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# On Conflict and Consensus: a handbook on Formal Consensus decisionmaking

C.T. Butler and Amy Rothstein

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On Conflict and Consensus: a handbook on Formal  
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C.T. Butler's email: [ctbutler@biddeford.com](mailto:ctbutler@biddeford.com)  
Amy Rothstein's email: [amyr@tiac.net](mailto:amyr@tiac.net)

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**oligarchy**

a few people make the decisions for everyone

**representative democracy**

a few people are elected to make the decisions for everyone  
majority rule democracy the majority makes the decisions for everyone

**consensus**

everyone makes the decisions for everyone

**proposal**

A written plan that some members of a group present to the whole group for discussion and acceptance.

**stand aside**

To agree to disagree, to be willing to let a proposal be adopted despite unresolved concerns.

agree to disagree, that is, give their consent by standing aside, and allow the proposal to be accepted by the group.

### **consent**

Acceptance of the proposal, not necessarily agreement. Individuals are responsible for expressing their ideas, concerns and objections. Silence, in response to a call for consensus, signifies consent. Silence is not complete agreement; it is acceptance of the proposal.

### **decision**

The end product of an idea that started as a proposal and evolved to become a plan of action accepted by the whole group.

### **evaluation**

A group analysis at the end of a meeting about interpersonal dynamics during decisionmaking. This is a time to allow feelings to be expressed, with the goal of improving the functioning of future meetings. It is not a discussion or debate, nor should anyone comment on another's evaluation.

### **meeting**

An occasion in which people come together and, in an orderly way, make decisions.

#### **methods of decisionmaking:**

### **autocracy**

one person makes the decisions for everyone

*If war is the violent resolution of conflict,  
then peace is not the absence of conflict,  
but rather,  
the ability to resolve conflict  
without violence.*

C.T. Butler

Consensus, as a decisionmaking process, has been developing for centuries. Many people, in diverse communities, have contributed to this development. From them, we have borrowed generously and adapted freely.

# Front Matter

## **agenda contract**

The agenda contract is made when the agenda is reviewed and accepted. This agreement includes the items on the agenda, the order in which they are considered, and the time allotted to each. Unless the whole group agrees to change the agenda, the facilitator is obligated to keep to the contract. The decision to change the agenda must be a consensus, with little or no discussion.

## **agreement**

Complete agreement, with no unresolved concerns.

## **block**

If the allotted agenda time has been spent trying to achieve consensus, and unresolved legitimate concerns remain, the proposal may be considered blocked, or not able to be adopted at this meeting.

## **concern**

A point of departure or disagreement with a proposal.

## **conflict**

The expression of disagreement, which brings into focus diverse viewpoints, and provides the opportunity to explore their strengths and weaknesses.

## **consensus**

A decisionmaking process whereby decisions are reached when all members present consent to a proposal. This process does not assume everyone must be in complete agreement. When differences remain after discussion, individuals can



## Glossary

C.T. wrote the first edition of this book for the Pledge of Resistance in Boston when it had over 3500 signers and 150 affinity groups. All policy decisions for the organization were made at monthly spokesmeetings, involving at least one spokesperson from each affinity group. Members from the coordinating committee were charged with managing daily affairs. Spokesmeetings were often attended by over one hundred people; they were usually seventy strong. For almost two years the process of consensus worked well for the Pledge, empowering very large numbers of people to engage confidently in nonviolent direct action. The forerunner of the model of consensus outlined in this book was used throughout this period at spokesmeetings and, particularly well, at the weekly coordinators meetings. However, it was never systematically defined and written down or formally adopted.

For over two years, C.T. attended monthly spokesmeetings, weekly coordinating meetings, and uncounted committee meetings. He saw the need to develop a consistent way to introduce new members to consensus. At first, he looked for existing literature to aid in conducting workshops on the consensus process. He was unable to find any suitable material, so he set out to develop his own.

The first edition of this book is the result of a year of research into consensus in general and the Pledge process in particular. It was mostly distributed to individuals who belonged to various groups already struggling to use some form of consensus process. The fourth printing included an introduction which added the concept of secular consensus. The secular label distinguishes this model of consensus from both the more traditional model found in faith-based communities and the rather informal consensus commonly found in progressive groups.

Unfortunately, the label of secular consensus gave the impression that we were denying any connection with spirituality. We wanted to clearly indicate that the model of consensus

we were proposing was distinct, but we did not want to exclude the valuable work of faith-based communities.

Therefore, since the sixth printing we have used the name Formal Consensus because it adequately defines this distinction. We hope that Formal Consensus will continue to be an important contribution to the search for an effective, more unifying, democratic decisionmaking process.

Formal Consensus is a specific kind of decisionmaking. It must be defined by the group using it. It provides a foundation, structure, and collection of techniques for efficient and productive group discussions. The foundation is the commonly-held principles and decisions which created the group originally. The structure is predetermined, although flexible. The agenda is formal and extremely important. The roles, techniques, and skills necessary for smooth operation must be accessible to and developed in all members. Evaluation of the process must happen on a consistent and frequent basis, as a tool for self-education and self-management. Above all, Formal Consensus must be taught. It is unreasonable to expect people to be familiar with this process already. In general, cooperative nonviolent conflict resolution does not exist in modern North American society. These skills must be developed in what is primarily a competitive environment. Only time will tell if, in fact, this model will flourish and prove itself effective and worthwhile.

We are now convinced more than ever that the model presented in this book is profoundly significant for the future of our species. We must learn to live together cooperatively, resolving our conflicts nonviolently and making our decisions consensually. We must learn to value diversity and respect all life, not just on a physical level, but emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. We are all in this together.

— C.T. Butler and Amy Rothstein

— August 1991

composed of people with similar viewpoints, whereas small group discussions are more useful if they are made up of people with diverse viewpoints or even a random selection of people.

## **Go-rounds**

This is a simple technique that encourages participation. The facilitator states a question and then goes around the room inviting everyone to answer briefly. This is not an open discussion. This is an opportunity to individually respond to specific questions, not to comment on each other's responses or make unrelated remarks.

## **Fishbowl**

The fishbowl is a special form of small group discussion. Several members representing differing points of view meet in an inner circle to discuss the issue while everyone else forms an outer circle and listens. At the end of a predetermined time, the whole group reconvenes and evaluates the fishbowl discussion. An interesting variation: first, put all the men in the fishbowl, then all the women, and they discuss the same topics.

## **Active Listening**

If the group is having a hard time understanding a point of view, someone might help by active listening. Listen to the speaker, then repeat back what was heard and ask the speaker if this accurately reflects what was meant.

## **Caucusing**

A caucus might be useful to help a multifaceted conflict become clearer by unifying similar perspectives or defining specific points of departure without the focus of the whole group. It might be that only some people attend a caucus, or it might be that all are expected to participate in a caucus. The difference between caucuses and small groups is that caucuses are

# **The Advantages of Formal Consensus**

There are many ways to make decisions. Sometimes, the most efficient way to make decisions would be to just let the manager (or CEO, or dictator) make them. However, efficiency is not the only criteria. When choosing a decisionmaking method, one needs to ask two questions. Is it a fair process? Does it produce good solutions?

To judge the process, consider the following: Does the meeting flow smoothly? Is the discussion kept to the point? Does it take too long to make each decision? Does the leadership determine the outcome of the discussion? Are some people overlooked?

To judge the quality of the end result, the *decision*, consider: Are the people making the decision, and all those affected, satisfied with the result? To what degree is the intent of the original *proposal* accomplished? Are the underlying issues addressed? Is there an appropriate use of resources? Would the group make the same decision again?

Autocracy can work, but the idea of a benevolent dictator is just a dream. We believe that it is inherently better to involve every person who is affected by the decision in the decision-making process. This is true for several reasons. The decision would reflect the will of the entire group, not just the leadership. The people who carry out the plans will be more satisfied with their work. And, as the old adage goes, two heads are better than one.

