

Decision-Making
and
Facilitation
Training Materials

KBOO
Community
Radio

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May 27, 2009



DECISIONS
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“The first art of democracy is active listening.”
Frances Moore Lappé.

Decision-Making Processes: A Range of Options

Consensus

Consensus is about participation and equalizing power. As a decision making process it works creatively to include all people making the decision in finding a solution that everyone can live with, even if it is not their personal first choice. When everyone’s opinions, ideas, and reservations have been considered and the group members are willing to accept the decision as good for the organization, you have consensus.

Many nonprofit organizations and community groups use a consensus process to make decisions. Consensus is often confused with unanimity. In fact, it does not require every member of the group to vote “for” anything, but simply to affirm that (1) the proposal meets the standard of acceptability and (2) the process has been fair (that is, everyone has had full opportunity to express their views and the group has done its best to close the gap).

Consensus has many benefits for participants and the organization. The consideration of multiple perspectives leads to high quality decisions and creative solutions. The dialogue process fosters respect, responsibility, and cooperation among members of the group. Participants are able to build their listening and speaking skills by following discussions and sharing their perspective on the best means of achieving the group’s goals. This involvement generates both personal satisfaction and commitment.

Other kinds of decision making

Many groups that seek consensus as an ideal use other forms of decision making when they are appropriate or as a back up when consensus may not be possible. It’s important to recognize the benefits and drawbacks of other types of decision making.

- ◆ **Autocratic:** One individual has the authority to make decisions for the group. This is most often found in hierarchical organizations. It can be quick and may work well in emergencies or for simple choices. However, the quality of decision depends on the person making the call. People who were not consulted may not support or participate in carrying out the chosen course of action.
- ◆ **Autocratic with consultation:** A variation of above in which the decision maker seeks information and guidance from others.
- ◆ **Minority rule:** A small group or committee makes decisions for larger groups. The quality of the decision and its level of support in the organization depends on how well the small group represents the perspectives and values of the larger group. Committees may make decisions by consensus or using voting.
- ◆ **Majority rule:** One person, one vote. The choice that is acceptable to half or some higher percentage of the group wins. Everyone gets to participate and the process can be quick,

but there are winners and losers. The majority does not have to consider the minority and the quality of decisions may suffer due to lack of dialogue.

Conditions that support consensus

There are a few important conditions that need to be met for consensus building to be possible:

1. **Unity of purpose:** Common goals are what hold the group together. Participants need to be clear about their purpose. When consensus is difficult, the goals are used as the compass to ground and guide the discussion.
2. **Commitment to consensus:** Participants must be willing to work cooperatively, share power, and allow each person to contribute. They must commit to express their views clearly, to listen attentively, and to search for solutions that bring people and ideas together. This requires a commitment to self-awareness, a willingness to trust, and may mean developing communication skills. The group as a whole needs to support an environment that is safe, respectful, and values both feelings and diverse perspectives.
3. **Time:** It takes time to develop skills, build trusting relationships, and listen fully to develop shared solutions. The group needs patience as well as effective meeting planning that allows appropriate time for discussion while maintaining momentum.

Challenges

Consensus is not easy to establish as a process in organizations. Using consensus well can require training and practice for unfamiliar participants. Many challenges stem from the dominant culture that emphasizes individualism and authority-over-people rather than shared power. Competition, lack of interest in others, ownership of ideas, suppressing feelings, relying on authority, and acknowledged or unrealized prejudices can hold up groups with the best intentions. Consensus is likely to fail if:

1. One or more people block consensus to further their own power or agenda.
2. The group is dominated by outspoken, intimidating members.
3. The struggle for unity takes too much time, leading to stress, boredom, and no decisions. People get burnt out from the extensive involvement required to reach consensus.

When not to use consensus

- ◆ When the group is deeply divided in its attitude and perceptions
- ◆ When there are no good choices. An intolerable situation is hard for any group to collectively choose to put themselves in.
- ◆ In emergencies where urgent and immediate action is necessary.
- ◆ When the issue is trivial. Consensus is for thinking. If there's nothing to think about, delegate or flip a coin. Don't bore people.
- ◆ When you don't have enough information the question to ask is *not whether you can decide, but what you need to decide*, and when and how you can get the information.

“Without consideration there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries.”

Benjamin Barber

KBOO Style Decision Making

Board and staff reviewed and revised the following general provisions at an all day retreat in February. The intention is to begin using the process for group decision-making and adopt it as organizational policy once board, committees, staff, and workgroups have established a comfort level through training and practice.

