# The Multidimensional Nature of Consensus in Business Economics: From Social Contract to Digital Transformation

*The contribution addresses consensus in business economics, analyzing its theoretical foundations, empirical manifestations, and strategic implications. Consensus is defined as an invisible infrastructure that supports the modern enterprise, configured not only as a formal agreement but as a social construct that permeates internal and external organizational relationships. The analysis begins with the theoretical roots of consensus, traceable to contractualist and institutionalist traditions, and then examines the fundamental contribution of stakeholder theory. The document illustrates how consensus manifests concretely in organizational dynamics through governance systems, decision-making processes, communication strategies, and change management. Particularly significant is the conceptualization of consensus as a strategic resource capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage, characterized by value, rarity, and non-substitutability according to the Resource-Based View. The contribution also addresses challenges and opportunities for consensus management in the digital era, highlighting how technologies and social media have transformed the architecture of corporate communication and accelerated the processes of consensus formation and dissolution. A new paradigm of organizational consensus is outlined, characterized by the need to balance potentially conflicting requirements (univocality and pluralism, stability and innovation, control and participation), emphasizing the importance of developing contextual approaches that recognize the diversity of legitimate practices and distinguish between authentic consensus and manipulation.*

**Keywords**: *consensus; consensus building; consensus processes; organizational sustainability; stakeholder engagement.*



## Introduction

The concept of consensus in business economics represents an important pillar in both theory and managerial practice. Consensus is not merely a formal agreement but constitutes the invisible infrastructure that supports the foundations of the modern enterprise (Rossi, 2003). This definition evokes the dual nature of consensus: a pragmatic governance tool and, simultaneously, a social construct that permeates intra-organizational and extra-organizational relationships. According to Kellermanns et al. (2011), strategic consensus is defined as a shared understanding and agreement on strategy-relevant content by a group of individuals, including high, middle, and low-level managers. This type of consensus improves cooperation and coordination after a decision, facilitating strategy implementation and improving organizational performance.

In a context characterized by increasing complexity and systemic uncertainty, consensus assumes a crucial role as a strategic resource for the success of business initiatives. The lack of strategic consensus among managers can lead to poor shared understanding and limited commitment, hindering effective strategy implementation. Consensus, on the other hand, promotes alignment of objectives and organizational communication, positively contributing to business performance.

Consensus is not limited to being a simple formal agreement; it represents a collaborative process that involves all interested parties. Consensus-based decision-making requires inclusivity and participation, valuing the perspectives of all team members and promoting innovative and sustainable solutions. This approach not only improves the quality of decisions but also strengthens team cohesion and builds a positive organizational culture.

According to Knight et al. (1999), consensus building is generally accepted as one of the first steps in the strategy formation process. The same authors define strategic consensus as the degree to which individual mental models of team members overlap, thus highlighting the link between consensus and managerial cognitive processes. Dong et al. (2018) add that the pursuit of consensus represents a fundamental element in group decision-making processes, where different actors with potentially divergent interests must converge towards shared solutions.

This contribution aims to analyze the concept of consensus in a multidimensional perspective, exploring its theoretical roots, empirical manifestations, and managerial implications. In particular, the research intends to answer the following questions:

1. What are the theoretical foundations of consensus in business economics and how have they evolved over time?
2. How does consensus empirically manifest in organizational practices?
3. How can consensus be configured as a strategic resource capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage?
4. What challenges and opportunities emerge for consensus management in the digital era?

These questions reflect the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, requiring an analytical approach that integrates different disciplinary and methodological perspectives.

The work is structured in seven main sections: after this introduction, the second section explores the theoretical roots of consensus from social contract to business contract; the third section examines the centrality of consensus in Stakeholder Theory; the fourth analyzes the empirical manifestations of consensus in businesses; the fifth discusses consensus as a strategic resource and its managerial implications; finally, the sixth section addresses the challenges and opportunities for consensus management in the digital era, before reaching the conclusions.

From a methodological perspective, the contribution adopts a literature analysis approach with interpretative and constructive characteristics (Hart, 1998). This method allows for the integration of different disciplinary perspectives to analyze consensus as a strategic resource capable of generating sustainable competitive advantages. Unlike a simple literature review, the literature analysis aims to synthesize, evaluate, and reinterpret existing knowledge, identifying gaps, inconsistencies, and new research directions. The analysis focuses on relevant academic publications in the field of management and organization, favoring studies that offer a solid theoretical perspective and rigorous empirical evidence.

The research also explores challenges and opportunities related to consensus management in the digital era, where technologies and social media have transformed corporate communication dynamics and accelerated the processes of consensus formation and dissolution. In this context, reference is made to the literature on Knowledge Management (KM) and Social Network Analysis (SNA) to understand how digital platforms influence the dissemination of information and opinion formation inside and outside businesses (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). In particular KM offers tools and methodologies to analyze how knowledge is created, shared, and applied within businesses, with a specific focus on the role of digital technologies in facilitating these processes (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Knowledge Management platforms, such as corporate intranets, wikis, and document management systems, can support the creation of informed consensus, providing organization members with easy and timely access to information relevant to the decision-making process. However, it is important to consider that the mere availability of information does not automatically guarantee consensus formation; active engagement by leaders and organization members is necessary to promote knowledge sharing and open discussion (Alavi and Leidner, 2001).

