Consensus Decision-making – Course Notes

By Jenny Spinks

What is consensus?

1.1 Consensus means a process whereby those present participate in discussion to reach a decision, which is agreed upon by all to be the best decision for the group.

1.2 Consensus is the way a group of equals makes decisions[1]. The process rests on the fundamental belief that each person has a piece of the truth. Each member of the group therefore must be given space and time in which to speak his or her truth and each must be listened to with respect. On the other hand, individuals cannot be permitted to dominate the group.

1.3 In consensus, as in ecosystems, each individual rules and is ruled by the larger community. In this web of reciprocal relationships, the beauty and strength of the whole is created.

1.4 In consensus process, no votes are taken. Ideas or proposals are introduced, discussed and eventually a decision is arrived at. In making a decision, a participant in a consensus group has three options:

   a) To **block** – this step prevents the decision from going forward, at least for the time being. Blocking is a serious matter, to be done, for example, only when one truly believes that the pending proposal, if adopted, would violate the morals, ethics or safety of the whole group;

   b) To **stand aside** – an individual stands aside when he or she cannot personally support a proposal, but feels it would be acceptable for the rest of the group to adopt it. Standing aside is a stance of principled non-participation, which absolves the individual of any responsibility for implementing the decision in question. Stand-asides are recorded in the minutes of the meeting. In the event of a significant proportion of stand-asides on an issue, the facilitator will ask the meeting if it considers consensus has in fact been reached; or

   c) To **give consent** – when everyone in the group (except those standing aside) says yes to a proposal, consensus is achieved. To give one's consent does not necessarily mean that one loves every aspect of the proposal, but it does mean that one is willing to support the decision and stand in solidarity with the group despite one's disagreements.

1.5 Consensus decisions can only be changed by reaching another consensus.

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[1] The following material on consensus is based on *Introduction to Consensus* by Beatrice Briggs, 2000. This booklet provides a comprehensive guide to the consensus process.

About Consensus

Consensus decision-making has many advantages over the voting method:
1. It produces decisions by incorporating the best thinking of everyone.
2. It increases the likelihood that new and better ideas will be brought up.
3. Participants often have more energy for working on a project because they have been involved in its formation.
4. It lessens the possibility that a minority will feel that an unacceptable decision has been imposed on them.

Consensus is a powerful tool and needs to be used rightly. Misuse can cause frustration and disruption.

For consensus to be effective it requires as much energy for the process as for the issues being discussed.

Consensus relies on responsible participation from all members. In that sense it is a more mature decision-making process than is voting.

The process
1. Proposal – an issue is presented.
2. Clarification – questions of clarification (not discussion).
3. Discussion – questions are asked, concerns are raised.
4. Differences – disagreements and similarities are drawn out.
5. Modifications – adaptations are suggested.
6. Modified proposal – based on ideas suggested.
7. Consensus – a decision is reached that is acceptable to all.
8. Implementation.

What is needed for consensus to go well?

1. Problems or issues that require decisions made by a group

   Not all decisions need to be made by a group. It is empowering for individuals to be given freedom to act alone. It is more fun for the group not to have to decide every little piece together. We need to be clear what problems or issues we are happy to delegate and then trust others to do.

   If an individual or group has been delegated to take on something for the wider group they should be trusted and valued for their work. We need to avoid reworking a decision in a way that belittles the work already done.

2. Clear agenda

3. Good facilitation

4. Accurate minute-keeping

5. Appropriate follow-through

6. The group needs a shared understanding of the value of:

Believing that human diversity is essential – as in ecosystems

Believing that the integrity of the group is more important than any particular decision

Recognising that we each are important

Including input from everyone

Giving people the safety to say something different, to disagree

Allowing space for contributions

Not holding back from making your unique contribution

Listening with respect and trust and without judgment of the person

Creating a safe space for people to be their true selves

Committing to the process

Deciding to trust the process – claim it as yours

Willingness to work together, without compromising your basic values

Trusting that there is a solution

Persevering to find the truth.

Agenda setting

An agreed agenda permits us to be all dealing with the same thing at the same time. It is often helpful to have a draft agenda circulated well before the meeting so that participants have time to inform and prepare themselves.

