Consensus Decision Making Packet

Tips, Ideals, and Techniques for the Revolution!

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copy and distribute away!!

I. Sample language for facilitators:

Setting of ground rules
- "What is the purpose of this discussion?"
- "What question are we hoping to answer?"
- "Everyone's opinion is valued, there are no wrong answers"
- "All ideas are valued"

Acknowledging participants' contributions
- "That's an excellent thought."
- "That interests me, say more"
- "Thank you for sharing your feelings on this tough issue"
- "Great- good- I like it- excellent- Spot on"

Probing
- "Say more about that…"
- "Please tell me more about what you mean when you said…"
- "Could you talk more about what you meant..."

Garnering participation
- "I'm wondering how this might look/appear/feel/seem to you?"
- "I invite you to…"
- "I'm curious to know what others think"
- "Does anyone else have [something]?"

Reflecting and clarifying
- "What I've heard is…"
- "So what you're saying is…"
- "What I'm hearing is…Is that right?"
- "Please clarify"
- "Can you help me be more clear?"

Equalizing Participation
- I'd like to hear from folks who haven't spoken yet
- I haven't heard from any women yet - does anyone have anything to add?
- I'd like to make sure that everyone's voices have been heard on this.
- I've noticed/feel like a few people are doing most of the talking - let's open the discussion to folks who haven't spoken yet.

Dealing with Strong Feelings/Strong Language
- I'm hearing some strong feelings on this issue - is it true that....
- I'm feeling some tension around this issue - maybe we should... (take a 5 minute break? ask whether there is an underlying issue to address? take 30 seconds of silence to refocus?)
- I'm hearing some strong language from you - do you feel like you're being understood and listened to on this issue?
- I noticed you have strong feelings on this - do you feel ok for the group to continue discussion?

II. Flow of a Decision Making Process

A. Before the meeting (or at previous meeting):
  1. Choose facilitator(s) for meeting
  2. Facilitator gathers agenda items, allot an estimated time for each item, determines item type - announcement, report, guest item, philosophical issue, "quickie", and writes out agenda
  3. Determine presenter/initiator for each item (if needed)

B. Possible elements of a meeting:
  1. Connect (game, dinner, song, ritual, etc.)
  2. Check-in/excitement-sharing (Determine together the expectations of this - Should we go around in a circle, or popcorn? How long, on average, should people talk? What types of things do folks want to share?)
  3. Agenda review: agree on order and time of items
  4. Choose notetaker, timekeeper, vibeswatcher
  5. Step through the agenda
  6. Set next meeting
  7. Evaluation of meeting
  8. Closing (game, song, prayer, etc.)\

C. The Flow of a Cooperative Decision-Making Process

  1. Issue raised — what is the question?
  2. Clarify problem — put it in context
  3. Open discussion for conversation - the group should bring out a diversity of ideas, concerns, and perspectives — look at possible solutions and the problems with those solutions
  4. Encourage heartfelt dissent and challenge
  5. Note agreements and disagreements and the underlying reasons for them — acknowledge those underlying reasons
  6. Synthesize proposals from the discussion
  7. Evaluate the different proposals until one idea seems right for the group
  8. Establish how the decision will be implemented
  9. Make sure there are no loose ends
  10. Restate the decision for the notetaker (including implementation)

III. Misc. Tools for Consensus

What ideas/tools might be helpful for you? Do these ideas bring up other ideas?

Discussion/Problem-Solving Tools
1. Brainstorms
2. Go around the circle
3. Small-group discussion, for processing (3-7 people), then sharing with larger group
4. Advantages/disadvantages chart
5. Visual aids, Visible notes
6. Goals-/priorities-setting techniques
7. Challenges/devil's advocate questions

Process/Empowerment Tools
1. Participation equalizers (pebbles, etc.)
2. Active listening in pairs
3. Support groups/caucuses
4. Feelings sharing
5. Fishbowls
6. Role plays

Typical Tasks of Facilitator(s)
1. Helps formulate agenda
2. Helps establish a hopeful, upbeat, and safe atmosphere
3. Helps group work through decisions
4. Asks for clarification
5. Summarizes and sorts discussion — lists threads of thought, agreements, and disagreements
6. Helps focus and order discussion topics
7. Restates final decisions
8. Encourages equal participation
9. Draws out quiet people
10. Asks windy speakers to be brief
11. Encourages everyone to perform leadership tasks
12. Calls on speakers
13. Stays neutral while facilitating

Typical Tasks of a Vibeswatcher
1. Watches the process of the meeting
2. Notices underlying feelings from tone of voice and body language, points out tension and weariness, recommends changes
3. Stops bad process (domineering, guilt-tripping, interrupting, put-downs, bulldozing, defensiveness, space-outs, etc.)

