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TREE BRESSEN

Consensus Decision Making

Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people.

—Harry Emerson Fosdick

Real-Life Story

It was 1984 and the Green Party was attempting its first large organizational meeting in the United States. More than one hundred activists had gathered for a weekend in St. Paul, Minnesota, to launch the movement. As the hours lengthened, frustrations grew. Well into the second day, as one participant tells it, the group was a "fractious mess," and the term "still birth" was being thrown around to describe what was happening. As this final day drew toward a close, the assembly was stalemated on whether to call a national convention the following year. Many saw the need, but with no resources, no plan, and no organizing team in place, tensions were high and participants were anxious to head home. While there were calls to vote by majority, facilitator Caroline Estes stubbornly persisted in the belief that a consensus solution was possible.

An hour before closing, one experienced activist from the Ozarks suggested that instead of putting on a major national event, energy might better be put toward regional organizing. The idea took hold and was affirmed by the whole of the group. Regional networks were established for the next few years, forming connections that led to the later rise of state chapters. Today, there are accredited Green Parties in 44 U.S. states plus Washington, D.C.

The Basics

WHY USE CONSENSUS?

- *High-quality decisions* based on full access to collective wisdom
- *Builds connection* by replacing competition with cooperation

• *More effective implementation* because full empowerment in the process results in common ownership of the results

Honing Discernment to Nurture Emergence

Consensus is a decision-making method in which all present must agree before action is taken. In this sense, it is a decision-making rule, in contrast to other available decision rules such as autocracy or majority voting. However, as it has grown up in a secular community-based tradition among political activists, residential intentional communities, nonprofits, worker cooperatives, and others, it is also a process and a way of doing business, a method of searching together for what solution will best meet the needs of the group at a given time. Note that this usage of the term "consensus" is distinct from the common usage of the word as meaning "agreement among some broad portion of people involved."

The search for consensus relies on every person in the circle seeking unity. Group members don't need to think the same, have the same opinion, or support the same proposal in a unanimous vote. Rather, what is earnestly sought is a *sense of the meeting.* This is the essence of what the group agrees on, the common ground, the shared understanding or desire. The method is founded on life-affirming assumptions about human nature and is structured to call forth those positive parts of ourselves, weaving into being the "co-intelligence" of the group to meet the needs of the whole.

Consensus may be used as an ongoing decision-making mechanism in standing organizations or communities, or less commonly, among groups gathered to make one-time decisions regarding a task at hand. Key characteristics include:

• Full empowerment of all participants in the decision making

• Deep listening

• Emphasis on continuing to ask questions until unity is reached

• Honoring of dissent as a "piece of the truth" pointing to something the group needs to learn and integrate

• Dynamics of working with all input rather than purely rational analysis (e.g., emotions, intuition, spirit)

• Choice to allocate more time if needed before the decision point in order to ensure maximum support for acting on whatever decision is reached

Canadian Sue Starr describes the Quaker version of the process this way: "My experience . . . is closer to dialogue than debate or discussion, but goes still beyond that. We speak to the 'center' rather than to each other, with spaces of silence between speakers. It is the most respectful way of coming to decisions that I've ever experienced."

How Consensus Works and When to Use It

The process starts with the presentation of an issue or proposal: its history and the goal of the discussion. As the facilitator integrates comments, a sense of group direction emerges. While diverse individuals may start out asserting their positions, as underlying needs and assumptions surface, they are worked with toward synthesis and/or creative breakthrough. Tom Atlee explains, "Consensus process treats the differences between people not as problems, but as stimulants to deeper inquiry and greater wisdom." If the group gets stuck, the issue may be sent to committee, discussed outside the meeting, or set aside for a future meeting. The container is a transformative one, both relying on and leading to individual and group shifts in consciousness.

The process can fulfill any standard organizational function that calls for a decision, including visioning, strategic planning, policy decisions, and budgeting. It can also take a proposal arrived at through other means and search out whether it is acceptable to everyone involved.

Using consensus effectively generally requires a sense of common purpose and training in the method. With practice, organizations can make decisions that are both inclusive and efficient.