Social Network Analysis provides a conceptual framework and analytical tools to study relationships between individuals, groups, and organizations (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

Social Network Analysis can be used to identify key nodes in the corporate communication network, i.e., individuals who have a central role in the dissemination of information and in influencing opinions. Understanding the structure and dynamics of social networks can help managers identify opportunities to promote consensus, for example by involving informal leaders in decision-making processes or facilitating communication between groups with divergent opinions (Borgatti et al., 2009).

Furthermore, SNA can be used to monitor the evolution of consensus over time, analyzing how relationships between actors change and how ideas and opinions spread through the network.

The objective is to develop a conceptual model that integrates the different dimensions of consensus (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) and that takes into account the specificities of the digital context, characterized by high speed, interconnection, and volatility of information.

## The Theoretical Roots of Consensus: From Social Contract to Business Contract

The notion of consensus has its roots in various intellectual traditions that have contributed to shaping economic-business thought. The path of this analysis must begin with the classical contractualist tradition, which provided the first conceptual tools for understanding the consensual nature of economic relationships.

The theory of social contract, elaborated by thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, has profoundly influenced the modern conception of businesses. According to Donaldson and Dunfee (1999), businesses can be interpreted as moral communities founded on an implicit second-level social contract. This perspective suggests that businesses operate on the basis of tacit consensus that legitimizes their existence and defines the limits of their operations.

Zingales (2000) has further elaborated this perspective, proposing a vision of the business as a "nexus of specific investments" rather than merely a "nexus of contracts". In this vision, consensus is not limited to the formal agreement between parties but implies a deeper commitment involving specific investments and fiduciary relationships. According to this approach, the business survives and prospers not by virtue of contractual coercion, but thanks to the ability to generate consensus around a shared vision of the future.

In business management, Farjaudon and Morales (2013) examine the role of accounting in the production of consensus, highlighting how accounting systems can serve as tools to define and reproduce dominant interests. The authors argue that consensus often masks power asymmetries in businesses, where some actors manage to impose their interests on others. Consensus, in this sense, denies positional conflicts, influencing power dynamics between organizational groups.

This conceptual evolution reflects the transition from a merely transactional conception of business economics to a more relational vision, in which consensus becomes a constitutive element of organizational identity itself. Consensus is not only a prerequisite for economic action but also its most precious result, capable of generating that fiduciary capital that no formal contract could ever guarantee (Zamagni, 2008).

The institutionalist tradition, from Commons (1934) to North, has made a decisive contribution to the understanding of consensus as a socially constructed phenomenon. North (1990) has highlighted how institutions, both formal and informal, emerge from processes of social consensus that reduce uncertainty and facilitate economic exchange. In this perspective, consensus is not just an agreement between parties, but a complex process of mutual legitimation that involves cultural, cognitive, and normative aspects.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983), in their analysis of institutional isomorphism, have highlighted how consensus often manifests through the adoption of practices considered legitimate within a particular organizational field. According to the authors, businesses compete not only for resources and customers but also for institutional legitimacy and social acceptance. In this perspective, consensus becomes a strategic resource that can confer significant competitive advantages, especially in contexts characterized by high uncertainty.

Masini (1979), in his fundamental contribution to Italian economic-business doctrine, emphasized the institutional nature of the business as an economic institution destined to endure, highlighting how business continuity largely depends on the ability to maintain the consensus of relevant stakeholders. According to this vision, the economic institution endures as long as it is able to renew consensus around its economic and social mission.

Dong et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of consensus in group decision-making processes in social network contexts, highlighting how consensus achievement is facilitated by trust relationships and opinion evolution mechanisms. The authors classify consensus paradigms into two main categories: those based on trust relationships and those founded on opinion evolution, showing how both contribute to the formation of shared decisions.

## The Stakeholder Theory and the Centrality of Consensus

A fundamental contribution to understanding consensus in the business context comes from stakeholder theory, initially elaborated by Freeman (1984). This theoretical perspective has shifted attention from shareholder value maximization to value creation for all stakeholders, emphasizing the relational and consensual nature of the business.

Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) have proposed a model for classifying stakeholders based on three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. This framework allows us to understand how consensus is not uniformly distributed among all stakeholders but is influenced by power dynamics and legitimation processes. Thus, stakeholder consensus is not a static quantity but a dynamic variable that requires a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation.

Phillips (2003) introduced the concept of “stakeholder fairness”, emphasizing how consensus must be founded on principles of distributive and procedural equity. Consequently, consensus can emerge only in contexts characterized by reasonable informational symmetry and genuine respect for the dignity of all actors involved. This ethical perspective on consensus enriches the discussion, introducing normative considerations that transcend the purely strategic dimension. Knight et al. (1999) highlight how demographic diversity within top management teams (TMTs) can negatively influence strategic consensus. According to their empirical study, functional and educational diversity tends to reduce consensus, while group processes can mitigate these negative effects, facilitating the emergence of a shared strategic vision. This suggests that consensus is not simply the result of demographic similarities but can be actively built through effective collaborative processes.