The full proposal is available as a separate document. For training purposes, we will focus on critical elements, definitions, and expectations.

KBOO will use a consensus process for all decisions made by all groups.

We strive for the active agreement of every member of a decision-making body because consensus-based decision making fits our values of community, emotional maturity, diversity, and creativity.

Consensus means:

All members present, and deciding an issue, affirm that the process has been fair and the proposal meets KBOO’s standard of acceptability.

- ◆ A fair process means all members present and entitled to participate in decision making have had a chance to voice their perspectives, ideas, and concerns and the group has done its best to create a solution that serves the best interest of the organization.
- ◆ KBOO’s standard of acceptability is that all members present are willing to accept the decision and respect the outcome of the group.

Modified Consensus

If a group cannot reach full consensus the following modifications may be exercised:

- ◆ The group can delay the decision until its next meeting if the delay will not negatively affect the work of the board, staff, committees, or station as a whole.
- ◆ After honest consideration of all concerns, the group may proceed with consensus minus one and note the nature of the opposition in its record of the decision.
- ◆ If the group cannot proceed using consensus minus one, a member may request a vote, and a proposal may be passed by a simple majority of those present and voting.

Responsibilities of participation:

- ◆ **Serve the best interest of KBOO**, share relevant wisdom and perspective, listen respectfully to the needs and concerns of the whole group, and adopt creative solutions that move KBOO toward its goals.
- ◆ **Do your homework.** Present proposals to your decision-making group that follow an established format that includes background information and details such as relationship to charter, goals, and values; expected impacts on KBOO finances, staff, volunteers, and community; timeline; and process for stakeholder input.
- ◆ **Use hand signals to facilitate consensus building.**
- ◆ **Respect the facilitator.** The facilitator will be selected conduct each meeting, draw all participants into discussions, provide for full consideration of proposals, and ensure that the process meets KBOO’s standards of fairness and acceptability.

Guardianship

To serve the best interest of KBOO, members must remember that they are acting as Guardians of the station’s wellbeing. They are “guarding” KBOO’s mission, program charter, community reputation, and financial health. When members participate as committee, board, staff, or volunteers, they are playing a role. Like any role there are expectations. Here are a few:

Guardianship IS	Guardianship IS NOT
Speaking up when you have something to offer	Taking time to repeat something that’s been said or does not apply to the topic
Listening to the opinions of other group members	Assuming agreement from group members who are silent
Considering concerns and creatively modifying proposals to serve the best interest of KBOO	Repeatedly articulating a perspective without responding to questions or reservations
A willingness to let your own ideas go in favor of something else favored by the group	Denying responsibility to contribute to and take ownership for the outcomes of the groups you participate in.
Seeking the greatest benefits and positive outcomes for KBOO	Seeking the greatest benefits and positive outcomes for yourself

This concept of Guardianship is becoming infused throughout KBOO. As more and more people come to understand their important roles in serving the organization, awareness of Guardianship will increase. Eventually, members will recognize when they are thinking and acting on behalf of KBOO and hold each other accountable to high standards of service.


Hand Signals

Consensus building is a process by which the group uncovers common ground by sharing wisdom, concerns, and ideas for the best ways to achieve KBOO's goals. Using hand signals is an effective way to help the facilitator and other group members identify the degree of support among participants as decisions are being made.

- ◆ During discussion, use the following signals:

-  **thumbs up** = support for speaker's ideas

- circling hands** = interest to move discussion along

-  **1 finger** = need for clarification or more information

- ◆ When the facilitator asks for a show of support or a vote, use the following signals:

- 4 fingers** indicates total agreement.

- 3 fingers** indicates willingness to support.

- 2 fingers** indicates willingness to accept the proposal. Although you may not personally support it, you are not expected to actively implement the decision, but you agree to follow it, and not to undermine it.

- 1 finger** indicates a need for more information.

- 0 fingers** (a fist) indicates principled opposition, a block, based upon the belief that the proposal is detrimental to KBOO. This concern can be based upon impacts on KBOO finances, staff, volunteers, and community; timeline; lack of process for stakeholder input; or your finding that the proposal is contrary to KBOO's mission, values, or the law.