This book presents a particular model for decisionmaking we call Formal Consensus. Formal Consensus has a clearly defined structure. It requires a commitment to active cooperation, disciplined speaking and listening, and respect for the contributions of every member. Likewise, every person has the responsibility to actively participate as a creative individual within the structure.

Avoidance, denial, and repression of conflict is common during meetings. Therefore, using Formal Consensus might not be easy at first. Unresolved conflict from previous experiences

times, the attitude of the group can be dominated by an idea, a mood, or a handful of people.

## Small Group

Breaking into smaller groups can be very useful. These small groups can be diads or triads or even larger. They can be selected randomly or self-selected. If used well, in a relatively short amount of time all participants have the opportunity to share their own point of view. Be sure to set clear time limits and select a notetaker for each group. When the larger group reconvenes, the notetakers relate the major points and concerns of their group. Sometimes, notetakers can be requested to add only new ideas or concerns and not repeat something already covered in another report. It is also helpful for the scribe to write these reports so all can see the cumulative result and be sure every idea and concern gets on the list.

## Brainstorming

This is a very useful technique when ideas need to be solicited from the whole group. The normal rule of waiting to speak until the facilitator recognizes you is suspended and everyone is encouraged to call out ideas to be written by the scribe for all to see. It is helpful if the atmosphere created is one in which all ideas, no matter how unusual or incomplete, are appropriate and welcomed. This is a situation in which suggestions can be used as catalysts, with ideas building one upon the next, generating very creative possibilities. Avoid evaluating each other's ideas during this time.

## Group Discussion Techniques

It is often assumed that the best form of group discussion is that which has one person at a time speak to the whole group. This is true for some discussions. But, sometimes, other techniques of group discussion can be more productive and efficient than whole group discussion. The following are some of the more common and frequently used techniques. These could be suggested by anyone at the meeting. Therefore, it is a good idea if everyone is familiar with these techniques. Again, be creative and adaptive. Different situations require different techniques. Only experience reveals how each one affects group dynamics or the best time to use it.

### Identification

It is good to address each other by name. One way to learn names is to draw a seating plan, and as people go around and introduce themselves, write their names on it. Later, refer to the plan and address people by their names. In large groups, name tags can be helpful. Also, when people speak, it is useful for them to identify themselves so all can gradually learn each others' names.

### Whole Group

The value of whole group discussion is the evolution of a group idea. A group idea is not simply the sum of individual ideas, but the result of the interaction of ideas during discussion. Whole group discussion can be unstructured and productive. It can also be very structured, using various facilitation techniques to focus it. Often, whole group discussion does not produce maximum participation or a diversity of ideas. During whole group discussion, fewer people get to speak, and, at

could come rushing forth and make the process difficult, if not impossible. Practice and discipline, however, will smooth the process. The benefit of everyone's participation and cooperation is worth the struggle it may initially take to ensure that all voices are heard.

It is often said that consensus is time-consuming and difficult. Making complex, difficult decisions is time-consuming, no matter what the process. Many different methods can be efficient, if every participant shares a common understanding of the rules of the game. Like any process, Formal Consensus can be inefficient if a group does not first assent to follow a particular structure.

This book codifies a formal structure for decisionmaking. It is hoped that the relationship between this book and Formal Consensus would be similar to the relationship between Robert's Rules of Order and Parliamentary Procedure.

Methods of decisionmaking can be seen on a continuum with one person having total authority on one end to everyone sharing power and responsibility on the other.

The level of participation increases along this decisionmaking continuum. Oligarchies and autocracies offer no participation to many of those who are directly affected. Representative, majority rule, and consensus democracies involve everybody, to different degrees.

### Group Dynamics

A group, by definition, is a number of individuals having some unifying relationship. The group dynamic created by consensus process is completely different from that of Parliamentary Procedure, from start to finish. It is based on different values and uses a different language, a different structure, and many different techniques, although some techniques are sim-

ilar. It might be helpful to explain some broad concepts about group dynamics and consensus.

## **Conflict**

While decisionmaking is as much about conflict as it is about agreement, Formal Consensus works best in an atmosphere in which conflict is encouraged, supported, and resolved cooperatively with respect, nonviolence, and creativity. Conflict is desirable. It is not something to be avoided, dismissed, diminished, or denied.

## **Majority Rule and Competition**

Generally speaking, when a group votes using majority rule or Parliamentary Procedure, a competitive dynamic is created within the group because it is being asked to choose between two (or more) possibilities. It is just as acceptable to attack and diminish another's point of view as it is to promote and endorse your own ideas. Often, voting occurs before one side reveals anything about itself, but spends time solely attacking the opponent! In this adversarial environment, one's ideas are owned and often defended in the face of improvements.

## **Consensus and Cooperation**

Consensus process, on the other hand, creates a cooperative dynamic. Only one proposal is considered at a time. Everyone works together to make it the best possible decision for the group. Any concerns are raised and resolved, sometimes one by one, until all voices are heard. Since proposals are no longer the property of the presenter, a solution can be created more cooperatively.

## **Censoring**

(This technique and the next are somewhat different from the others. They may not be appropriate for some groups.) If someone speaks out of turn consistently, the facilitator warns the individual at least twice that if the interruptions do not stop, the facilitator will declare that person censored. This means the person will not be permitted to speak for the rest of this agenda item. If the interrupting behavior has been exhibited over several agenda items, then the censoring could be for a longer period of time. This technique is meant to be used at the discretion of the facilitator. If the facilitator censors someone and others in the meeting voice disapproval, it is better for the facilitator to step down from the role and let someone else facilitate, rather than get into a discussion about the ability and judgement of the facilitator. The rationale is the disruptive behavior makes facilitation very difficult, is disrespectful and, since it is assumed that everyone observed the behavior, the voicing of disapproval about a censoring indicates lack of confidence in the facilitation rather than support for the disruptive behavior.

## **Expulsion**

If an individual still acts very disruptively, the facilitator may confront the behavior. Ask the person to explain the reasons for this behavior, how it is in the best interest of the group, how it relates to the group's purpose, and how it is in keeping with the goals and principles. If the person is unable to answer these questions or if the answers indicate disagreement with the common purpose, then the facilitator can ask the individual to withdraw from the meeting.

erator needs to recognize this and take time to reformulate the proposal with the new information, modifications, or deletions. Then the proposal is presented to the group so that everyone can be clear about what is being considered. Again, this might be done by the facilitator, the notetaker, or anyone else.

## **Stepping out of Role**

If the facilitator wants to become involved in the discussion or has strong feelings about a particular agenda item, the facilitator can step out of the role and participate in the discussion, allowing another member to facilitate during that time.

## **Passing the Clipboard**

Sometimes information needs to be collected during the meeting. To save time, circulate a clipboard to collect this information. Once collected, it can be entered into the written record and/or presented to the group by the facilitator.

## **Polling (Straw Polls)**

The usefulness of polling within consensus is primarily clarification of the relative importance of several issues. It is an especially useful technique when the facilitator is confused or uncertain about the status of a proposal and wants some clarity to be able to suggest what might be the next process technique. Polls are not decisions, they are non-binding referenda. All too often, straw polls are used when the issues are completely clear and the majority wants to intimidate the minority into submission by showing overwhelming support rather than to discuss the issues and resolve the concerns. Clear and simple questions are best. Polls that involve three or more choices can be especially manipulative. Use with discretion.

## **Proposals**

In the consensus process, only proposals which intend to accomplish the common purpose are considered. During discussion of a proposal, everyone works to improve the proposal to make it the best decision for the group. All proposals are adopted unless the group decides it is contrary to the best interests of the group.

