Consensus Decision-making

Consensus is a phrase that gets thrown around a lot. We're told that the United Nations reaches a consensus, for example. Politicians and journalists speak of consensus emerging around some important issue or other. What they are talking about seems to be a significant majority view. What they're not talking about is consensus decision-making as we at Rhizome understand it.

Consensus is often referred to as a decision-making process, and it is. There are several such processes, a common one being *formal*, or *simple*, consensus. But we see it, first and foremost, as a set of values or a state of mind that supports people to work together collaboratively. Our experience is that without the right *state of mind*, consensus cannot fulfil its potential for delivering high quality decisions that have the genuine support of a group.

In this guide we'll look at how the state of mind that is consensus helps underpin an effective decision-making process, and how that process can, in turn, draw out and strengthen the values of consensus. It's a virtuous circle. We'll also look at some criticisms of consensus; share some of our philosophical and technical understanding of the consensus decision-making process; touch on some history of how it developed; and suggest resources for further reading.

So what is consensus?

There's a short anecdote which helps to illustrate what consensus is:

> *Two stonemasons are carving blocks of stone. When asked what he's doing the first mason says: "I'm carving this block of stone". When asked the same question the second mason says: "I'm building a cathedral".*

Consensus is a decision-making process that, when used with a co-operative state of mind, allows groups to come together and take inspired and creative decisions. It supports individuals to pool their power and work together as equals to produce results far better than they could produce alone.

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It's a process that can deepen the connection of a group. It can help a group to challenge and transform oppressive behaviour. It values those on the margins of a group as much as (or even more than at times) those in the mainstream of the group.

Oppressive behaviour?

Oppressive behaviour is essentially any behaviour that puts down or disempowers anyone within the group, conscious or unconscious sexism, racism, or classism are examples. Whenever we make assumptions based on prejudice or stereotypes, or when we use our own power to get what we want at the expense of others, we're guilty of oppressive behaviour. This can be as simple as the men in the group doing most of the talking, using the social power they hold because of their gender to dominate, with little or no thought given to the impact this has on the women in the group.

Margins and Mainstreams?

What's marginal and what's mainstream vary from group to group – being marginalised can, of course, occur because of disability, social class, gender, race, age, and sexuality. But it can also happen because of an opinion a person holds, or how much time they can dedicate to the group because of work and family commitments or how articulate a speaker they are. Margins and mainstreams are not necessarily fixed. It's possible to be in the mainstream for one part of a group meeting, and in the margin for another.

Consensus decision-making is:

- An acknowledgement that we can achieve more together than we can alone – it's a group process.

- A way of finding the best decision for a diverse group of people who all share some common ground - often shared values. Consensus works because the common ground is stronger than the difference within the group. With strong common values or aims groups can be diverse and see that diversity as a strength.

- A way of agreeing to disagree. Consensus isn't unanimous agreement. It's unanimous consent. Everyone consents to the decision even if they disagree. Consensus offers a range of ways to relate to a proposed decision that reflect human psychology. For example it allows for people to stand aside from implementing a decision they are lukewarm about whilst giving their blessing to the rest of the group to go ahead (consenting without agreeing).

- A pulling together of ideas to build the strongest available decision.

- A commitment to challenge domineering and self-centred behaviour in ourselves and others, working for the common good over personal benefit.

- A process that asks us to put aside our personal certainty and create a group certainty. This can deepen trust and foster better group working skills along the way, rather than weakening groups as majority-based decision systems often can.

And the states of mind that we've referred to are implicit in this list – a genuine willingness to:

- Work co-operatively as part of a group, and trust others in the group to be doing the same.

- Recognise that there may be many opinions all of equal value to your own.

- Listen to, and hear those opinions, and work to ensure the group knows that they are valued.

- Look for solutions that work for the wider group and not just yourself, paying special attention to those at the margins of the group.

- Supportively challenge prejudice and abuses of power, and have our own behaviour challenged because we acknowledge that none of us are free of unwelcome social conditioning.

Misconceptions about consensus decision-making

There are many common misconceptions about consensus, even in groups that use it. When consensus is used badly it can be a long and frustrating process that fails to live up to its reputation for providing an alternative to the many oppressive behaviours common in group dynamics. Worse still it can actively create poor dynamics. But these are criticisms of consensus done badly and the misconceptions they lead to are not true of well-functioning consensus. So let's start by clearing up a few of the misconceptions.

Consensus decision-making is not: A significant majority:

consensus decision-making seeks to avoid the potential divisiveness of majority/minority decisions. Whenever there's a minority that neither agrees with or consents to a decision, there's potential for:

- Resentment which in turn can breed ongoing conflict.

- Perpetuation of social or group dynamics that alienate a specific sort of person or opinion, a specific margin within the group or society.

- Lack of ownership of decisions leading to poor implementation of tasks.

- A culture of lobbying – trying to acquire support for a point of view outside of meetings, which can damage accountability.

For those reasons consensus focuses on hearing those at the margins of a group, those traditionally in the minority, and ensuring that final proposals include their perspectives. This does not mean that a margin always holds sway (sometimes referred to as the tyranny of the minority), but it does mean that it should always feel heard.

