

## Consensus building

*It helps to view things through the eyes of the other group*

**In these days of confrontation, debate and polarization**, we don't hear so much about consensus building. Not unless it's pressure and token compromise to get reluctant agreement with your basic point of view, like pulling teeth.

But one can be more analytically friendly than that. Over the years I've found one of the basic notions from economics to be very useful as a starting point—the concept of *complementary-supplementary-competitive relationships*. This helps to sort out whether two or more groups can be expected willingly to agree on proposed aims, means and/or lines of collaboration, as distinct from having to be forced or bribed into it.

This can be depicted as follows:

	Your group	The other group
<b>Complementary</b>	Gains +++++	Gains at least something +++
<b>Supplementary</b>	Gains +++++	Neither gains nor loses 00
<b>Competitive</b>	Gains +++++	Loses ---

A *complementary* relationship is a win-win relationship. Both you and the others are helped. They can be expected to go along with the proposal, or something close to it, without special inducements.

When a *supplementary* relationship is believed to exist, the other group might be talked into going along with the proposal, since it isn't particularly harmed. A sort of "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" proposition.

But when a *competitive* relationship is seen to exist, it's a win-lose situation. Compromises and/or compensation (e.g., subsidies, tax breaks) will probably have to be negotiated to induce the other group to go along with the proposal.

In my experience, it helps at the beginning to define proposals in this way. It brings the focus on the aspects of a proposal that need special attention, negotiation or modification. I've seen much time wasted trying to get a party voluntarily to agree on a proposal that clearly was against that party's interest. Likewise for money wasted to compensate one or more groups when the original proposal clearly benefited them too.

Sometimes when the effect is neutral (supplementary) or harmful (competitive), a group can be nudged into supporting a proposal on the basis of enduring human relationships (cultural bonds, old school bonds, etc.). This might happen also on the basis of good public relations, earning “points” for another time, satisfaction of contributing to the common good, or simply feeling it’s not worth creating a hassle about it.

However, unlike the Pareto-optimum concepts of welfare economics and some other lines of thought, the other group may not be happy even if a proposal makes it no worse or only a little better off than before. My observation is that policy actions often create *jealousies* that loom important in people’s minds. The other group might be content if it viewed its own situation but may become very discontent when it sees that you are receiving more benefit than they from the action.

Note that much of this depends on what people *believe* to be the case. A group’s response will reflect its *perceptions* as to whether a proposal is complementary, supplementary or competitive to its interests. This goes deeper than the usual communication theory about how messages can get distorted:



Fundamental differences in perceptions of key policy issues and options, the impacts that are weighted most in people’s minds, and acceptable ways to resolve issues arise from differences in peoples’ backgrounds, life experiences, and socioeconomic settings. How things *appear* to them—not only the proposals themselves but also *who* is making the proposal and *how* the proposals are presented—can be important.