

Toward Collective Decision Making – Some Guidelines for Activists

compiled by the Prison Activist Resource Center

Often called *consensus*, the process outlined below can be used for participatory and democratic decision making that empowers everyone in a group. See the reverse side for tools, pitfalls, and resource info.

Start here

After making a goal or discovering a problem, the group uses a **brainstorm** to generate a **proposal** that addresses the need at hand.

-- or --

A group, individual, or committee, brings a (preferably **written**) proposal to the group, ideally with several days to weeks lead time, so the group can review it before a meeting.

Next...

1. Everyone in the group gets a chance to ask **clarifying questions** in order to better understand and/or refine the proposal.
2. The group has a **general discussion** of the proposal and its possible outcomes, its pros and cons.
3. The facilitator **tests for consensus** by asking if there are any **concerns** or objections to this proposal.

Yes

No

Deal with concerns...

Taking each concern individually, the facilitator guides group through a discussion covering the following steps:

1. **Clarifying questions** asked so everyone understands the concerns.
2. **Discuss the concerns** one at a time, find ways to resolve them.
3. **Revise and restate** the proposal.
4. The facilitator **tests for consensus** by asking if there are any **concerns** or objections to this **revised** proposal.

Collective Decision!

(*consensus*)

When needed, make a detailed **implementation plan**, designating who's responsible for what and by when.

No

Declare proposal **blocked**.

Send the proposal to **committee**

Those with unresolved objections **stand aside** from decision and implementation.

Yes

Some Roles For Successful Meetings

- **Facilitator:** An effective facilitator solicits input, creates and distributes a proposed agenda, brings the meeting together and keeps it on track, calls on people to speak in turn, clarifies, summarizes, focuses discussion, brings out various viewpoints, draws out quiet people and limits overtalkers, and looks to synthesize different ideas or suggestions into a workable proposal for all.
- **Note taker:** Date, names, highlights of discussion, detailed (re)wording of proposals, decisions reached and who's responsible for what – *action items*; makes sure notes get typed and distributed.
- **Timekeeper:** Updates group of impending time limits, keeps track of time left and time needed.
- **Optional:** In large meetings, a **stacker** can make a list to help keep track of who's hand went up to speak next.

Some Tools to Use For Collective Decision Making

Basic tools necessary for any effective meeting:

- Start on time;
- Rotate facilitation, hold periodic facilitation trainings;
- Plan and review agenda before and/or at start of meeting;
- Set times for agenda items, choose time keeper, bargain for more time if item goes over;
- Use check-in and check-out / evaluation process whereby folks can know both what to expect from each other in the meeting and what needs to be improved for future meetings (constructive criticism/self-criticism can be helpful);
- Facilitator (or stacker) uses a speakers list or "stack" to keep track of who should be called on to speak next;
- Rotation of tasks so that all participants can become adept at various roles, and power does not become concentrated in one or a few individuals.

Helpful tools not necessary in all situations:

- Brainstorm sessions: not for discussion, only generation of ideas;
- Go-arounds: each person speaks from their own perspective, not responding to others;
- Games and ice breakers, taking a break;
- Outlines, timelines, flowcharts, and suchlike;
- Written / typed proposals distributed to group before or at start of meeting;
- Use of blackboard, butcher paper, markers;
- Co-facilitation (especially in large meetings);
- Small group discussions can help digest complex issues;
- Straw polls are a quick way to gauge where the group is at without committing to the decision (thumbs up = yes, down = no, sideways = not sure yet)
- Pass a clipboard/sign up sheet: phone list, volunteer for tasks

Watch Out For These When Trying to Improve Group Process

- Talking off-topic or taking the group on a tangent when decisions are being made;
- Cross-talk, side-discussions, constant interruptions;
- Grand-standing, blaming, hogging the show, repeating others;
- Constantly making jokes **or** not allowing for the group to let off steam with jokes and whatnot - think about striking a balance between **brevity** and **levity**;
- Over-facilitation, such as: 1. Being super rigid about the exact process used, or harsh in one's facilitation, simply for the sake of time; or 2. Not allowing for participants to falter, or develop ideas gradually over the course of a meeting or meetings, through back-and-forth discussion; or 3. The facilitator being the main person talking throughout the meeting.
- Under-facilitation: only calling on people, without taking an active role to guide the process. To avoid this, pay close attention and try taking steps such as: synthesizing and re-capping key points, cutting people off when necessary, and using tools such as those above to move the discussion forward.

Some Resources for More Information

On Conflict and Consensus, Amy Rothstein and CT Butler, Food Not Bombs Publishing 1987
Democracy in Small Groups, John Gastil, New Society Publishers 1993
A Manual For Group Facilitators, Center for Conflict Resolution (731 State St. Madison WI 53703)
The Tyranny of Structurelessness, Jo Freeman (1970, dozens of reprints on web)