“When we are giving our full attention to something, when we are really attending, we are calling on all our resources of intelligence, feeling, and moral sensitivity.” Robert Bellah

Facilitation: Helping a group achieve a goal by guiding a process

The facilitator:

- ◆ Believes the power of the group lies in its diversity of perspectives
- ◆ Knows tools and methods to unleash the group’s energy
- ◆ Seeks decisions the group will own and implement
- ◆ Relies on group members to make things happen

Tools and methods include: designing, guiding, and defending the process along the way. Successful facilitation is based upon clear structures, guidelines, and involvement methods that support broad participation. Even the best facilitator will struggle when members of the group do not understand the process.

Preparation

- ◆ Get the background: goals and people
Start by understanding the group’s goals. Think through how a meeting will help to achieve the goals. Then think about people. Ask, who needs to be present? Who will attend? How many people? How much time do they need to work through an issue? Do you expect conflict?
- ◆ Design the agenda
You need a written agenda for every meeting that indicates the purpose of each item. Common purposes include: inform, decide, and recommend. The facilitator needs to determine how to work through each topic (what techniques to use, i.e. brainstorming) and estimate the time each item should take. Estimates are just that. Be sure to include flexibility to adjust to the unexpected.

Roles of the facilitator

Clarify so people can understand.

There are three parts of a comment: the intention, what was said, and what people heard. The facilitator works to match the intention with what people heard.

- ◆ Actions: restatement and elaboration.
Assure understanding by the group by repeating someone’s comment using different words. Hearing the same things two different ways is very valuable to people in the group. If you don’t quite understand the comment, other people aren’t likely to either. Ask for more information or for elaboration. Then use restatement.

Engage people

Draw out the full spectrum of ideas in the group by halting the over-talkers and seeking out comments from quiet folks.

- ◆ Actions: interrupt and request new voices

When people tend to monopolize a meeting, you can interrupt to remind participants of the goal to hear all ideas and concerns. Assure the speaker that he has been heard, and request to hear thoughts and concerns from others.

Build consensus

A key function of the facilitators is to help with group tracking by bringing threads of conversation together. The facilitator reiterates the sense of the meeting by clarifying areas of agreement and highlighting areas of disagreement that the group needs to continue to discuss.

- ◆ Actions: connect comments and summarize

The facilitator can connect comments of different speakers by identifying common threads during the process of restatement. As needed, the facilitator pauses the flow of conversation to summarize the interests that have been expressed on the current topic.

Keep pace

Once you have created a good agenda, keep to it. But remember to think of the agenda as a prediction, not a prescription. Your goal is to help group achieve its purpose, not to blindly follow the agenda. This means you need to be flexible. The facilitator works with the time allotted for discussions, maintains a sense of what decisions or actions need to be made to move forward, and works with the group to prioritize.

- ◆ Actions: time check and move on to new topic

The facilitator pauses the discussion for a progress report, putting the present topic into context of the meeting goals, and propose a course of action for the group. When moving on to a new topic the facilitator reviews what was decided, action items, and next steps including specific responsibilities undertaken by group members.

Challenging People

People come to groups with many different experiences, needs, and backgrounds. The way people position themselves and operate as a member of a group is often consistent with ongoing patterns of behavior that repeats unconsciously. These interactions grow from their unspoken assumptions about how the world works, how they can function within the world as they understand it, and where they feel comfortable. Some people get used to being important figures at the center; some prefer more anonymity and gravitate to the middle; others hover on the outside. With deliberate efforts to become aware, these patterns can change, and people can learn to recognize the power dynamics at play in themselves and others.

Here are some common roles and suggestions for coping with them.

- ◆ **Dominators:** Fast, loud, and sometimes brilliant, these folks love to interrupt and believe they have the right answers. They can be afraid of failure, objecting to anything that is not their route to success, or they can just blow a lot of air trying to impress people. It may be appropriate to ask them to observe silence and speak after others have had a chance. Alternatively, ask them to summarize the points around the table and express their sense of the common ground shared by the group.
- ◆ **Passion Players:** They have spirit, yes they do, and it's all focused on one issue. This is fine if the issue is central to the group's workplan, however, passion players are usually looking for a venue for their game. Reduce their tendency to alienate others by helping them connect to the group's priorities. Understand what's at the root of their passion, and find ways to channel this energy into specific activities that share a connection to their core issue.
- ◆ **Contrarians:** The lone wolf loves to criticize and often makes negative comparisons. This person is not committed to the group. Listen for words like, "you guys," or "you all." Invite the contrarian to consider themselves an equal member of the group and ask that (s)he speak from the collective perspective. How would their comments be different if they began with, "we should..."
- ◆ **Distractors:** A comment for any occasion, especially topics that are not on the agenda, distractors are usually demanding something from the group. They want to feel heard, reassured, welcome, and supported. They may need orientation to the group's goals, and they usually need help finding specific tasks that help them contribute something valuable to the group.
- ◆ **Shy violets:** Often desperate for the inclusiveness that a group offers, but afraid their opinions aren't valuable or would be rejected, shy violets need to be drawn in to open up. Help them become full members of the group by inviting them to work with another person or take on a routine task that they alone can own.

