

The
FIVE-FOLD PATH OF
PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS

STARHAWK
<http://www.starhawk.org>



A special bonus chapter from

The
EMPOWERMENT
MANUAL

A GUIDE *for* COLLABORATIVE GROUPS

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NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

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The Five-Fold Path of Productive Meetings

LEARNING TO LOVE MEETINGS

Meetings are the heart of any organization. We get together in meetings for many reasons: to discuss issues, make decisions, set priorities and respond to crises. In meetings, we learn who our colleagues are and decide whom we can trust. We may laugh, cry, rage, love and comfort one another as well as dealing with the business at hand. With all our ability to converse over the Internet, to text, Skype and send Facebook messages galore, organizations still need face to face meetings to function well.

Most people hate meetings. The same person who looks forward to a social gathering, regales a party with a witty story and shines at dinner conversation clams up at a meeting. Meetings, we think, are work, painful, dull, perhaps necessary but boring, to be avoided whenever possible.

I like meetings. Perhaps because I was introduced to them while I was still in high school back in the 1960s. We were organizing student protests against the Vietnam War, and meetings were exciting, laced with whiffs of illegal drugs and hopes of illicit sex. Or maybe because, as a writer, I find a meeting a welcome social break from the loneliness of staring at the blank page. After more than four decades and thousands of meetings, I still find them fascinating. Meetings are where challenges are met and interpersonal dynamics play themselves out. What could be more enthralling?

Productive meetings allow an organization to move forward, keep members engaged and give them a sense of empowerment and efficacy. Meetings can be

cauldrons of group creativity or occasions of intimate sharing. And, of course, they can also be long-winded, fruitless, pointless arenas of frustration. The difference is often what makes or breaks a group.

There are five aspects of structure and interpersonal dynamics we must pay special attention to if we want our meetings to be truly productive. I call this the Five-Fold Path of Productive Meetings.

- Right People
- Right Container
- Right Process
- Right Facilitation
- Right Agenda

RIGHT PEOPLE

By right people, I do not mean the blue-blood relatives of Princes William and Harry or the latest celebrities from the *Tonight Show*. I mean paying attention to who needs to be part of the discussion at hand, who needs to weigh in on the decisions being made and who needs to be informed of them.

Communication is far more complex in collaborative groups and networks than in hierarchies. In a hierarchy, people generally know to whom they report and who reports to them. A hierarchy could be diagrammed as a tree, with clear branches. But a collaborative group is more like a network or web. Many criss-crossing lines of communication exist, as well as many possible ways for a message to reach its recipient. In a collaborative group, we may easily get confused by this wealth of possibilities. We may forget who was at a particular meeting, and who was not. Many people may agree to a project, but no one may actually carry it out because each person thinks someone else is doing it. Messages may get tangled in a snarl of potential pathways.

To function well, collaborative groups must pay rigorous attention to communication. Meetings are a key place where communication happens, so the first questions we must ask concern who needs to be in the room when decisions are made.

One democratic principle is that people should have a voice in the decisions that affect them. Yet most peoples' lives are busy and often stressed, and asking people to come to meetings is asking for a true gift of their limited resources.

Overwhelming people with meetings is not empowering. So, while we might ideally want input from everyone possible on every possible issue, we need to prioritize.

If RootBound ecovillage decides to change the timing of its group dinners from 6:30 to 6:00 PM, that's a fairly minor decision. It could be made in a general meeting of all members, or perhaps decided by a simple online poll. But if RootBound wants to revise its founding documents and shift its core principles, that's something that everyone needs to weigh in on, and over time, not in a single or hastily-called meeting.

Getting input from everyone affected by an issue may not always be possible. If Reclaiming's ritual planning committee decides to change the location of our annual Spiral Dance ritual, everyone who comes or may come will be affected, but there is no practical way to get them all in the room together.

Work hard to get key people into the room and in the meeting! It is far better to argue out any conflicts face to face than to let them fester and resurface later, perhaps for years to come. If you want your group to appeal across the lines of race, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation or any other aspect of diversity, include people from those groups from the beginning. Make sure we help to set the frame, the focus and the priorities of any project — don't just invite us in at the end as tokens to set a seal of approval on a done deal.

EXERCISE

Key Questions About Who Should Be At a Meeting

- Whose input would we like to have?
- Whose ideas might benefit this project?
- Who might have insights or perspectives that are important or enriching?
- Aside from the meeting, how else might we invite this input? A community roundtable, an online poll, informal discussions, interviews, one on one discussions?
- Whose input *must* we have?
- Who is the project's strong advocate?
- Who has vital information to present?
- Who has the ability to make or break this project?
- Who is most affected by it?
- Who has the most to lose, or to gain?
- Whose opposition will keep it from going forward if they feel disrespected?
- Who will carry out the decisions?
- Will the meeting represent the diversity we aim for?

