Notes on Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus is a form of cooperative, non-coercive decision-making. Though simple to describe, this process usually requires great understanding and a fair bit of experience to practice well.

Briefly, a group of people gathers together, raises an issue, discusses it, poses various solutions, and then chooses the decision that *best satisfies the group*. Individual preferences and concerns are considered, but the decision is for the group and so must satisfy the group as best it can — not any individual.

If there is too much disagreement and uncertainty as to the best decision, the decision can be left for each person to make and act on individually or the decision can be deferred to a later time. Usually though, in a group that wants to work together, some satisfactory decision can be devised at the first meeting. When this does not happen, the meeting process is often deficient. Then the process must be changed so the group can re-establish the cooperative atmosphere necessary for productive behavior.

Below is an outline of useful facts, ideas, and notes about the history, theory, and practice of cooperative decision-making and techniques to get back on track when things have gone awry.

Note that different groups practice consensus in many different ways. The ideas presented here are just a few of those ways — decide with your group what are the best methods for your group.

Topic   Description and Notes

Consensus Basics
- Consensus is a **cooperative** process for making decisions in which **everyone consents** to the decisions of the group
- Consensus is for people who are trying to work together
  - People must make a commitment to honestly try to cooperate with each other
  - Not for individualists or people trying to dominate or coerce others — keep these folks out or use a different process (such as nonviolent direct action)
  - Not a process for determining whose ideas are best, but searching together for the best solution for the group
  - Problem solving orientation — "the decision is in this room — your job is to find it"
- Everyone must consent to the decisions of the group
  - Not everyone's first preference necessarily, but true consent
  - Not decided by one person, a minority, or a majority, but by everyone
  - Decisions should reflect the **integrated will of the whole group**
  - No coercion or intimidation — preserve the interests, integrity, and self-worth of every person
- Consensus process is **not a set of rules or procedures**, but a cooperative spirit
  - There are many ways to work by consensus — choose the process that is best for your group
    - Formal Consensus (see "On Conflict and Consensus" — emphasis on specific rules of order
    - Centered Consensus — see "Sharing Consensus" and articles in *Peacemaker* — no rules and strong emphasis on self-empowerment/responsibility
    - Strong facilitation and strong goal-orientation versus informal facilitation and no goal (discussion group, support group, etc.)
- Consensus is **a questioning process**, not an affirming process (creative conflict)
  - Goal is to thrash out an issue until a good solution is found — not to make everyone feel good by all agreeing
  - Share, question, and learn from other's experience and thinking
- Good consensus process requires patience, creativity, and flexible thinking
  - Best performed by people who are powerful, responsible, cooperative, skilled, and experienced
  - Employing many important skills, it requires years of practice to excel at it — like team sports, the group must learn to work together
  - New people must have a chance to learn
- Consensus meetings are work; they are business meetings, not frivolous parties or social gatherings
- Consensus meetings should also be fun, exciting, joyful, empowering — not long, boring, tedious, or depressing — if they are, then process is poor

Note: Much of the "consensus" currently practiced by groups contains a great deal of poor process. Be wary of poor methods: make sure the process is cooperative, empowering, and egalitarian. If it is not, change it!

Some Examples of Cooperative Decision-Making

Eight people want to go out to dinner together and are trying to decide on a restaurant
(thanks to Susan Sandler for this example)

Decision Process	Description	Comments
Unanimity	Everyone's first choice happens to be a Mexican restaurant.	Nice if it works out that way and quick to decide, but doesn't happen very often.
Convincing Argument	One person likes a French restaurant — after describing it, everyone is convinced that this option is better than their original preference.	Sometimes works but frequently doesn't.
Follow a Popular Leader	One person wants to go to a German restaurant — everyone else wants to do whatever that person wants more than they want their own food preference; or they believe that that person knows better what is best for the group than they do.	Easy to make decisions this way, but often based on people's low self-esteem or cultish devotion to a leader
Compromise	Some want to go to a Vietnamese restaurant, some want to go to a seafood restaurant, and some want to go to McDonalds so they decide to go to the seafood restaurant this time, the Vietnamese restaurant next time, and to McDonalds after that; or they decide to go to another Vietnamese restaurant that serves Vietnamese dishes, seafood, and hamburgers, but none of the food is very good.	Nobody gets exactly what they want, but everyone gets part of what they want and everyone is treated fairly.
Implicit Majority	If 5 people want to go to the Vietnamese restaurant, 2 want to go to the seafood restaurant, and 1 wants to go to McDonalds, they could decide to go the Vietnamese restaurant since that is what most people want — the others agree that they do not want to get in the way of what most people want. Without a formal vote, the group goes with the majority.	Usually satisfies most people, but the minority may feel ripped off, especially if they must defer too many times.
Intensity of Preferences	Maybe the 5 who want Vietnamese food are mostly interested in eating unusual food, the 2 who want seafood don't like spicy food, and the person who wants to go to McDonalds cannot afford to spend more than $3. Here the people who don't like spicy food have a stronger reason not to go to a Vietnamese restaurant than the people who like unusual food have a reason **to** go so it takes precedence; but the person who wants to go to McDonalds absolutely cannot go to the other more expensive places, whereas everyone else can go to McDonalds — so they decide to go to McDonalds.	A type of least-common-denominator process that is often not very satisfying.
Meeting Everyone's Needs ("True Consensus")	They decide to go to a Japanese restaurant (unusual, but not spicy) and everyone chips in to cover the cost for the poor person	• Everyone's true needs are met and a solution is found that everyone feels excited about. • Not a compromise or amalgam of people's original preferences, but a "third way."