Difficult Situations

- ◆ **Mixed levels of experience.** People fluctuate in and out of groups in volunteer organizations. Making it easy for people to come in and connect to a group's work is critical for gaining new energy and capacity. It can be hard for newcomers to fit in with old timers. The longer the old timers have been around, the more knowledge they will take for granted. Asking someone to partner with the new member for a few months will not only demonstrate a welcoming attitude, but will provide the newcomer with a supportive Go-To person to help bring them up to speed. It's important for the facilitator to create a sense of safety so that questions can be raised and assumptions tested.
- ◆ **Interpersonal issues.** Past experiences contribute to trust and help create both positive and negative expectations. When interpersonal issues surface in the context of a group it is important to separate the current work of the group from issues between particular

members. When possible, the facilitator should make time outside the group to discuss the fear, distrust, and other feelings between individuals that can become barriers to the group's progress.

- ◆ **Major issues not on agenda.** When an urgent or important issue arises, but was not planned for discussion the facilitator can work with the group to determine the best means of dealing with the topic. First, acknowledge the current agenda and the priorities of the group. Consider whether the group is the appropriate body to handle the issue and what its role could be. Then propose a course of action on the new issue that balances the group's ability to work effectively on the emergent issue while maintaining its current course of action. Sometimes an urgent matter will take precedence, and the agenda may be remade on the spot. Often it is enough to spend a few minutes to let people be heard, reaffirm the importance of existing agenda items, and proceed as planned. Whatever the outcome, it is critically important to follow up on the details to maintain the flow of the group and communicate with others in the organization.

Meeting notes:

These are often a distillation and expansion of group memory. Notes provide context for members who were unable to attend and serve as a record of decisions, action agreements, and next steps. The facilitator is often best person to type the notes because (s)he is playing a role that requires neutrality. If someone else will be taking notes, they should be knowledgeable enough about the subject to follow the conversation, capture acronyms, and understand technical terms well enough to record them accurately. Notes should not be released until the facilitator has reviewed them.

Minutes require a totally different level of detail from notes. The facilitator is not in a position to record and report what was said by whom. For most purposes, notes provide sufficient records of the meeting without the investment of time required to produce official minutes.

What should be recorded?

- ◆ The names of those present at the meeting.
- ◆ A description of the reason for the discussion. What's the issue and why is it important?
- ◆ The facts and perceptions of the current situation.
- ◆ The ideas and options for moving forward.
- ◆ Analysis or exploration of potential consequences of alternative suggestions.
- ◆ Any decisions made about a course of action, next steps, and who will do what. This piece is critically important for follow up, and presents an opportunity for the notetaker to interject and request clarification.
- ◆ The decision-making process used and the outcome if appropriate. Was it a consensus decision? Did people vote? It may be important to record the number of votes, names with votes, and people who object or choose not to vote.

How should notes look?

Clean and clear. Use headings that correspond to the meeting agenda and topics of conversations. Create consistent conventions for type such as all caps for titles, bold for decisions, italics for next steps or loose ends.

Easy to distinguish big picture from detail. It often helps to summarize an issue with an introductory paragraph, then follow with details organized by lists or bullets.

Organized for follow through. Summarize or call out next steps and leadership roles. Make it easy for people to identify their own tasks and those of others.

Additional Resources

"Tools for Meetings and Workshops"

www.seedsforchange.org.uk

This compilation of tools includes activities for starting meetings, building trust, encouraging participation, energizing participants, and evaluating meetings.

"Facilitation Skills for Interpersonal Transformation," Ron Kraybill

http://www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/kraybill_handbook.pdf.

This article describes a number of skills and tools facilitators can use to help transform situations of group conflict. The article focuses on the role of the facilitator in defining the way in which people discuss issues and engage with each other in making decisions.

Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making, published by Center for Conflict Resolution, Madison, WI, 1981.

A great resource for study and practice, this is full of cartoons, little stories, and easy to read instructions on a variety of nuts and bolts topics.

"I've always maintained that it isn't the form that's going to make the difference. It isn't the rule or the procedure or the ideology, but it's the human beings that will make it."

Cesar Chavez