Decision Point Options

Once substantial airing of the issues has occurred and every member has made a good-faith effort to find common ground, there are three responses available to each participant at the point of decision:

Agreement

This may range from tolerance ("I can live with it") to zesty enthusiasm. Standards for what level of support constitutes adequate agreement may vary depending on the group and situation.

Standing Aside

This option is invoked due to personal conscience or strongly differing individual opinion. It allows someone who holds a position of dissent to let the group move forward without sacrificing their own beliefs or values.

Blocking

Called "standing in the way" by Quakers, blocking gives an individual authority to prevent the group from taking action if (and only if) the proposal is perceived to be against core values of the group or might jeopardize the group's ability to fulfill its purpose. Inappropriate use of blocking is the mistake that most often gives consensus-based groups a poor reputation; personal values or preferences, no matter how strongly held, are not a reason to block. Anyone considering blocking a decision is obligated to thoroughly explain the reasons and work hard to find an acceptable solution.
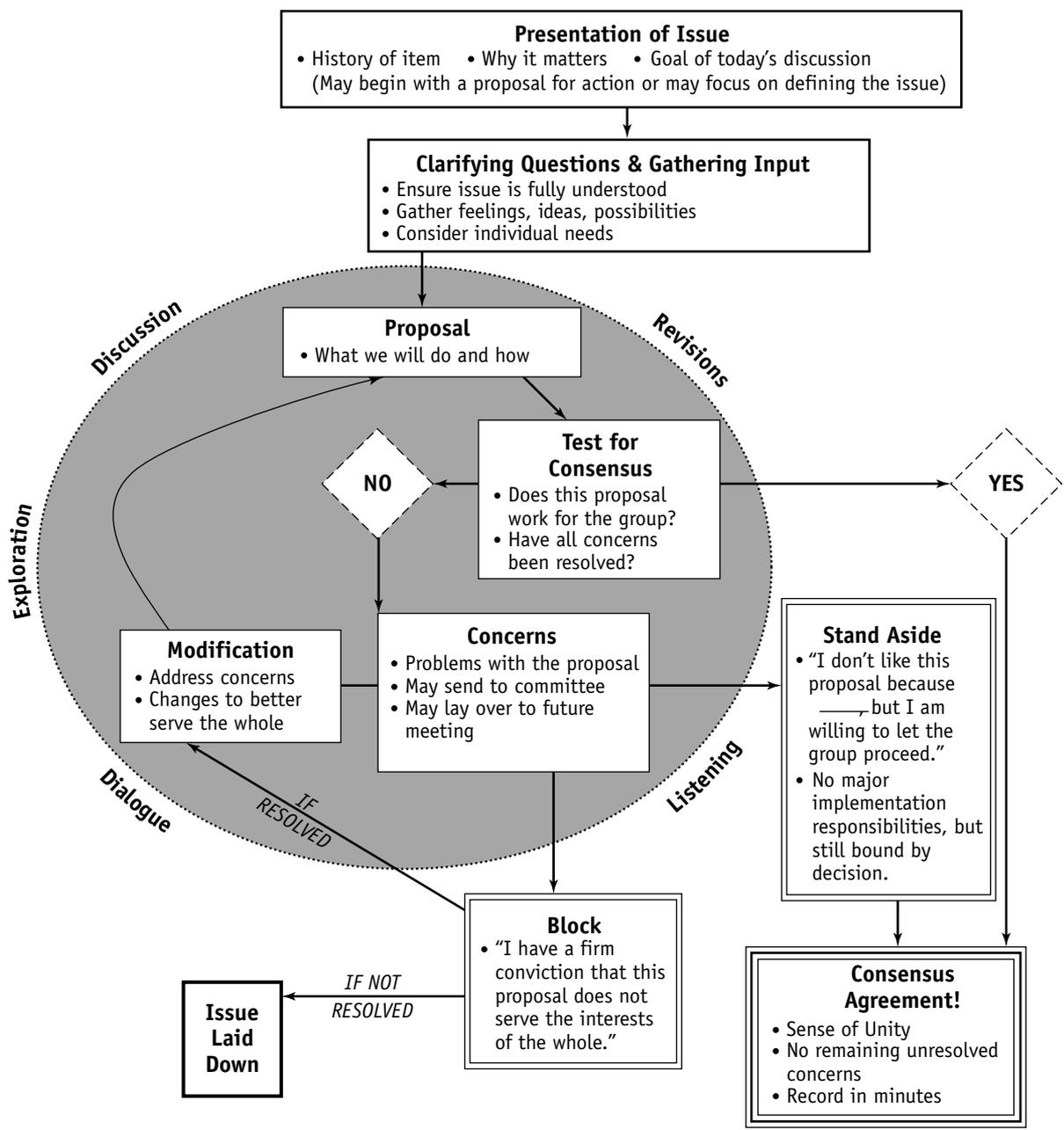
Presentation of Issue
• History of item   • Why it matters   • Goal of today's discussion
(May begin with a proposal for action or may focus on defining the issue)