- People trying to use consensus, use all of these processes
- The last option is probably the best and is usually thought of as closest to the spirit of consensus — a "true consensus"
- Notice that each of these solutions could have been reached **cooperatively** (everyone truly agrees that the solution is best), **through coercion** (people reluctantly go along with the decision only because they are intimidated or mesmerized), or **through exhaustion** (people go along because they are tired or they don't know how to come up with a better solution) — consensus is the spirit, not just the process
- All are fine as long as they are cooperative, but strive for the last one

The Flow of the Consensus Process

- Raise an issue or problem
- Clarify the issue or problem and put it into context
- Discuss the issue, bring out a diversity of ideas, concerns, and perspectives — look at possible solutions and the problems with those solutions
  - Encourage heartfelt dissent and challenge
  - Be particularly aware of shy people and their small voices
- Note agreements and disagreements and the underlying reasons for them — discuss those underlying reasons
- Synthesize proposed ideas/solutions or come up with totally new ideas in the supportive atmosphere of the meeting (find a "third way")
- Evaluate the different ideas until one idea seems right for the group
  - Make sure there are no loose ends
  - Check that everyone truly **consents** to the decision
- Restate the decision for the notetaker

- Do *not* let the discussion get limited to one idea or proposal pro & con or choosing between two proposals — this closes off more fruitful possibilities
  - Do not gather proposals as quickly as possible and then try to choose among them
  - Do not make a proposal and then try to modify it to fit people's concerns — let the proposal "bubble up" from discussion
  - Sometimes it is necessary to write proposals out in advance (to save time or if the group is geographically dispersed) — if so, the proposal should try to anticipate and accommodate concerns and questions — also, be open to completely modifying or abandoning the proposal

Tips for Good Process (based on Hall, "Decisions, Decisions, Decisions")

- Avoid arguing for your own positions or ideas. Present your ideas as lucidly and clearly as possible, but listen to other member's reactions and consider them carefully before you press your point.
- Do not assume someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate. There may be a totally new idea (a "third alternative") that encompasses everyone's views. Or, if you can't find such a solution, look for the next-most-acceptable alternative for everyone.
- Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony. Be suspicious when agreement seems to come too quickly or easily. Explore the reasons for the easy acceptance and be sure everyone accepts the solution for basically similar reasons. Yield only to positions that make sense to you and really solve the problem.
- Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, coin-flips, and bargaining. When dissenting members finally agree, don't feel they must be rewarded by having their own way on some later point.
- Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the group's decision process. Disagreements can actually *help* the process — with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance that the group will hit upon more satisfying solutions.
- Encourage thorough discussion and dissent. Every option has its limitations — determine what they are during the discussion rather than after you begin the activity.
- If, after thorough discussion, there seems to be an irresolvable sticking point, each person should reconsider why they seek to work together. Are there things you can offer to others (time, work, money) that would contribute to finding a satisfactory group solution? Should the group divide up and have people pursue separate goals?

Essentials of Good Process — Wallchart (based on Consensus Corner, "Strong Objections")

- Thorough discussion — a thorough probing of the issues
  - All viewpoints and perspectives — examine the full complexity of the issue
  - Everyone understands the decision and why other decisions were *not* made
- Depersonalized discussion and decision — what is best for the whole group?
  - Lay out all possible options and opinions without attribution to any individual
    - "Some people think this..., others think this..., and we could also do this..., though it has been pointed out that that option would lead to that..."
  - Don't take disagreements with your ideas as a personal attack — stay calm and centered — relax, you are among friends
- Synthesis, *not* compromise, give-and-take, or watering-down
- General support and no strong objections
  - The merits outweigh the problems
  - There is sufficient excitement in the group to go for it — not a "lukewarm consensus"
  - There are no sufficiently strong objections
- The decision feels right — it feels like the true emergence of an integrated ***group will***

Types of Consensus Decisions — Wallchart

- All agree to one decision
- All agree to disagree and go separate ways — perhaps even leave or disband the group
- Some agree to "stand aside" with or without their concerns recorded in the notes
- All agree to let one person or a committee decide (most often by delegating to a working committee)
- All agree to go along with what most people want (50% or 75% or everyone except Joe — "modified consensus")
  - Be *very* careful with this, it can easily become an ***uncooperative*** process!)