4. Helps work out negative emotions (fear, anger, anxiety, hopelessness)
5. Suggests tools to improve meetings
6. Helps create a safe, accepting tone
7. Deals with outside distractions

Stress-Reduction Techniques
1. Stretch breaks/cooperative games
2. Singing
3. Humor
4. Affirmations
5. Feelings sharing
6. Silence (mediation, prayer)
7. Calm voice
8. Eye contact
9. Breathing (deep)
10. Back rubs

Conflict Resolution Tools
1. Appreciations/affirmations
2. Active listening
3. I-messages
4. Restating other's viewpoint
5. Six-step problem solving technique
6. Support groups
7. Venting emotions somewhere else
8. Gripe sessions
9. Resentment sharing
10. Fishbowls

Sample Template for Meeting
- 6:00 Dinner (optional)
- 7:00 Meeting Begins: Prayer, Agenda Review
- 7:10 Sharing
- 7:30 Guest Items
- 7:50 Break
- 8:00 Other Items #1
- 8:20 Other Items #2
- 8:40 Decision Review
- 8:45 Meeting Evaluation
- 9:00 Concluding Prayer

IV. Pitfalls and Advice for Meetings

Do you , or the group as a whole, display any of these tendencies? What lessons can this bring to your meetings?

Working Together for A Change

While we are working for change and building alternatives, we still carry the baggage of our upbringings and cultures, and need to do explicit work to decrease our domination of other people and groups. Here are some common problems to become aware of:

- Hogging the show. Talking too much, too long, too loud.
- Problem solver. Continually giving the answer or solution before others have had much chance to contribute.
- Speaking in capital letters. Giving one's own solutions or opinions as the final word on the subject, often aggravated by tone of voice and body posture.
- Defensiveness. Responding to every contrary opinion as though it were a personal attack.
- Nit-picking. Picking out minor flaws in statements of others and stating the exception to every generality.
- Using sexuality to manipulate others.
- Restating. Especially what another person has just said perfectly clearly.
- Attention seeking. Using all sort of dramatics to get the spotlight.
- Task and content focus. To the exclusion of nurturing individuals or the group through attention to process and form.
- Put downs and one-upmanship. 'I used to believe that, but now..." or 'How can you possibly say that?' Negativism. Finding something wrong or problematical in everything.
- Condescension and paternalism.
- Focus transfer. Transferring the focus of the discussion to one's own pet issues in order to give one's own pet raps.
- Residual office holder. Hanging on to former powerful positions.
- Self-listening. Formulating a response after the first few sentences, not listening to anything from that point on, and leaping in at the first pause.
- George Custerism. Intransigence and dogmatism; taking a last stand for ones position on even minor items.
- Seeking attention and support from women while competing with men.
- Running the show. Continually taking charge of tasks before others have the chance to volunteer.
- Graduate studentitis. Protectively storing key group information for one's own use and benefit.
- Speaking for others. 'A lot of us think that we should… "or "What so and so really meant was..."

Here are some specific ways we can be responsible to ourselves and others in groups:

Not interrupting people who are speaking. We can even leave space after each speaker, counting to five before speaking.

Becoming a good listener. Good listening is as important as good speaking. It's important not to withdraw when not speaking; good listening is active participation.

Getting and giving support. We can help each other be aware of and interrupt patterns of domination, as well as affirm each other as we move away from those ways. It is important that dominant groups (for example, men) support and challenge each other, rather than asking targeted groups (for example, women)

to do so. This will also allow women more space to break out of their own conditioned role of looking after men's needs while ignoring their own.

Not putting others down. We need to check ourselves when we're about to attack or "one-up" another. We can ask ourselves, 'Why am I doing this? What am I feeling? What do I need?"

Not giving answers and solutions. We can give our opinions in a manner which says we believe our ideas to be valuable, but no more important than others' ideas.

