

Some good resources...

On Doing Consensus:

The Facilitator's Guide to Consensus Decision Making.

- Sam Kaner. New Society Publishers, 1996

Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making.

- Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981

Leadership for Change: Towards a Feminist Model.

- Bruce Kokopeli & George Lakey. New Society Publishers

A Manual for Group Facilitators.

-Center for Conflict Resolution

On Conflict Resolution:

The Mediator's Handbook.

- Jennifer E. Beer with Eileen Stief, New Society Publishers, 1997.

On the Theory:

The Tyranny of Structurelessness

- Joreen Freeman. Pittsburg: Know, Inc. Originally published in The Second Wave vol. 2, no. 1.

available on-line at: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/tyranny/>

The Tyranny of Tyranny

- Cathy Levine

On Oppression:

Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice

- Paul Kivel, New Society Publishers, 1996.

Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race & Culture in Courtrooms & Classrooms

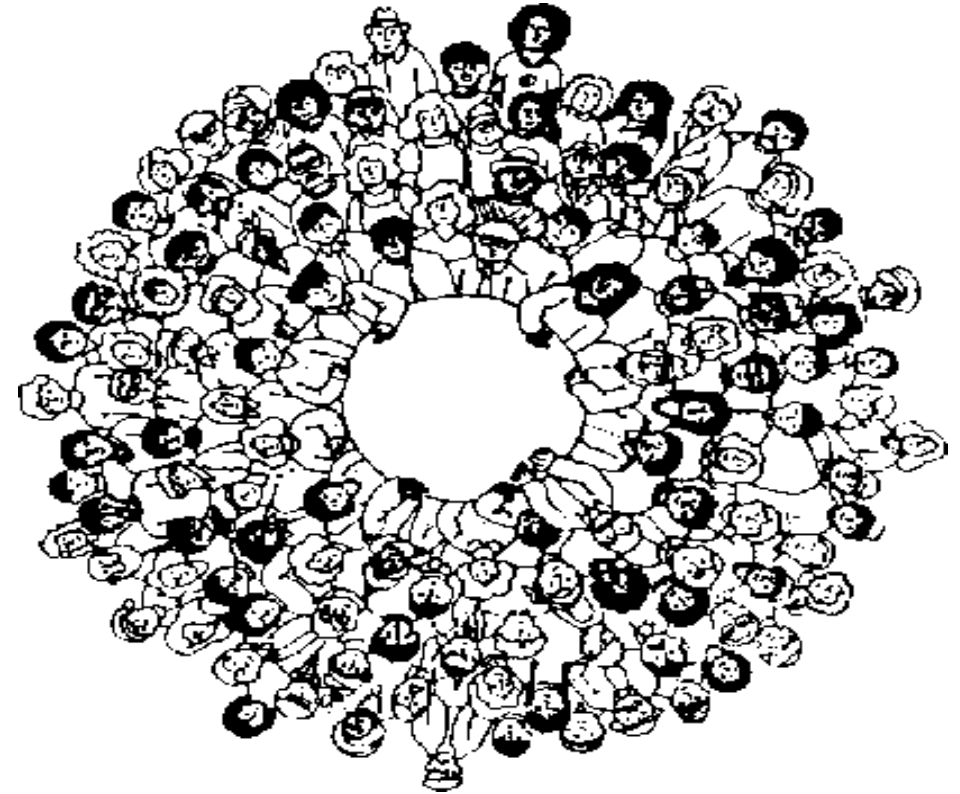
- Sherene H. Razack, University of Toronto Press, 1998

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Consensus Decision Making

Tips on how to make your meetings run more effectively using non-hierarchical strategies.