Clearly a decision that 80% of a group agree with is stronger than one which only 51% agree with, but it's not consensus. There may be times in which working towards a high level of agreement is more appropriate than consensus decision-making because good consensus requires a deeper level of commitment and a deeper sense of shared values than most decision-making systems. If that's not present, a significant majority may be your best bet. There are several 'near consensus' approaches that can help here, which we'll look at later in this guide.

We talk until we all agree:

People often speak of consensus as unanimity. When asked how they make decisions they will tell you that they discuss the issue until they are all in agreement. If strong unanimous agreement can be reached, great. But there are issues with seeking unanimity as the ultimate goal:

- Unanimity can be intolerant of diversity. It tends to build a culture of uniformity. Consensus is about *unity not uniformity*. The built-in mechanisms that encourage and allow individuals to consent whilst disagreeing provide an important safety valve and encourage diversity and tolerance.
- It can also lead to overlong meetings that sap energy from a group rather than energise it.
- Unanimity can often only be found by compromising and accepting the lowest common denominator option, which can be a weak and pointless decision. Consensus on the other hand asks people to be flexible in seeking the highest common factor.

For a full and detailed critique of unanimous decision-making see *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making* by Tim Hartnett (more details in the Resources section)

We talk until you all agree with me:

Sadly quite a common variation of the above. This mentality of having the "right answer " can be genuine and even well-meaning, but it is disempowering for groups and usually results in unanimity by browbeating rather than a sincere agreement. Consensus works on the principle that we work in groups because we are stronger through our diversity of experience and ideas. It appreciates that the best decision will usually be a *synthesis* of the best elements of the possible options. These principles are rarely compatible with one person's vision, however clear it may be and however articulate and charismatic they may be.

A meeting with hand signals:

This is a description that's become common in some activist circles. Consensus decision-making has become confused with the specific facilitation techniques often used in meetings, in this case hand signals. In other words consensus becomes confused with any meeting at which there's an attempt to facilitate for equality and participation. Consensus is (usually) a facilitated process because it does have a strong commitment to accessibility, inclusion and equality...so we're a small part of the way there with this definition, but no way near all of the way. And of course there are some critiques of hand signals. (www.rhizome.coop/blog/2011/08/17/sticking-your-hand-up-to-oppression/)

Consensus minus one:

Some groups have found consensus hard to achieve, but have an ideological commitment to it so they've found a short cut here and there. Consensus minus one is one of those shortcuts. Often it starts to happen without any formal agreement that it's how a group operates. Every participant in consensus has the right (and responsibility) to block proposals that run counter to the groups shared and stated purpose and ethos. The act of blocking is one of the most misunderstood and contentious parts of the consensus decision-making process. For that reason we'll focus on it more later in this guide. For many groups this is where they get stuck. And so they've created a rule that allows them to overrule a single block if all those not blocking agree to overrule it. In some groups this has crept up from a single block to multiple blocks where the mainstream of the group considers those blocks to be inappropriate, for whatever reason. Essentially, this is significant majority by another name with all the dangers that entails, even though the majority can often be 90% of the group or more. It can and will still alienate people.

Consensus decision-making: Who?

Why do people choose consensus? And who are these people anyway? Some groups using consensus are searching for a genuinely egalitarian and inclusive model of democracy. Others because they are committed to participation because they understand that it delivers stronger decisions that stand the test of time. Consensus is currently used by a wide variety of groups.

A few examples are:

- Many co-operatives and community groups such as the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra (www.gtrnews.com/greater-tulsa-reporter/1497/tulsa-symphony) and, of course, us at Rhizome.
- Co-housing projects and housing co-operatives such as the Threshold Centre in the UK (www.thresholdcentre.org.uk/) or Heartwood Co-housing in the USA (www.heartwoodcohousing.com/).
- Grassroots protest movements and non-hierarchical campaigning groups such as the Camp for Climate Action (www.climatecamp.org.uk/), the Occupy movement (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement), Earth First! (wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth_First!), and Stop New Nuclear network (www.stopnewnuclear.org.uk/).
- Entire communities such as the town of Casper, California (casparinstitute.org/lib/artConsensus.htm), USA and the Fristaden Christiania in Copenhagen (wikipedia.org/wiki/Freetown_Christiania), Denmark.

Consensus Decision-making – Why?

Why does consensus deliver a superior form of participation and democracy? Partly because it's often used where there is strong sense of group, which it then strengthens. Partly it's down to the stated intention to treat all people as equals. Partly it's down to quirks of the method, prime amongst them giving all participants in the process an equal right of veto over any and all decisions. Partly it's down to consensus being a facilitated approach. And partly it's down to people's experience of consensus delivering high quality decisions that the whole group feels comfortable with (if not inspired by).

Sense of group

Consensus is used by groups: not loose or accidental formations of people, but by groups that have a definite sense of themselves as a group (at least in that moment, if not in the long term). In her book *Truth or Dare* Starhawk calls this sense group mind. (www.starhawk.org/writings/truth-dare.html) Other terms for it include common ground, shared values, and group vision.