Relaxing. The group will do fine without our anxiety attacks.

Not speaking on every subject. We need not share every idea we have, at least not with the whole group.

Interrupting others' oppressive behavior. We should take responsibility for interrupting another who is exhibiting behavior which is oppressive to others and prohibits his/her own growth. It is no act of friendship to allow friends to continue dominating those around them. We need to learn caring and forthright ways of doing this.

-Adapted from Handbook for Nonviolent Action, article by Bill Moyers-

V. Consensus Decision Making Ideals

   1. Consensus means making decisions by the united consent of all. It is noncoercive, as it avoids imposing anyone's will on others.

   2. Consensus is really more natural than majority vote, and small groups often use it without naming it. But in large, diverse groups, consensus may need special attention to work smoothly.

   3. In consensus, the group encourages the sharing of all viewpoints held by those with interest in a topic. These viewpoints are then discussed in a spirit of respect and mutual accommodation. New ideas arise and viewpoints are synthesized, until a formula emerges that wins general approval.

   4. Consensus is "organic"—unlike mechanical voting. Often, the final decision is different from anyone's original idea.

   5. Consensus does not require that everyone be in complete agreement, but only that all be willing to accept—consent to—a decision. If the group fails to accommodate your viewpoint after fair effort, ask yourself if you feel strongly enough to uphold your position. If not, it may be best to "stand aside." Refusing to do so might paralyze the group.

   6. Also, consensus does not give everyone an equal voice. Some people know more and care more about an issue. Naturally, their views should carry greater weight.

   7. Better decisions often take longer—in the short run. Try not to make it worse. Before you speak, ask yourself whether your statement is worth the group's time. (To get an idea of this, you could multiply your speaking time by the number of listeners.) If someone else has said it, you may not need to. When you speak, be brief and to the point—and say it only once.

   8. If time is short and the group is large, a matter may need to be turned over to a smaller group. Try to cultivate the mutual trust that allows this.

   9. Be aware of how often you speak. Of course, some people will at times have more to offer. Still, you may have to stop yourself from speaking too often, to avoid dominating. Or if you're shy, you may need to push yourself to speak. Consensus can fail if some group members dominate others.

   10. A moment of silence can work wonders in easing tensions.

   11. A chosen facilitator can help consensus by keeping the discussion on track, encouraging good process, and posing alternatives that may resolve differences. But a facilitator is a servant, not a director, and assumes a neutral role. If a facilitator wishes to take a stand on an issue, the task of facilitating is handed to someone else.

   12. Consensus makes special demands on all. You must respect and consider each other. You must have a sense of common searching, instead of wanting to "win." You must be sensitive and open to each others' ideas and feelings, and honestly try to accommodate them. Finally, you must be dedicated to uncovering and pursuing truth—even if it leads where you never expected.

VI. Difficulties in Reaching Consensus

If enough discussion has occurred, and everyone has equally participated, there should not be a group decision which cannot be supported by everyone. But depending on the importance of the decision, the external conditions, and how the process has gone, the group might be on the verge of reaching a decision you cannot support. There are several ways of expressing your objections:

- Non-support: "I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along with the group."

- Reservations: "I think this may be a mistake, but I can live with it."

- Standing Aside: "I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it."

- Blocking: "I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral." If a final decision violates someone's moral values, they are obligated to block consensus. A decision by an affinity group spokescouncil can only be blocked by an entire affinity group, not by an individual. Blocks will rarely occur if the group has fully discussed a proposal.

- Withdrawing from the group. Obviously, if many people express non-support or reservations, or leave the group temporarily through standing aside, there may not be a viable decision even if no-one directly blocks it. This is what as known as a "luke-warm" consensus and is just as desirable as a lukewarm bath or a lukewarm beer.

- If consensus is blocked and no new consensus is reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject, or does nothing if that is applicable. Major philosophical or moral questions that come up with each affinity group should be worked through as soon as the group forms. Discussions about values and goals are as important as discussions about actions to be taken, and too frequently get pushed aside by groups who feel time pressures.

VII. Sources and More Info:

- www.starhawk.org

- Building United Judgement. A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making. By Centre for Conflict Resolution in 1981, Reprinted June 1999, ISBN 1-800-995-8342

- Handbook for Nonviolent Action available online at
http://www.soaw.org/article.php?id=644