Clarifying Questions & Gathering Input
• Ensure issue is fully understood
• Gather feelings, ideas, possibilities
• Consider individual needs

Discussion

Revisions

Proposal
• What we will do and how

Exploration

Test for Consensus
• Does this proposal work for the group?
• Have all concerns been resolved?

NO

YES

Modification
• Address concerns
• Changes to better serve the whole

Concerns
• Problems with the proposal
• May send to committee
• May lay over to future meeting

Stand Aside
• "I don't like this proposal because ———, but I am willing to let the group proceed."
• No major implementation responsibilities, but still bound by decision.

Dialogue

IF RESOLVED

Listening

Block
• "I have a firm conviction that this proposal does not serve the interests of the whole."

IF NOT RESOLVED

Issue Laid Down

Consensus Agreement!
• Sense of Unity
• No remaining unresolved concerns
• Record in minutes

Figure 1. Steps of the Process

The Journey Toward Wholeness

As Mary Parker Follett says, "Social process may be conceived either as the opposing and battle of desires with the victory of one over the other, or as the confronting and integrating of desires. . . . The latter means a freeing for both sides and increased total power or increased capacity in the world." Furthermore, "The time spent in evolving the group spirit is time spent in creating the dynamic force of our civilization. . . . Democracy is the rule of an interacting, interpermeating whole. . . . We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness."

Table of Uses

Typical Settings	Brief Description	Project Length/Key Events	Participants
Cohousing Community	Design and adoption of new system for participation and work requirements in the community.	6–8 months. 10 committee meetings, 4–8 monthly community meetings.	Committee meetings of 3–6 people. Community meetings with all members invited, typically 9–45 people
Nonprofit Board	Agreement on new compensation structure as the organization shifts to having more work done by paid staff in addition to the existing volunteer base.	3 meetings. Proposal raised at first meeting, revised at second meeting, and adopted at third meeting.	12 board members
Watershed Council	Development of formal process to assess proposed projects based on scientific management, collaborative process, ecosystem sustainability, and economic diversity.	5 monthly meetings, interspersed with work sessions by smaller task group.	50 residents, ranchers, farmers, environmentalists, recreational users, and government representatives
Political Protest	Blockade and disruption of meeting of global governmental agency (WTO, IMF, etc.).	Protest lasting several days. Broad nonviolence guidelines agreed to in advance. Independent decisions by affinity groups of 3–12 people. Coordinated decisions by spokescouncil composed of representatives from 30–50 affinity groups.	10,000+ people

About the Author

Tree Bressen (tree@ic.org) supports a wide variety of organizations in putting their ideals into action via meetings that are lively, productive, and connecting. She teaches practical workshops on consensus decision making, meeting facilitation, and related subjects; facilitates for organizations facing tough issues; and designs large events to maximize dialogue and participation. Her base is in intentional communities—groups that live together and have to deal with each other every day! Tree works on a gift economy basis.

Where to Go for More Information

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Dressler, L. *Consensus Through Conversation.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006.

Snyder, M., et al. *Building Consensus: Conflict and Unity.* Richmond, IN: Earlham Press, 2001. http://www.earlham.edu/consense.

ORGANIZATIONS

Seeds for Change (UK)—http://seedsforchange.org.uk/free/consens

Tree Bressen's Group Facilitation Site—http://www.treegroup.info