Case Study: Heartwood Co-housing

Consensus decision making is one of the cornerstones of Heartwood. In majority rules decision making, participants align themselves on different sides of an issue in opposition to each other and then try to persuade the undecideds to join their side. There are clear winners and losers.

Consensus decision making turns that process on its head. Rather than expending energy on persuading why your position is right and the other is wrong, energy is focused on hearing all of the wants, needs, and concerns and then working with those to sculpt a proposal that best fits them... It is a wholly different process, one which values deep listening, cooperation, and maturity.

Consensus does not mean everyone getting their way. That's where the maturity comes in. Every decision is looked at from the perspective of what's in the best interest of the community as a whole... And because there are no losers, everyone has buy-in in the decision and supports the implementation. We move forward together with no disgruntled minority left behind.

We do have alternative decision making options available if consensus is not appropriate for a particular decision (urgency, conflict of interest, etc), but we rarely go to those alternatives.

Consensus is about much more than making decisions. It's really a reflection of the quality of relationships that characterize Heartwood...We are all on this journey together and we support each other in the process. Taken from www.heartwoodcohousing.com/

Whatever the phrase a group uses, it's a conscious sense of the group being more than the sum of its parts. That sense of the group being able to achieve far more than any one individual makes it worthwhile for individuals to allow the group precedence over their personal ambition. This makes consensus the perfect approach for many co-operatives, community groups, or activist affinity groups. (wikipedia.org/wiki/Affinity_group)

But groups don't need to be long-term to use consensus. A group could come together to organise a one-off community festival and use consensus as long as they had clear purpose, that sense that they could achieve more together than apart, and a commitment to using consensus.

The best of intentions – supporting diversity

Consensus is an explicitly egalitarian and participatory process and as such it attracts users who already have a commitment to behaving in that way. So consensus is the preferred option for many anti-discrimination groups, and those for whom hierarchy is a problem – such as some co-operatives, anarchist groups and networks. But it's not exclusive to those groups.

Participation and deep decision-making

Many groups or organisations are looking for an effective way to make decisions that maximise opportunities for participation They don't necessarily have an ideological objection to hierarchy. It's by no means impossible for such groups to use formal consensus decision-making.

The state of mind and the process of formal consensus enshrine deep participation. They provide the opportunity to make uncommonly strong decisions because each proposal emerges from the breadth of the group's experience and ideas, and because everyone's consent is required for that proposal to become a decision.

A local authority or community council could use consensus in a decision-making dialogue with the public over services, for example, as long as the remit was clear (which decisions were on offer and which were not), and as long as the authority agreed to be bound by the decision. In fact it would be ideal when a high level of commitment to the outcome was required. And of course there are alternatives to formal consensus that share many of its qualities. We'll come to these later.

aspire to build a cathedral rather than simply carve a block of stone
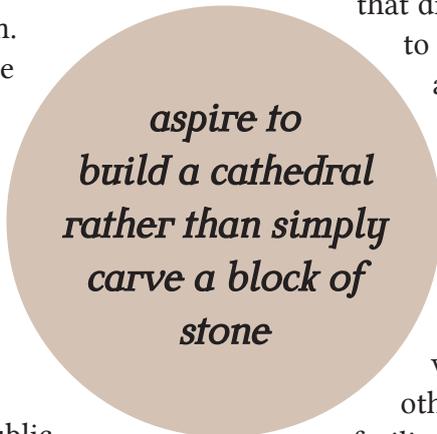
The block – supporting equal power and preserving group vision

In consensus every individual has the right to block any proposal at any stage if the proposal undermines the cohesion or integrity of the group. That's a huge amount of power and a huge responsibility. It's also one of the attractions of consensus. Although the block can be very contentious, it's a great leveller.

