalf of teams or team leaders, asking the question "What level of agreement do we need?" before the discussion will determine an appropriate process for the conversation. A consensus building process looks and feels very different than an acceptance building process. The quickest way for a leader to damage trust is to put people through a process designed to create a consensus when he or she will be satisfied merely to convince the majority.

### **TIPS FOR GETTING MORE AGREEMENT THAN YOU HAVE**

What if you're at a stalemate and struggling to climb to another level of agreement? Try these tips:

- *Ask, "What would it take?" The question is not just for car salesmen. Asked with genuine curiosity, the question allows people to help problem-solve rather than simply point out what they don't like about where the team's headed.*
- *Listen empathetically to a person's rationale for holding out. In many cases, letting go of our publically stated points of view requires understanding not convincing.*
- *Focus on interests not positions. Rather than trying to win over those who are not ready to agree at the level you want, try understanding what's behind their current position. Find out what they're afraid of losing, why they hold the position, or what matters most. Don't assume that what people say they want is what they really want.*
- *Focus on agreement, not disagreement. Try to build from the elements you already have agreement at the level you want rather than spotlighting the differences.*
- *Return to a discussion of the problem versus working to increase the level of agreement on a solution. Sometimes you can unlock disagreement on a solution by reframing the problem. For example, we're not all aligned on a proposed approach to reducing cost by eliminating overtime for hourly employees. Ask the team, "What problems are we solving by eliminating overtime and what problems are we creating by eliminating overtime?" The answer may come back, "we're reducing labor cost, but we're also taking money out of the pockets of our most dependable associates." Re-frame by asking, "What else would reduce labor cost while keeping our best associates happy?"*

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- *Move to a discussion of the vision or over-arching goal. Sometimes, people need to be reminded of the big picture in order to let go of whatever prevents them from committing at the level of agreement you want.*
- *Call a break. People may just need time to get used to the idea.*

Agreements are the building blocks of business. With these tips, you'll have a better chance of building, brick by brick, a lasting agreement. And next time you need to agree, you'll have a clearer idea just what you're doing.

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