## Empirical Manifestations of Consensus in Businesses

After exploring the theoretical roots of the concept of consensus, it is appropriate to analyze how it concretely manifests in organizational dynamics. This section aims to examine the various empirical dimensions of consensus, from governance practices to decision-making processes, from communication strategies to organizational change management.

The governance system represents one of the main areas in which consensus assumes practical relevance. Corporate governance can be interpreted as the set of mechanisms that define decision-making powers within businesses and that influence managers' decisions (Charreaux, 2004:2). In this perspective, consensus is not limited to the formal approval of decisions by corporate bodies but implies a broader alignment of interests among the various actors involved.

Empirical research has highlighted how more inclusive and participatory governance structures tend to generate greater consensus and, consequently, superior performance. Specifically, heterogeneity in board composition not only improves the quality of decisions but also increases the perceived legitimacy and internal and external consensus around strategic choices (Adams and Ferreira, 2009). This evidence suggests that consensus is not just a result but also an enabling condition for the effectiveness of governance processes.

In advanced economies, there is growing attention to governance models that facilitate the emergence of consensus through stakeholder engagement practices. Contemporary governance is characterized by a progressive expansion of the audience of subjects involved in decision-making processes, not as a mere concession by corporate leaders but as a strategic response to growing pressures from the external environment. This evolution reflects the awareness that consensus represents a strategic resource capable of conferring legitimacy and sustainability to business choices.

Decision-making processes constitute a privileged area for observing the dynamics of consensus building. Management literature has identified various ways through which businesses seek to generate consensus around strategic decisions, from explicit negotiation to implicit persuasion, from co-optation to manipulation.

significant contribution in this area comes from Mintzberg's (1983) studies on power in businesses. The author has highlighted how consensus often emerges from complex power games in which different organizational actors mobilize resources and skills to influence collective decisions. Organizational consensus rarely emerges spontaneously; more often, it is the result of skillful negotiation strategies and a wise balancing of divergent interests.

The research of Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988) on political dynamics in managerial teams has further enriched this perspective, showing how consensus building is influenced by contextual factors such as time pressure, environmental uncertainty, and power distribution. In conditions of high environmental turbulence, participatory and consensus-oriented decision-making processes tend to produce higher quality decisions compared to more authoritarian processes.

A particularly interesting aspect concerns the distinction between substantial consensus and procedural consensus. Strategic consensus can manifest both as agreement on the content of decisions (substantial consensus) and as agreement on the ways in which such decisions are made (procedural consensus) (Amason, 1996). This distinction is crucial, as it suggests that businesses characterized by high internal diversity can still achieve significant forms of consensus, focusing on the rules of the game rather than on specific results.

Furthermore, communication represents a fundamental vehicle for building and maintaining consensus in businesses. Indeed, communication is not just a means to transmit information but constitutes the connective tissue that allows the emergence of organizational consensus (Invernizzi, 2000), emphasizing the constitutive nature of communication, which does not merely describe organizational reality but actively contributes to creating it.

Empirical studies have highlighted how transparent and inclusive communication practices tend to generate greater consensus and trust. Businesses that invest in two-way and symmetrical communication not only improve the quality of relationships with stakeholders but also increase their perceived legitimacy and their ability to influence the external environment (Cornelissen, 2020). This evidence underscores the strategic importance of communication as a tool for building consensus.

A particularly relevant aspect concerns the role of language in consensus formation. Indeed, managerial discourse not only reflects but also constructs organizational reality, defining what is considered legitimate and desirable (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). In this perspective, consensus emerges through discursive processes that define the boundaries of what is thinkable and sayable within businesses.

Organizational change processes represent a crucial testing ground for businesses' ability to generate and maintain consensus. Empirical research has highlighted how resistance to change is often the result of a failure in building consensus rather than a rational opposition to new practices. What is labeled as resistance is frequently the symptom of a change process that has not adequately involved organizational actors in defining objectives and implementation modalities (Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio, 2008). This perspective suggests that consensus is not just a prerequisite for change but must be actively built throughout the entire process.

According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), consensus building passes through processes of signification in which organizational leaders propose new interpretations of reality that can be accepted, negotiated, or rejected by members of the business. Strategic change implies a renegotiation of the psychological contract between the business and its members, a process that requires significant time, resources, and relational skills.

A relevant perspective in the analysis of empirical manifestations of consensus concerns the role of Knowledge Management and Social Network Analysis as interpretative paradigms and operational tools.

Knowledge Management, understood as a systematic process of identification, organization, and sharing of knowledge within the business (Davenport and Prusak, 1998:5), offers a fundamental key to understanding the mechanisms of consensus building based on knowledge sharing. The creation of organizational knowledge is configured as a spiral process involving continuous interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge, a shared space that serves as a foundation for knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). This shared space can be physical, virtual, or mental, but it always represents the context in which the socialization of knowledge occurs, an essential element for building organizational consensus.