## **Characteristics of Formal Consensus**

Before a group decides to use Formal Consensus, it must honestly assess its ability to honor the principles described in Chapter Three. If the principles described in this book are not already present or if the group is not willing to work to create them, then Formal Consensus will not be possible. Any group which wants to adopt Formal Consensus needs to give considerable attention to the underlying principles which support consensus and help the process operate smoothly. This is not to say each and every one of the principles described herein must be adopted by every group, or that each group cannot add its own principles specific to its goals, but rather, each group must be very clear about the foundation of principles or common purposes they choose before they attempt the Formal Consensus decisionmaking process.

## **Formal Consensus is the least violent decisionmaking process.**

Traditional nonviolence theory holds that the use of power to dominate is violent and undesirable. Nonviolence expects people to use their power to persuade without deception, coercion, or malice, using truth, creativity, logic, respect, and love. Majority rule voting process and Parliamentary

Procedure both accept, and even encourage, the use of power to dominate others. The goal is the winning of the vote, often regardless of another choice which might be in the best interest of the whole group. The will of the majority supersedes the concerns and desires of the minority. This is inherently violent. Consensus strives to take into account everyone's concerns and resolve them before any decision is made. Most importantly, this process encourages an environment in which everyone is respected and all contributions are valued.

### **Formal Consensus is the most democratic decisionmaking process.**

Groups which desire to involve as many people as possible need to use an inclusive process. To attract and involve large numbers, it is important that the process encourages participation, allows equal access to power, develops cooperation, promotes empowerment, and creates a sense of individual responsibility for the group's actions. All of these are cornerstones of Formal Consensus. The goal of consensus is not the selection of several options, but the development of one decision which is the best for the whole group. It is synthesis and evolution, not competition and attrition.

### **Formal Consensus is based on the principles of the group.**

Although every individual must consent to a decision before it is adopted, if there are any objections, it is not the choice of the individual alone to determine if an objection prevents the proposal from being adopted. Every objection or concern must first be presented before the group and either resolved or validated. A valid objection is one in keeping with all previous de-

### **Silence**

If the pace is too fast, if energies and tensions are high, if people are speaking out of turn or interrupting one another, it is appropriate for anyone to suggest a moment of silence to calm and refocus energy.

### **Taking a Break**

In the heat of discussion, people are usually resistant to interrupting the flow to take a break, but a wise facilitator knows, more often than not, that a five minute break will save a frustrating half hour or more of circular discussion and fruitless debate.

### **Call For Consensus**

The facilitator, or any member recognized to speak by the facilitator, can call for a test for consensus. To do this, the facilitator asks if there are any unresolved concerns which remain unaddressed. (See page 13.)

### **Summarizing**

The facilitator might choose to focus what has been said by summarizing. The summary might be made by the facilitator, the notetaker, or anyone else appropriate. This preempts a common problem, in which the discussion becomes circular, and one after another, speakers repeat each other.

### **Reformulating the Proposal**

After a long discussion, it sometimes happens that the proposal becomes modified without any formal decision. The facil-



possible problems and solutions that exist. Be creative. Invent your own.

## **Listing**

To help the discussion flow more smoothly, those who want to speak can silently signal the facilitator, who would add the person's name to a list of those wishing to speak, and call on them in that order.

## **Stacking**

If many people want to speak at the same time, it is useful to ask all those who would like to speak to raise their hands. Have them count off, and then have them speak in that order. At the end of the stack, the facilitator might call for another stack or try another technique.

## **Pacing**

The pace or flow of the meeting is the responsibility of the facilitator. If the atmosphere starts to become tense, choose techniques which encourage balance and cooperation. If the meeting is going slowly and people are becoming restless, suggest a stretch or rearrange the agenda.

## **Checking the Process**

If the flow of the meeting is breaking down or if one person or small group seems to be dominating, anyone can call into question the technique being used and suggest an alternative.

cisions of the group and based upon the commonly-held principles or foundation adopted by the group. The objection must not only address the concerns of the individual, but it must also be in the best interest of the group as a whole. If the objection is not based upon the foundation, or is in contradiction with a prior decision, it is not valid for the group, and therefore, out of order.

## **Formal Consensus is desirable in larger groups.**

If the structure is vague, decisions can be difficult to achieve. They will become increasingly more difficult in larger groups. Formal Consensus is designed for large groups. It is a highly structured model. It has guidelines and formats for managing meetings, facilitating discussions, resolving conflict, and reaching decisions. Smaller groups may need less structure, so they may choose from the many techniques and roles suggested in this book.

## **Formal Consensus works better when more people participate.**

Consensus is more than the sum total of ideas of the individuals in the group. During discussion, ideas build one upon the next, generating new ideas, until the best decision emerges. This dynamic is called the creative interplay of ideas. Creativity plays a major part as everyone strives to discover what is best for the group. The more people involved in this cooperative process, the more ideas and possibilities are generated. Consensus works best with everyone participating. (This assumes, of course, that everyone in the group is trained in Formal Consensus and is actively using it.)

## **Formal Consensus is not inherently time-consuming.**

Decisions are not an end in themselves. Decisionmaking is a process which starts with an idea and ends with the actual implementation of the decision. While it may be true in an autocratic process that decisions can be made quickly, the actual implementation will take time. When one person or a small group of people makes a decision for a larger group, the decision not only has to be communicated to the others, but it also has to be acceptable to them or its implementation will need to be forced upon them. This will certainly take time, perhaps a considerable amount of time. On the other hand, if everyone participates in the decisionmaking, the decision does not need to be communicated and its implementation does not need to be forced upon the participants. The decision may take longer to make, but once it is made, implementation can happen in a timely manner. The amount of time a decision takes to make from start to finish is not a factor of the process used; rather, it is a factor of the complexity of the proposal itself. An easy decision takes less time than a difficult, complex decision, regardless of the process used or the number of people involved. Of course, Formal Consensus works better if one practices patience, but any process is improved with a generous amount of patience.

## **Formal Consensus cannot be secretly disrupted.**

This may not be an issue for some groups, but many people know that the state actively surveilles, infiltrates, and disrupts nonviolent domestic political and religious groups. To counteract anti-democratic tactics by the state, a group would need to develop and encourage a decisionmaking process which could

## **Facilitation Techniques**

There are a great many techniques to assist the facilitator in managing the agenda and group dynamics. The following are just a few of the more common and frequently used techniques available to the facilitator. Be creative and adaptive. Different situations require different techniques. With experience will come an understanding of how they affect group dynamics and when is the best time to use them.

### **Equalizing Participation**

The facilitator is responsible for the fair distribution of attention during meetings. Facilitators call the attention of the group to one speaker at a time. The grammar school method is the most common technique for choosing the next speaker. The facilitator recognizes each person in the order in which hands are raised. Often, inequities occur because the attention is dominated by an individual or class of individuals. This can occur because of socialized behavioral problems such as racism, sexism, or the like, or internal dynamics such as experience, seniority, fear, shyness, disrespect, ignorance of the process, etc. Inequities can be corrected in many creative ways. For example, if men are speaking more often than women, the facilitator can suggest a pause after each speaker, the women counting to five before speaking, the men counting to ten. In controversial situations, the facilitator can request that three speakers speak for the proposal, and three speak against it. If the group would like to avoid having the facilitator select who speaks next, the group can self-select by asking the last speaker to pass an object, a talking stick, to the next. Even more challenging, have each speaker stand before speaking, and begin when there is only one person standing. These are only a handful of the many

not be covertly controlled or manipulated. Formal Consensus, if practiced as described in this book, is just such a process. Since the assumption is one of cooperation and good will, it is always appropriate to ask for an explanation of how and why someone's actions are in the best interest of the group. Disruptive behavior must not be tolerated. While it is true this process cannot prevent openly disruptive behavior, the point is to prevent covert disruption, hidden agenda, and malicious manipulation of the process. Any group for which infiltration is a threat ought to consider the process outlined in this book if it wishes to remain open, democratic, and productive.

