Consensus 101

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CANBRIDGE

a process collective

(Consensus And Network Building Resolving Impasse and Developing Group Effectiveness)

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1. Cultural Context

Consensus is a decision-making process whereby groups do not move forward in the presence of a principled objection.

Consensus works best in a cooperative environment, where information is willingly pooled and people believe that the collective wisdom is superior to individual ideas. Unfortunately, most of us have been raised in a culture that is competitive, adversarial, and hierarchic—not one that is cooperative and egoless.

In consensus you are trying to develop an inquisitive atmosphere that welcomes new information and creative ways of putting things together—where individuals trust that their input will be heard and respected (though not necessarily agreed with).

The bad news is that developing a cooperative culture is not easy. The good news is that it's possible. We were not born competitive and adversarial; we learned that behavior. And what can be learned can be unlearned.

While parliamentary procedure in some form goes back centuries, it's most dominate form today—Roberts Rules of Order—is only a bit more than 100 years old. In contrast, consensus has two main roots: the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), going back about 300 years, and a number of Native American traditions, which go back even further.

Who's to say what form of decision-making is most natural? The point is we have a choice. Over time, whatever you practice will become what feels natural.

☞ **Top Secret**: The trick to getting good results with consensus is to develop a culture where people come to meetings with an open mind, eager to hear new ideas that will change their mind about how they think. This is *totally* different than the mainstream model where the ideal meeting participant is seen as the person who is self-assured, firm in their beliefs, and persuasive about their point of view.

2. Essential Ingredients

There are four main ingredients to making consensus work:

A. Common values

The group should have a clear and current understanding of the values it stands for. In general, groups are pretty solid about this when they are first created, but this tends to slip over time. New members may not be fully aware of what the group stands for, and values can change over time. A healthy group will periodically revisit its core values to make sure what you've written down and tell people is still true.

It's important that a group's core values are alive and readily accessible to the group because that's the well you drink from in hard times. Knowing that you share common values is why you labor through times of tension and disagreement with other group members; it provides the foundational rock on which you can build durable solutions to even the most challenging dynamics.

B. Work appropriate for the group

While groups occasionally attempt topics beyond the scope of their mission, by far the most common problem is a tendency to micro-manage. Learn to delegate effectively. This means developing a consciousness and discipline about the appropriate use of plenary time.

Once you've addressed all group-level concerns, give it over to a manager or committee and stop talking about it!

☞ **Top Secret**: The tendency to micro-manage simultaneously causes two problems frequently associated with consensus: it undermines the work of committees and leads to demoralization (why bother if it's just going to be redone on the plenary floor?); and it is directly linked to the complaint that too much time is spent in meetings.

C. <u>Willingness to engage</u>

While most groups just give rubber stamp approval to the draft agenda at the start of a meeting, pay attention! Once you agree to the agenda you have an obligation to energetically show up when that item comes up. (if you want others to focus on topics dear to you, you had better extend the same courtesy on topics hot for them).

Do not agree to an agenda that you believe is over-packed (too many items and too little time). Swallowing food that's improperly chewed is bad for the digestion; ramming topics to conclusion prematurely (in an effort to shoehorn a conversation into a time slot too small to hold it) leads to poor implementation. Insist that there is adequate breathing room for topics to be considered, and demand that you take things up in priority order from among all those sufficiently ready to come forward.

D. <u>Belief in the process</u>

You are far more likely to achieve progress on topics using consensus if you believe that you will, than if you believe that you won't. Once you start expecting failure, you're well along toward achieving it. Luckily, the reverse is also true. See the glass half full instead of half empty.

3. Addressing for Success

While there are exceptions to everything (did someone promise you this was going to be easy?), here's a highly serviceable sequence for working through a topic:

1. Presentation of the issue (why is this matter worthy of group attention?)

2. Questions (did everyone understand what was said?)

3. Discussion (this is where the bulk of the work is done and can be a wide variety of things; while open discussion is the most common choice, it is by no means the only format to consider)

4. Proposal (after hearing all the input, what do we want to do about it?)

5. Decision (where you don't find a consensus that wraps things up, identify next steps and pick up wher you left off next time it surfaces on the agenda; repeat as needed)

6. Tasks, deadlines, and budget (don't leave the topic until you pin down these elusive, yet essential details!)

Note that the proposal comes fourth, not first. Many groups insist that something arrive in proposal form before it's worthy of agenda time. (And many groups experience frustration in what gets talked about—don't let that be true of your group.) This is a common trap.

Words of caution:

o Don't get hung up on the difference between steps two and three. Be gentle.

o Do get firm about not entertaining potential solutions (proposals) before all the input and factors have been flushed out.

Trap: as a group gets rolling, it is often irresistible to avoid micro-managing, for the sheer thrill of accomplishing things.

☞ **Top Secret**: As soon as you have addressed all issues pertaining to the full group, get that sucker off the plenary floor and move onto the next topic. Either you will have resolution, or are ready to delegate.