Types of No Consensus — Wallchart

- Defer decision until a later time
- Drop the discussion forever and go on to other things
- Process breaks down (ramming through of proposals, obstructive blocking, rhetorical posturing, defensiveness, choosing sides, lack of trust)
  - Discuss process and work out problems, let people blow off steam, mediate personal differences
  - Ram through one decision and then fight about it for months
  - Growl and leave upset

What Consensus is *Not* — Wallchart

- Not Voting
  - Voting is a process in which people express their **preferences** — whether strongly heartfelt or weakly ephemeral
  - Voters are usually forced to choose between two proposals — ostensibly opposite, but often both unacceptable: "would you rather be poked in the eye with a stick or hit on the head with a rock?"
  - The decision is reached by simplistically adding up these preferences
  - Often encourages cagey manipulation
- Not Unanimity
  - Unanimity is a voting process in which 100% of the group votes the same way, that is, everyone has the same first choice
  - Unanimity is almost impossible to achieve with more than 2 people
  - If there appears to be unanimity, then there probably has not been enough discussion to really bring out all the different perspectives, or people are tired and are hiding their disagreements
- Not Giving In
  - If you disagree, then disagree — then decide together if your concerns are important enough to find another solution
  - Consensus is not coercive rape, but gentle, joyful lovemaking — the spirit of consensus is cooperation — consensus cannot be used to get what you want at the expense of others
- Not Bargaining
- Not Appeasement
- Not Finding the Least-Common-Denominator

Good Meetings

- *Not* long, boring meetings dominated by one or two people
- *Involvement* — each person participates
- *Education* — people gain insight and learn new information
- *Accomplishment* — the group makes decisions and moves toward achieving its goals
- *Interaction* — members socialize enjoyably with each other and feel part of a community

Why Consensus?

- Consensus can give us a ***true democracy***
  - Everyone has an equal chance to participate — no one dominates anyone else
  - Everyone agrees to the final decision no matter whether a majority, minority, or lone voice
  - Everyone participates directly in decision-making (not indirectly through a representative)
- ***Nonviolent***
  - There are no losers, no one feels oppressed or imposed upon by anyone
  - Everyone's perspective is valued and every person is supported
  - Encourages cooperation instead of competition
  - Encourages lifting everyone up to their highest potential rather than knocking down your opponents
- Helps ***avoid an adversarial atmosphere*** where people get attached to their own ideas
  - Encourages each person to listen and find the best in others' ideas rather than attack others ideas to make their own look better
  - The group becomes a ***safe place*** for every person to truly express themselves — this helps prevent misunderstandings and tension and allows everyone to think fully

- ***Better decisions***, more creative solutions
  - No ideas are lost
  - Incorporates the best thinking of everyone
  - Addresses more concerns and has more fresh ideas — stimulates creative solutions that ***really*** solve the problem
- Everyone is involved in the final decision and understands it better, so everyone is ***more likely to work to implement it*** — it may take longer to arrive at a decision, but implementation time will likely be shorter and there will be less bickering later on
- Democracy and group unity are ***inspiring*** and encourage everyone to work harder for the group
- The skills necessary for good consensus are also necessary for ***good relationships*** with others
- If a group uses consensus well, it actively demonstrates:
  - It is possible to work cooperatively
  - There are win-win solutions to problems
  - It is possible for people with diverse ideas to find a common ground
  - We can solve our problems without experts or coercive leaders