If there has been no pre-meeting circulation of the agenda it helps to be sure that there will be sufficient information available at the meeting for each issue to be covered adequately.

If at least the facilitator/s and minute-taker are clear about the different items on the agenda before the meeting then the meeting will go well.

There are some items that it makes sense to have regularly on the agenda. These are:
   a) Place, date and time of meeting
   b) Appointment of facilitator/s and minute-taker
   c) Introductions, or list those present
   d) Apologies
   e) Some sharing or focus time

f) Minutes of the last meeting.
g) Matters arising from the minutes particularly actions that were agreed at the last meeting
h) List of correspondence in and out
i) Financial report
j) Announcements
k) Date, time and place of next meeting
l) Meeting evaluation.

Not every meeting will need all these items. However, the meeting will benefit from the facilitator/s considering which of these items to include on the agenda.

Responsibility of minute-keeper:
a) Record decisions, actions to be taken by who, how, when, where
b) Check that the facilitator/meeting, are in agreement with any minute about something that was in any way contentious
c) Get the minutes to everyone as soon as possible after the meeting

Be prepared to alter them at the next meeting because participants may agree that they are not an accurate reflection.

Role of the Facilitator/s

The facilitator's role is to serve the group by making sure that it gets to carry out the tasks that it sets itself, in the time that it has allowed itself, with respect for the needs and rights of each group member.

The facilitator's task is to 'hold the process' so that issues can be effectively resolved. This means nurturing the process itself. Everyone else at the meeting also needs to be responsible for looking after the process. Everyone can be attending to facilitator tasks by making sure everyone is heard and that the group sticks to time.

Specific tasks and duties include:

Ensuring there is an agreed agenda

Making sure everyone is clear what the issue/s is/are

Staying aware of the valuable contribution each person has to make

Keeping one's own personal energy focused on the process rather than the issues

Stepping out of the facilitator role whenever contributing to the discussion

Helping the meeting to stay on track and not be distracted by anyone going off at a tangent

Keeping to time. Meetings will be better attended if folk know that they aren't going to go over time

Ensuring that everyone has a chance to be heard – if necessary encourage quiet people, discourage noisy ones

Interrupt repetition and red herrings. Remind folk of the need to keep information concise and to stay with core issues

Get a sense of the common ground – where there is agreement – and state it

Checking that everyone shares that sense

Asking if anyone is not in agreement

Making sure that agreements are minuted

Making sure that those responsible for taking on an action are aware of this

Checking the mood of the group and suggesting a break if necessary

Fixing the time of the next meeting.

Asking for an evaluation of the meeting to learn ways of improving facilitation skills.

Role of participants in consensus decision-making

Coming to meetings with a clear and unmade-up mind

Maintaining open thinking throughout the discussion

Supporting the facilitator – being fully aware of the facilitator's role, and helping them to carry it through

Trusting the process

Patience

Practicing self-discipline – being concise and to the point, **do** speak if you have something to contribute, waiting in turn, sticking to the matter in hand.

Paying full attention/Listening well:

  1. To self, (have I said what it would be useful to contribute?)

  2. To other individuals (what is this person saying?)

  3. To whole group (how is the whole group responding?)

<u>Participants can perform different functions in a meeting:</u>

1. **Helping further the task in hand** by initiating ideas, initiating contributions, seeking further information, giving further information, summarising, clarifying, checking up, following up, facilitating discussion.

2. **Caring about the group and the process** by keeping members involved, harmonising disagreements, reinforcing good contributions, relieving tension (gentle humour), encouraging cooperation.

3. **Being unhelpful** by dominating, horsing around, not listening, avoiding responsibility, nit picking, factionalising.

When someone isn't in agreement

We need to learn to disagree creatively.

Nothing that one person really needs can hurt another person.

It helps to not take disagreement personally. We need to be delighted that we have different approaches to things and to act on the understanding that everyone has something to offer.

We need to continually decide to listen – whatever is being said.

Someone who disagrees may help us reach a better outcome – something that is different from what any of us had thought.