When delegating, be sure the mandate and authority are clearly captured in the minutes. That is, answer all of the following questions that apply:

—Is the committee ad hoc or standing? If ad hoc, will the committee be automatically laid down when its mission is accomplished? If standing, for how long will committee members serve?

—What qualities are valuable or desirable for people serving on this committee (Hint: distinguish between qualities that are important that *someone* has, from those that are important that *all* have)?

—How will committee members be selected?

☞ **Caution:** If the committee is doing work that requires balanced representation and/or high trust from members, be careful about just asking for volunteers to fill slots.

—Is the committee empowered to self-organize (do you want committee decisions to be made the same way that plenary decisions are; are committee meetings expected to be open to all group members, or can the committee close them—and if so, under what circumstances)?

—Is the committee expected to have a convener (the person responsible for calling meetings, drafting the agendas, making sure that minutes are kept and posted, and answering questions about the committee)? If so, who will serve as the start-up convener (at least until the first meeting, at which time ongoing responsibilities can be discussed and assigned)?

—What is the committee expected to accomplish?

—Are there deadlines for when committee work is expected to be completed?

—What resources will be made available to do this work (this can include money, labor, skills, access to equipment and information…)?

—If reports are expected, what are they supposed to address, how and to whom will they be disseminated, and when are they due?

—What license does the committee have to make decisions without coming back to the whole? (The flip side: when is the committee expected to come back to plenary for additional guidance?)

—To what extent is this committee expected to coordinate or share authority with other committees?

—Is it clear how group members not on the committee can offer input on committee topics? Is the committee empowered to establish drop dead dates, such that the committee is not obliged to work with input arriving afterwards?

4. Choices in Decision Making

Once a proposal has been crafted and seems ready for a decision, in consensus members are asked to make one of three choices in relation to the proposal:

A. Agreeing

They are OK with the proposal going forward. Their range of enthusiasm can be anywhere from wildly supportive (it's the best thing since pockets on shirts) to lukewarm (it's about the same as lint on shirts).

B. Standing Aside

They are not ready to support the proposal, yet neither do they think it a mistake for the group to move ahead and approve it.

It is important for any group using consensus to be clear about the conditions under which a member can stand aside on a proposal. Typically, groups permit standing aside in either of two situations:

—a member has a personal objection to the proposal but does not believe it will be a mistake for the group to proceed; or

—a member is uncertain or uneasy about their view on the proposal, yet does not feel that the matter is sufficiently serious to ask the group to delay a decision.

When standing aside, the member has an obligation to attempt to explain their reasons, and the group has an obligation to make a good faith effort to make room to hear and understand the concern. This is important for several reasons:

1) The group may help the member understand their concerns, which could lead to either resolution or to a block.

2) The group may be persuaded by the explanation to reconsider some aspect of the proposal or to lay the item over for further reflection.

3) Making the effort to encourage the reasoning to come out will go a long way toward helping the member with the stand aside feel held by the group (it is one thing to have a viewpoint that is not aligned with the rest of the group; it is another to feel that the group does not want to hear your viewpoint).

☞ **Caution**: consensus groups should discuss how many stand asides it can tolerate and still have potent decisions. While it is technically possible for consensus to proceed with any number of stand asides, it is easy to see how a group of six would not have a very good decision if four people stood aside, though a group of 100 might easily proceed with four people standing aside. One important nuance in the circumstance of multiple stand asides is whether they are for the same or differing reasons. It is generally safer to proceed if all the stand aides are for the same concern, and less wise to proceed if there are differing concerns. In the end, the

group will have to use judgment about when to proceed with stand asides, and when to slow down.

Suppose a member stood aside on a proposal and it was subsequently approved. Are there circumstances under which the person standing aside is not bound by the effect of the agreement? If so, it is imperative that the group be explicit about all exceptions. Vagueness here can lead to hard feelings, and mistaken assumptions about behavior.

C. Blocking

They object to the proposal and stand in the way of its approval.

It is crucial that there be clarity about the grounds on which someone can acceptably block a proposal. In general, the most common approach is to insist that the objection be rooted in a sense that the proposed action will violate a group common value, and that at least one other group member can see the link (not agree with the analysis; just see the sense of it and find it reasonable).

It is not sufficient for someone to block and then not explain what the objection is based on; nor is it acceptable for others to override the block simply because they are uncomfortable with the objection. The group is obliged to make a good faith effort to understand the block & the blocker is obliged to make a good faith effort to explain it.

Aside from confusion about legitimate grounds for blocking, there are two main ways groups get into trouble around blocking:

1) There tends to be sloppiness around use of the term. In consensus it means an objection to a proposed action after full discussion of the issue. It should not be used to refer to concerns or irritations with someone's position at the outset of the conversation (as in hearing someone say ahead of a meeting that they intend "to block so-and-so's proposal to have a party where the whole neighborhood is invited"). Concerns do not become blocks until everyone thinks the discussion has been completed.

☞ **Top Secret**: In a healthy group blocks are quite rare—because healthy groups rarely develop proposals that haven't already addressed blocking concerns. If you're seeing a pattern of certain people blocking frequently, there is an underlying problem. Perhaps the blocker is having regular trouble understanding or working constructively with the process; perhaps they're inappropriately looking for attention, perhaps its time to revisit the common values; perhaps the blocker & the group no longer belong together.

