

A ROUGH

GUIDE

T.

CONSENSUS

by major tom.

(with parables from the theory
of mathematical knots.)

INTRODUCTION:

These notes on Consensus decision-making are based largely on the process we used at The Domes, a cooperative housing area in Davis, California. It's a beautiful, otherworldly space, so improbable in its design and very existence that it forces one to reconsider one's most fundamental ideas of the possible. I lived there for four years.

For two-and-a-half years, I was a liaison between the Domes (a consensus-based community) and the University which owned the land. The University - or at least the parts we interacted with - was very hierarchical, and expected us to act similarly, with snap decisions, disenfranchisement, and all those other iniquities that masquerade as "leadership".

By acting together, even when it was really hard, we honored each other and the incredible community and space we had inherited.

fig. 1:
a dome.

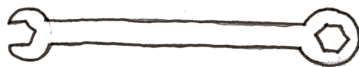


Just outside my dome was the Davis Bike Church, which helped all kinds of people fix their bikes for free (or for a small donation) teaching skills at the same time. They were another consensus-based organization; different in that the members (mostly) didn't live in the space.

When I moved to Toronto last year, I got involved with the Bike Pirates, who operate almost identically to the Bike Church!

This zinc came out of discussions at Pirates; they wanted their meetings to run a bit more smoothly, and some of the things I had learned in California seemed relevant...

But enough about me, let's dig into the Basics!



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probably the best way to understand consensus is to understand its goals....

GOALS OF CONSENSUS:

- * Create a respectful dialogue and non-oppressive space for collective decision-making.
- * Find a healthy balance in which we can make collective decisions which respect our individual needs.
- * Ensure that all voices have a chance to be heard and contribute to the final form of decisions.

* Consensus process creates a cooperative rather than an adversarial decision-making space. We work together to overcome problems, instead of jockeying for power....



* We strive to make decisions efficiently. It is more efficient to have a sometimes longer but more inclusive process than to waste energy clearing up the conflicts generated by exclusive processes.

* Consensus builds trust amongst participants, even when they're otherwise annoyed with each other, by making decisions everyone can live with, with all parties invested in the final outcomes. People are happier when they can trust one another!

BECAUSE THERE'S NO "U" or "I" IN "DEMOCRACY!"

* Democracy - where one votes on resolutions - has two major methods of disenfranchisement.

but if you need some definition in the negative....



1) Tyranny of the Majority
Coined by de Tocqueville, the tendency of the majority to vote for their own interests, ignoring the needs of the minority.

2) Tendency to Oligarchy
Large, representative democracies are in the de facto control of a very few: those with the ability to craft the resolutions that reach a vote.

Consensus avoids these traps by striving to include all stakeholders in the decision process, and having an active process of amendment to make proposals acceptable to all participants.

Furthermore, blocks mean that any individual can stop a proposal, preventing the Tyranny of the Majority, and encouraging those crafting proposals to consider the needs of all participants in the decision process.

* Finally, consensus puts us all on equal footing in the decision process, lessening the influence of big-mouthed individuals while giving more voice to the meek.

BASICS OF CONSENSUS

It's good to think of the meeting as a kind of big game with lots of little sub-games.

Then, if things are confusing, you can step back and say "Which game are we playing right now? Are we following the right process for this game?"



- * Send in items to the facilitators before the meeting.
- * Include a description of your item, and how long you expect it will take.
- * What is your goal for the item? What would a good outcome look like?
- * Make sure you have all of the relevant facts before the meeting. How much will it cost? What are the dates/ deadlines?
- * Try to avoid discussion for discussion's sake - build consensus through conversation outside of the meeting space.

MEETING STRUCTURE:

1. Check-Ins. Everyone at the meeting says their name, and briefly how they're feeling coming into the meeting. (It's helpful to know if people are feeling good or cranky!)
2. Announcements. People announce upcoming events, etc, which may be of general interest. Anything requiring more than one minute should be an item.
3. Choose Roles. Choose a note-keeper, time-keeper and vibe-check for this meeting and a facilitator(s) for the next meeting.
4. Report-Backs, from previous-meeting action-items, committees, or ongoing work-groups, etc. Anything needing more than 2 minutes should be an item!
5. Agenda Items. This is the bulk of most meetings. See the "flow of an item," pg 1, for more!
6. Check-Outs. Go around and say how you're feeling. Acknowledge things that were good in the meeting, and thank people for their contributions. Then go drink some tea or beers and decompress.... or just go sleep!



(this is a mathematical knot! No matter how you try, it can't be untied without being cut. Sometimes we have to accept uncomfortable abstractions....)

Some notes
on

FACILITATION.

Being the facilitator is a big job, requiring lots of vigilance. Here are some tools & tips for keeping the process on-track.

ARRANGING THE AGENDA.

* The facilitator's job starts with setting up the agenda!
Make sure to mix up big and small items, and to include a 10-min. break every hour or so. This helps people stay focused!!

TIME, TIME, TIME.