For those groups who haven't achieved the necessary shared state of mind it can also be a huge problem, with people vetoing proposals for individual reasons and not with a sense of group in mind. But used well, and well facilitated, the block not only equalises power but keeps a group true to it's stated aims, and principles. And that makes the block a radical safety valve that keeps groups working to their highest shared ideals.
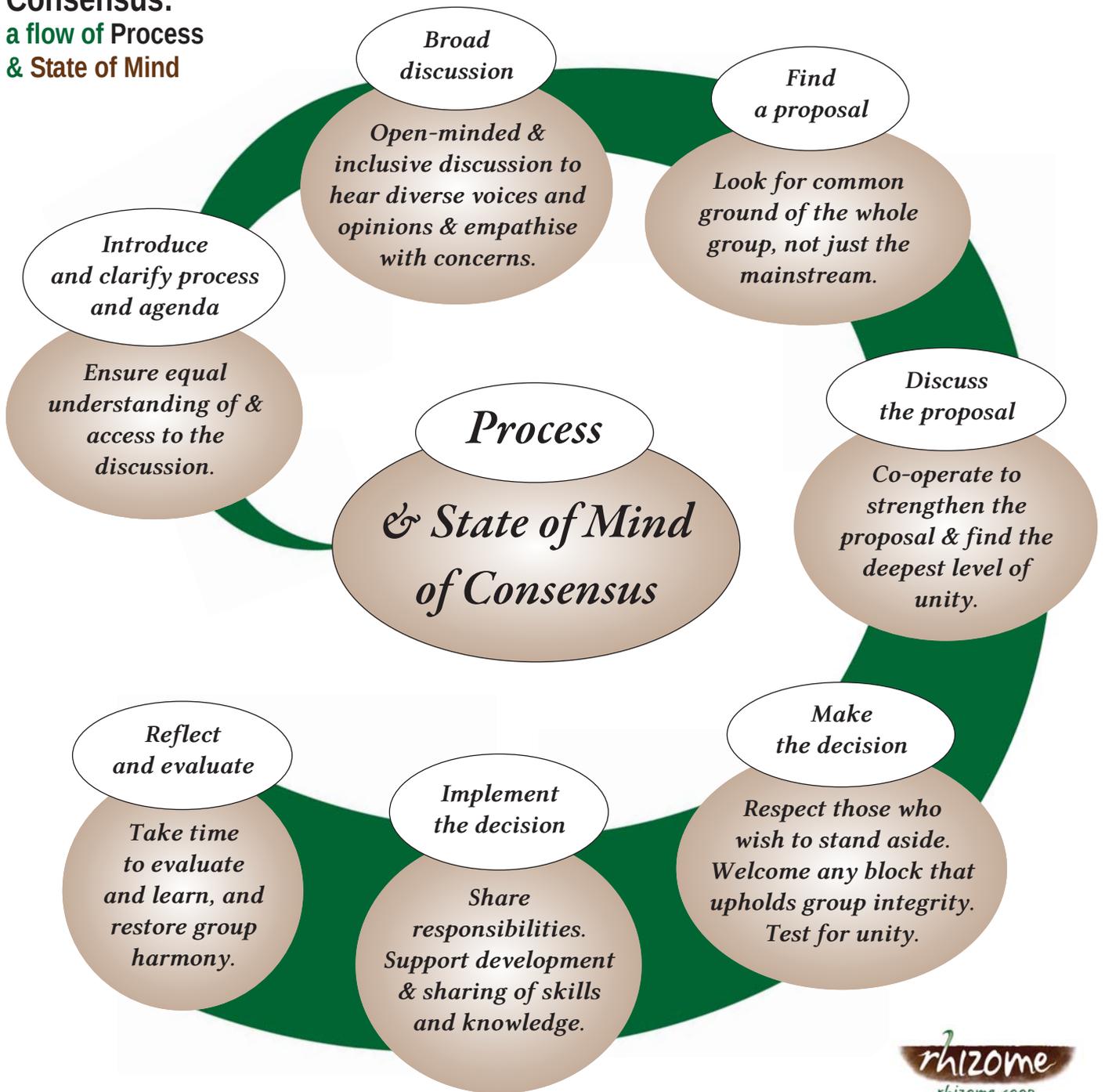
Facilitation – supporting co-operation

Consensus assumes facilitation - that is a conscious effort to make the process easier for its participants by paying attention to the emotional and physical well-being of the group, by intervening to ensure that discussion flows and is genuinely open to all. For most groups this entails appointing one or more individuals to look after the process. Some groups may say they reach consensus without facilitation. More likely they do so without a facilitator, but they're functioning well enough that they share the roles of facilitator without even thinking about it. In other words they're collectively doing facilitation.

The use of facilitation in consensus provides some reassurances that the process will be more equitable. It's far more than simply deciding between a go-round or a full group discussion for the next stage of the agenda. In a consensus setting having a facilitator or facilitation team in place ensures that someone out there is consciously monitoring the level of equality and is challenging informal hierarchy or any oppressive behaviour. More than that, they can gently and regularly remind the meeting to work towards their highest intentions, to co-operate rather than compete, to aspire to build a cathedral rather than simply carve a block of stone.

Consensus:
a flow of Process & State of Mind

Broad discussion

Open-minded & inclusive discussion to hear diverse voices and opinions & empathise with concerns.

Find a proposal

Look for common ground of the whole group, not just the mainstream.

Introduce and clarify process and agenda

Ensure equal understanding of & access to the discussion.

Process

& State of Mind of Consensus

Discuss the proposal

Co-operate to strengthen the proposal & find the deepest level of unity.

Reflect and evaluate

Take time to evaluate and learn, and restore group harmony.

Implement the decision

Share responsibilities. Support development & sharing of skills and knowledge.

Make the decision

Respect those who wish to stand aside. Welcome any block that upholds group integrity. Test for unity.

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7 Steps of Consensus Decision-making

We've talked about what consensus is and is not and why groups might choose to use it. But we haven't yet got down to the detail about how the process works. Here's an overview of how a consensus decision might flow, and where those values we've talked about come in.

There are quite a few models of consensus out there which prescribe what to do at each stage of the process (start with an ideastorm, then have a go-round....and so on).

We feel that those details depend too much on individual group needs and culture, so what we present here focuses on what the needs of the group are at each stage, and leaves the details of how to meet them up to you. We're also concentrating on that all-important state of mind which provides the context and infuses a good consensus process. So to the flow...