Developing Attitudes, Learning Skills, Problem Solving

- Consensus is not just decision-making, but a group ***process***
  - Promotes trust, builds caring, and forges community bonds
- **Attitudes**
  - Dominant culture => violence, coercion, competition, individualism, shirking responsibility, emphasis on money, viewing people as objects, fear of not having enough possessions, love, time, and so on
    - "Free market system" teaches us to make money for ourselves, don't worry about others or the common good, only express our own preference, individual greed will somehow lead to a fair and efficient system
    - Political process teaches us to vote our preference without considering the whole, not to expect good decisions, and to focus on rules and mechanical procedures instead of spirit and attitudes
  - Alternative culture =>
    - Nonviolence, cooperation, win-win, what's best for the whole group/community (statesmanship)
    - Emphasis on people — relaxed appreciation, respect, and love of others
    - Empowerment   • Personal responsibility
    - Open to learning new things   • Honesty
    - Voluntary caring — compassion, altruism   • Trust
  - **Learning** attitudes takes time: we must develop skills and flush out dominant culture
    - Teach newcomers skills and encourage alternative culture
  - **Especially useful attitudes** for consensus
    - Responsibility — voice your opinions, actively listen to others, participate in the discussion, search for alternative solutions, and work to implement decisions
    - Self-discipline — speak clearly, briefly, and to the point without interrupting, repeating, or speaking on behalf of others; relax and allow others to think well or make mistakes without your control
    - Respect — be courteous and trust that others will act intelligently and responsibly
    - Cooperation
      - Look for areas of agreement and build on them
      - Avoid competitive, right/wrong, win/lose thinking
      - Express your disagreements with ideas, not with people — try to love people even when your ideas conflict
      - Use disagreements to learn, grow, and change
      - Work to build unity — but not at the expense of anyone's individuality
- **Problem solving**
  - Depersonalize the discussion and the decision — how can the group work together to solve their mutual problem?
  - View from others' perspective
  - Problem solving methods
    - Brainstorm, explore, experiment, turn things upside down and backwards
    - Go back to basics, question your assumptions, be irrelevant and irreverent, pose silly answers, ask dumb questions, fantasize another world where this problem doesn't exist
    - Work backwards from the answer and see where to begin
    - Put it away, sleep on it, try again later
- Consensus works best when:
  - Participants share basic values
  - Participants value the other participants and get along with them
  - Participants are informed — they have enough information so that they are all evaluating the same situation
  - Participants make a commitment to work together and take responsibility for the well-being of the group
  - Participants listen well to each other so they can understand why they have differences of opinion
  - Participants can evaluate information in a rational fashion — even unusual solutions
  - Participants allocate enough time for a participative process

- Participants have skills in group process, conflict resolution, and problem sharing — or at least are open to letting people skilled in these areas facilitate
- Participants are mature and easy-going, willing to accept minor differences of opinion and preferences
- Participants take each other seriously and really try to work things out

Special Roles in a Cooperative Meeting (consensual or otherwise)

- Everyone should be aware and involved in the meeting. Special roles are **only** to help the process run smoothly — designating a particular person is not necessarily required. Everyone has the responsibility to take on any role whenever it is needed.
- Rotate roles to new people so they can learn and to prevent a few people from usurping power while others abdicate and become passive

- **Facilitator(s)**
  - Responsible for helping the group reach decisions which reflect the **group will**
    - People at the meeting must be aware that it is **their** meeting and **they** are in charge
    - The facilitator **serves** the group
  - Not a chairperson or leader — makes no decisions for the group
    - Should not be involved in the discussion — pass role on to someone else when you want to participate in discussion — keep roles separate
    - Shouldn't introduce topics, give background or reports, or answer substantive questions because this may give the facilitator more power over the content than others
  - Provides good role-model for group process — as the group becomes experienced, the facilitator plays less of a role — in a very experienced group, facilitation may shift from person to person without anyone being specifically designated
  - Consider having two co-facilitators: they can alternate facilitating agenda items or can both facilitate together
    - Less stressful
    - More experienced facilitator can help a less experienced facilitator
    - Facilitator who wants to participate in discussion can hand facilitation over to other facilitator

- **Tasks of the Facilitator(s)**
  - Help to establish a hopeful, upbeat, and safe atmosphere — protect members and their ideas from attack
    - Stop bad process (domineering, guilt-tripping, interrupting, put-downs, bulldozing, defensiveness, space-outs, insults)
  - Prepare the agenda
  - Ask the group how it wants to proceed — suggest ways to proceed
    - "What should we talk about first?"
    - "Why don't we spend 10 minutes on this topic — does that sound like enough?"
    - "Does anyone else have anything to say about this?"
  - Summarize, sort, focus, and synthesize the discussion
    - Summarize the discussion and point out agreements and disagreements fairly and objectively — "It sounds like everyone thinks this is a good idea, but some people feel like it will cost too much, is that correct?"
    - When people hear their ideas summarized, they know they have been heard and they don't need to repeat
    - Sort the various ideas into sections — "Some people think we can reduce the cost by buying a large quantity, others think we might reduce the cost by buying elsewhere, and others don't think the cost is a problem."
    - Try to clarify the discussion; make sure no ideas get left behind
    - Focus: Where appropriate, divide the discussion issue into parts and focus discussion on each part in its turn
      - Help ensure that everyone is discussing the same thing at the same time in the same way
      - Most discussions require summarizing, sorting, and focusing after every few speakers
    - Synthesize: Pull together strands of thought and help weave them into a tapestry — ask the group if they can go along with the synthesis; if so you have at least a partial consensus; if not, you at least know where the sticking points are
  - When it looks like a decision has evolved, state that decision clearly and check with the group that it does, in fact, agree — "Does anyone have a problem with this decision?"
  - When there is agreement, clearly restate the decision so the notetaker can write the decision down
  - Encourage everyone to participate in the discussion and ensure there is space for everyone
  - Encourage everyone to perform leadership tasks
  - Handle disruptive behavior
    - Interrupt it, focus attention on it, insist that it stop, offer solutions, resolve it