EXERCISE

Encouraging People To Come

Setting meetings and inviting people is all very well, but how do we actually get stressed, busy people into the room? Below are some tips.

1. Give generous notice of the time, place and logistics of the meeting.
2. Let people know what will be discussed and what's at stake for them.
Be clear about what negative outcomes might transpire without them and what positive benefits their presence might bring — but be sure your invitation remains a request, not a demand.
3. Call or talk to people personally if you really want their attendance, don't just send out a generic e-mail.

Let them know why their participation is

vital and valued and that you personally care about them being there.

4. Offer help and support with transportation — information on public transportation, help finding rides to share, pickups at home for those with disabilities or physical limitations. Provide child care and other forms of practical support.
5. Send out a reminder notice close to the meeting and possibly a final reminder on the day.
6. Welcome people personally, thank them for coming and create opportunities for them to network, make announcements and share their own projects.

EXERCISE

Ongoing Communication

As communication is complex in collaborative groups, information can easily be dropped and key messages fall through the cracks. When people are not informed of meetings or decisions, they feel disrespected and disempowered. To guard against communication snarls, develop this practice:

At the end of every meeting ask:

- Who needs to be informed of these decisions and discussions?
- Who is affected by the decision?
- Who stands to gain or lose?
- Whose participation are we hoping for?
- Who missed the meeting?
- What allied groups or communities might need to know this information?

CONT

- Who will convey this information, how and by when?
- Who will send out the minutes, in what form, by what date?
- Who will call the absent members and fill them in on what happened?
- How will we know when that is done?

Getting someone to commit to communicate the information is the key to making sure it happens. In a circular structure, it's easy for each person to assume that someone else is taking care of the need, so get a clear commitment.

EXERCISE

A Template for Minutes

Sending out the minutes is one thing, getting people to actually read them is another. When minutes are long and detailed, key information may get buried or lost. Below is a simple template for minutes that puts vital information up front.

Name of Group

Date and Time of Meeting

List of Those Present

Next Meeting Date, Time and Place

Action Items:

Things people who might read the minutes are called upon to do, for example, "Go to the online poll (LINK) and fill in the information about your availability by September 3 so we can schedule the retreat!"

Key Decisions:

What was decided, who will implement it or be responsible for it, by when?

Body of the Meeting:

Whatever is relevant to flesh out the decisions, however much needs to be conveyed of the discussion and interactions and chains of reasoning behind the decisions. Objections or stand asides can be recorded here.

Announcements:

Recap — a very short summary of what was discussed and what decisions were made.

Following these simple guidelines can eliminate the source of a lot of hurt feelings and conflict, and strengthen the group's sense of involvement and commitment.

RIGHT CONTAINER

By *container*, I mean the setting, frame, length and stated purpose of the meeting. Master trainer George Lakey offers his definition: "I call the kind of social order that supports safety, a 'container.' The metaphor of container suggests that it

might be thin or thick, weak or robust. A strong container has walls thick enough to hold a group doing even turbulent work, with individuals willing to be vulnerable in order to learn.”¹

The setting is the physical aspect of the container. Any meeting benefits from a setting that is private, quiet and comfortable. That’s not always possible — I’ve been in many meetings in the streets, in noisy warehouses, even in jail. But when conditions allow, protecting the group from outside noise and providing what people need for their physical comfort will allow them to focus on the issues at hand.

A meeting will have a different feel in an office board room than in a comfortable living room. A council might take place outdoors under a tree. Some meetings benefit from a formal setting: for making a business deal, for signing a contract or for tense negotiations, an office or conference room may be far more appropriate than a coffee house or living room. In other cases, a relaxed setting may encourage people to let down their guard and relate more openly. Mediations and conflict resolution require neutral ground — a setting that is not deeply identified with either party.

A public meeting should be accessible for people with disabilities — and that includes the bathrooms! Older people, and even young people with back problems, need chairs. As I get older and more and more hearing-impaired, I’ve become more sensitive to noise levels in meetings. Hard, concrete, echoey spaces make participation very difficult for people with even slight hearing impediments. When a choice exists, pay attention to the acoustic properties of the room. Rugs, hangings and soft surfaces can help absorb those extraneous reverberations that interfere with hearing. At important public meetings, or in groups that include members of the deaf community, provide an interpreter who can translate the meeting into sign language, and make sure that adequate lighting and seating is available.