We need to give them time to say fully what they think.

Maybe the facilitator/s need to let the person know that the person who disagrees seems to be off track, or they have not been around for the preparation that has led the group to this point and perhaps they need to trust the process so far.

Maybe a slight modification needs to be made so that the decision more accurately reflects the sense of the meeting.

If the person continues to disagree with the direction of the group there are three choices:

1. If possible the decision is put off to another meeting. Ask them to keep talking with everyone and ask everyone to keep thinking about the issue on the basis that we can make a decision that will work for everyone.

2. The person agrees to stand aside from the decision because they feel that the best outcome for the whole group is for there to be agreement even if it is not what the individual feels is right. This is recorded in the minutes and it may be decided to revisit the decision at a later time.

3. The person can block consensus. This is a serious and unusual action and is not to be taken lightly. Someone blocking consensus needs to be absolutely clear in their mind that blocking consensus on this issue will be the best outcome for the whole group. It is entirely likely that in this case the group will look back on the outcome with gratitude for the individual's courage. Or, less likely, the outcome will reflect a decision that the group regrets.

If more than one person isn't in agreement and they all choose to stand aside the group may feel that consensus has not been reached. It may well be better for the group to leave the decision for a while until there can be a greater sense of unity.

How to avoid attacking each other

Often we have a sense of unease about what someone is doing or saying, or how they are saying or doing it. Their way of being feels as though it is not supportive of the group and its activities. It is important to clear up this unease we feel, whether it is well founded or not.

The way to deal with the unease is to check in fully with ourselves as to what the basis of the unease is. Is it something to do with our own past experience or is something bad really happening now? Make sure we have the full information by gently asking simple questions directly of the people concerned. If the unease persists then talk directly with the person we feel the unease about.

For various reasons it may be hard to speak directly to that person, or, if we are that person, it's hard to hear the unease expressed. However, for a group to function well these are skills that we need to learn. We also need to learn how to respond to someone expressing to us their unease about someone else.

If, for some reason or another, we feel unable to talk to the person concerned, and instead we talk with others, the result could be division in the group and an attack on the person. This outcome is destructive to the group. Attack may not be the intention but it can become the outcome.

An attack can be defined in this way: 'inciting others to think badly about an individual or the organisation'.

In our culture leaders are often attacked. A real leader is someone who is thinking creatively and compassionately about themselves, the community around them and the environment around them. They are good listeners. They see themselves as humble facilitators of good outcomes for the whole. In all our lives we take leadership. Parents are very important leaders. For groups to function well good leadership is key. We consistently need to support leadership.

Supporting leadership means acknowledging the role that leaders are playing and making sure that they have people around them while they lead. If a leader is operating in isolation, then they will not be able to listen well, in fact they will no longer be a real leader. It is up to us all to see that leaders are supported.

If someone comes to us about unease they have about someone else we need to a) listen, b) acknowledge the feelings they are having (not agree with them but appreciate that they are struggling with something – don't just dismiss it), c) help them to think about whether they have all the correct information, d) help them to work out how they can speak directly to the person who they are concerned about.

If we hear that someone has unease about us we need to look carefully and fully at the unease. It is possible that we are making a mistake. It is possible that there is a misunderstanding. It is possible that they are making a mistake. Whatever is going on it is important to learn not to take it personally. We need to remember that we are doing our best, that our contribution is essential and that it is human to make mistakes.

If we overhear someone bad-mouthing someone else behind their back it is important to stand up for the person being attacked – to say 'I know that person is doing their best. They may be making a mistake, but they are good.'

For each of us to have the freedom to be our true selves, we need to be sure that everyone else does too.

A pre-meeting poem/prayer that may be useful
(used by Mumbulla Steiner School, Bega)

As we meet here now
may we truly meet.

In the presence of the Spirit,
in the presence of each other
may we be fully present.

May we learn to listen to each other
and listening, learn
until light is fully shed
on every question.

May we be open with each other
and trust in others'
openness to us
so that we share
our hopes and concerns

May clear thoughts
and warm hearts
bring strength to our purpose
as it finds its way
into our hands.

References

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