Step 1: Be clear and ensure your clarity is shared

These first few minutes can be crucial for framing what happens in the rest of the discussion. If the group aren't clear on the decision to be made or the process to be used you can waste a lot of time and cause unnecessary confusion, even conflict. Common examples of problems caused by lack of clarity include:

- Discussing issues you simply don't have enough information to decide upon.
- Talking at cross purposes and then having to take time to untangle the mess.
- Excluding newcomers who haven't had an induction to the group's process and aren't familiar with the agenda.

All this, and more, can be avoided simply by checking in with the group and having a short discussion on what the group think the agenda item is about. Many people would say that it's obvious what we're talking about, but, as we've been heard to utter on many occasions, *my obvious is often different from your obvious'*. In terms of that consensus state of mind, this shared clarity empowers everyone to take part in a discussion as equals, challenges any jargon and assumptions being used by individuals or cliques to give themselves a sense of power, and sends a message that everyone is welcome.

Step 2: Have a broad and inclusive discussion – inclusive of wide range of people and ideas.

The aim of the game here is to ensure that the discussion is wide enough for people to build a real sense of ownership around the issue; to explore a variety of ideas; and, vitally, to hear people's concerns. Bottom line in consensus – if concerns aren't dealt with adequately, a group cannot reach consensus. To really attain that consensual state of mind, there needs to be a conscious effort to hear all concerns, especially those of the margins of the group, however unpalatable they are to the group's mainstream.

This can feel like precious time the group doesn't have, but it ensures a stronger outcome with a higher level of group commitment, leading to far better implementation. It also builds greater understanding in the group, which provides long term strength and resilience. Time well spent.

Step 3: Pull together, or synthesise, a proposal that arises from the best of all the group's ideas, whilst simultaneously acknowledging concerns.

That's a pretty tall order and a group won't always get it right at the first go. There may be some time spent moving back and forth into discussion until the final pieces come together to give you an appropriate proposal. The key thing here is that the proposal is inclusive – it doesn't marginalise anyone. This is a moment in consensus when a group can choose between being fully inclusive or glossing over difference and applying subtle (and not so subtle) pressure on minorities to conform. Inclusion can be effected by too little time being given to reach a widely supported synthesised proposal. Don't let time pressure open up fault lines in the group that may never close.

Step 4: Friendly amendments – tweak the proposal to make it even stronger.

You're looking for the best possible proposal that you can formulate with the people, time, and information that you've got. Are there any niggling doubts that can be addressed by a change of language or a tweak to the idea? After a little reflection (take a tea break) are there any ways in which the proposal can be improved upon? These are known as friendly amendments. What they are not is an attempt to water down a proposal so far that it becomes meaningless – death by a thousand amendments. Nothing friendly in that thinking.

Step 5: Test for consensus – do we have good quality agreement?

So far the flow we've presented could be for any decision-making system looking to maximise participation. It's at Step 5 that it becomes uniquely consensus. That's because this is where we entertain the possibility of consenting rather than agreeing and of blocking. So let's reflect a minute. We've got a shared agreement on the issue we're discussing. We've given it the time it needs to explore diverse perspectives, to hear concerns and possible concerns and out of that we've drawn together a proposal that seems to have the energy of the group behind it. We've paused and then tried to make the proposal even stronger, taking into account some concerns we hadn't heard clearly enough before. We've restated the proposal so we're all clear what we're being asked to agree to (and if not, we clarify).

Now the facilitator asks us 3 questions:

1. **Any blocks?** Does anyone feel that this proposal runs contrary to the shared vision of the group and as such will damage the integrity of the group, potentially even causing people to leave? If you've done the work well to this point, the answer will usually be "no". But let's not assume…. give people time, and if there are no blocks move on to the next question. However if there are blocks you need to back up – is it enough to amend the proposal or do you need to return to the broad discussion (which obviously wasn't broad enough first time round) and look for a new proposal? You may need to pause and take a look at the meeting dynamics - how come the group hasn't heard this concern up to this point? Is the meeting space not safe enough for people to articulate concerns? Are there problems in understanding or communication that the group hasn't addressed?

The use of the block in consensus

In a well functioning consensus group the use of the block is so rare as almost to be unheard of. Consensus lore says that an individual should block no more than the fingers on one hand in a lifetime. To get to the point in a process at which someone feels moved strongly enough to stop a proposal from going any further, a group has to have ignored some pretty significant warning signs. The quality of listening, observation, inclusion has to have dropped well below the standard expected of a group committed to equality, access and participation. And given that blocks are used to prevent a group taking an action that runs contrary to its core aims and values, the group also has to be going significantly off course. In our well-functioning group, the block is not something to be afraid of, but to be welcomed. If someone blocks it brings the group back to itself, it sense of self, and its core aims and values.

And that makes the block a radical safety valve that keeps groups working to their highest shared ideals.

That said, there are different definitions of the block. We recommend that the block be seen as a *principled objection* – as we've described above. This gives a group firm criteria they can use to determine whether a block is appropriate, should there ever be an issue. It also focuses all blocks on the group's values and not personal values. But some groups and facilitators see it simply as a major objection – a fundamental problem with a proposal, which could include one based on personal values. However, once we're focused on personal values things can get very messy. One person's major objection because of their dearly held personal values might clash with another's dearly held support for an idea, and suddenly we're into the territory of immovable objects and unstoppable forces.