The KM perspective allows for interpreting consensus not only as an alignment of interests but also as a cognitive convergence based on shared mental models. Individuals within a business can generate new insights or knowledge when they interact and share their tacit knowledge, or when they articulate their tacit knowledge in explicit forms (Alavi and Leidner, 2001:108). This process of articulation and knowledge sharing facilitates the emergence of a common understanding of organizational reality, an essential prerequisite for authentic consensus.

Businesses that invest in Knowledge Management practices tend to develop what Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) define as "collective understanding", i.e., a collective ability to interpret and respond to events in a coordinated manner. This collective understanding does not imply uniformity of thought, but rather the emergence of an integration of different perspectives within a coherent framework. The consensus that emerges from these processes is not the result of imposition or manipulation, but of a genuine co-construction of meanings.

Social Network Analysis, on the other hand, provides analytical tools to map and understand the communicative and relational flows through which consensus is formed and diffused in businesses. SNA focuses on the relationship between social entities, and on the patterns and implications of these relationships. Applied to the organizational context, this methodology allows for identifying the central actors in consensus formation processes, emerging coalitions, and potential breaking points (Wasserman and Faust, 1994:20).

Moreover, the structure of social networks significantly influences the diffusion of information, opinions, and practices within businesses. In particular, the role of "hubs" and "brokers" in the processes of knowledge dissemination and translation is crucial. Hubs are nodes characterized by a high number of connections, which amplify the reach of messages, while brokers connect otherwise separate or isolated groups of the network, facilitating the translation of ideas between different communities. Both of these figures play a determining role in building organizational consensus, serving as catalysts or bridges between potentially divergent perspectives (Borgatti et al., 2009).

A particularly relevant contribution of SNA concerns the understanding of social influence mechanisms in organizational networks. Individuals tend to align their opinions and behaviors with those of their peers. This phenomenon can accelerate the diffusion of consensus within homogeneous groups, but it can also contribute to polarization between different groups. Awareness of these dynamics is essential for managers interested in promoting authentic and transversal consensus (Contractor and Monge, 2002).

SNA also allows for analyzing the temporal evolution of consensus networks, highlighting how alliances, coalitions, and interest groups form, consolidate, or dissolve over time. This longitudinal approach is particularly valuable for understanding the impact of critical events, such as organizational changes or crises, on cohesion and internal consensus.

The integration between Knowledge Management and Social Network Analysis offers a particularly fruitful perspective for understanding the empirical processes of consensus building. While Knowledge Management provides the conceptual framework for analyzing the creation and sharing of knowledge, SNA offers methodological tools for mapping the paths through which such knowledge spreads and generates alignment or divergence. Together, these approaches allow for developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the empirical mechanisms through which consensus emerges, consolidates, or disintegrates in contemporary businesses.

## Consensus as a Strategic Resource: Managerial Implications

After examining the theoretical roots and empirical manifestations of consensus, it is appropriate to analyze its strategic implications for business management. This section aims to explore how consensus can be configured as a distinctive resource, capable of generating sustainable competitive advantages and positively influencing business performance.

In the perspective of the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991:105-112), consensus can be interpreted as an intangible resource potentially capable of generating competitive advantages. Resources capable of generating sustainable competitive advantages are typically characterized by value, rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability. Consensus, understood as an alignment of interests and expectations between internal and external stakeholders, largely presents these characteristics.

First, consensus is undoubtedly a valuable resource, as it allows for reducing transaction costs, mitigating reputational risks, and facilitating the mobilization of critical resources. Businesses exist because they provide a social context that favors the creation and transfer of knowledge through consensus on shared values and practices (Kogut and Zander, 1996). This perspective underscores the fundamental value of consensus as a social infrastructure that enables value creation processes. Second, authentic consensus is a relatively rare resource in the contemporary competitive context. Despite the rhetoric on the centrality of people, many businesses continue to operate according to logics that generate alienation and misalignment rather than consensus and commitment (Pfeffer, 2010). This evidence suggests that businesses capable of generating genuine consensus can distinguish themselves in a context of growing cynicism and disaffection. Third, consensus presents characteristics of inimitability, as it emerges from complex social interactions rooted in organizational history and culture. Organizational culture, when characterized by uniqueness and causal ambiguity, can represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1986:663). Consensus, as a manifestation of a cohesive and inclusive culture, shares these properties of path dependency and causal ambiguity that make it difficult to replicate (Chatman et al., 2014). Finally, consensus presents a high degree of non-substitutability, as few other mechanisms can perform the same integrative and legitimizing functions. In terms of organizational legitimacy, social consensus cannot be simply substituted with forms of coercion or incentivization without incurring significant economic and reputational costs (Suchman, 1995). This consideration underscores the distinctive nature of consensus as a mechanism of social coordination.

The relationship between consensus and business performance has attracted the attention of numerous researchers, generating a significant but not unambiguous body of empirical evidence. The empirical literature highlights that the relationship between internal/external consensus and business performance is influenced by the adoption of balanced measurement systems (Eccles, 1991), the ability to integrate multiple perspectives (Neely, 1999), and consistency with environmental dynamics (Smith and Bititci, 2017), configuring itself as a significant but not deterministic link.