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Differences between Majority Rule and Consensus

Majority Rule

- Assumption of competition: some must lose and some must win. This always produces a silent and forgotten minority. What happens to these people? Eventually, they leave.
- Little real listening & learning going on, just trying to prove your own points.
- Often has a hierarchy which dominates the discussion and influences everyone else.
- Shy people, people with different cultures or languages, women, children, etc, are often ignored if they don't participate in normally assertive fashions.
- Often, quick decisions are made that may not be the best ones. People often feel the "debate" is focussed only on a 'yes' or a 'no' vote to the original proposal rather than brainstorming alternatives.
- Concerns about process & group dynamics are often left unaddressed, seen as secondary to "getting things done".

Consensus

- Stresses the co-operative development of a decision and the active search for common ground rather than differences.
- Everyone's support is needed to finalize the decision, so softer or culturally undervalued voices are actually encouraged and attended to.
- The decision will usually garner greater commitment to follow through & carrying it out, because everyone was involved in making it.
- Both feelings and logical arguments are considered important.
- When a decision is not favourable to the whole group, time is often taken to find creative and often better solutions.
- Attention is paid to the process of making the decision, not just the product.

A few disadvantages of consensus

- the group can be dominated by outspoken members, as in any process.
- sometimes takes a bit longer - can lead to boredom and frustration if not facilitated properly.
- individuals can block decisions to further their own power.
- groups that have one person in charge and groups whose members have little in common or opposing goals may experience difficulty implementing consensus.

Sample Agenda

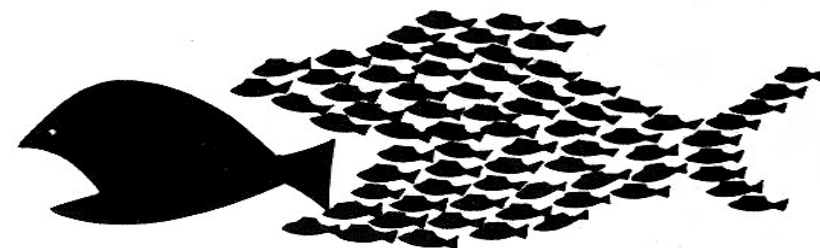
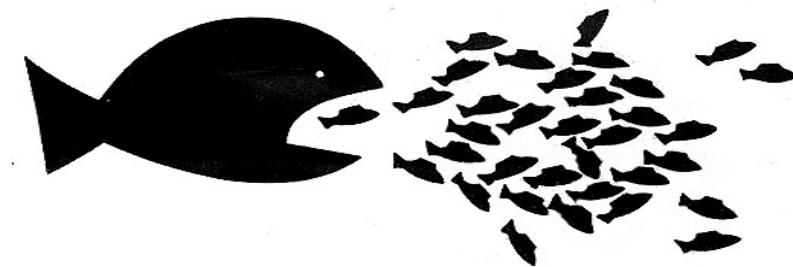
| | |
|----------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Rounds/Check-in | 5 min |
| 2. Review/Revise agenda | 2 min |
| 3. Task Review (from last mtg.) | 3 min |
| 4. Old Business | |
| -hiring (Rajan) | 10 min |
| -budget (Kerry) | 20 min |
| 5. New Business | |
| -rally (Kris) | 15 min |
| -picnic/social (Phillip) | 15 min |
| 6. Reports | |
| -staff report (Angelina) | 10 min |
| -resource committee (Rocky) | 10 min |
| 7. Task review (from this mtg.) | 3 min |
| 8. Closing round/mtg evaluation | 10 min |
| 9. Next meeting | 2 min |
| | <hr/> |
| | 1hr 45min |

Taking Minutes

The task of taking minutes should be rotated amongst all able group members. The minutes should answer the following questions:

- WHAT exactly is the decision?
- WHO is going to do it?
- WHAT information or materials do they need to carry out the decision?
- WHEN will it be done?
- HOW will the group know it has been done?

Minutes should either be distributed to all group members or kept accessible to group members between meetings so people can check to see what tasks they took on, etc.



Setting the Agenda

The purpose of an agenda is to organize the topics in a way that reflects priorities and helps the meeting run efficiently.