## Techniques

# On Decisionmaking

are recorded accurately, and are reproduced and distributed according to the desires of the group (e.g., mailed to everyone, handed out at the next meeting, filed, etc.).

## Doorkeeper

Doorkeepers are selected in advance of the meeting and need to arrive early enough to familiarize themselves with the physical layout of the space and to receive any last minute instructions from the facilitator. They need to be prepared to miss the first half hour of the meeting. Prior to the start of the meeting, the doorkeeper welcomes people, distributes any literature connected to the business of the meeting, and informs them of any pertinent information (the meeting will start fifteen minutes late, the bathrooms are not wheelchair accessible, etc.).

A doorkeeper is useful, especially if people tend to be late. When the meeting begins, they continue to be available for latecomers. They might briefly explain what has happened so far and where the meeting is currently on the agenda. The doorkeeper might suggest to the latecomers that they refrain from participating in the current agenda item and wait until the next item before participating. This avoids wasting time, repeating discussion, or addressing already resolved concerns. Of course, this is not a rigid rule. Use discretion and be respectful of the group's time.

Experience has shown this role to be far more useful than it might at first appear, so experiment with it and discover if meetings can become more pleasant and productive because of the friendship and care which is expressed through the simple act of greeting people as they arrive at the meeting.

ing brainstorm, reportbacks from small groups, or whenever it would help the group for all to see written information.

## Notetaker

The importance of a written record of the meetings cannot be overstated. The written record, sometimes called notes or minutes, can help settle disputes of memory or verify past decisions. Accessible notes allow absent members to participate in ongoing work. Useful items to include in the notes are:

- date and attendance
  - agenda
  - brief notes (highlights, statistics...)
  - reports
  - discussion
- verbatim notes
  - proposals (with revisions)
  - decisions (with concerns listed)
  - announcements
  - next meeting time and place
  - evaluation comments

After each decision is made, it is useful to have the notetaker read the notes aloud to ensure accuracy. At the end of the meeting, it is also helpful to have the notetaker present to the group a review of all decisions. In larger groups, it is often useful to have two notetakers simultaneously, because everyone, no matter how skilled, hears information and expresses it differently. Notetakers are responsible for making sure the notes

Decisions are adopted when all participants consent to the result of discussion about the original proposal. People who do not agree with a proposal are responsible for expressing their concerns. No decision is adopted until there is resolution of every concern. When concerns remain after discussion, individuals can agree to disagree by acknowledging that they have unresolved concerns, but consent to the proposal anyway and allow it to be adopted. Therefore, reaching consensus does not assume that everyone must be in complete agreement, a highly unlikely situation in a group of intelligent, creative individuals.

Consensus is becoming popular as a democratic form of decisionmaking. It is a process which requires an environment in which all contributions are valued and participation is encouraged. There are, however, few organizations which use a model of consensus which is specific, consistent, and efficient. Often, the consensus process is informal, vague, and very inconsistent. This happens when the consensus process is not based upon a solid foundation and the structure is unknown or nonexistent. To develop a more formal type of consensus process, any organization must define the commonly held principles which form the foundation of the group's work and intentionally choose the type of structure within which the process is built.

This book contains the building materials for just such a process. Included is a description of the principles from which a foundation is created, the flowchart and levels of structure which are the frame for the process, and the other materials needed for designing a variety of processes which can be customized to fit the needs of the organization.

## The Structure of Formal Consensus

Many groups regularly use diverse discussion techniques learned from practitioners in the field of conflict resolution. Although this book does include several techniques, the book

is about a *structure* called Formal Consensus. This structure creates a separation between the *identification* and the *resolution* of concerns. Perhaps, if everybody in the group has no trouble saying what they think, they won't need this structure. This predictable structure provides opportunities to those who don't feel empowered to participate.

Formal Consensus is presented in levels or cycles. In the first level, the idea is to allow everyone to express their perspective, including concerns, but group time is not spent on resolving problems. In the second level the group focuses its attention on identifying concerns, still not resolving them. This requires discipline. Reactive comments, even funny ones, and resolutions, even good ones, can suppress the creative ideas of others. Not until the third level does the structure allow for exploring resolutions.

Each level has a different scope and focus. At the first level, the scope is broad, allowing the discussion to consider the philosophical and political implications as well as the general merits and drawbacks and other relevant information. The only focus is on the proposal as a whole. Some decisions can be reached after discussion at the first level. At the second level, the scope of the discussion is limited to the concerns. They are identified and publicly listed, which enables everyone to get an overall picture of the concerns. The focus of attention is on identifying the body of concerns and grouping similar ones. At the third level, the scope is very narrow. The focus of discussion is limited to a single unresolved concern until it is resolved.

## **The Flow of the Formal Consensus Process**

In an ideal situation, every proposal would be submitted in writing and briefly introduced the first time it appears on the agenda. At the next meeting, after everyone has had enough

good faith. Assume the concern is in the best interest of the group. While they are doing this, everyone else might take a short break, or continue with other agenda items. When they return, the meeting (after completing the current agenda item) hears from the advocate. The intent here is the presentation of the concern by the advocate rather than the upset person so the other group members might hear it without the emotional charge. This procedure is a last resort, to be used only when emotions are out of control and the person feels unable to successfully express an idea.

## **Timekeeper**

The role of timekeeper is very useful in almost all meetings. One is selected at the beginning of the meeting to assist the facilitator in keeping within the time limits set in the agenda contract. The skill in keeping time is the prevention of an unnecessary time pressure which might interfere with the process. This can be accomplished by keeping everyone aware of the status of time remaining during the discussion. Be sure to give ample warning towards the end of the time limit so the group can start to bring the discussion to a close or decide to rearrange the agenda to allow more time for the current topic. There is nothing inherently wrong with going over time as long as everyone consents.

## **Public Scribe**

The role of public scribe is simply the writing, on paper or blackboard, of information for the whole group to see. This person primarily assists the facilitator by taking a task which might otherwise distract the facilitator and interfere with the overall flow of the meeting. This role is particularly useful dur-

person who is willing to remain somewhat aloof and is not personally invested in the content of the discussion would be a good candidate for peacekeeper. This person is selected without discussion by all present at the beginning of the meeting. If no one wants this role, or if no one can be selected without objection, proceed without one, recognizing that the facilitator's job will most likely be more difficult.

This task entails paying attention to the overall mood or tone of the meeting. When tensions increase dramatically andangers flare out of control, the peacekeeper interrupts briefly to remind the group of its common goals and commitment to cooperation. The most common way to accomplish this is a call for a few moments of silence.

The peacekeeper is the only person with prior permission to interrupt a speaker or speak without first being recognized by the facilitator. Also, it is important to note that the peacekeeper's comments are always directed at the whole group, never at one individual or small group within the larger group. Keep comments short and to the point.

The peacekeeper may always, of course, point out when the group did something well. People always like to be acknowledged for positive behavior.

## **Advocate**

Like the peacekeeper, advocates are selected without discussion at the beginning of the meeting. If, because of strong emotions, someone is unable to be understood, the advocate is called upon to help. The advocate would interrupt the meeting, and invite the individual to literally step outside the meeting for some one-on-one discussion. An upset person can talk to someone with whom they feel comfortable. This often helps them make clear what the concern is and how it relates to the best interest of the group. Assume the individual is acting in

time to read it and carefully consider any concerns, the discussion would begin in earnest. Often, it would not be until the third meeting that a decision is made. Of course, this depends upon how many proposals are on the table and the urgency of the decision.

## **Clarify the Process**

The facilitator introduces the person presenting the proposal and gives a short update on any previous action on it. It is very important for the facilitator to explain the process which brought this proposal to the meeting, and to describe the process that will be followed to move the group through the proposal to consensus. It is the facilitator's job to make sure that every participant clearly understands the structure and the discussion techniques being employed while the meeting is in progress.