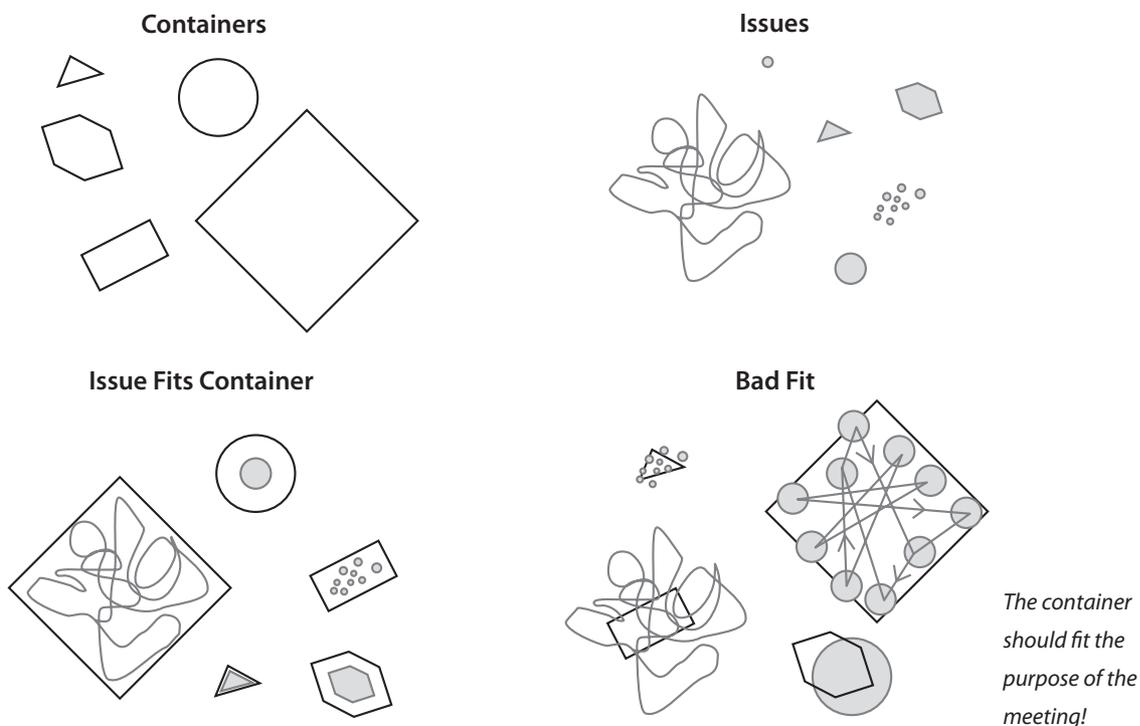
Providing child care, or a child care subsidy, may make it possible for parents, especially single parents, to attend. Child care providers must be people who are known and trusted. Most parents will not feel comfortable leaving their children with random volunteers. And a child care space must be safe for children and secure from outsiders.

To prepare for a meeting, make sure all the needed aids are in place: markers for the whiteboard or an easel for the flipchart, pens, pencils, any visual aids. Such

preparations signal that the group is serious and organized. For some gatherings, an altar or even a simple vase of flowers signals an intent to address deeper levels of emotion and spirit, not just business. Offering food, snacks, tea and coffee or holding a potluck signals that we care about people personally and want to connect socially as well as around the work at hand.

Adam Wolpert is an artist who lives and works in a thriving intentional community in northern California, Occidental Arts and Ecology Center. When he teaches workshops on consensus and meeting process, he draws a series of shapes, from tiny circles to big, amorphous blobs, on one side of the board. On the other side, he makes dots, squares and big squiggles. He then goes on to explain the importance of fitting the issue to the right container.

Some issues are small and discreet: how do we reduce our phone charges, or who is entitled to use the copy machine in the office? Small issues require a small, limited container — for example, a two-hour, once a week business meeting. Put them into a big, open-ended container, such as a weekend retreat, and they will



bounce around and fill up all the available space. People will discover powerful ethical concerns about who gets to use the copy machine, and deep and painful emotions will erupt over the phone bill.

Other issues are big, amorphous, squiggly — for example, how do we resolve some of the hurt feelings and personal conflicts that have built up over time? Put them into a two-hour business meeting, and the container will explode, perhaps taking the group with it.²

At OAEC, they have different types of meetings for different issues: small, frequent, regular meetings to handle routine business; longer monthly meetings for bigger issues; once a year retreats for deep emotional work and questions of core values. Management consultant Patrick Lencioni suggests that businesses need different kinds of meetings for different purposes. He proposes a structure of four kinds of meetings: A daily check-in, “a ‘huddle’ ... (where) team members get together, standing up, for about five minutes every morning to report on their activities that day,” is the shortest. He also suggests a weekly tactical meeting lasting 45 to 90 minutes, a monthly strategic meeting lasting three to four hours to look at larger issues and a quarterly offsite review lasting a day or more.³

Collaborative groups might consider what kind of meetings address both their ongoing work and make space to nurture relationships.