CHECK IN

- Open the meeting with a “check-in” round to see how people are doing and personalize your meeting.

AGENDA

- After the round, there should be an “agenda review”, where items can be added or moved (ie: if somebody has to leave early, but wants to be present for a specific discussion). Each item on the agenda should have a time limit for discussion.
- Regular meetings at PIRG shouldn't be longer than an hour, and always try to avoid having meetings longer than 2 hours. Peoples' energy runs low and attention spans deteriorate. Lengthy meetings also discriminate against those with other responsibilities (ie: children, jobs, classes). Meetings longer than 1 1/2 hours should have a break. Always try to keep the meeting to the agreed-upon time frame.
- Try to group related topics under one heading and evaluate each item to determine if you have the information you need to discuss it that day
- The Facilitator should delegate someone to “motivate” the discussion on each item
- The goal of each discussion should be clearly stated at the beginning of each item (ie: to come up with brainstorm ideas, to make a decision, to discuss the item and make a decision at a later date, to share information, etc.) and all statements or discussions should be geared towards that goal.

TASK REVIEWS

- There should be a “task review” at the end of every meeting, where the minute-taker scans the minutes and reads out what work people took on. This list should be reviewed at the beginning of the next meeting to ensure that group members have completed assigned tasks. If not, find out if that member needs more information, assistance, doesn't have time, etc.

CLOSING

- Do a round at the end for meeting evaluation and feedback. This is to evaluate how the group and its facilitators ran the meeting rather discussing the decisions made during the meeting, and how everybody feels going out (frustrated, excited, etc). Constructive feedback is key to everyone learning the skills necessary to run effective meetings.
- The last item should be “next meeting” (when, where, who is facilitating)

Necessary Conditions for Consensus

Commitment & Sincerity

One of the basic assumptions of consensus-based work is that members of the group engage in the consensus process in good faith - which is to say that everyone *wants* to achieve consensus in the group. Consensus gives an enormous amount of power to each individual in the group, and that makes the process very easy to undermine. Often consensus is blocked for reasons that have nothing to do with the matter being discussed, reasons the blocker and/or the group may be unaware of.

Basis of unity

It is important for group members to be clear on the points cohesion - what everyone has in common that can be used as a basis for building consensus. Often, this includes a simply basic description of the project/goals the group has been formed to complete/attain, and a statement of common ideology (which can be as simple as a commitment to the consensus process). At times when consensus seems unreachable, it can be useful to revisit the basis of unity so everyone remembers the original points of groups cohesion and can place disagreements in perspective.

Process

The development of a clear and open decision-making process that is understood by all the members of the group is fundamental to effective consensus-building. It is essential that this process be structured and explicit so that it is not co-opted when there is dissent. This means establishing a meeting process & guidelines (ie: what is quorum for the group?) at the beginning that all participants are comfortable with and agree to use. Planning conflict resolution before conflict happens is also a good idea.

Rules for Consensus

Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees with the decision, but that everyone is willing to live with it.

STANDING ASIDE - If you do not agree with the direction that the group is heading in, but you are not willing to stop the rest of the group from going ahead with a generally accepted idea, you can choose to stand aside. This should only be done after you have clearly articulated your concerns and there has been discussion from the group about them. If there are more than one or two people standing aside, it would be wise to continue to search for other ideas and compromises.

Rules (continued)

BLOCKING - One individual has the power to block a decision, even if it goes against something that the rest of the group agrees to. Again, this should only be done after lengthy discussion, and only in situations where you feel that the decision is morally wrong and would harm the group or other people in some way. Good conflict management skills are necessary in these situations to try and work out solutions.

MODIFIED CONSENSUS - Some groups, especially larger ones, use a modified form of consensus that allows for a fall back to voting if consensus is not working or if someone is blocking a decision that the group feels strongly about. A vote must be taken to determine if a vote will take place. Both votes must usually garner 2/3 or 75% approval. A simple majority is not acceptable.

