CONSensus DECISION-MAKING

by The Catalyst Centre, October 2006

Consensus decision-making is a democratic and rigorous process that radically respects individuals’ right to speak and demands a high degree of responsibility to ensure mutual benefit.

Consensus, like democracy, has many meanings. When we use consensus as a decision-making process we must narrow this range. And even as a decision-making process there are many interpretations of what consensus means and how it can be applied. What it comes down to is what a group agrees upon as a definition and practice of consensus. Take a page from those who advocate for the use of appropriate technology. Despite its lack of cogs and wheels consensus decision-making is as much a technology as any tool or practice fashioned by humans. And, as with all technologies, we should exercise caution and critical mindedness in its use. To this end, it is worth drawing on the wealth of experience with consensus around the world.

An important part of what consensus is about is hidden in the history of the word – its etymology. Taken apart, consensus becomes “com”, Latin for “with” or “together”, and “sentire” meaning feeling. So consensus means “to share the same feeling.” An interesting hidden meaning in our hyper-rational world that all-too-often values reason at the expense of emotion.

WHAT CONSENSUS IS NOT

It’s important to recognize a couple of common sense meanings of consensus. The first is one that circulates widely in the mass media and within public political culture. We often read about the “consensus” of the people, political consensus, the Washington consensus and even the “manufacture of consent”. Each of these uses refers to some form of widespread agreement about the way things are or ought to be. But this type of “agreement” results from the complex ways in which some voices and opinions are privileged while those of the majority are silenced or ignored (see the work of Noam Chomsky in Manufacturing Consent - the film or the book – and Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks).

Another unhelpful meaning of consensus is “no one disagrees strongly enough to speak up” – i.e. silence is interpreted as consent. And, while this may be true after a fashion, it is a dangerous interpretation of consensus if you wish to use consensus decision-making democratically.

Consensus is not unanimity. It is not 100% agreement on every aspect of a decision. Consensus, to state the obvious, is not voting. Consensus is also not the lowest common denominator that a group can agree on.

Consensus decision-making does not need to be the only form of decision-making used by a group. It’s up to the group to name and affirm appropriate forms of decision-making for various things. Decisions can be made by voting, compromise, bargaining, committees, facilitators, leaders, volunteers and by self-selection.

SO WHAT IS CONSENSUS ALL ABOUT?

Power! It’s all about power.

As usual.

Whether we use consensus or voting, cooperation or competition, whether we rely on executive decisions or go-with-the-flow, whether we acquiesce or collude, passively or actively resist, you name it— it’s about power. About how we share it, use it, abuse it, are oppressed by it, resist it or
create more just uses of it. Being in relationship with humans and human societies is about power. We ignore this at our peril.

Democracy through voting creates minorities who will always have at least three choices: support the will of the majority (by deferring, submitting, etc.); withdraw from the group (mentally, emotionally and/or physically); and work against the majority (either openly or in secret).

Consensus decision-making is a different democratic use of power – one that resists creating minorities that lose. Different from democratic voting (commonly based on one-person-one-vote) consensus is not necessarily better. This depends on the circumstances and the type of decisions that are required. Consensus is as open to being abused as any other practice. Consensus decision-making is an appropriate technology for certain situations.

While the goal in voting is to win majority support (usually defined as “simple”, meaning 50%+1, or, for some things, “two-thirds”) for a position, the goal in consensus decision-making is to develop a position for which there is a maximum amount of agreement from all participants. When it comes down to voting for a position participants have only three choices: in favour, against and abstain. It can be very difficult to gauge the will of the group when voting is used. Consensus, however, has many choices.

While there are six identifiable choices in consensus decision-making (we can give support, lukewarm support, support with reservations, we can stand aside, block, withdraw from the group) in truth it is more like a continuum along which people can find numerous places to stand. The plain wording of the six choices is important in promoting clear communication that works well with limited amounts of time. And the six clear choices make it easier when calling for consensus to quickly determine the will of the group.

It is worth noting that the first four choices in consensus decision-making could all be expressed in a voting process as a “YES” (although some might use abstention to express an opinion). You could say that consensus decision-making has four ways to say “yes” and two ways to say “no.”

**FOUR “YESses” AND TWO “NOs”**

There are six identifiable options in consensus decision-making:

(See pages 22-23 for handouts on consensus, which are followed by a number of popular education exercises designed to increase democratic participation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTION</th>
<th>FOR EXAMPLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SUPPORT</td>
<td>“I support the proposal as stated.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. LUKEWARM SUPPORT</td>
<td>“I’m lukewarm. I don’t see the need for this, but I’ll go along.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. SUPPORT WITH RESERVATIONS</td>
<td>“I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. STANDING ASIDE</td>
<td>“I personally can’t do this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. BLOCKING</td>
<td>“I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>If a final decision violates someone’s fundamental moral values they are obligated to block consensus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. WITHDRAWING FROM THE GROUP</td>
<td>“I feel that this group does not and will not represent my interests. I believe it is best if I leave the group at this point.”</td>
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FIVE WAYS TO DISSENT

Consensus decision-making values dissent – it welcomes it, recognizing its creative force. You could say that consensus decision-making has five ways to dissent.