RIGHT PROCESS

Some time ago, I gave a workshop for a Transition Town group in Southern England. One of the participants complained that his group came up with hundreds of creative ideas but never seemed to move beyond visioning to taking action.

“What process do you use for making decisions?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly. “We use Open Space,” he said.

“That might explain your problem,” I suggested. “Open Space is a visioning process — great for generating ideas and participation. But it’s not a process for making decisions or setting priorities.”

When a carpenter builds a house, she uses a saw to cut wood and a hammer to pound nails. If she tried to cut her boards with a hammer and fasten them with a saw, she wouldn’t get far. Different tools do different jobs. Yet often in groups, we only have one tool, one process we expect to do all the different jobs a group needs. Our work will be far more effective if we learn that there are many types of meeting processes which are suited for different purposes.

The list of processes below is by no means comprehensive, but gives an overview, some resources and ideas for several different functions.

Fostering Group Creativity and Participation

Some processes work well to foster group thinking, visioning and the sharing of ideas. They are not decision-making processes, but they might be used as a prelude to a vote or consensus process to get out all possible ideas and facets of an issue.

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is often used in conferences, community visioning meetings, permaculture convergences, Transition Town meetings or design charettes. A big sheet of paper is put up on the wall, divided according to the available times for meeting and spaces available. People are encouraged to put up the topics they would like to meet around or present, choosing a particular time and place. They each make a short announcement, describing their session. Participants are free to go where they wish. Each session has a notetaker, who types notes onto a computer after the session is over, allowing the group to easily and quickly produce a report that can be circulated to participants, and beyond.

There are four rules:

1. Whoever is there is the right group.
2. When it starts is when it starts.
3. Whatever happens is all that could have happened.
4. When it's over, it's over.

There's also the Law of Two Feet — “If you find yourself in a situation where you aren't contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can.”

Open Space encourages participation, individual empowerment and spontaneity. It's easy, requires no great skill to facilitate and encourages everyone to take part. It's a good opening or connecting process but not a process that helps a group set goals, priorities or come to decisions.⁴

The World Cafe or Conversation Cafe

A World Cafe is a way to have larger conversations in small groups that can then harvest their information and share it together.⁵

A large room is set up with many tables. A big sheet of paper and many colored pens are placed on each table. A Convener sits at each table, and she or he remains at that table throughout the Cafe.

Facilitators decide on discussion questions beforehand. Choosing the questions is an important part of the process, as they will frame the discussions. Questions must be open-ended enough to encourage creativity and broad thinking but narrow enough to focus the group. Generally, three related questions are chosen and written on big sheets of paper (or put up on a slide show). At the beginning, only one question is displayed.

Participants choose tables, seating from four to eight people. The Facilitator explains the rules and poses the first question. The group is given time to discuss the question — generally 30 to 45 minutes. They are also encouraged to draw, write or doodle. The Conveners take notes. At the end of the allotted time, the Facilitator rings a bell. Everyone except for the Conveners change tables. A new question is revealed, and participants can discuss it for the allotted time. The Conveners may also summarize the discussion from the previous table.

When the time is up, again the Facilitator rings a bell. Participants, except for the Conveners change places, and the third question is revealed for discussion. After the third or final round, the group gathers together to hear brief reports from each table.

World Cafes are great ways to have deep conversations in small groups while sharing the overall wisdom of a larger group. They encourage participation and empowerment. Like Open Space, they are not decision-making processes, but can be used in the lead-in to decision-making to help develop a sense of the group's thinking on a question, help refine proposals and synthesize ideas.

Speaking from the Heart

Some processes are designed to open up deep feelings and emotions, to allow people to share with a greater level of intimacy.

Talking Stick

A group designates a sacred stick or other object as the talking tool. They sit in a circle, and the Talking Stick is placed in the center. They may begin with a meditation or a time of silence, prayer or song. When someone feels moved to speak, they take the stick and are given the floor. When they are done, they put the stick

back in the center. The next person who wishes to speak takes the stick, is given the floor, and the meeting continues in this way until everyone who wishes to speak has spoken or until the meeting must end.

The Talking Stick originated in Native American cultures that see time as open-ended and value human connection over brisk efficiency. When time is not at issue, the talking stick can work for decision-making. However, when a group is functioning under the pressures of Western society and time constraints, the Talking Stick can feel ponderously slow when a course of action must be set. With no facilitation, the group can easily wander far off the track of a discussion. And with no boundaries on how long people can speak, long-winded people can easily dominate the group.