- **Public Scribe**
  - Takes visible notes (on large pieces of paper or blackboard) — see *How to Make Meetings Work*
  - When the meeting moves quickly, you may need two scribes

- **Notetaker or Recorder**
  - At a minimum, records all the important decisions of the group and who will implement them for future reference
  - May also record the major points of discussion and various proposed solutions

- **Timekeeper**
  - Points out when the time allocated to each discussion has ended

- **Vibes Watcher**
  - Points out tension, distractions, weariness, boredom, or excessive silliness in the group and recommends changes
  - Points out coercion or intimidation or any lessening of safety in the group
  - Especially looks for unexpressed feelings and tensions and, when appropriate, brings attention to them
  - Reminds the group to relax, take deep breaks, play games, have a group hug or other tension reducers

- **Doorkeeper**
  - Greets new members and explains consensus process
  - Tells latecomers what has already happened

Special Techniques for a Cooperative Meeting (consensual or otherwise)

- **Sit in a Circle** so everyone can see each other, or semi-circle facing the visible notes

- **Introductions**
  - When there are newcomers, allow time for people to get to know each other
  - Try having people introduce themselves to just one other person and then introduce their partner to the group
    - Shy people can speak out better
    - Everyone gets to know one person well (a buddy)
    - Provides practice for listening and looking out for others

- **Check- in**
  - "Weather report" — how people are feeling (anxious, silly, tired)
  - Excitement sharing — something good that has happened recently
  - Expectations of the meeting

- **Agendas and Review**
  - Shows what is scheduled, who will present information, type of item (announcement, report, discussion, or decision), and time allocated
  - Prevents important topics from being neglected or trivial ones from being given too much time
  - Prevents important decisions from being made at the end of a long meeting when people are tired and some may have left

- **Visible Notes (Group Memory)**
  - A scribe writes main ideas on a large piece of paper taped to the wall
    - Focuses attention on the problem, not on other participants; ideas are de-coupled from the person who proposed them
    - All ideas are remembered, none lost

- **Brainstorming**
  - Say every idea you have, record it on a wallchart
  - No negative comments or criticism of ideas
  - Let others' ideas stimulate new ones for you
  - Provides a way to get everyone's ideas out quickly and to generate new, fresh ideas

- **Criteria List**
  - Make a list of important criteria the solution must satisfy
  - Check how each possible solution satisfies the criteria

- **Advantages/Disadvantages Chart**
  - For each possible solution, list the advantages and disadvantages
  - Point out that no solution is perfect and none is completely bad — then choose the one with the most (or best) advantages and the fewest (or mildest) disadvantages

- **Go Around the Circle**
  - Let each person speak in turn as you go around the circle of the meeting
  - Gives everyone a chance to speak
  - Interrupts back-and-forth debates
  - Lets everyone in the group know what everyone else is thinking

- **Small Group Discussions**
  - Make a large group manageable by breaking into small groups of 3-7
  - Provides everyone with a chance to speak and be heard in a non-intimidating atmosphere
  - Makes it possible for real discussion and debate of ideas to occur — poor ideas can be weeded out and good ones expanded so that only good, well-thought-through ideas need be presented to everyone
  - 3 Ways to Break Down into Small Groups
    - Groups of random people to generate ideas and discuss the merits of each idea
    - Groups of like-minded people to provide support and help put ideas into words or on paper
    - Groups of people with differences to work through their objections
  - When done
    - Break into other small groups for further discussion
    - Report back the best ideas to the large group — then discuss in the large group or break into the same or different small groups for further discussion
    - Have a spokesperson from each group meet with other spokes to further refine the ideas generated while the rest of the group focuses on other issues — when the spokes come up with a solution, they then present this to the larger group for ratification or further discussion

- **Fishbowl**
  - A few people who feel strongest or have the most diverse viewpoints discuss an issue while everyone else listens to the debate from outside the "fishbowl"
  - Spokescouncil meetings are often held in fishbowl format

- **Order of Speaking**
  - Three possibilities
    - Facilitator may call on people in turn ("deli — take a number" or "stacking" method) — don't stack up more than 4 or 5 people at a time
    - Each speaker calls on the next
    - Those who want to speak stand (or raise a hand), then begin to sit down until only one is left standing (perhaps the person with the most urgent statement or who has spoken least often); then this person speaks
  - Leave a silent space between each speaker for people to really listen
  - If some speak frequently, ask them to refrain — encourage those who seem excluded — if this is a real problem, give each person 5 pebbles and require they use a pebble each time they speak

- **Nods and Shakes**
  - When the facilitator asks the group simple questions (usually about the procedure), nod or shake your head in agreement or disagreement (or look puzzled or disturbed) to give others some indication of what you are feeling (without taking up much time)