Consider a 3-hour cap on all meetings. This seems to be the upper limit for people to stay attentive and productive. A limit also helps keep things on track.

STEP BACK and LISTEN.

- * First of all, the facilitator should be less actively involved in the actual discussion, and instead should listen closely to all speakers and pay attention to the moods & body language of all the others involved in the process.
- * If the facilitator has an especially deep connection to any given item, they should stand aside for that item and let the co-facilitator or someone else take on facilitating that item. Otherwise you risk mucking up the process and keeping consensus from being reached.

- * Before the meeting, try to check in with the people presenting agenda items. Make sure you understand what the items are about, and what kinds of outcomes might be possible.

THE STACK.

- * Keep a list of people who want to speak. Work through it to ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard.
- * If people jump the queue, ask them to wait their turn.
- * Stay vigilant, so that you see when people want to be added to the stack.
- * If some people speak a lot relative to other members, move them lower in the queue. Conversely, consider moving up people who usually say little. This helps to maintain discussion, instead of monologue.
- * Try to keep the discussion from being between two people; keep the whole community involved!
- * Step IN to SUMMARIZE and SYNTHESIZE the discussion! This reduces repetition and keeps things on track.

have a solution?
then it's time to...

MAKE A PROPOSAL!!



1: State the Proposal.

- Be clear and concise, but cover contingencies.
- Who will bottom-line the proposal, to make sure necessary actions occur?
- Are there important Action Items attached to the proposal?
- Any important dates or deadlines?
(Sometimes it makes sense to decide to do something, and choose the date with another proposal.)

2: SHOW US YER THUMBS!

- Everyone shows their thumb, - up, down, or sideways - to indicate support for the proposal as stated. One may silently abstain by not showing a thumb.

- The facilitator picks out people with sideways thumbs and amends the proposal accordingly, based on their concerns.

UP-THUMB
Agree to the proposal as stated.

all thumbs up?
if so, the PROPOSAL PASSES!
mark it in the notes!

SIDEWAYS THUMB

Offer amendments or concerns.
The proposal can be changed to accommodate these concerns.
Can also be used as an active abstention, voicing concern and then silently abstaining.

After listening to a few sideways thumbs, the proposal should be repeated, and all thumbs shown again.

If it's too complicated to address all sideways thumbs, the proposal may be WITHDRAWN, returning to the usual discussion process.

DOWN-THUMB
Blocks the proposal entirely.
No form of the proposal would be acceptable.

(If you cut open a knot you get a braid.
By solving problems, we uncover beautiful patterns!)



Some Thoughts on
**SCALING
UP.**
(because everything's
bigger in Texas.)

The system in this pamphlet worked really well at the Domes, which had 28 residents. People tend to work together really well at that scale: it's about the size of a small tribe, and seems to be a very human scale.

If your community has hundreds of people, consider breaking it down into tribe-sized pieces of 12-30 people. Then have a board with representatives from the smaller groups. This works really well for the Berkeley Student Co-Ops, which has over 1,000 residents. Each house has its own consensus process, and the board of about 30 people has its own consensus. The board members are really meant to represent the houses, though! This also keeps the board from having to worry about dirty dish problems, so they can focus on issues affecting the whole co-operative.

(scaling down.)

With a smaller group (<10) it's tempting to drop the formalities. Actually, sticking closely to process can help a lot in small groups, too. That informality often leads to things being left out, people left unheard, and long-term disagreements....

Ok, that's all for now!

There are some awesome further resources out there if you want to read more. Here are a few!

"Consensus: A New Handbook for Grassroots Political, Social and Environmental Groups":
by Peter Gelderloos - Short and to the point, with some great ideas on addressing harmful dynamics in consensus groups.

"On Conflict and Consensus": CT Butler & Amy Rothstein.

Free online. Extensive and readable, by a co-founder of Food Not Bombs. One of (if not the) first book on consensus!

NASCO: North American Students of Cooperation have a yearly Institute good for meeting others using consensus on a day-to-day basis.

"Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shop keeper and farmer, landowner and laborer. People spoke without interruption, and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens. [...]

"I noticed how some speakers rambled and never seemed to get to the point. I grasped how others came to the matter directly at hand, and who made a set of arguments succinctly and cogently. I observed how some speakers used emotion and dramatic language, and tried to move the audience with such techniques, while other speakers were sober and even, and shunned emotion. [...]

"The meeting would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all. Unanimity, however, might be an agreement to disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy meant all men were heard, and a decision was to be taken together as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority.

"Only at the end of the meeting, as the sun was setting, would the regent speak. His purpose was to sum up what had been said and form some consensus among the diverse opinions. But no conclusion was forced on people who disagreed. If no agreement could be reached, another meeting would be held. [...]

"As a leader, I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place. I have always endeavoured to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. Oftentimes, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in a discussion. I always remember the regent's axiom: A leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind."

-NELSON MANDELA.

from "A Long Walk to Freedom," pg 35.