Case Study: The Hundredth Monkey Co-op – principled objection or personal concern?

The Hundredth Monkey was a small ethical retail workers' co-op on the east coast of Scotland. As ethical retailers they marked Buy Nothing Day each year. One year they placed anti-consumerist art on the walls of their shop, made space for a sofa, played campaigning videos, and so on. For some staff this wasn't enough. So in one co-op meeting a proposal was made to close for the day. There was a lot of energy for the proposal, and the case for it was argued strongly.

But one co-op member had significant concerns – it was one of the busiest Saturdays before Christmas, and for a struggling co-op the day's takings were very important. The outcome? What seemed like an unstoppable proposal was decisively dropped. Why? Because the proponents of it could see that the idea was causing real distress to their fellow co-op member. She didn't block. It wasn't a blocking issue – there was no question that closing would have contradicted the core values of a radical co-op. But her personal concern was deemed too important to ignore.

2. **Any stand asides?** Does anyone disagree with the proposal enough, on a personal level, that they don't want to take part in implementing it (but is happy for the rest of the group to go ahead, without feeling in any way a lesser part of the group for it)? It's worth checking here that there aren't too many stand asides as that's an obvious sign of a lukewarm response to a proposal. And we can do better than lukewarm.

3. **Do we have consensus?** Assuming there are no blocks, and no more than a manageable number of stand asides, can we assume that we have consensus? No – never assume. Ask the question and insist on a response. Lack of response may indicate *"I'll consent to anything just as long as this interminable meeting ends"* syndrome.

And this is where a lot of groups finish and pile down the pub to celebrate another well made decision. But what about Step 6 and 7?

Step 6: Make it happen.

Making the decision is just the start of a longer process, and unless there are definite steps taken to ensure that people sign up to specific tasks, with specific

A group circle on the ecotopia biketour in Poland, 2006 Photo: (cc) pedalofilo

deadlines and so on, decisions are meaningless. For some decisions it may be as simple as typing up the agreed form of words and filing it, but that's still an action and still needs someone to make it happen. For other decisions it may need complex timelines and multiple volunteers or staff members to engage in taking the decision forward.

But if your consensus process is working well, this won't be the drag it often is at the end of fractious meetings when people are tired and grumpy. In theory the group has just made a high quality decision that it has energy for – so ride that wave of enthusiasm and get folk signed up!

Remember that state of mind – does the group continue to apply the same values here? Does everyone have equal access to roles and tasks, are people's skills and interests nurtured? Are their personal circumstances respected (time available to contribute to making the idea happen, financial resources and so on).

Step 7: Evaluate.

It's worth taking a moment to reflect on the decision before launching into the next one. Are there any bad feelings that need to be aired? Is it worth actually celebrating a decision well-made?

That's the overview. For more on the detailed step by step process and how to facilitate it, see our other Guides on consensus

The values of the consensus process: in summary

Consensus works. Yet there are many groups for whom it's a real struggle. They find themselves watering down the process, making poor decisions, and dealing with informal hierarchy, and poor group dynamics. But there are enough groups who make it work well, and yet more who at least achieve moments of clarity in which they see the promise of consensus, that it's worth pursuing. When it's working well consensus delivers well supported decisions based on the best of all the ideas of a diverse group. It addresses people's concerns. And it reaffirms the sense of group and leaves people energised.

When not to use consensus…

In *Truth or Dare*, Starhawk wrote some oft-quoted words on when not to use consensus. They stand re-quoting, and we've added a few thoughts:

When there is no group in mind: A group thinking process cannot work effectively unless the group is cohesive enough to generate shared attitudes and perceptions. When deep divisions exist within a group's bonding over their individual desires, consensus becomes an exercise in frustration.

When there are no good choices: Consensus process can help a group find the best possible solution to a problem, but it is not an effective way to make an either-or choice between evils, for members will never be able to agree which is worse. If the group has to choose between being shot and hung, flip a coin. When a group gets bogged down trying to make a decision, stop for a moment and consider: Are we blocked because we are given an intolerable situation? Are we being given the illusion, but not the reality, of choice? Might our most empowering act be to refuse to participate in this farce?

When they can see the whites of your eyes: In emergencies, in situations where urgent and immediate action is necessary, appointing a temporary leader may be the wisest course of action.

When the issue is trivial: I have known groups to devote half and hour to trying to decide by consensus whether to spend forty minutes or a full hour at lunch. Remember consensus is a thinking process – where there is nothing to think about, flip a coin.

When the group has insufficient information: When you're lost in the hills, and no one knows the way home, you cannot figure out how to get there by consensus. Send out scouts. Ask: Do we have the information we need to solve this problem? Can we get it?

Starhawk *'Truth or Dare'.* © Miriam Simos, published by Harper and Row
www.starhawk.org/writings/truth-dare.html

We'd add:

When there's no collective decision to be made: Let's illustrate with an example - a group of activists gather to plan and take action. Perhaps some have come as organised affinity groups. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affinity_group) Perhaps others are there as individuals. They discuss tactics and identify potential targets and as the meeting progresses ideas emerge and energy gathers around them. There comes a stage where a range of ideas for action have been put forward and people need to decide what action they want to take, if any. But it's not a collective decision, just a personal one – *"where do I want to put my energy? what do I feel will be most effective."*

There's a strange dynamic that can emerge in groups using consensus whereby they start to believe that full group sign-off is needed for everything. So when an affinity group states that they have an idea for action that they are planning to take forwards, and invites others to join in, there can be a response along the lines of *"but we haven't agreed we're doing that particular action yet."* The action hasn't been 'authorised' by the group.