- **Silence, meditation, prayer**
  - Allows everyone the chance to ponder what has been said
  - Helps to "center" or "ground" everyone — interrupts the process when people start mindlessly rushing forward
  - Allows everyone to reflect on the issue, the group, and how they are trying to work together

- **Encourage Cooperation**
  - Use tension reducers (games, singing, backrubs, deep breathing)
  - Create a safe space (prohibit personal attacks, affirm one another)
  - Build trust (be honest, follow through with your commitments)

- **Evaluation**
  - Purpose
    - Helps criticize the process and improve it
    - Helps individuals learn how to perform their roles and tasks better
    - Makes explicit any weird interpersonal dynamics so they can be acknowledged, discussed, and changed
  - List Positives (+), Negatives(-), Improvements(Δ) of the process
    - List everything so the group can learn — be brutal towards problems, gentle towards people
      How was the facilitation, the recording, the timekeeping?
      How was the meeting room, the temperature, the sound level?
      Did the group accomplish its goals?
      How was the tone of the meeting — did it feel good?
      Was anything left out or not covered sufficiently?
    - Try to minimize discussion and comments on others' evaluations — instead look for encompassing improvements for next time
  - For improvements of the behavior of the people at the meeting use "I messages"
    - I feel … (an emotion), when I see… (specific observation of the behavior), and I want… (an action - change of behavior)

Spokescouncils

- For use with large and/or geographically dispersed groups
- Spokesperson for your group — also like the spokes of wheel connecting the hub to the rim
- Only make decisions at the larger level that must be made at this level — decisions that only affect the small group should be made by the small group — often all you need to do is tell other groups what your group is doing
- Each small group selects one person (maybe 2) to be their spokesperson or "spoke"
- This person carries the group's opinions, concerns, and suggested solutions to a "spokescouncil"
  - The ideas taken to the spokescouncil should be the same regardless of *who* the spoke is — the spoke *serves* the small group and is responsible to adequately represent the *group* and the group opinion (not her own)
  - If every small group has discussed the issue thoroughly and the spoke knows the group well, then the spokescouncil can come up with new solutions to meet every concern brought to it — each spoke knows whether or not the newly proposed solution will be acceptable to her group and if not, why not — here, the spoke is empowered by the group to make a decision on behalf of the group — "empowered spoke"
  - If the spoke(s) cannot adequately represent all the ideas of their groups, then any new proposed solutions should be taken back to the small groups for further discussion ("unempowered spoke")
  - No decision is made unless everyone represented in all the small groups would (does) consent to the decision
  - To make the spokescouncil more efficient, each small group should try to *anticipate* the concerns and problems other small groups will have with their solutions and discuss contingencies in advance of the spokes meeting
  - Each spoke should check to make sure she is adequately representing others' ideas and opinions — change spokes to spread the skills and prevent stagnation

Organizational Structures

- Many ways to organize — choose the most appropriate way
  - Support groups — ideas and feelings shared, no critical decisions —> loose discussion, no designated facilitator
  - Discussion group — ideas and information shared, no critical decisions —> loose discussion, participants may try to persuade each other of a particular perspective, but don't need to
  - Workshops: presentation by skilled person to less-skilled —> very structured, designated facilitator/presenter
  - Day-to-day tasks — individual initiative and responsibility important —> individuals work on their own and make their own decisions, but report back to a supervisor or steering group
  - Important decisions — everyone's input important, careful deliberation necessary, involves people's ethical/moral values or political perspective—> consensus of group, cooperative facilitation
  - Federations, alliances of groups with similar values and goals — decisions restricted to areas where groups are trying to work together —> consent of each group to federation decisions, cooperative facilitation
  - Coalitions of groups with diverse values and goals

  - Egalitarianism, hierarchy, managers, committees, bureaucracy

But "Consensus Takes Too Long"

- Often the problem is just that people are inexperienced and don't know how to use the process efficiently, discussion digresses, people don't listen
  - Learn skills and practice them until they come naturally
  - Don't let people participate in making decisions until they make a commitment to cooperate and they have learned the necessary skills (perhaps a rule of "no participation until you have attended three meetings"
- Often groups spend too much time on unimportant issues
  - When any option would be ok and none stands out, just choose a solution (flip a coin)
  - Delegate decisions to committees or individuals — trust them to do a good enough job
- Sometimes other things — such as quality of decision — are more important than time
  - Learn to value the time you spend interacting with and listening to others
  - Focus on quality over quantity

Other Possible Problems with Consensus

- Endless wrangling due to one or several people's emotional problems and intransigence
- Endless wrangling due to one or several people's ignorance about how the consensus process should work
- Poor decisions made by inexperienced people
- Lots of time spent informing everyone of all the factors necessary for a good decision
- Manipulation of the decision so that one person's or group's view prevails
- Poor decisions based on admiring the views of a charismatic person or lover, wanting to be accepted by the "in" clique — groupthink, cultishness
- No one takes responsibility for the decision or for implementing it because it is a group decision, not their personal decision