Dissent requires a willingness to argue, disagree, even getting passionate. If a group is committed to developing a proposal for which there is the maximum shared feeling, it is hard to imagine that this could happen without some good and passionate arguing. Conflict can be creative, provocative, challenging. It can help participants in a debate test their own clarity of thought and emotion; it can help reveal the depth of commitment to an idea, a position, a feeling.

Many people think that strong emotions prevent consensus. This is because strong emotions are often equated with aggression or violence and, while they can be used to silence and intimidate, they can also be used with respect. It is especially important to recognize different cultural (including gender, race, class, age, etc.) choices and values regarding expressing emotion. Some cultures value reserving expressing strong emotions only in private places while maintaining a calm and rational demeanor in public. Some cultures expect strong emotion to be expressed publicly as a demonstration of commitment while still others see this as a loss of control.

Strong emotion is often linked to violence and coercion. And this should be acknowledged. For example, it is a commonplace for North American men to raise their voice as a means of intimidation. It is also common for some people to drop their voice to force people to ask them to repeat. Both of these are examples of manipulation that is unhelpful (even damaging) to a consensus process.

What is important for consensus decision-making is to be conscious and critically-minded about the many ways emotion is legitimately expressed and for the group (at some point) to negotiate some forms that are acceptable without unduly silencing any of its members. It can be a huge mistake simply to accept and affirm that the only form of debate and communication is cool, calm, collected, never-raise-your-voice, rational speech.

ENSURING HIGHEST QUALITY DECISIONS

People are more likely to carry out and/or defend a decision that they accept. What obliges a person who lost a vote to implement or defend that decision?

One of the great strengths of consensus decision-making compared to voting is the amount of information shared about the quality of the decision. A "yes" vote does not communicate much about what a person might mean by that "yes". Perhaps they are heartily enthusiastic or perhaps they are simply so fed up with the debate that they just want it to be over with. Both positions are equally well-represented by a simple "yes" vote. Consensus recognizes both of these positions as supporting the proposal but also gives people a few choices with which to represent their position: from fully supporting to being lukewarm to expressing cautions or provisos to standing aside to allow the group to go forward because one doesn’t feel strongly enough to stop the group from going ahead.

The information about the quality of people’s support can be very helpful to a group in making effective decisions. How often have we seen groups decide to do something only later to complain that, despite a majority "yes" vote, no one showed up to carry out the decision. Using consensus decision-making a group might have seen that only two or three people were fully supportive while many were lukewarm and many stood aside. Seeing this, someone could have advocated for revisiting the proposal and changing it to win stronger support. Or the group could still stand by its decision – which tells the few who were strongly supportive the likelihood of their compatriots showing up to follow through. For some decisions a group might consider it acceptable to support an enthusiastic minority while with others the group might deem it essential
Sometimes the position of a single person (or a critical few) is crucial. Consensus allows a group to gauge the quality of that single person’s support. If that person is supportive with reservations or chooses to stand aside, the decision might not be workable. The group could continue to work on the proposal to make a decision for which that person would be more enthusiastic.

**TESTING FOR CONSENSUS AND STRAW POLLS**

The process of testing for consensus often stumps people and groups that are used to voting (by asking for a show of hands, saying “yes” or “no”). One advantage to “testing” is that once a consensus is reached the group can evaluate the quality of the consensus. If too many people are lukewarm, even though consensus has been reached, some people might wish to change their position or move to re-visit the decision.

Short of testing for consensus, the group could decide to call a straw poll. This is usually done by asking for a show of hands of those who support the proposal so far. A straw poll is a non-binding opinion check. This is often mistaken for voting — it is NOT voting and should not be allowed to be used in this way. It is easy to slide from a straw poll into a hasty reading of consensus. This can easily silence many people. An individual who indicates support for a proposal in this way is not committing themselves at this point in the debate. A straw poll should only be used if there is time to respond to the results. If there are five minutes left in a meeting it is probably unwise to use a straw poll. In this event it would probably be better to test for consensus or table the decision to a later date.

**BLOCKING AND HOLDING A GROUP HOSTAGE**

Blocking is one of the strengths of consensus and, like any strength, it can also be a weakness. Blocking is an extreme choice and should never be used lightly. Anyone or any party considering blocking has the responsibility to ensure that all other options have been exhausted and that they are not acting out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, fear, etc.

Many people unfamiliar with consensus fear that blocking will lead to impasse. And, in truth, if a group is inexperienced with consensus, this is a possibility. It is the responsibility of both the group and the individual to sustain an understanding of the many choices available in a consensus decision-making process as well as to promote the critical awareness that consensus is about rights and responsibilities.