## **Present Proposal or Issue**

When possible and appropriate, proposals ought to be prepared in writing and distributed well in advance of the meeting in which a decision is required. This encourages prior discussion and consideration, helps the presenter anticipate concerns, minimizes surprises, and involves everyone in creating the proposal. (If the necessary groundwork has not been done, the wisest choice might be to send the proposal to committee. Proposal writing is difficult to accomplish in a large group. The committee would develop the proposal for consideration at a later time.) The presenter reads the written proposal aloud, provides background information, and states clearly its benefits and reasons for adoption, including addressing any existing concerns.

## Questions Which Clarify the Presentation

Questions are strictly limited by the facilitator to those which seek greater comprehension of the proposal as presented. Everyone deserves the opportunity to fully understand what is being asked of the group before discussion begins. This is not a time for comments or concerns. If there are only a few questions, they can be answered one at a time by the person presenting the proposal. If there are many, a useful technique is hearing all the questions first, then answering them together. After answering all clarifying questions, the group begins discussion.

items getting more time than items which can wait until the next meeting, etc. Also, review the suggested presenters and time limits. If anything seems inappropriate or unreasonable, adjustments may be made. Once the whole agenda has been reviewed and consented to, the agenda becomes a contract. The facilitator is obligated to follow the order and time limits. This encourages members to be on time to meetings.

## Good Will

Always try to assume good will. Assume every statement and action is sincerely intended to benefit the group. Assume that each member understands the group's purpose and accepts the agenda as a contract.

Often, when we project our feelings and expectations onto others, we influence their actions. If we treat others as though they are trying to get attention, disrupt meetings, or pick fights, they will often fulfill our expectations. A resolution to conflict is more likely to occur if we act as though there will be one. This is especially true if someone is intentionally trying to cause trouble or who is emotionally unhealthy. Do not attack the person, but rather, assume good will and ask the person to explain to the group how that person's statements or actions are in the best interest of the group. It is also helpful to remember to separate the actor from the action. While the behavior may be unacceptable, the person is not *bad*. Avoid accusing the person of *being* the way they behave. Remember, no one has *the* answer. The group's work is the search for the best and most creative process, one which fosters a mutually satisfying resolution to any concern which may arise.

## Peacekeeper

The role of peacekeeper is most useful in large groups or when very touchy, controversial topics are being discussed. A



think about a personal response to a given situation. Also, it is not appropriate for the facilitator to give a particular point of view or dominate the discussion. This does not build trust, especially in those who do not agree with the facilitator.

### **Clarity of Process**

The facilitator is responsible for leading the meeting openly so that everyone present is aware of the process and how to participate. This means it is important to constantly review what just happened, what is about to happen, and how it will happen. Every time a new discussion technique is introduced, explain how it will work and what is to be accomplished. This is both educational and helps new members participate more fully.

### **Agenda Contract**

The facilitator is responsible for honoring the agenda contract. The facilitator keeps the questions and discussion focused on the agenda item. Be gentle, but firm, because fairness dictates that each agenda item gets only the time allotted. The agenda contract is made when the agenda is reviewed and accepted. This agreement includes the items on the agenda, the order in which they are considered, and the time allotted to each. Unless the whole group agrees to change the agenda, the facilitator is obligated to keep the contract. The decision to change the agenda must be a consensus, with little or no discussion.

At the beginning of the meeting, the agenda is presented to the whole group and reviewed, item by item. Any member can add an item if it has been omitted. While every agenda suggestion must be included in the agenda, it does not necessarily get as much time as the presenter wants. Time ought to be divided fairly, with individuals recognizing the fairness of old items generally getting more time than new items and urgent

## **Level One: Broad Open Discussion**

### **General Discussion**

Discussion at this level ought to be the broadest in scope. Try to encourage comments which take the whole proposal into account; i.e., why it is a good idea, or general problems which need to be addressed. Discussion at this level often has a philosophical or principled tone, purposely addressing how this proposal might affect the group in the long run or what kind of precedent it might create, etc. It helps every proposal to be discussed in this way, before the group engages in resolving particular concerns. Do not allow one concern to become the focus of the discussion. When particular concerns are raised, make note of them but encourage the discussion to move back to the proposal as a whole. Encourage the creative interplay of comments and ideas. Allow for the addition of any relevant factual information. For those who might at first feel opposed to the proposal, this discussion is consideration of why it might be good for the group in the broadest sense. Their initial concerns might, in fact, be of general concern to the whole group. And, for those who initially support the proposal, this is a time to think about the proposal broadly and some of the general problems. If there seems to be general approval of the proposal, the facilitator, or someone recognized to speak, can request a call for consensus.

## Call for Consensus

The facilitator asks, “Are there any unresolved concerns?” or “Are there any concerns remaining?” After a period of silence, if no additional concerns are raised, the facilitator declares that consensus is reached and the proposal is read for the record. The length of silence ought to be directly related to the degree of difficulty in reaching consensus; an easy decision requires a short silence, a difficult decision requires a longer silence. This encourages everyone to be at peace in accepting the consensus before moving on to other business. At this point, the facilitator assigns task responsibilities or sends the decision to a committee for implementation. It is important to note that the question is not “Is there consensus?” or “Does everyone agree?”. These questions do not encourage an environment in which all concerns can be expressed. If some people have a concern, but are shy or intimidated by a strong showing of support for a proposal, the question “Are there any unresolved concerns?” speaks directly to them and provides an opportunity for them to speak. Any concerns for which someone stands aside are listed with the proposal and become a part of it.

so that it flows smoothly. Rotating facilitation from meeting to meeting shares important skills among the members. If everyone has firsthand knowledge about facilitation, it will help the flow of all meetings. Co-facilitation, or having two (or more) people facilitate a meeting, is recommended. Having a woman and a man share the responsibilities encourages a more balanced meeting. Also, an inexperienced facilitator may apprentice with a more experienced one. Try to use a variety of techniques throughout the meeting. And remember, a little bit of humor can go a long way in easing tension during a long, difficult meeting.

## Good facilitation is based upon the following principles:

### Non-Directive Leadership

Facilitators accept responsibility for moving through the agenda in the allotted time, guiding the process, and suggesting alternate or additional techniques. In this sense, they do lead the group. However, they do not give their personal opinions nor do they attempt to direct the content of the discussion. If they want to participate, *they must clearly relinquish the role* and speak as an individual. During a meeting, individuals are responsible for expressing their own concerns and thoughts. Facilitators, on the other hand, are responsible for addressing the needs of the group. They need to be aware of the group dynamics and constantly evaluate whether the discussion is flowing well. There may be a need for a change in the discussion technique. They need to be diligent about the fair distribution of attention, being sure to limit those who are speaking often and offering opportunities to those who are not speaking much or at all. It follows that one person cannot simultaneously give attention to the needs of the group and

## Standard Agenda

Agenda Item	Presenter	Time
INTRODUCTION	Facilitator	5 min
AGENDA REVIEW	Facilitator	5 min
REVIEW NOTES	Notetaker	5 min
REPORTS		20 min
Previous activities		
Standing committees		
PROPOSALS		15 min
Old business		
Break		5 min
REPORTS		10 min
Informational		
<b>Proposals</b>		<b>30 min</b>
New business		
ANNOUNCEMENTS		5 min
Pass hat		
Next meeting		
REVIEW DECISIONS	Notetaker	5 min
EVALUATION		10 min
CLOSING	Facilitator	5 min
TOTAL		2 hours

### Facilitator

The word facilitate means to make easy. A facilitator conducts group business and guides the Formal Consensus process

## Level Two: Identify Concerns

### List All Concerns

At the beginning of the next level, a discussion technique called brainstorming (see page 55) is used so that concerns can be identified and written down publicly by the scribe and for the record by the notetaker. Be sure the scribe is as accurate as possible by checking with the person who voiced the concern before moving on. This is not a time to attempt to resolve concerns or determine their validity. That would stifle free expression of concerns. At this point, only concerns are to be expressed, reasonable or unreasonable, well thought out or vague feelings. The facilitator wants to interrupt any comments which attempt to defend the proposal, resolve the concerns, judge the value of the concerns, or in any way deny or dismiss another's feelings of doubt or concern. Sometimes simply allowing a concern to be expressed and written down helps resolve it. After all concerns have been listed, allow the group a moment to reflect on them as a whole.