Secondly, and more seriously: **when a group isn't willing or able to grow**. Consensus is an aspirational process. We talk in terms of equality, challenging oppression, including the margins of a group, building the best possible proposal for the group, and more. Visionary stuff. How many groups are genuinely capable of doing that all of the time? So we're constantly working towards consensus. And if we ever get there? Well then there's a particularly controversial decision to be made, or we're having an off day, or we have new members that have changed the dynamic of the group, and momentarily we're a step back, striving for consensus all over again. If the group isn't equipped for that journey they might want to reconsider using consensus.

Many groups struggle to enact the values of consensus. Their process is full of competition, lacks empathy, is distrustful and intolerant. This cycle is vicious not virtuous and distrust deepens, intolerance intensifies. Before long you don't so much have the conditions for consensus as for dysfunction.

Why is this different to Starhawk's "no group mind"? Because in many such groups there's plenty of potential for group mind – the shared values, a shared political analysis, shared aims or tactics are there, and indeed that's often what brought the group together. But the group is focused, mentally and emotionally, on difference and the difference overwhelms the similarities. This is usually reflected in the process, which is paralysed by a large number of blocks.

The basic premise of consensus in large groups is moving between small group (sub-group) discussion, at which level high quality, inclusive and participatory conversation can be held, to plenary discussion in which ideas can be aired and the final decisions taken. In most cases there will need to be several rounds of conversation. Within a larger group communication needs to be more conscious. Any confusion or miscommunication is amplified in larger groups.

This kind of process still needs to have a foundation of that state of mind. Care needs to be taken to help support and cultivate that, especially if a high proportion of those involved are new to consensus.

Formal consensus in larger groups?

One question commonly asked about consensus is whether it's appropriate for larger groups of people. The assumption seems to be that it's simply not possible. The short answer is that it is entirely possible to do consensus in large groups. It does need the same state of mind to be in place to work well and arguably that may be harder the larger the group, but there are plenty of examples of it working with groups and communities of up to 10,000 people. We've already mentioned the Californian town of Casper and the Christiania district of Copenhagen as examples of bigger communities using consensus.

There are some specific models that have been developed for large group consensus. Foremost amongst them is the **Spokescouncils**, used by some parts of the protest movement to co-ordinate its actions.

Spokescouncil meeting at Murray Bergtraum High School where 15 operational working groups were represented as part of the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York, 2011. Photo: (CC) Brennan Cavanaugho

The spokescouncil was popularised by the Movement for a New Society as a process for reaching consensus during the 1977 occupation of the proposed site of the Seabrook nuclear power station in the USA. The occupation involved over 2000 people. Spokescouncils were also used to co-ordinate action to shut down the World Trade Organisation during the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 which involved 10,000. But like all models they simply formalise the relationships involved in coming to a decision.

A very brief history of consensus

Formal consensus is often cited as starting in the 1970s, and is connected to feminist groups that found traditional organising very patriarchal and hierarchical. The feminist movement sought to maintain the practice of participatory democracy when other groups were abandoning it as they became more mainstream. *The Movement for a New Society*, a radical Philadelphia based network, popularised consensus in the 70s and 80s1.

There are many historical groups, peoples, and communities who have demonstrated values of community and participation that are echoed in modern consensus. They include indigenous cultures such as the *Aymara* of the Bolivian Altiplano, the *San* bushmen of the Sahara, and the *Haudenosaunee* first nations people of modern day USA.

A number of religious denominations such as *Quakers* and *Anabaptists* also chose decision-making processes that had, or have, similar values to consensus. They tended to use unanimous decision-making rather than consensual decision-making, but their values and processes have provided much inspiration for formal consensus.

Other notable examples of consensus-like processes and values include: the *Hanseatic League*, a 13th to 17th century northern European trading alliance; the Dutch *Polder Model*, a three-way collaboration between state, employers organisations and trade unions designed to keep industrial relations working effectively; and *Sociocracy*, another process that relies on full consideration of everyone's views and unanimous consent for decision-making. often used in commerce as well as in the non-profit sector.

There is evidence that *pirate ships* worked according to shared common values and were far more democratic than our modern stereotype credits. Decisions were taken in favour of the good of the whole crew, and any leadership positions, including that of captain, were held only with a mandate from the crew.

Adapted from the *Rhizome Guide to a History of Consensus*, available at http://www.rhizome.coop/resources

Alternatives to formal consensus?

There are other approaches to reaching something akin to consensus. Some of these fall back on the definition of consensus we touched on in the introduction to this guide – a general groundswell of support for an idea. The Resources section of this guide will signpost you to more information.