The relationship between performance and strategic consensus in management teams suggests that moderate levels of consensus are associated with superior performance compared to situations of excessive consensus (groupthink) or excessive dissent (decision paralysis) (Dess and Priem, 1995). Consequently, optimal consensus does not necessarily imply unanimity, but rather a balance between diversity of perspectives and the ability to converge on shared decisions. This perspective suggests the existence of a curvilinear relationship between consensus and performance.

In the field of marketing and brand management, the consensus among consumers regarding brand values and positioning is positively associated with indicators of customer equity and brand loyalty (Keller, 2003). Consequently, the strongest brands are those that manage to generate widespread consensus around a distinctive set of mental associations, creating communities of consumers who share meanings and values. This evidence underscores the strategic importance of consensus in market relationships.

In the context of studies on corporate sustainability, businesses capable of generating consensus around their social responsibility practices tend to enjoy greater legitimacy and resilience, as in a context of growing public interest, stakeholder consensus represents a form of insurance against reputational and regulatory risks (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). This perspective underscores the relevance of consensus as a factor of protection and risk mitigation.

Given the strategic importance of consensus, it is fundamental for managers to understand which strategies can facilitate its construction and maintenance. Management literature has identified various potentially effective practices that can be adapted to different organizational and environmental contexts.

A first strategy concerns the implementation of structured and systematic stakeholder engagement practices. Stakeholder engagement requires a shift from occasional consultation to a continuous and two-way dialogue, founded on mutual respect and transparency (Greenwood, 2007:324). This perspective underscores the importance of creating institutionalized spaces for confrontation and negotiation with relevant stakeholders.

A second strategy concerns the development of inclusive and participatory governance systems. Governance models that integrate different perspectives and interests tend to generate greater consensus and legitimacy, as effective governance is not limited to protecting shareholders' interests but creates value through the dynamic balancing of expectations of different stakeholders (Aguilera and Jackson, 2003). A third strategy concerns investment in transparent and responsible communication practices, through corporate communication that must evolve from a unidirectional persuasion tool to a platform for authentic dialogue, in which listening becomes as important as speaking (Christensen and Cheney, 2015). This perspective underscores the importance of communication practices that not only inform but also actively involve stakeholders in the co-construction of shared meanings.

A fourth strategy concerns the alignment between words and actions, i.e., the coherence between corporate rhetoric and concrete practices, given that businesses that enjoy greater consensus are those that avoid misalignment between what they say and what they do, demonstrating an authenticity that resonates with stakeholder values (Sisodia et al., 2007). This perspective underscores the importance of integrity as a foundation of authentic consensus.

Despite the potential benefits associated with consensus, it is important to adopt a critical perspective that also highlights its possible risks and limitations. Excessive consensus can lead to a deterioration of the decision-making effectiveness of groups, suppressing constructive dissent and critical evaluation of alternatives (Janis, 1972). This consideration invites a distinction between authentic consensus, founded on genuine dialogue, and pseudo-consensus, resulting from conformist pressures or manipulation.

The presence of dissenting minorities within decision-making groups can improve the quality of decisions, stimulating more divergent and creative thinking, as dissent, when expressed in a constructive manner, can serve as a catalyst for innovation and organizational learning (Nemeth, 1986). This perspective suggests that a certain degree of tension and diversity of opinions can be functional to the vitality of businesses.

In the context of the debate on corporate social responsibility, CSR practices oriented exclusively towards image can generate an apparent consensus that masks substantial conflicts of interest and perpetuates asymmetric power relationships (Fleming and Jones, 2013). This critique underscores the importance of distinguishing between authentic consensus and mere impression management strategies.

Managerial practices oriented towards consensus can sometimes be configured as forms of “normative control” that limit the autonomy and critical capacity of organization members (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Because of this, the contemporary emphasis on organizational culture and value alignment can translate into subtle forms of manipulation that colonize workers’ subjectivity.

## Consensus in the Digital Era: New Challenges and Opportunities

The advent of digital technologies and social media has profoundly transformed the modalities of building and managing consensus in businesses. This section aims to explore the new challenges and opportunities that emerge in this rapidly evolving context, analyzing how businesses are adapting their consensus strategies to the peculiarities of the digital environment.

Social media have radically modified the architecture of corporate communication, shifting from a predominantly unidirectional and controlled model to a more open and participatory system. As suggested by Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) analysis, social media have democratized corporate communication, transforming every stakeholder into a potential producer and distributor of brand-related content. This evolution has expanded the audience of actors participating in consensus building, making the process more complex and less predictable.

Social media have created reputational arenas in which different actors compete to define the meanings associated with brands and businesses (Aula, 2010). In the digital era, consensus emerges from the interaction between official narratives and counter-narratives generated by users, in a dynamic process of continuous negotiation.

