

Introduction to Consensus Decision-Making

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This was developed by the Quakers originally, but similar principles have been used since pre-history.

“Their natural way of doing it [reaching a decision] is to discuss it at length, ... until public opinion has settled overwhelmingly in one direction”

Obviously, this doesn't work so well with large groups. But as I pointed out earlier, large groups tend to fragment.

Consensus is **not** the same as voting. Nor does it mean unanimity. Groups sometimes think they are using consensus but revert to voting when they can't all agree.

When we vote, we are still using dualism — here is one choice, or another. The choice we will make is the one of the majority. Thus the majority wields power over the minority.

The ethics of integrity however, give no-one the right to wield power over another. With consensus, the story is different.

Consensus is based on the principle that every voice is worth hearing, every concern is justified. If a proposal makes a few people, even one person, deeply unhappy — then there is a valid reason for that unhappiness, and if we ignore it, we are likely to make a mistake.

Instead of spending energy trying to convert people to agree to something they don't want, we drop either or both alternatives and look for a new solution, one that satisfies everyone's concerns. The universe is not either/or choices, it is “rich with infinite possibilities”

How it works

The consensus usually works with a facilitator, who is agreed by the group at the start of the meeting.

One person puts forward a proposal. The facilitator makes sure everyone gets a chance to put forward concerns, or speak for it. Negative reactions are not expressed as hard/fast positions. Instead of saying “I am categorically against it”, you say “I am concerned about it, because...” Voicing concerns allows the proposal to be modified to meet those proposals.

If a person feels their concerns cannot be met, and the group is enthusiastic, they can “stand aside”, and simply not participate in that part of the group.

If they have **strong** objections to a proposal that affects them, they can *block* the proposal. Blocks are used rarely and carefully. But the block gives each individual ultimate power to influence decisions that affect her/him. If someone feels strongly enough about something to block it, they are probably aware of factors the group should consider more carefully.

Consensus takes time. Its also fails to work well in large groups, simply because there isn't time to hear everyone. It also can't deal with dualist questions imposed from outside the community.

Roles within a consensus based group (names from Starhawk)

The Facilitator

The facilitator observes the content of talk in a meeting. They keep the meeting focused and moving. Commonly people will drift off the subject under discussion and begin talking about something else. The facilitator reminds them what the subject is, and if necessary arranges for later discussion of new issues raised.

From time to time the facilitator may summarize what has been said so far, and what has been decided as relevant.

The facilitator calls on people to speak. It is their job to ensure that everyone has the chance to state their concerns.

The facilitator should be neutral on the subject being discussed. If they hold strong views, another facilitator can be chosen for that topic.

Timekeeper

The timekeepers job, when time is limited, is to ensure that people remain aware of how much time is passing discussing each item.

Peacekeeper

Peacekeepers function not only during meetings, but whenever the group is active. Their role is to keep order and prevent crises. They defuse potential violence from outside the group or within it.

Notestaker

The notestaker takes notes and ensures that they are presented to the group for checking. “This should be the person who monopolizes the conversation most”

Coordinator

Coordinators act as a switchboard — they keep track of what is being done, who is doing it and what needs to be done. “It is a marvelous opportunity to make mistakes and learn to take criticism.” Coordinators should switch roles often.

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