2) In the event that a legitimate block does surface, it is typically challenging for everyone to create and maintain a constructive atmosphere for examining what the block is about. There tends to be frustration about failing to achieve resolution, and this is often directed at the blocker, encouraging (if not pressuring) them to stand aside or otherwise rescind their objection, so the group can move on. It is tough to create a mood of grace and open consideration in the presence of a block. Looked at the other way, the blocker can feel terrific pressure because they are preventing the group from moving forward. Having the group spotlight focused on them can be excruciating, and more than some can tolerate (on top which, they are expected to articulate an unpopular viewpoint). It is quite easy for a group to inadvertently create a culture that suppresses dissent because there is no good model for working constructively with blocking dynamics. If people fear that moment, they may be highly reluctant to speak their blocking concerns. This will show up in weakly implemented decisions. In the extreme, agreements may even be sabotaged by people who felt pressured into agreeing.

5. Key Questions

"Consensus" is rather like "natural food." Everyone knows it's a good idea, but what exactly are we talking about?

For consensus to work well, it's important for groups using it to make explicit choices about a number of things. There is no single right answer to these questions, yet groups will predictably suffer if they fail to have any answer at all. Mischief and misunderstanding will enter your house through the door of ambiguity if you leave these questions unaddressed. Though uninvited, there will be hell to pay once they've crashed the party. Here's a list of questions illuminating where ambiguity lurks:

A. *What is the meaning of silence in your group?* In Quaker groups silence typically is interpreted as assent. In most Native American cultures agreement is never assumed unless you have spoken it.

B. *How do you want to work with emotional input?* Emotions can be tricky to work with. For some people emotions are a major mode of knowing and working with information; if you disallow or marginalize the expression of feelings, it can be crippling. At the same time, strong feelings are often associated with aggression and people are afraid of verbal violence or abuse if emotions are sanctioned. Talk about how you want to handle this.

C. *To what extent are meetings to share ideas and make decisions and to what extent are they to get to know one another and build relationships?* This is sometimes referred to as the "product vs. process" debate. It's easy to see how the product people believe that process people are wasting time and not using group time efficiently. Going the other way, process people feel that product folks are going too fast and racing proposals to conclusion without adequate hearing and reflection. Is there room for both in your meetings?

D. *How will you inform members about what happened at meetings they missed?* There are two considerations here: 1) a system of passing along information; and 2) guidance on what level of information is captured in minutes.

☞ **Caution**: If minutes only capture decisions and tasks—and not a sense of the discussion—then your group may be condemned to hear many of the same comments again, once the people who missed the meeting weigh in. It may be tough to find people willing & able to take good minutes, but it's damn expensive to not have them!

E. *Under what conditions is it acceptable to make decisions binding on people if they missed the meeting at which the matter was considered?* There should be a protocol by which missing members have an opportunity to add input on topics they didn't hear discussed. Going the other way, there should be a protocol for how the group can make decisions even though people miss meetings. Talk about it.

F. *What authority does your group give its meeting facilitators?* Facilitators are there to help the group abide by its process agreements. It'll be hard to accomplish that without explicit guidance from the group on how they can proceed.

6. Consensus Takes Forever, Right?

One of the most common criticisms of consensus is how ponderous it is. It's trial by meeting, where decisions are made by those with the strongest bladders or the last ones standing. It doesn't have to be that way.

There are several key things to watch for in managing plenary time well, and to help see the full import of what you accomplished:

—Make sure you're delegating effectively and not chewing on things which needn't be handled by the whole group.

—Don't let things get on the agenda without meeting clear standards of maturity and appropriateness. This should be some committee's job, and they should be available to help people think through how to get an item ready for plenary, and how to make a concise presentation.

—Insist on product at all meetings. If you haven't made definite movement on all topics, you haven't had a good meeting.

☞ **Caution**: I didn't say, "If you haven't *finished* all topics… " Don't conflate completion with progress.

—The point of paying attention to emotional input (if you're willing to give it a try) is to take advantage of both the information and energy in the feelings, and to apply these directly to the issue at hand. You are not just looking for a cathartic moment. Remember: it's a meeting, not a therapy session.

—In assessing the value of plenary time devoted to rooting out undercurrents of distress and dissent, don't limit your focus to the time spent in meeting. You must also consider the quality of implementation. It's a poor bargain to reach decisions quickly in the meeting if it's followed by lackluster or halfhearted implementation. Look at the whole picture.

☞ **Top Secret**: Consensus meetings don't have to be a battle between "product" and "process"; you can bake your cake and eat it too. In fact, good process should result in both solid product *and* thorough buy-in with the decisions.

—Don't expect consensus to go smoothly with people new to the process. Budget time and money to train people.

—For groups new to consensus having skilled facilitation (by people savvy about consensus) can make a world of difference in both the energy and the product from meetings. This is a powerful point of leverage in getting good results early on. Budget time and money for people to learn facilitation.