Talking Stick rounds, however, can be powerful ways to speak about deep questions, to explore feelings and values and to prepare the ground for making decisions.

Feminist Consciousness Raising

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the second wave of the feminist movement was ignited and spread by horizontally organized groups using a process we called *consciousness raising*. It originated from Maoist Chinese Speak Bitterness circles, in which oppressed peasants and workers were encouraged to speak openly of their experiences under the old regime. Women, we knew, were oppressed, and political and psychological theories were made by men about men. We had nothing to believe in or trust, except our own experiences. So, by sharing our experiences, we could build new insights, theories and develop courses of action.

A consciousness-raising group generally met every week. We would have a topic each week — work, sexuality, our mothers, fear — the topics were as broad-ranging as life itself. We would sit in a circle, and each woman was given a protected time in which to talk about her own experiences. If she had nothing to say, we all sat silent for her ten minutes. Because women were so often silenced, interrupted and shut down, we did not interrupt, respond or ask questions. When every woman present had been given a chance to speak, we would have an open discussion about what was similar or different in our experiences, and what it meant.

For many women, our consciousness-raising group became a close, supportive circle of intimate friends. Having a regular circle in which we were heard and

appreciated was enormously empowering. Out of those groups came the whole feminist agenda of the 1970s and 1980s. Issues such as rape, sexual abuse, child sexual abuse, battering, pornography and violence against women had never been seen as politically important until women started to honestly share our real-life experiences together.

Consciousness-raising is a powerful process for sharing insights, inspiring growth and finding support. Many sorts of support groups, even Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs, have developed their own variations of this process of honestly sharing one's own experiences with a group of peers.

The Way Of Council

The Way of Council was developed at the Ojai Foundation and popularized in a book by that name written by Jack Zimmerman and Gigi Coyle.⁶ The Way of Council has Four Intentions:

Speak from the Heart

Speak honestly, openly and from a feeling place as well as from practical or intellectual perspectives. *Speaking* may also mean dancing, breathing, drawing or otherwise communicating.

Listen from the Heart

Listen actively, listen for feelings as well as content, listen with your full presence and attention, and listen with compassion.

Be Succinct

Say what you wish to say briefly. Be conscious of how much time you are taking up, and leave time for others to speak.

Be Spontaneous

Don't preplan your statements or marshal your arguments. Let thoughts and feelings arise in the moment, and respond to what is in the room.⁷

The Way of Council is taught at the Ojai Foundation and by facilitators trained in its deeper aspects. The Ojai Foundation also runs programs to teach The Way of Council in schools. According to their website, "Council offers effective means of resolving conflicts and for discovering the deeper, often unexpressed needs of

individuals and organizations. Council provides a comprehensive means for co-visioning and making decisions in a group context. Council is about our personal and collaborative story.”⁸

Council can open people up to share more intimately. It is a powerful tool for healing group pain, loss or conflict, for exploring deep issues and core values, for making the big decisions that need long, thoughtful exploration. While the Ojai Foundation does use council for decision-making, many organizations would find it slow, especially for day-to-day, operational decisions.

Decision-Making Processes

Sharing heartfelt feelings and inspiring ideas are important aspects of group connection. But what happens when we need to get things done? To move from vision to action, we need decision. And there are three basic ways groups make decisions:

By Decree

This is absolutely the best way to run a group — providing I am the one issuing the decrees. Perhaps not everyone would consent to my absolute rule, but they would be wrong.

Seriously, in some situations, especially emergencies, it can be helpful and appropriate for someone to occasionally take charge and tell people what to do. A teacher must set standards and give out homework. A doctor must prescribe medication and treatment.

But in collaborative groups, we generally try to avoid this form of decision-making except for limited areas of personal responsibility and limited times of emergency.

By Majority Rule

When we vote, majority rules. We find out who says yea or nay, count hands, and winners take all.

Voting is key to what most people think of as democracy, and it has some clear advantages over autocracy and subjugation. Voting can be efficient: quick, clear and transparent. In large groups who do not have a common set of values, or when people are unfamiliar with other options and untrained in them, it may be the simplest and best way to make decisions. Even in groups that generally use consensus, voting may be appropriate for making minor decisions.

In voting, we are generally choosing between two or several alternatives. Voting can be polarizing — we're asked to say either yes or no, or sometimes to abstain, but we don't often get the chance to refine or synthesize the options. Voting works well when the options are limited or the decision is limited in scope: for example: choosing between two different restaurants for lunch, or deciding whether to start the meeting at 7 PM or 7:30.

Voting can also be combined with forms of consensus. We might use consensus for decisions involving our goals and values, and use voting to decide the next meeting date. Modified consensus uses a supermajority vote as a fallback.