### Group Related Concerns

At this point, the focus is on identifying patterns and relationships between concerns. This short exercise must not be allowed to focus upon or resolve any particular concern.

## Level Three: Resolve Concerns

### Resolve Groups of Related Concerns

Often, related concerns can be resolved as a group.

### Call for Consensus

If most of the concerns seem to have been resolved, call for consensus in the manner described earlier. If some concerns have not been resolved at this time, then a more focused discussion is needed.

### Restate Remaining Concerns (One at a Time)

Return to the list. The facilitator checks each one with the group and removes ones which have been resolved or are, for any reason, no longer of concern. Each remaining concern is restated clearly and concisely and addressed one at a time. Sometimes new concerns are raised which need to be added to the list. However, every individual is responsible for honestly expressing concerns as they think of them. It is not appropriate to hold back a concern and spring it upon the group late in the process. This undermines trust and limits the group's ability to adequately discuss the concern in its relation to other concerns.

- be flexible

Usually, each item already has a presenter. If not, assign one. Generally, it is not wise for facilitators to present reports or proposals. However, it is convenient for facilitators to present some of the standard agenda items.

For complex or especially controversial items, the agenda planners could suggest various options for group discussion techniques. This may be helpful to the facilitator.

Next, assign time limits for each item. It is important to be realistic, being careful to give each item enough time to be fully addressed without being unfair to other items. Generally, it is not desirable to propose an agenda which exceeds the desired overall meeting time limit.

The last task is the writing of the proposed agenda so all can see it and refer to it during the meeting. Each item is listed in order, along with its presenter and time limit.

The following agenda is an example of how an agenda is structured and what information is included in it. It shows the standard agenda items, the presenters, the time limits and the order in which they will be considered. It also shows one way in which reports and proposals can be presented, but each group can structure this part of the meeting in whatever way suits its needs. This model does not show the choices of techniques for group discussion which the agenda planners might have considered.

- reports or proposals from committees
- business from the last meeting
- standard agenda items, including:
  - introduction
  - agenda review
  - review notes
  - break
  - announcements
  - decision review
  - evaluation

Once all the agenda items have been collected, they are listed in an order which seems efficient and appropriate. Planners need to be cautious that items at the top of the agenda tend to use more than their share of time, thereby limiting the time available for the rest. Each group has different needs. Some groups work best taking care of business first, then addressing the difficult items. Other groups might find it useful to take on the most difficult work first and strictly limit the time or let it take all it needs. The following are recommendations for keeping the focus of attention on the agenda:

- alternate long and short, heavy and light items
- place reports before their related proposals
- take care of old business before addressing new items
- consider placing items which might generate a sense of accomplishment early in the meeting
- alternate presenters

## Questions Which Clarify the Concern

The facilitator asks for any questions or comments which would further clarify the concern so everyone clearly understands it *before* discussion starts.

## Discussion Limited to Resolving One Concern

Use as many creative group discussion techniques as needed to facilitate a resolution for each concern. Keep the discussion focused upon the particular concern until every suggestion has been offered. If no new ideas are coming forward and the concern cannot be resolved, or if the time allotted for this item has been entirely used, move to one of the closing options described below.

## Call for Consensus

Repeat this process until all concerns have been resolved. At this point, the group should be at consensus, but it would be appropriate to call for consensus anyway just to be sure no concern has been overlooked.

# Closing Options

## Send to Committee

If a decision on the proposal can wait until the whole group meets again, then send the proposal to a committee which can clarify the concerns and bring new, creative resolutions for consideration by the group. It is a good idea to include on the committee representatives of all the major concerns, as well as those most supportive of the proposal so they can work out solutions in a less formal setting. Sometimes, if the decision is needed before the next meeting, a smaller group can be empowered to make the decision for the larger group, but again, this committee should include all points of view. Choose this option only if it is absolutely necessary and the whole group consents.

## Stand Aside (Decision Adopted with Unresolved Concerns Listed)

When a concern has been fully discussed and cannot be resolved, it is appropriate for the facilitator to ask those persons with this concern if they are willing to stand aside; that is, acknowledge that the concern still exists, but allow the proposal to be adopted. It is very important for the whole group to understand that this unresolved concern is then written down with the proposal in the record and, in essence, becomes a part of the decision. This concern can be raised again and deserves more discussion time as it has not yet been resolved. In contrast, a

A role is a function of process, not content. Roles are used during a meeting according to the needs of the situation. Not all roles are useful at every meeting, nor does each role have to be filled by a separate person. Formal Consensus functions more smoothly if the person filling a role has some experience, therefore is desirable to rotate roles. Furthermore, one who has experienced a role is more likely to be supportive of whomever currently has that role. Experience in each role also encourages confidence and participation. It is best, therefore, for the group to encourage everyone to experience each role.

## Agenda Planners

A well planned agenda is an important tool for a smooth meeting, although it does not guarantee it. Experience has shown that there is a definite improvement in the flow and pace of a meeting if several people get together prior to the start of the meeting and propose an agenda. In smaller groups, the facilitator often proposes an agenda. The agenda planning committee has six tasks:

- collect agenda items
- arrange them
- assign presenters
- brainstorm discussion techniques
- assign time limits
- write up the proposed agenda

There are at least four sources of agenda items:

- suggestions from members

# Roles

concern which has been resolved in past discussion does not deserve additional discussion, unless something new has developed. Filibustering is not appropriate in Formal Consensus.

## **Declare Block**

After having spent the allotted agenda time moving through the three levels of discussion trying to achieve consensus and concerns remain which are unresolved, the facilitator is obligated to declare that consensus cannot be reached at this meeting, that the proposal is blocked, and move on to the next agenda item. The Rules of Formal Consensus The guidelines and techniques in this book are flexible and meant to be modified. Some of the guidelines, however, seem almost always to be true. These are the Rules of Formal Consensus: 1. Once a decision has been adopted by consensus, it cannot be changed without reaching a new consensus. If a new consensus cannot be reached, the old decision stands. 2. In general, only one person has permission to speak at any moment. The person with permission to speak is determined by the group discussion technique in use and/or the facilitator. (The role of Peacekeeper is exempt from this rule.) 3. All structural decisions (i.e., which roles to use, who fills each role, and which facilitation technique and/or group discussion technique to use) are adopted by consensus without debate. Any objection automatically causes a new selection to be made. If a role cannot be filled without objection, the group proceeds without that role being filled. If much time is spent trying to fill roles or find acceptable techniques, then the group needs a discussion about the unity of purpose of this group and why it is having this problem, a discussion which must be put on the agenda for the next meeting, if not held immediately. 4. All content decisions (i.e., the agenda contract, committee reports, proposals, etc.) are adopted by consensus after discussion.

Every content decision must be openly discussed before it can be tested for consensus. 5. A concern must be based upon the principles of the group to justify a block to consensus. 6. Every meeting which uses Formal Consensus must have an evaluation.

- What expectations did you have at the beginning and to what degree were they met? How did they change?
- What goals did you have and to what degree were they accomplished?
- What worked well? Why?
- What did not work so well? How could it have been improved?
- What else would you suggest be changed or improved, and how?
- What was overlooked or left out?



- Provide an overall sense of completion and closure to the meeting

## **Types of Evaluation Questions**

It is necessary to be aware of the *way* in which questions are asked during evaluation. The specific wording can control the scope and focus of consideration and affect the level of participation. It can cause responses which focus on what was good and bad, or right and wrong, rather than on what worked and what needed improvement. Focus on learning and growing. Avoid blaming. Encourage diverse opinions.