A particularly relevant aspect concerns the temporal acceleration of the processes of consensus formation and dissolution, as social media have compressed the life cycle of consensus, making businesses more vulnerable to sudden reputational crises but also more capable of rapidly mobilizing support around their initiatives (Cova and Dalli, 2009). This temporal dynamic requires greater agility and reactivity in consensus management, with significant implications for organizational structures and decision-making processes. Digital technologies have exponentially increased the visibility of business practices, reducing information asymmetry between businesses and stakeholders. In the era of transparency, businesses operate in a glass house where every action is potentially visible to the public eye (Tapscott and Ticoll, 2003). This condition of radical transparency has profound implications for consensus-building strategies, which must be adapted across different sectors. For example, in the luxury industry sector, there is a "tendency to opt for omnichannel strategy, and the use and optimization of data and digital innovations to leverage the customer experience" (Bertrand and Glebova, 2024:183). This approach illustrates how specific industries develop consensus around digital transformation strategies. As Jones demonstrates in his study of German retailers, businesses increasingly recognize that "digitization offers great opportunities, but also possible risks must be considered" (Jones, 2023: 375), leading to industry-specific frameworks for balancing economic imperatives with social responsibility in digital environments.

Christensen's (2002) research has highlighted how transparency can serve as a disciplining mechanism that aligns organizational behavior with stakeholder expectations. Indeed, the awareness of being constantly observed modifies the cost-benefit calculation of businesses, making practices that could generate dissent and controversy more costly. This dynamic can facilitate the emergence of forms of consensus based on a genuine convergence of interests rather than on manipulation or information asymmetry.

On the other hand, Etzioni (2010) has warned against the potential perverse effects of transparency, highlighting how excess information can paradoxically reduce the capacity for understanding and critical evaluation. According to this perspective, transparency does not in itself guarantee a more informed consensus if it is not accompanied by tools that help stakeholders interpret and contextualize information. This consideration underscores the importance of disclosure practices that not only provide data but also facilitate their understanding and contextualization.

A particularly problematic aspect of the digital ecosystem concerns the role of algorithms in the formation of public opinion and social consensus. Algorithms that personalize the online experience tend to create echo chambers that amplify existing beliefs and reduce exposure to different perspectives (Pariser, 2012). This dynamic can favor polarization and make it more difficult to build authentic consensus based on confrontation between different positions.

Sunstein's (2017) research has deepened this phenomenon, highlighting how the fragmentation of the informational ecosystem can undermine the very foundations of social consensus. In a highly personalized media environment, individuals tend to select information sources that confirm their existing beliefs, reducing opportunities for exposure to different perspectives. This tendency can translate into increasing difficulty for businesses in building transversal consensus around their initiatives and values.

On the other hand, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have highlighted how digital technologies can also facilitate forms of connective action based on shared identities rather than formal organizational memberships. Digital platforms allow the formation of temporary communities united by shared interests or values, capable of rapidly mobilizing around specific causes. This dynamic can offer businesses new opportunities to build consensus through alignment with causes and values that resonate with their stakeholders' identities.

The digital context requires the development of new skills for the effective management of organizational consensus. According to Van Dijck and Poell (2013), the logic of social media requires a radically different approach to communication, based on authenticity, interactivity, and co-creation rather than on control and unidirectionality. This evolution implies a rethinking of the skills and professional roles associated with consensus management.

Kietzmann et al. (2011) have identified a set of critical skills for managing organizational presence in the digital ecosystem, which include capabilities of active listening, conversation management, sharing, and reputation. The effective management of consensus in the digital era requires a balance between immediate reactivity and strategic vision, between openness to dialogue and value coherence. This perspective underscores the complexity of the role of communication professionals in the digital era.

A particularly relevant aspect concerns the ability to use data to understand and influence consensus formation processes. Big data analysis allows businesses to monitor stakeholder sentiment in real-time and adapt their engagement strategies in an agile and personalized manner (Davenport, 2014). This evolution suggests the emergence of more scientific and data-driven approaches to consensus management, which integrate managerial intuition and quantitative analysis.

## Towards an Integrated Conceptual Framework: Dimensions and Dynamics of Organizational Consensus

The analysis conducted highlighted the multidimensional and contextual nature of consensus in businesses. This section aims to integrate the various theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence into a coherent conceptual framework, capable of capturing the fundamental dimensions of consensus and their dynamic interrelations.

The proposed conceptual framework is articulated around three fundamental dimensions of organizational consensus: the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension, and the behavioral dimension. These dimensions are not independent but influence each other reciprocally, configuring a complex and dynamic system.

The cognitive dimension of consensus refers to the sharing of mental models, interpretative schemas, and frames of reference among organization members. As highlighted by the contributions of Knowledge Management (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Alavi and Leidner, 2001), this dimension manifests through the creation and diffusion of explicit and tacit knowledge. Cognitive consensus does not necessarily imply uniformity of thought, but rather the ability to integrate different perspectives into a coherent sense framework.

Empirical research has highlighted how cognitive consensus is influenced by factors such as demographic and functional diversity (Knight et al., 1999), knowledge-sharing practices (Davenport and Prusak, 1998), and collective sensemaking processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). This dimension of consensus is particularly relevant in strategic decision-making processes, where convergence on shared objectives and visions facilitates coordination and effective implementation.

The affective dimension of consensus, on the other hand, concerns the sharing of values, emotions, and feelings within the business. This dimension finds theoretical foundation in the institutionalist perspective (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and in Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which have highlighted the importance of emotional and value legitimation in organizational dynamics.