- One of the most rigorous is **Consensus-oriented decision-making (CODM)**, which takes a group through a process very similar to the flow we've outlines. That process is designed to support the group to deeply explore an issue with an open mind and with mutual respect. The main difference with formal consensus is that the CODM process culminates in the decision rule of the groups choice – in other words they may choose to make the decision by unanimity, by a vote, by getting the boss to decide or whatever. It relies on the rigour of the process to have deeply influenced every participant, so that whatever way the group formally take the decision the result is much more co-operative. It's a good alternative for organisations with a difficult decision to make but constitutional or cultural restraints to allowing everyone access to the final decision. www.consensusbook.com/index.html

- **Crowd Wise** is a consensus voting approach that allows groups to co-develop and prioritise a series of options around a contentious issue, eventually moving towards one option that has the widespread support of the group. This final option often gathers widespread support by fusing together important elements of several of the other options originally under discussion. Whilst not relying on full consent,

Crowd Wise has the advantage of working well in environments where formal consensus would not have been seen as appropriate. It's been used in football clubs and hierarchical organisations. It also works well for large groups and organisations. www.neweconomics.org/projects/crowd-wise

- **Dotmocracy** is another consensus voting system that relies less on spoken debate and discussion. It's a participatory process that allows all ideas to have equal consideration, and for the results to be communicated visually rather than in spoken form. Participants display ideas on 'dotmocracy sheets' which are then displayed around the room for people to read, comment on, and finally vote on. It's a simple process whilst simultaneously being a more sophisticated approach to the 'dot voting' techniques some groups use to prioritise ideas. It's been used by local government, community organisations, in schools and for participatory budgeting, amongst other. www.dotmocracy.org/

- **Sociocracy** is a consent-based decision making structure that has been applied in commercial settings as well as in non-profit and public sector organisations. Decisions are deemed to have been taken when there are no paramount objections. Sociocracy can be used in hierarchical organisations through a model of circular organising. Each level of the hierarchy has a semi-autonomous circle mandated to make decisions on its own area of work, and to decide about its own development. Each circle is double linked with the one directly above it in the chain. One link is a representative tasked to voice his or her circle's interests to the next higher circle. The other link is chosen by the next higher circle to represent the wider organisation to their own circle. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocracy

- **Consensus building** draws heavily on the values of consensus. It's any facilitated and participatory process that aims for unanimous consent amongst stakeholders, but ultimately settles for overwhelming support for a proposal having heard and respectfully listened to all views. The final test is *"can we live with this proposal?"*. www.consensusdecisionmaking.org/Articles/A%20Short%20Guide%20to%20Consensus.html

Glossary of consensus terms

Block: The power, that every participant shares in consensus, to prevent a proposal going through and becoming a decision. Different groups have different thresholds for when a block can be used. Some organisations phrase it as a fundamental objection, but leave it open for that to be a personal objection. We argue that it is used to prevent a group from taking a decision that is counter to its stated core aims and ethos rather than for any personal reasons – in other words it's a Principled Objection.

Consensus: In this context consensus is shorthand for formal consensus decision making, a process by which a group agrees by reaching full consent. The process allows for differing ways to dissent from a proposal, including the stand aside and block.

Consent: Consent differs from agreement. You can consent to an idea that you disagree with on some level. As such consensus differs from unanimity, although it is possible to reach a unanimous decision through consensus.

Facilitation: The role of making the decision-making process easier for a group through interventions such as: preparing an effective agenda, creating a meeting environment that supports people to contribute equally, keeping an eye on time, calling for breaks and refreshments at appropriate moments, ensuring accurate notes are taken, recording decisions, and challenging poor group dynamics.

The facilitator is the person with responsibility for co-ordinating this, although they don't necessarily do all of these functions themselves.

Friendly Amendment: Any amendment or addition to a proposal that improves it and makes it more representative of the energy, excitement and concerns of a group.

Major Objection: See block.

Principled Objection: See block.

Proposal: A suggested way forwards for action, normally synthesised out of the best elements of all of the ideas discussed.

Stand aside: To consent but not agree. In other words to step back from participating in the implementation of a decision because of some level of disagreement with it, whilst simultaneously consenting to the group taking that course of action.

Spokescouncil: A process for large group consensus decision-making in which sub-groups sends a delegate (or spoke) to a meeting. The spokes represent the views of their group and reach consensus on a way forward that works for all the constituent parts. There may be some consultation between spoke and sub-group as part of this process.

Synthesis: a pulling together of the best elements from a discussion into a proposal.

Unanimity: the agreement of all participants involved in a decision.

Veto: see block.

Resources

Tree Bressen's excellent and varied consensus resources. www.treegroup.info/topics/#CDM

Autumn Brown's consensus resources, including a world map of consensus and a useful summary of different consensus models. http://iambrown.mayfirst.org/node/4

Tim Hartnett's Consensus-Orientated Decision-Making. www.consensusbook.com/

Seeds for Change consensus briefing which focuses on consensus in grassroots activist circles, including use of spokescouncils for large groups. www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/consensus

www.consensus.net – a website dedicated to Formal Consensus, a specific form of formal consensus.

Consensus Decision-making – a virtual learning centre for people interested in making decisions by consensus which includes articles on consensus building in a public sector business setting, videos, and more. www.consensusdecisionmaking.org/