### **Some sample questions for an evaluation:**

- Were members uninterested or bored with the agenda, reports, or discussion?
- Did members withdraw or feel isolated?
- Is attendance low? If so, why?
- Are people arriving late or leaving early? If so, why?
- How was the overall tone or atmosphere?
- Was there an appropriate use of resources?
- Were the logistics (such as date, time, or location) acceptable?
- What was the most important experience of the event?
- What was the least important experience of the event?
- What was the high point? What was the low point?
- What did you learn?

# **On Conflict and Consensus**

Conflict is usually viewed as an impediment to reaching agreements and disruptive to peaceful relationships. However, it is the underlying thesis of Formal Consensus that nonviolent conflict is necessary and desirable. It provides the *motivations* for improvement. The challenge is the creation of an understanding in all who participate that conflict, or differing opinions about proposals, is to be expected and acceptable. Do not avoid or repress conflict. Create an environment in which disagreement can be expressed without fear. Objections and criticisms can be heard not as attacks, not as attempts to defeat a proposal, but as a concern which, when resolved, will make the proposal stronger.

This understanding of conflict may not be easily accepted by the members of a group. Our training by society undermines this concept. Therefore, it will not be easy to create the kind of environment where differences can be expressed without fear or resentment. But it can be done. It will require tolerance and a willingness to experiment. Additionally, the values and principles which form the basis of commitment to work together to resolve conflict need to be clearly defined, and accepted by all involved.

If a group desires to adopt Formal Consensus as its decision-making process, the first step is the creation of a *Statement of Purpose* or *Constitution*. This document would describe not only the common purpose, but would also include the definition of the group's principles and values. If the group discusses and writes down its foundation of principles at the start, it is much easier to determine group versus individual concerns later on.

The following are principles which form the foundation of Formal Consensus. A commitment to these principles and/or a willingness to develop them is necessary. In addition to the ones listed herein, the group might add principles and values which are specific to its purpose.

remind everyone of the group's unity of purpose, and provide an opportunity for closing comments.

## Uses of Evaluation

There are at least ten ways in which evaluation helps improve meetings. Evaluations:

- Improve the process by analysis of what happened, why it happened, and how it might be improved
- Examine how certain attitudes and statements might have caused various problems and encourage special care to prevent them from recurring
- Foster a greater understanding of group dynamics and encourage a method of group learning or learning from each other
- Allow the free expression of feelings
- Expose unconscious behavior or attitudes which interfere with the process
- Encourage the sharing of observations and acknowledge associations with society
- Check the usefulness and effectiveness of techniques and procedures
- Acknowledge good work and give appreciation to each other
- Reflect on the goals set for the meeting and whether they were attained
- Examine various roles, suggest ways to improve them, and create new ones as needed

with a specific suggestion for improvement. Also, always speak for oneself. Do not attempt to represent anyone else.

Encourage everyone who participated in the meeting to take part in the evaluation. Make comments on what worked and what did not. Expect differing opinions. It is generally not useful to repeat other's comments. Evaluations prepare the group for better future meetings. When the process works well, the group responds supportively in a difficult situation, or the facilitator does an especially good job, note it, and appreciate work well done.

Do not attempt to force evaluation. This will cause superficial or irrelevant comments. On the other hand, do not allow evaluations to run on. Be sure to take each comment seriously and make an attempt, at a later time, to resolve or implement them. Individuals who feel their suggestions are ignored or disrespected will lose trust and interest in the group.

For gatherings, conferences, conventions or large meetings, the group might consider having short evaluations after each section, in addition to the one at the end of the event. Distinct aspects on which the group might focus include: the process itself, a specific role, a particular technique, fears and feelings, group dynamics, etc.

At large meetings, written evaluations provide a means for everyone to respond and record comments and suggestions which might otherwise be lost. Some people feel more comfortable writing their evaluations rather than saying them. Plan the questions well, stressing what was learned, what was valuable, and what could have been better and how. An evaluation committee allows an opportunity for the presenters, facilitators, and/or coordinators to get together after the meeting to review evaluation comments, consider suggestions for improvement, and possibly prepare an evaluation report.

Review and evaluation bring a sense of completion to the meeting. A good evaluation will pull the experience together,

## Foundation Upon Which Consensus Is Built

For consensus to work well, the process must be conducted in an environment which promotes trust, respect, and skill sharing. The following are principles which, when valued and respected, encourage and build consensus.

### Trust

Foremost is the need for trust. Without some amount of trust, there will be no cooperation or nonviolent resolution to conflict. For trust to flourish, it is desirable for individuals to be willing to examine their attitudes and be open to new ideas. Acknowledgement and appreciation of personal and cultural differences promote trust. Neither approval nor friendship are necessary for a good working relationship. By developing trust, the process of consensus encourages the intellectual and emotional development of the individuals within a group.

### Respect

It is everyone's responsibility to show respect to one another. People feel respected when everyone listens, when they are not interrupted, when their ideas are taken seriously. Respect for emotional as well as logical concerns promotes the kind of environment necessary for developing consensus. To promote respect, it is important to distinguish between an action which

causes a problem and the person who did the action, between the deed and the doer. We must criticize the act, not the person. Even if you think the person *is* the problem, responding that way never resolves anything. (See pages 7- 8.)

## **Unity of Purpose**

Unity of purpose is a basic understanding about the goals and purpose of the group. Of course, there will be varying opinions on the best way to accomplish these goals. However, there must be a unifying base, a common starting point, which is recognized and accepted by all.

## **Nonviolence**

Nonviolent decisionmakers use their power to achieve goals while respecting differences and cooperating with others. In this environment, it is considered violent to use power to dominate or control the group process. It is understood that the power of revealing your truth is the maximum force allowed to persuade others to your point of view.

## **Self Empowerment**

It is easy for people to unquestioningly rely on authorities and experts to do their thinking and decisionmaking for them. If members of a group delegate their authority, intentionally or not, they fail to accept responsibility for the group's decisions. Consensus promotes and depends upon self empowerment. Anyone can express concerns. Everyone seeks creative solutions and is responsible for every decision. When all are encouraged to participate, the democratic nature of the process increases.

Meetings can often be a time when some people experience feelings of frustration or confusion. There is always room for improvement in the structure of the process and/or in the dynamics of the group. Often, there is no time to talk directly about group interaction during the meeting. Reserve time at the end of the meeting to allow some of these issues and feelings to be expressed.

Evaluation is very useful when using consensus. It is worth the time. Evaluations need not take long, five to ten minutes is often enough. It is not a discussion, nor is it an opportunity to comment on each other's statements. Do not reopen discussion on an agenda item. Evaluation is a special time to listen to each other and learn about each other. Think about how the group interacts and how to improve the process.

Be sure to include the evaluation comments in the notes of the meeting. This is important for two reasons. Over time, if the same evaluation comments are made again and again, this is an indication that the issue behind the comments needs to be addressed. This can be accomplished by placing this issue on the agenda for the next meeting. Also, when looking back at notes from meetings long ago, evaluation comments can often reveal a great deal about what actually happened, beyond what decisions were made and reports given. They give a glimpse into complex interpersonal dynamics.

## **Purpose of Evaluation**

Evaluation provides a forum to address procedural flaws, inappropriate behavior, facilitation problems, logistical difficulties, overall tone, etc. Evaluation is not a time to reopen discussion, make decisions or attempt to resolve problems, but rather, to make statements, express feelings, highlight problems, and suggest solutions in a spirit of cooperation and trust. To help foster communication, it is better if each criticism is coupled

# The Art of Evaluation

## Cooperation

Unfortunately, Western society is saturated in competition. When winning arguments becomes more important than achieving the group's goals, cooperation is difficult, if not impossible. Adversarial attitudes toward proposals or people focus attention on weakness rather than strength. An attitude of helpfulness and support builds cooperation. Cooperation is a shared responsibility in finding solutions to all concerns. Ideas offered in the spirit of cooperation help resolve conflict. The best decisions arise through an open and creative interplay of ideas.