Affective consensus manifests through members' identification with the business, interpersonal trust, and commitment towards shared objectives. Empirical research has shown how this dimension is influenced by factors such as transformative leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1993), organizational culture (Schein, 2010), and internal communication practices (Cornelissen, 2020). The affective dimension of consensus is particularly relevant in organizational change processes, where resistance is often rooted in emotional rather than cognitive dynamics.

The behavioral dimension of consensus, finally, concerns the alignment of concrete actions and practices of organization members. This dimension finds theoretical foundation in the perspective of the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) and in theories of organizational action (Weick, 1995), which have highlighted the importance of coherence between intentions and actions in building sustainable competitive advantages.

Behavioral consensus manifests through coordinated practices, shared routines, and stable interaction models. Empirical research, in particular that based on Social Network Analysis (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Borgatti et al., 2009), has highlighted how this dimension is influenced by factors such as the structure of relational networks, incentive mechanisms, and organizational control systems. The behavioral dimension of consensus is particularly relevant in strategic implementation processes, where effectiveness depends on the ability to translate shared visions into coordinated actions.

The three dimensions of consensus identified do not operate in isolation but influence each other reciprocally in complex dynamics of reinforcement or tension.

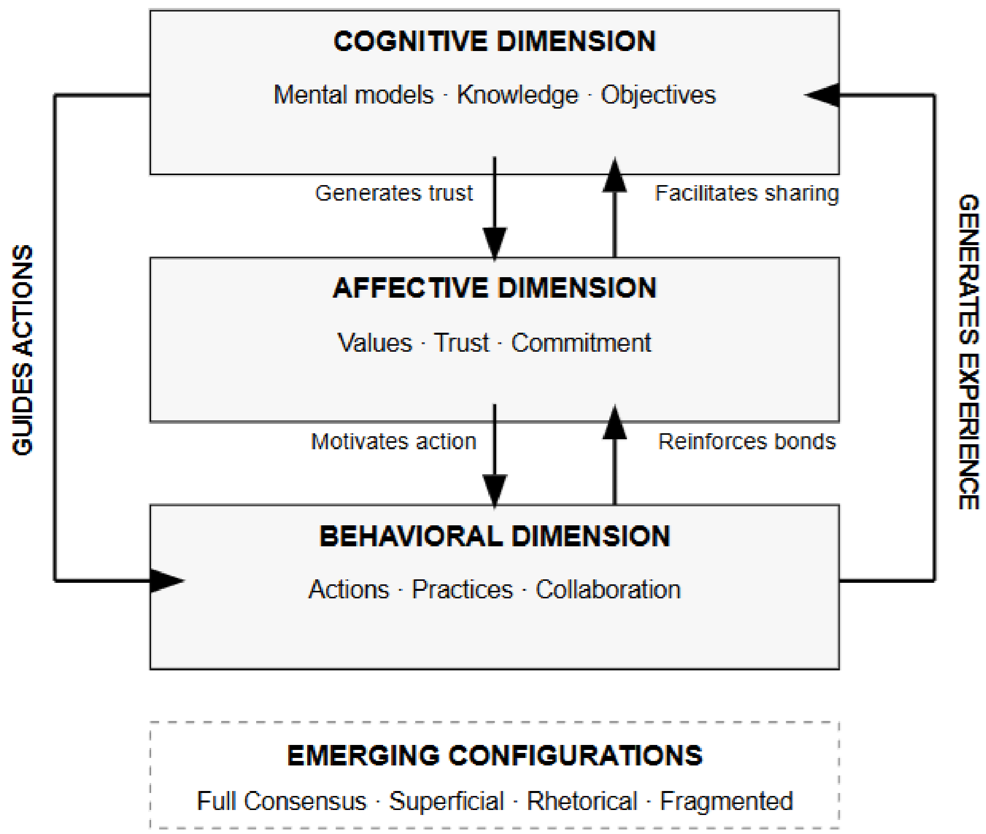
For example, strong cognitive consensus can facilitate the emergence of affective consensus, creating a sense of belonging and shared identity.

Similarly, solid affective consensus can sustain behavioral alignment, motivating organization members to translate shared values into coherent actions.

On the other hand, tensions can emerge between the different dimensions of consensus. For example, strong behavioral consensus imposed through rigid control systems can coexist with weak affective consensus, generating superficial conformity but limited commitment. Similarly, high cognitive consensus in the absence of behavioral alignment can result in a misalignment between espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1978), undermining organizational credibility and effectiveness.

The articulation of organizational consensus increases further when one considers the diversity of stakeholders involved. As highlighted by Stakeholder Theory (Mitchell et al., 1997), different businesses can attribute different priorities to different stakeholder groups, generating specific consensus configurations. Moreover, different stakeholders can value different dimensions of consensus: while investors might privilege behavioral alignment oriented to results, employees might attribute greater importance to the affective and value dimension. The following qualitative overview represents a conceptual model that highlights the three fundamental dimensions of consensus in businesses: cognitive, affective, and behavioral, in a vertical structure that suggests a progression from shared thinking, through values and emotions, to concrete practices.