Because so many people are familiar with voting and because there are already so many resources available, I'm not going to discuss it in detail here. Groups that do use voting would do well, however, to review and train their members in Roberts' Rules of Order, or create their own ground rules for procedure. Sociocracy trainer Sharon Villines wrote about her early experience in political

E X E R C I S E

Simple Voting Procedure

This is one form of simple procedure I've seen work well.

- An open discussion is held around an issue. The Chair may direct the discussion using appropriate tools from the Facilitator's Toolbox.
- Someone makes a proposal. Someone else must second the proposal for it to be considered.
- The Chair calls on people who wish to speak in favor of the proposal for a limited period of time.
- The Chair then calls on people who wish to speak against the proposal for the same amount of time.
- The Chair then calls for rebuttals and debate for a period of time — or she may again call on those in favor, and those against. During this time, amendments can be proposed and the maker of the proposal can either accept them as friendly or reject them.
- Someone moves to call the question, and someone else must second the motion.
- The Chair calls for the vote — either a voice vote, a count of hands or a paper ballot.
- The votes are tallied, and the majority wins.
- The decision is stated, recorded, and consideration of how to implement it begins.
- The group notes who else must be informed of this decision, and who will communicate it to them, how and by when.

groups, “I learned parliamentary procedure in 1971, when Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, and Betty Friedan held workshops during the founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus. I remember a key session when Bella Abzug insisted that until women understood Robert’s Rules of Order they could not progress in politics. You have to know the rules and when to use them.”⁹ Knowledge of procedure confers power, and lack of knowledge can leave people frustrated and unheard.

Classic parliamentary procedure may be far too restrictive and rigid for many collaborative groups, however. A group might use any of the processes described here and in the Facilitator’s Toolbox for discussion, employ some of the priority-setting processes and culminate with a simple vote. Alternatively, you might use many of the procedures detailed below under Consensus Process but end with a simple vote.

Consensus Process

Consensus in some form is the decision-making process most often used by collaborative groups, and it is the one with which I have the most personal experience. Over four decades of activism, I’ve probably facilitated thousands of meetings, from small, intimate circles planning a ritual to huge groups under extreme tension in the midst of an action.

My first experience of a group that was collaboratively organized and that worked by consensus was at the blockade of a nuclear power plant at Diablo Canyon in Central California in 1981. Actually, that wasn’t my first experience of consensus — I had been working in circles and collectives of various sorts for many years. But it was my first experience of a group that was trained in how to use consensus and skilled at doing so, and it was on a much bigger scale, with thousands of people taking part in the blockade over a period of three weeks. While our meetings certainly had their moments of frustration, overall it was a life-changing event that left an indelible mark on the political culture of the environmental and peace movements for decades to come.

Fifteen years later, I bought some land in the Cazadero Hills in western Sonoma County. Many of my neighbors seemed strangely familiar, as if I’d known them in some previous life — as indeed I had, for they’d taken part in the blockade and in many later mobilizations. When we formed a group to help protect our local wildlands, we discussed how we wanted to make decisions. Over and over,

I heard people say, “We learned consensus at Diablo Canyon, and it’s worked for us ever since.”

A Culture of Respect

Consensus works best in a group that cultivates respect, where people care not only what gets done but how we treat one another in the process. Consensus asks us to put aside our egos, our need to win and to be right and open our ears to listen, to appreciate the contributions of others and to co-create solutions to our problems.

When groups hold these values, using consensus can reenforce them and reward people for flexibility, for their willingness to listen and for their creative responses.

When groups don’t hold values of respect and don’t care about the process as well as the results, consensus may still work but only if the group has very skilled and stubborn facilitators.

Training for Consensus

Consensus is a bit like the proverbial little girl with the little curl right in the middle of her forehead — when it’s good, it’s really, really good and when it’s bad, it’s horrid! The discussion here and in the following sections on facilitation and agendas will help to make it good. But groups that intend to run by consensus do well to invest some time and effort in training their members. Most of us are familiar with voting, but consensus is not common in the larger society and there are many misconceptions about it. Groups that find consensus unworkable often have not taken the time to train their members or even familiarize them with the rules and conventions. As a result, people may mistake a block for a disagreement or get frustrated when they cannot reach unanimity. Many of the things that people dislike about consensus are actually rooted in unfamiliarity with the process or mistaken ideas of how it works.

Misunderstandings about Consensus

People often think that consensus process means that we all agree. It does not. Within consensus there is room for people to disagree, to object or to stand aside, refusing to participate in implementing a decision.

Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity. Consensus does mean that we’ve gone through a process in which everyone’s ideas and concerns can be heard, and done our best to meet them. We ask, “Can you live with it?” not “Do you

love it?” We ask “Can you consent?” not “Is this the most perfect expression of your own ideas?” Consensus does mean that the group has done its best to hear all ideas and concerns and synthesize the best possible proposal.

When to Use Consensus

Consensus is also not a group structure or a form of governance. Some groups seem to think that once they’ve said “We work by consensus,” every person must always be part of every single decision. But consensus works best when many decisions are delegated and people have a high degree of autonomy and responsibility. If we all have to be part of every single decision on every issue, none of us would have time for a life, nor any time to actually get the work done. No one would have freedom to exercise independent judgment or creativity.

Consensus is costly — in group time and energy, although not generally in money unless the group is paying a facilitator. For that reason, a group should be sure to use it judiciously: for issues that are important and that relate to core values, that need wide group support or participation or that have lasting effects. Smaller decisions with a limited scope should be delegated to groups or individuals directly concerned with them. Simple decisions like “How long will the lunch break be?” can be decided by straw poll or vote.

Levels of Commitment

Roger Schwarz, in *The Skilled Facilitator*, discusses different forms of decision-making. In *Consultative decision-making*, a leader consults with others but ultimately make the decision. In *Democratic decision-making*, the group discusses the decision, then votes and majority rules. In *Consensus decision-making*, everyone discusses the issue and revises the proposal until they reach unanimity (note that here Schwarz accepts one of the common fallacies about consensus). In *Delegative decision-making*, the decision is referred to a small group or an individual.¹⁰

Schwarz suggests matching the process we use to the degree of internal commitment needed. Consensus is time-consuming, but it generates a high degree of commitment. Other forms generate less buy-in but may be appropriate for decisions where less is at stake. The levels of commitment he discusses are:

Internal Commitment: We believe in the decision, we feel part of it and will do whatever it takes to implement it.

Enrollment: We support the decision and will work within our own roles to implement it.

Compliance: We accept the decision although we may not believe in it; we will do what is required of us.

Noncompliance: We don't support the decision, and we don't do what we're asked to do to implement it.

Resistance: We actively work against the decision.¹¹

The amount of time, energy and consideration devoted to an issue should be proportional to its importance and its scope. My spiritual network, Reclaiming, contemplating a change to the wording of our Principles of Unity, has embarked on what we expect to be a multi-year process of discussion in many forums, culminating in a consensus meeting that people will have long prepared for. But we delegate to small groups decisions such as whether the Spring Equinox ritual in San Francisco will be in the park or at the beach, or which bookkeeper to use for the collective accounts. When setting dates, we often now use online polls to see which day works best for most people — in effect, a form of voting.

Consensus: A Creative Thinking Process

Consensus encourages us to think creatively about issues and problems. The heart of consensus is a process of synthesis. An issue is brought up — we hear a diverse range of ideas, opinions and concerns, and out of them all we try to synthesize the best possible approach.

Consensus works best in groups that share some common values and that value respect and caring treatment of one another. However, with strong and skilled facilitation, consensus can work even in groups that differ widely on their politics and their approach to process — providing they share some common goal strong enough to hold them together.

Meta-talking Bogs the Process Down

Consensus can be empowering, exciting and surprisingly efficient — but it can also bog down and become ponderous and agonizingly frustrating. One of the key reasons people lose patience with meetings comes from what I call meta-talking. Talking is addressing content — wrestling with issues, proposing ideas, stating concerns or objections. *Talking* takes time, but people will be engaged

Consensus Roles

Consensus process has three necessary roles and one optional one:

- The *facilitator* — or more often, co-facilitators — set the agenda, run the meeting, keep the discussions on track, assure fairness and respect in discussions and attempt to assure equal opportunity to participate for all.
- The *timekeeper* keeps track of time. Groups often set time limits on discussion for each item on the agenda, and the timekeeper warns when those limits are approaching or have passed. Groups can agree to contract for more time if a discussion warrants it — but awareness of time can help keep the meeting moving forward and can assure that all the crucial items on the agenda are addressed.
- The *notetaker* keeps the meeting minutes, taking notes on key points of the discussions, and most importantly, on decisions that are reached. The notetaker also holds the responsibility to see that the record of the meeting is sent out to everyone who needs to know.
- Optional role: Some groups like to have a *vibeswatcher* who pays attention to the process of the meeting. She or he watches body language and tracks the mood and energy of the group. They may help the facilitator interrupt arguments or make positive suggestions for a game, a break, a moment of silence. If *vibeswatcher* sounds too 1970s, you may prefer to create a different name for this role.

as long as the discussion moves forward and does not simply repeat arguments already heard.