Interrupting Poor Process

- Types of Poor process
  - Grandstanding — repeatedly raising unimportant concerns, saying the same thing over and over, repeating what others have said, proposing the same idea repeatedly without hearing others' objections to it
  - Obstructive blocking — refusing to allow a proposal to be considered without adamantly expressing your concerns or preferences; refusing to allow any ideas except your own to be considered
  - Ramming or Bulldozing — imposing a proposal on others even though someone has already expressed an objection to it; moving too quickly to a decision or without the full input of everyone
- Blocking is sometimes a response to ramming — your process has broken down
  - Insist that decision-making cease until these poor processes change
  - Acknowledge errors in process and attempt to correct them
  - Seriously consider the concerns of those who are blocking
  - Incorporate these concerns or build a whole new decision
- Sometimes blocking and grandstanding are due to emotional hangups
  - Assertively interrupt this behavior and honestly state its nature
  - Provide emotional support for the individuals, but demand that they change their behavior (nonviolent direct action)
  - If someone is consistently intransigent or disruptive, ask them to leave — they do not belong in a group that works cooperatively
- Sometimes blocking and grandstanding are due to ignorance about the consensus process
  - Spend some time explaining how consensus differs from other (more familiar) decision-making processes — consensus is not unanimous voting
- Irreconcilable differences — two factions have opposite perspectives and cannot agree
  - Realize there is a disagreement that won't change
  - Flip a coin and make a decision
  - Split the group and bid each other good luck in their ventures
- If meetings are too long or not enjoyable
  - Consider expanding the time for meeting evaluation — figure out what is wrong and fix it
  - Consider having a workshop on meeting process and spend the time to develop consensus, meeting, and problem solving skills

Consensus History

- Families and Tribes
  - Most cooperative groups, like families, use some form of consensus — they try to take care of everyone and accommodate their needs, try not to hurt anyone, and try not to force anyone to leave
- Quakers
  - In mid-1600's developed consensus as a way of balancing individual rights ("Spirit of God") and insights ("Inner Light") against the needs of the whole group; tried to find a way that prevented fanatics and crazies from dominating the group (as occurred among another group called "the Ranters")
  - Recognize every person has access to the truth, but any person could be wrong
  - A truth that incorporates every individual truth might be "The Truth"
- The Human Potential Movement (beginning especially in 1950's)
  - Introduced ideas of facilitation (non-authoritarian functioning of group) and emotional blocks to good process
- The New Left's Participatory Democracy (1960's)
  - Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other groups encouraged participatory democracy (direct, face-to-face democracy)
  - Process broke down in late 1960's: dominating leaders, power plays, manipulation, rhetorical speech-making
- The Feminist Movement (beginning in late 1960's)
  - Criticism of New Left machoism, dictatorial leadership, and inequality between men and women within the group
  - Emphasized the importance of expressing feelings
  - Value strength (traditionally male) and vulnerability and compassion (traditionally female) and let both genders do both
  - Tried "no leaders" and free-flowing meetings (as in "rap groups"), but led to hidden leadership, manipulation, and power plays — the "tyranny of structurelessness"
- Non-violent Direct Action Movement (beginning in mid-1970's)
  - Pulled together above ideas
  - Concept of consensus as nonviolent — non-coercive, respects each person's truth
  - Decentralized, decisions made at the lowest level possible
  - Non-hierarchical, but facilitators to help process stay on track
  - Leadership roles and tasks shared and made explicit
  - Value every person and allow all their emotions
  - Emphasis on teaching new people all the necessary skills for good process and encouraging broad leadership

Bibliography

Here is an annotated list of some of the best written materials on consensus and cooperative decision making.

Cooperative Decision Making and Consensus

Butler, C. T. Lawrence and Amy Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus: A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decisionmaking*, 1991, 64 pages, Food Not Bombs Publishing, 1430 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 306-35, Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 864-8786. This short book attempts to codify consensus the same way that Robert's Rules of Order codifies parliamentary procedure. It describes "Formal Consensus" — a highly structured procedure based on presenting and modifying a proposal in response to concerns. This approach appears to have been developed in groups with a great amount of conflict and antagonism. I find it too rigid and too similar to conventional voting processes.

Center for Conflict Resolution, *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making*, 1981, 119 pages, available from New Society Publishers, Philadelphia. A review of practical methods for making consensus work as a decision making process.

_____, *A Manual for Group Facilitators*, 1977, 88 pages, available from New Society Publishers, Philadelphia. A working manual on communication, planning, creative problem solving, conflict resolution, and moving groups toward their goals.

Consensus Corner Editor, "Strong Objections," *The Peacemaker,* March 1983, 4 pages. The author asserts that many people misunderstand the consensus process and summarizes his desired approach.

