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Consensus Decision-Making Process

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All groups and communities must always answer the questions of "Who will decide?" and "How will we decide?" Making clear choices about the basic issues of who has authority and how authority is exercised can transform diverse individuals into a group that is stable and sustainable. Today, many people want to get away from "top-down" decision making. They want to define and resolve problems through cooperation, trust, truthfulness, inclusivity, and then take shared responsibility for the group's action. A decision-making process that clearly reflects these goals is called **consensus**.

Consensus is an "old-new" idea that is gaining popularity because groups and communities have identified the need for it. Like "sustainable," however, it is becoming a buzz word and being co-opted by those who may have no real desire to give up decision-making power. Consensus is not just a loose concept open to subjective definition and use. It has a structure and integrity of its own. The process is based on the fundamental belief that **each person has a piece of the truth. Consensus is the way a group of equals makes decisions.** It is built through a web of reciprocal relationships where each individual rules and is ruled by the larger community.

Consensus decision making has its limitations. It will not work in every situation and it is not a panacea. Five main elements must be in place for it to work: (1) a common purpose, (2) a willingness to share power, (3) informed consent, (4) a strong agenda, and (5) effective facilitation.

- **A common purpose** is an essential precondition for the consensus process. Without this to unify and focus its effort, a group will "spin its wheels" endlessly.
- Participants in a consensus process must have **a willingness to share power**, a willingness to give up hierarchical roles and to function as equals. This willingness to share in decision making may be most difficult for those accustomed to being in charge.

- **Informed consent** means a clear understanding about what consensus is and an informed commitment to it. The fundamental principles of the process need to be explained carefully and reviewed from time to time.
- **A strong agenda** is planned by people designated by the group. The group collectively reviews the proposed agenda, revises it as necessary, formally adopts it by consensus, and subsequently honors this agenda contract.
- **A facilitator** is the custodian of the consensus process, a "servant-leader" whose purpose is to help the group make the best decisions possible through effective facilitation. He or she must be consistently neutral and ask questions intended to equalize participation, elicit pertinent information, and clarify the group's situation.

The stages of consensus decision making are **introduction, discussion, and decision**. The **introduction** of a proposal or course of action focuses only on questions about its content and not on its merits. Once these factual questions are taken care of, the **discussion** of the proposal can begin. This should start with a discussion of the broad principles behind the idea in order to clarify what is being proposed. Next the group should discuss and try to resolve any concerns they may have about the proposal. Agreements should be collected along the way as concerns are raised and the group figures out how to deal with them. Finally, the facilitator should see if it is time to make a **decision** by testing for consensus. In the consensus process, no votes are taken. As the group arrives at the point of decision, each participant has three options: to block, to stand aside, or to give consent.

When a participant wishes **to block**, this prevents the decision from going forward for the time being. Blocking is a serious step and should only be taken when the participant genuinely believes that the pending proposal, if adopted, would violate the morals, ethics or safety of the whole group. When people elect to block a proposal, they are asked to explain their reasons. If possible, the group tries to resolve the concerns. If the person does not remove his or her block, the decision does not go forward.

If there are no blocks or blocks have been resolved, the group is then asked if anyone wishes **to stand aside**. A person stands aside when he or she cannot personally support the proposal but feels that it would be acceptable for the rest of the group to adopt it. This is a stance of principled nonparticipation and absolves this person from any responsibility for implementing the decision in question. The names of those standing aside are recorded in the minutes. If there are more than a few stand asides, more work is needed and consensus has not been reached.

If there are no blocks and not too many stand asides, the facilitator will state "We have consensus." **To give consent** does not necessarily mean that every participant is in total agreement with every aspect of the proposal. **It does mean that each person is willing to support the decision and stand in solidarity with the group despite whatever disagreements, if any, they may have.** Consensus decisions can only be changed by reaching another

consensus.

Critics of the consensus process will often recognize that it is a good idea but maintain that it takes too much time. This is not the case if the process is handled properly or if you consider the amount of time "burned up" by decisions and unintended consequences that lead to the need for yet additional decisions when other processes are used. Some advantages of the consensus approach are high quality decisions, psychological satisfaction due to individual participation, and a higher likelihood of implementation.

Resources

This overview is based to a large extent on Briggs, Beatrice, and Leyshon, Shari, "Consensus: The Way Healthy Communities Make Decisions," *Conscious Choice* (January 1995) and an unpublished manuscript of the same name by these authors.

Additional sources include:

Butler, C.T. *On Conflict and Consensus*. Portland, ME: Food Not Bombs Publishing.
Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making. New Society Publishing.

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