A Brief History of Consensus

Quakers have been using consensus since the 1600s. Although they developed the formal process we use today, Indigenous peoples all over the world have used it in less formal ways for centuries. Feminist organizations began to use it in the 60's in order to counter the hierarchical structures they saw both in society and within the 'social change' movements of the day. Many feminist and activist organizations use it today as a practical way to counteract ingrained power structures. Consensus has been used successfully with groups of several hundred people, both for meetings of large formal/informal networks and for one-off groupings.

Resisting Oppression

We need to recognize that the group operates in the context of a larger society, and that we bring a whole series of oppressions and experiences of oppression with us to every meeting, consciously & unconsciously. These dynamics of oppression seriously impact the ability of a group to engage in real consensus building. It is essential to engage in open & active analysis of power dynamics, recognize imbalances, and work to resist them as a group.

This means recognizing the dynamics of gender, class, race, education, etc. that are at work in every group. Certain members of the group are often silenced as a result of power dynamics, not simply "personality" or "mood". The power of persuasion is often dependent on class and educational background, or gendered behaviour.

The analysis and active resistance of oppression is an ongoing process. It is a lot of work to recognize the ways in which we oppress others, and we cannot always expect those whom we are oppressing to have the will or the ability to explain it to us. The responsibility is ours to find ways to become conscious.

& Consensus

Attitudes that Support Consensus.....

COOPERATION

- share information freely
- acknowledgement and acceptance of difference
- recognition that there is no one "right" answer

ACTIVE LISTENING

- not thinking on your own ideas while other members are speaking
- allow somebody's new or controversial idea to percolate in your mind before you respond

COMMON OWNERSHIP OF IDEAS

- "we all hold a piece of the truth"
- someone's "great idea" is often the result of some of the previous suggestions made by others.
- whole group takes responsibility for failures, tries not to blame individuals

MUTUAL TRUST

- willingness to be vulnerable
- willingness to compromise

VALUE FEELINGS

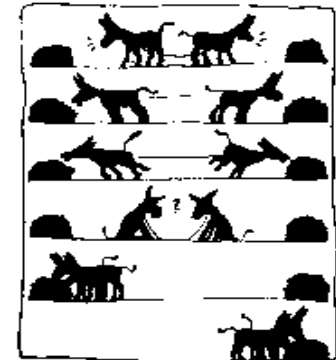
- the greater the acceptance of the whole person, the more efficient, open and trusting the group dynamics will be

VALUE CONFLICT

- conflict is natural and only signifies that there is disagreement and diversity in the group
- if handled cooperatively, conflict could lead to more options and possibly better decisions

EQUALIZE POWER

- if some members possess more information, communication skills, experience, privilege, etc; special attention should be paid to how this power is used and attempts made to share it



Attitudes

Attitudes Which May Impede Consensus.....

COMPETITION

- achieving your own goals at the expense of others - withholding information, manipulation, focus on other's weaknesses, etc.
- belief that there is only "one way" to do things.

LACK OF INTEREST IN OTHERS

- putting your personal needs ahead of others'
- focussing on your own ideas and contributions
- not listening to other's input

OWNERSHIP OF IDEAS

- your ideas are "your property" and you expect personal credit for them
- not open to suggestions or compromise, or to other members taking your ideas and changing them

SUPPRESSION OF FEELINGS AND CONFLICT

- logic valued above feelings
- idea that conflict is "wrong"

RELIANCE ON AUTHORITY

- depending on others to give "answers"
- not valuing your perspectives, potential contributions & ideas as much as the others'

LACK OF PARTICIPATION

- not actively participating in the process, either through active listening and/or contribution of ideas and opinions

UNACKNOWLEDGED BIASES

- unspoken judgements, racism, unresolved conflicts, unpleasant past dealings, sexism and other prejudices affect the way you listen to others

Spokescouncil: Organizing large groups

One method used to organize large, one-off gatherings, or regular meetings involving groups from different places/ with different roles in one organization, is the spokescouncil.