## Conflict Resolution

The free flow of ideas, even among friends, inevitably leads to conflict. In this context, conflict is simply the expression of disagreement. Disagreement itself is neither good nor bad. Diverse viewpoints bring into focus and explore the strengths and weaknesses of attitudes, assumptions, and plans. Without conflict, one is less likely to think about and evaluate one's views and prejudices. There is no *right* decision, only the best one for the whole group. The task is to work together to discover which choice is most acceptable to all members.

Avoid blaming anyone for conflict. Blame is inherently violent. It attacks dignity and empowerment. It encourages people to feel guilty, defensive, and alienated. The group will lose its ability to resolve conflict. People will hide their true feelings to avoid being blamed for the conflict.

Avoidance of conflicting ideas impedes resolution for failure to explore and develop the feelings that gave rise to the conflict. The presence of conflict can create an occasion for growth. Learn to use it as a catalyst for discovering creative resolutions and for developing a better understanding of each other. With

patience, anyone can learn to resolve conflict creatively, without defensiveness or guilt. Groups can learn to nurture and support their members in this effort by allowing creativity and experimentation. This process necessitates that the group continually evaluate and improve these skills.

## **Commitment to the Group**

In joining a group, one accepts a personal responsibility to behave with respect, good will, and honesty. Each one is expected to recognize that the group's needs have a certain priority over the desires of the individual. Many people participate in group work in a very egocentric way. It is important to accept the shared responsibility for helping to find solutions to other's concerns.

## **Active Participation**

We all have an inalienable right to express our own best thoughts. We decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. Since consensus is a process of synthesis, not competition, all sincere comments are important and valuable. If ideas are put forth as the speaker's property and individuals are strongly attached to their opinions, consensus will be extremely difficult. Stubbornness, closedmindedness, and possessiveness lead to defensive and argumentative behavior that disrupts the process. For active participation to occur, it is necessary to promote trust by creating an atmosphere in which every contribution is considered valuable. With encouragement, each person can develop knowledge and experience, a sense of responsibility and competency, and the ability to participate.

group are agreeing to disagree, regarding each point of view with mutual respect. Occasionally, it is a concern which has no resolution; the person does not feel the need to block the decision, but wants to express the concern and lack of support for the proposal.

A blocking concern must be based on a generally recognized principle, not personal preference, or it must be essential to the entire group's well-being. Before a concern is considered to be blocking, the group must have already accepted the validity of the concern and a reasonable attempt must have been made to resolve it. If legitimate concerns remain unresolved and the person has not agreed to stand aside, consensus is blocked.

and unresolved, it again falls upon the individual to choose whether to stand aside or block consensus.

The individual is responsible for expressing concerns; the group is responsible for resolving them. The group decides whether a concern is legitimate; the individual decides whether to block or stand aside.

All concerns are important and need to be resolved. It is not appropriate for a person to come to a meeting planning to block a proposal or, during discussion, to express their concerns as major objections or blocking concerns. Often, during discussion, the person learns additional information which resolves the concern. Sometimes, after expressing the concern, someone is able to creatively resolve it by thinking of something new. It often happens that a concern which seems to be extremely problematic when it is first mentioned turns out to be easily resolved. Sometimes the reverse happens and a seemingly minor concern brings forth much larger concerns.

The following is a description of different types of concerns and how they affect individuals and the group.

Concerns which can be addressed and resolved by making small changes in the proposal can be called minor concerns. The person supports the proposal, but has an idea for improvement.

When a person disagrees with the proposal in part, but consents to the overall idea, the person has a reservation. The person is not completely satisfied with the proposal, but is generally supportive. This kind of concern can usually be resolved through discussion. Sometimes, it is enough for the person to express the concern and feel that it was heard, without any actual resolution.

When a person does not agree with the proposal, the group allows that person to try and persuade it to see the wisdom of the disagreement. If the group is not persuaded or the disagreement cannot be resolved, the person might choose to stand aside and allow the group to go forward. The person and the

## **Equal Access to Power**

Because of personal differences (experience, assertiveness, social conditioning, access to information, etc.) and political disparities, some people inevitably have more effective power than others. To balance this inequity, everyone needs to consciously attempt to creatively share power, skills, and information. Avoid hierarchical structures that allow some individuals to assume undemocratic power over others. Egalitarian and accountable structures promote universal access to power.

## **Patience**

Consensus cannot be rushed. Often, it functions smoothly, producing effective, stable results. Sometimes, when difficult situations arise, consensus requires more time to allow for the creative interplay of ideas. During these times, patience is more advantageous than tense, urgent, or aggressive behavior. Consensus is possible as long as each individual acts patiently and respectfully.

## **Impediments To Consensus Lack of Training**

It is necessary to train people in the theory and practice of consensus. Until consensus is a common form of decision-making in our society, new members will need some way of learning about the process. It is important to offer regular opportunities for training. If learning about Formal Consensus is not made easily accessible, it will limit full participation and create inequities which undermine this process. Also, training provides opportunities for people to improve their skills, particularly facilitation skills, in a setting where experimentation and role-plays can occur.

## External Hierarchical Structures

It can be difficult for a group to reach consensus internally when it is part of a larger group which does not recognize or participate in the consensus process. It can be extremely frustrating if those external to the group can disrupt the decision-making by interfering with the process by pulling rank. Therefore, it is desirable for individuals and groups to recognize that they can be autonomous in relation to external power if they are willing to take responsibility for their actions.

## Social Prejudice

Everyone has been exposed to biases, assumptions, and prejudices which interfere with the spirit of cooperation and equal participation. All people are influenced by these attitudes, even though they may deplore them. People are not generally encouraged to confront these prejudices in themselves or others. Members of a group often reflect social biases without realizing or attempting to confront and change them. If the group views a prejudicial attitude as just one individual's problem, then the group will not address the underlying social attitudes which create such problems. It is appropriate to expose, confront, acknowledge, and attempt to resolve socially prejudicial attitudes, but only in the spirit of mutual respect and trust. Members are responsible for acknowledging when their attitudes are influenced by disruptive social training and for changing them. When a supportive atmosphere for recognizing and changing undesirable attitudes exists, the group as a whole benefits.

## On Degrees of Conflict

Consensus is a process of nonviolent conflict resolution. The expression of concerns and conflicting ideas is considered desirable and important. When a group creates an atmosphere which nurtures and supports disagreement without hostility and fear, it builds a foundation for stronger, more creative decisions.

Each individual is responsible for expressing one's own concerns. It is best if each concern is expressed as if it will be resolved. The group then responds by trying to resolve the concern through group discussion. If the concern remains unresolved after a full and open discussion, then the facilitator asks how the concern is based upon the foundation of the group. If it is, then the group accepts that the proposal is blocked.

From this perspective, it is not decided by the individual alone if a particular concern is blocking consensus; it is determined in cooperation with the whole group. The group determines a concern's legitimacy. A concern is legitimate if it is based upon the principles of the group and therefore relevant to the group as a whole. If the concern is determined to be unprincipled or not of consequence, the group can decide the concern is inappropriate and drop it from discussion. If a reasonable solution offered is not accepted by the individual, the group may decide the concern has been resolved and the individual is out of order for failure to recognize it.

Herein lies a subtle pitfall. For consensus to work well, it is helpful for individuals to recognize the group's involvement in determining which concerns are able to be resolved, which need more attention, and, ultimately, which are blocking consensus. The pitfall is failure to accept the limit on an individual's power to determine which concerns are principled or based upon the foundation of the group and which ones are resolved. After discussion, if the concern is valid