_____, Letter of September 30, 1984 to Susan Sandler, 6 pages, available from Randy Schutt. This letter presents a nice history of consensus.

Coover, Virginia, and others, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1981, 330 pages. An extensive general resource guide for those seeking fundamental social change through nonviolence. It was written by members of Movement for a New Society (MNS) who helped create the nonviolent direct action anti-nuclear power movement of the 1970s. It includes sections on strategizing, group dynamics, meeting facilitation, decision-making, conflict resolution, training, and organizing.

Doyle, Michael, and David Straus, *How to Make Meetings Work: The New Interaction Method,* 1976. An excellent introduction to win/win decision-making including an adaptation of the consensus process for business groups with a manager. It shows how a facilitator, recorder, and a group memory help achieve good decisions, tells how to develop agendas, how to arrange meeting rooms, and how to deal with 16 types of problem people.

Gastil, John. *Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision Making, and Communication*. New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1993. This book has an excellent decision tree for small group democracy.

Hall, Jay, "Decisions, Decisions, Decisions," *Psychology Today*, November 1971, pages 51-54, 86-88. This article explores the findings of studies that show groups can make high quality decisions by consensus under certain conditions.

Handbook Committee of the War Resisters League, *Handbook for Nonviolent Action*, 1989, available from WRL, 339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012, (212) 228-0450. This handbook includes a one-page description of consensus that first appeared in the 1978 Clamshell Alliance handbook for a civil disobedience action at the Seabrook nuclear power plant. This description was reproduced in many other similar handbooks and variations have appeared in almost every action handbook since.

Institute for Nonviolence Education, Research and Training (INVERT), *Sharing Consensus: A Handbook for Consensus Workshops*, around 1978, 80 pages. This handbook presents a non-directive approach to teaching consensus based on exercises that encourage self-initiation and responsibility. There is an emphasis on problem solving skills and working together.

Problem Solving

Adams, James, *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas*, W. W. Norton, New York, NY, 1979, 159 pages. This book discusses various impediments to solving problems and presents approaches for overcoming them.

de Bono, Edward, *New Think*, Basic Books, New York, 1967. This book contrasts "vertical thinking" (careful, logical analysis and problem solving based on the available data) with "lateral thinking" in which one uses different viewpoints and unusual approaches to come up with fresh ideas. Later books by de Bono describe more ways to encourage lateral thinking.

Conflict Resolution

Bramson, Robert M., *Coping with Difficult People*, Dell, New York, NY, 1981, 228 pages. Presents a six-step plan for effectively dealing with seven types of difficult people.

Filley, Alan, *Interpersonal Conflict Resolution*, 1975. This book discusses and integrates various studies on the handling of conflict. It contains a wide variety of approaches.

Fisher, Roger, and William Ury, *Getting to Yes*, 1984. This book presents techniques for "principled negotiation," negotiating in a fair manner that produces good results for both the negotiator and her opponent.

History of Consensus

Brinton, Howard, *Friends for Three Hundred Years,* Pendle Hill Publications, Wallingford, Pennsylvania, 1964, 240 pages. This book discusses the beliefs and history of Quakers. Pages 15-58 and 99-117 describe Quaker beliefs about and use of "unity" (Quaker consensus).

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Related Topics

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Janis, Irving, *Groupthink*, 1982. This book discusses the tendency of some groups to make poor decisions because they are not thinking critically. Pages 2-13 and 242-276 summarize the causes and symptoms of this tendency and ways to prevent it.

Kokopeli, Bruce, and George Lakey, "Leadership for Change," *Win,* 1978. pp. 5-14. Traditional, "patriarchal" leadership is compared to "feminist" or shared leadership in groups. Tactics for changing leadership style are described.

Mansbridge, Jane, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, 1983, 400 pages. This book explores "adversary" and "unitary" democracy and the applicability of consensus. It looks particularly at a New England town meeting and a workplace that employs consensual participatory decision-making.

Pitkin, Hana F., and Sara M. Shumer, "On Participation," *Democracy*, Fall 1982, pp. 43-54. The article criticizes three pieces on consensus, including *Beyond Adversary Democracy.*

Criticism of Consensus and Rebuttals

Ryan, Howard, "Blocking Progress: Consensus Decision Making in the Anti-Nuclear Movement." 1983, 16 pp. Ryan critiques consensus based on his experience in the anti-nuclear movement. This article stimulated a three-way dialog from September 1983 to February 1985 between Howard Ryan, Randy Schutt, and the Consensus Corner Editor of *The Peacemaker* (who chooses to use no name). This 70-page dialog is available from Randy Schutt.

Smith, Allen, "The Hidden Dynamics of Consensus," *The Nonviolent Activist*, War Resisters League, New York, NY, January-February 1990, 2 pages. This article and a two-page response from Randy Schutt, "Consensus Is Not Unanimity: Making Decisions Co-operatively," are available from Randy Schutt.