If a decision (that has been fully discussed and is ready for testing) violates someone’s moral principles or if they feel that a decision violates an agreed-upon principle of the organization then they have an obligation to block. If this implies that deciding to block is close to deciding to stay in or leave a group this is often the case. If someone is choosing to block it is because “standing aside” is not satisfactory and a group is about to make a decision that crosses a line. If a group fails to respect the right for someone to exercise blocking then this is a point that someone might want to consider the final option of consensus decision-making: withdrawing from the group.

**NOTHING IS ABSOLUTE**

If a group feels that one person or party should not have the power to block a decision it is possible only to allow blocking by two people or parties. One person blocking would not enough to stop consensus. Some groups call this “consensus minus one”. Depending on the size of the group it is conceivable only to allow blocking by three people. This should be done very cautiously. Should a group increase the limitation on blocking thoughtlessly you could end up with a situation in which it requires 25% of the participants to block which might become a defacto voting process.
It is also important to consider group size. Consensus decision-making can take more time than majority vote processes. For each participant of a large group to have the opportunity to speak can take more time than a group has. Groups should consider using small group discussions (from pairs to groups of five) to facilitate decisions.

A group should also be critical and creative about how voices get represented in a discussion. In coalitions it is common for each organizational member to have one voice regardless of the number of members of that group present (each individual can still be granted full rights to speak while limiting each organization to one voice when testing for consensus). Unaffiliated individuals in a coalition effort can be asked to form affinity groups for the same purpose. These are processes for democratically balancing mutual interest with individuals’ interests.

It is also important to always consider the needs of newcomers. Consensus decision-making requires a constant process of education and critical reflection. Newcomers should receive an orientation to the process and should be expected to agree to the responsibilities of consensus if they wish to enjoy its rights. A group might oblige newcomers to attend one or two meetings before being granted the right to exercise a voice in consensus decision-making.

Groups using consensus decision-making should be vigilant about resisting groupthink which is always a risk when silence is assumed to mean consensus. If time has been used poorly, if an issue has dragged on too long, if a few vocal people have dominated, many group members may simply submit rather than continue to resolve differences.

**FIVE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF COALITION PARTICIPATION:**
Coalitions of groups require articulating shared principles in order to work democratically and effectively. Coalitions often use some form of consensus since groups whose interests are not being served always have the option to leave. The following five principles are adapted from Filipino coalition experiences:

1. **Democratic Pluralism:** the coalition will include many democratic forces with different but some overlapping goals. We acknowledge that we don’t all know each other.

2. **Consensus:** the coalition will work by consensus and use a formal process of consensus decision-making. We agree to work by persuasion not coercion.

3. **Independence and initiative:** coalition members unite on common issues while remaining free to pursue other activities outside the coalition according to their missions (as long as these don't violate principles and objectives of network unity). Unaffiliated individuals who are members of the coalition are encouraged to seek affiliation through a member group or otherwise self-organize with others (individuals can form a new group that could formally join the coalition or use an affinity group process to represent like-minded allies).

4. **Shared responsibility:** each coalition member must share in coalition work on a basis of ability according to size and resources and not on a basis of reward. We are all responsible for creating and maintaining a culture of participation.

5. **Unity and struggle:** no member of the coalition can advance at the expense of others. Although programs and lines may vary, coalition members should welcome and encourage dialogue on matters related to realizing higher levels of political unity and understanding. We agree to open sharing of information amongst members and we encourage healthy and democratic debate and discussion.
AT A GLANCE GUIDELINES FOR CONSENSUS

- Consensus requires a good degree of trust within a group.

- Consensus decision-making requires effective facilitation. The facilitator is responsible for ensuring that everyone’s rights to participate are respected and that everyone is encouraged to act from a position of responsibility. The facilitator is always responsible for ensuring (through recommending and/or negotiating changes) that the process is serving the interests of the group.

- It is both a right and a responsibility of each participant to challenge the process if it is not serving the interests of the group.

- Not all decisions require consensus. Be critically-minded about how and when to use formal consensus.

- Any participant can suggest that consensus be tested. (i.e. the facilitator then has the option to allow debate to continue; to test consensus using a straw poll; to test consensus by asking people to state their position.)

- A straw poll is not a vote and should not be used, even informally, as a voting process. If a straw poll is called (and agreed to) it is a means of providing information to the process of dialogue. The results of the straw poll should be addressed and those who did not express and opinion should be asked for more information. Even if the straw poll reveals unanimity, this should not stop debate. The group should be asked if they are ready to test for consensus and, if ready, then consensus should be tested.

- Once debate on an issue is complete the facilitator (or chairperson) will test or call for consensus (e.g. “Can I ask everyone to state their position on the proposal?” It is always advisable when groups first start using this process to ask people to state their position verbally.)

- Participants in a formal process of consensus decision-making have four different ways to say yes, two ways to say no or five ways to dissent:

- N.B.: Obviously, if many people declare themselves as lukewarm or stand aside or leave the group, it may not be a viable decision even if no one directly blocks it.