**Figure 1.** *A conceptual model of the three fundamental dimensions of consensus in businesses*




The cognitive dimension generates trust in the affective dimension, while the latter facilitates knowledge sharing in the former. Similarly, the affective dimension motivates action in the behavioral dimension, which in turn strengthens emotional ties in the affective dimension. The external transversal connections highlight how the cognitive dimension directly guides actions in the behavioral dimension, while the practical experience of the latter generates new shared knowledge in the cognitive dimension.

The lower section of the model introduces the configurations emerging from the interaction between the three dimensions:

- full consensus, characterized by strong alignment in all dimensions;
- superficial consensus, which presents behavioral alignment not supported by the other dimensions;
- rhetorical consensus, distinguished by cognitive agreement that does not translate into coherent practices;
- fragmented consensus, in which alignment is present only in some areas or groups of the business.

In the digital era, characterized by pervasive connectivity and accelerated information flows, the dynamics of consensus building undergo profound transformations. As highlighted in the analysis of consensus in the digital era, communication technologies and social media redefine the boundaries between internal and external, accelerating the processes of consensus formation and dissolution and making the management of different dimensions more complex.

In this context, the need emerges for an integrated approach to consensus management, which recognizes the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon and adopts differentiated strategies for the various dimensions.

Knowledge Management provides valuable tools to manage the cognitive dimension, facilitating the creation and diffusion of shared knowledge.

Social Network Analysis offers methodologies to map and influence the relational networks that support the behavioral dimension, while transformative leadership and value communication practices can support the affective dimension. The integration of these perspectives suggests a consensus management model characterized by multiple factors such as:

- contextuality: the recognition of the specificities of the organizational and environmental context, with adaptation of strategies to the distinctive characteristics of the business and its ecosystem;
- multidimensionality: balanced attention to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of consensus, with awareness of their dynamic interrelations;
- processuality: vision of consensus not as a static final state but as a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation between different actors;
- authenticity: distinction between genuine consensus, based on authentic convergence of interests and values, and pseudo-consensus, resulting from manipulation or coercion;
- inclusivity: active involvement of diverse stakeholders in consensus-building processes, with attention to power dynamics and information asymmetries.

This integrated conceptual framework offers not only an interpretative lens to understand the empirical dynamics of consensus in contemporary businesses but also operational guidelines for managers and leaders interested in promoting forms of authentic and sustainable consensus.

In future perspective, research on organizational consensus could benefit from mixed methodological approaches that integrate the quantitative analysis of social networks, typical of SNA, with the qualitative exploration of processes of knowledge creation and sharing, central to Knowledge Management.

**Conclusions: Towards a New Paradigm of Organizational Consensus**

Consensus represents a fundamental dimension of contemporary business economics, characterized by increasing interdependence. The exploratory path conducted has allowed for outlining an articulated framework that embraces the theoretical, empirical, and strategic aspects of the phenomenon, highlighting its multidimensional and contextual nature.

The pursuit of consensus in contemporary business economics is configured as a dialectical process that must balance potentially contrasting needs: univocality and pluralism, stability and innovation, control and participation. The contemporary enterprise is called to navigate the paradoxical tension between the need for internal cohesion and openness to the diversity of perspectives that fuels innovation (Mintzberg, 2009). This consideration underscores the dynamic and processual nature of consensus, which cannot be reduced to a static result or a standardized procedure.

Technological and social evolution has introduced new challenges and opportunities for building and maintaining consensus. In the era of the network society, power is increasingly exercised through the ability to influence meaning-making processes rather than through direct control of material resources (Castells, 2009). This evolution requires a profound rethinking of consensus management strategies and practices, which must adapt to a context characterized by greater transparency, connectivity, and participation.

In future perspective, it is possible to identify some development directions that deserve particular attention both in academic research and in managerial practice. First, the deepening of the modalities through which different businesses build and maintain consensus in different cultural and institutional contexts appears crucial. Consensus-building practices are profoundly influenced by cultural variables such as power distance and orientation to collectivism or individualism (Hofstede et al., 2010). This perspective invites the development of contextual approaches that avoid inappropriate generalizations and recognize the diversity of legitimate practices.

Second, the importance emerges of exploring the relationship between consensus and innovation, with particular attention to the ways in which businesses can balance continuity and change. Disruptive innovation often requires the ability to challenge the dominant consensus, proposing alternative visions that initially meet resistance but may prove visionary in the long term (Christensen, 1997). This consideration invites a dynamic vision of consensus, which recognizes the value of constructive dissent as an engine of renewal and adaptation.

Finally, it appears fundamental to deepen the ethical implications of consensus-building practices, with particular attention to the distinction between authentic consensus and manipulation. Legitimate consensus can emerge only from shared processes characterized by participatory symmetry and absence of coercion (Habermas, 1984). This normative perspective invites the development of consensus-building practices founded on principles of mutual respect, transparency, and genuine openness to confrontation.

Authentic consensus represents not only a strategic resource for contemporary businesses but also an indicator of their ability to contribute positively to economic and social development. This consideration underscores the relevance of the theme not only in an instrumental perspective but also in terms of social responsibility and long-term sustainability.

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