The smaller groups meet and discuss agenda issues separately. Then, a representative (or more than one) from each affinity group meet together at "spokescouncil". These representatives are selected by the smaller groups, and rotate, although for one-off events (ie: planning a large demonstration), rotation is often sacrificed for the sake of more stable group dynamics in the large meeting.

Either way, other members of the smaller group should still attend the larger meeting, sitting behind their speaker, like spokes in a wheel. Then, if a spokescouncil decision needs further discussion, speakers can turn around and consult with members of their sub-group/council.

This method of organization was used to organize thousands of people from all over North America and beyond to shut down the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Washington, in 1999.



Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator keeps track of WHAT the group is talking about and HOW the group is talking about it!

- your role is to “make easy” (smooth, equal) the functioning of the group
- everything you do or say must be checked with the group
- facilitation should be shared via regular rotation - for larger meetings, it’s a good idea to have co-facilitators, pairing up experienced & unexperienced
- if you start getting personally involved in the discussion or debate, ask someone else to facilitate for a while
- everyone should try to “self-facilitate” - we are all equally responsible for making the meeting run effectively, and the end goal is to have the facilitator do very little work

Your function as a facilitator is to.....

GUIDE THE AGENDA

- start a check-in round
- review and revise the agenda with the group
- monitor time, or appoint a time keeper for larger meetings
- keep a speakers list, if necessary. For larger meetings, this can be the job of a co-facilitator, and the list can be used as it’s own facilitation tool (see sidebar).

KEEP THE DISCUSSION ON TOPIC

- point out tangents, watch out for repetition
- reiterate original goal of the discussion, or ask the group to clarify the original goal

CLARIFY AND REPHRASE

- if a member is being misunderstood, or not listened to, rephrase or repeat their statement - always check out the accuracy of your statement with the speaker, do not act as an advocate.

EQUALIZE PARTICIPATION

- check in with silent members
- initiate a “round robin” so that everyone’s voice can be heard
- point out domination on the part of individuals or small groups

SUMMARIZE

- interject occasionally with statements that summarize the direction of the discussion (ie: “I think what you’re saying is...”), especially when the conversation drags on

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

- recognize that lack of conflict may signal hidden issues
- ensure that people involved in a conflict are listening to one another
- offer paraphrases to ensure mutual understanding
- offer to participate in a meeting outside of the current one to deal with “other issues” that are affecting discussion (personal conflicts, etc)
- do not align yourself with one party - remain neutral
- try to work through the problem, rather than breaking or postponing - maybe take a break after
- Ensure that the conflict is resolved as much as possible - it won’t go away if you ignore it

TEST FOR AGREEMENT

- if you feel the group has reached consensus, clearly state what the decision is and ask the group for agreement
- silence from the group or a few individuals does not imply consent

Speakers Lists: Equalizing Power

Tools like rounds can go a long way to equalize participation in smaller groups. They can work in large groups too, especially to open meetings, dealing with serious conflict, and are always advisable at first meetings. However, using them often in a large group is time consuming, and often not practical or possible. In these situations, speakers list can be used as a tool to accomplish this task.

It’s advisable, for larger meetings, to have a co-facilitator whose only job is to take & manage the speakers list. The co-facilitator’s job is to make a list of those wishing to speak. S/he may then prioritize the people on the list. For example, bumping people who have not spoken ahead of those who have, alternating between women & men, bumping up people of colour in a white-dominated meeting, etc.

The list can also be used to sort out who is speaking on what specific aspect of an item, in order to help the facilitator maintain focus.

Time limits can be placed on everybody speaking. Even just letting speakers know they have spoken for X number of minutes (2 is a good one), but not stopping them, can help reduce the time individuals take, leaving time for other voices. It can be decided everybody only gets to speak a maximum number of times (usually 1 - 3) on a particular item or aspect of an item.

Be creative, adapt the speakers list to the situation you find your group in.