Meta-talking is talking about talking. When the group gets embroiled in discussions about which items to discuss first or second, what processes to use, whether or not to take a break and for how long, people rapidly become impatient and frustrated, rightfully feeling that their time is not being well used.

I believe that the facilitators best serve the group by setting an agenda ahead of time, giving thought to the processes and tools they will use for discussion and asking for the group's authority to decide minor issues by decree or simple vote, if necessary. After you've suffered through one 45-minute discussion on whether to take ½ an hour or an hour to break for lunch, your need to participate in such decisions is fulfilled for a lifetime. Ever after, you will welcome a facilitator who simply says, "We're taking a break for an hour." Voting is also a simple and quick method for determining simple decisions of procedure.

If people seem attached to the idea of weighing in on process or bogged down in a minor discussion, they can often be persuaded to move on simply by reminding the group that talking about talking is a recipe for frustration.

Blocking Consensus

In classic consensus, any one individual can block the group from moving forward — but only for very specific reasons. A block is not a disagreement or an objection. It's not a way to express general dislike. A block is only accepted when it is a moral objection, that is, a block says: "This decision would violate the shared values upon which this group is founded." When someone does block a consensus, they must be able to state their principled objection.

The values must be ones core to the group and to which the group subscribes. If RootBound ecovillage has not formed around animal rights, the most ardent vegan member can't block the farmers from raising chickens. The vegans are free, however, to register their opinions, concerns, to advocate for their position, to educate their friends and to say that they personally will not come to dinner if any meat is served. In classic consensus, a block is something you might do once or twice in a lifetime. Another way to look at a block is to say, "Is this so serious that I would have to disassociate myself and leave the group if they go ahead with it?"

The only other reason for blocking would be that the discussion and decision-making process have been so unfair or so badly done that the decision is not a true one. A process block does not kill the issue, but sends it back for more discussion and a more fair presentation.

Groups may decide to limit blocking. Some groups decide, for example, that a lone individual cannot block, but only a representative of some subgroup that has itself reached consensus to block. For example, in a mobilization for a direct action the group might decide that any blocks must come from an affinity group or a working group, not just a single person, to protect the organization from potential disrupters who might parachute in and stop the work from going forward. Other groups might limit blocking to people who have been members for a determined period of time, or who fulfill other requirements. Some groups require anyone who blocks a proposal to offer an alternative.

When the discussion of an issue is carried out openly and thoroughly, blocking rarely if ever arises. Deep feelings and strong, moral objections are dealt with as the proposal is being formulated, and projects that might violate the group's

Hand Signals

Some groups find hand signals helpful in discussion. The most common, in the United States, is upraised hands with wiggling fingers to signify agreement. *Twinkling*, as it's called, derives from American Sign Language for clapping. Other groups may use finger-snapping á la the beatniks. Radical faeries hiss like snakes, which are sacred animals in old Goddess traditions.

Other hand signals might be thumbs up for consensus. Groups sometimes use a triangle of fingers and thumbs to indicate that someone

has a process suggestion to make. I've even known groups to use rapid hand rolling to mean "Wrap it up already!" and British groups to mime drinking a pint to mean "Take it down to the pub afterwards."

Which signals a group chooses is not as important as making sure newcomers understand them, so they don't mistake hissing, for example, as a sign of disapproval or fear the sudden onset of palsy when the group starts wiggling their hands.

core values are amended or dropped long before they reach the stage at which a block is put forward.

The Three Parts of a Decision-Making Process

When we use consensus to address an issue, we may find it helpful to think of three different phases to the process. The phases are:

- Presenting the Issue
- Discussing the Issue
- Deciding the Issue

Some groups, such as Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, prefer to separate the three phases into separate meetings. At one meeting, an issue is presented, but not discussed. Information is shared, questions can be answered, but discussion is withheld until the next meeting. The actual decision is reserved to a third meeting. Community members are sent agendas beforehand so they know what issues will be discussed or decided — if they have strong opinions, they can be sure to attend or instruct a friend to speak for them. People have plenty of time for informal discussions between meetings — and time to do research and formulate their opinions. When decisions are reached, members feel that they have had fair warning and a chance to have their voices heard.

We don't always have the lead time to break decisions into separate meetings, but separating out the three sections can be helpful even in a single meeting, for each needs a somewhat different approach.

Presenting the Issue

Someone presents the issue to be discussed. The person who presents information should not be the facilitator, at least not for that section of the meeting. The presenter should do her or his best to separate neutral information from advocacy. People may ask questions, although clarifying questions are likely to bleed over into comments and opinions. The facilitator can remind people that the group is not yet discussing the issue — if it proves too difficult to keep people on track, move into phase two. The goal of the first phase is to get the information out so that everyone starts with the same level of understanding.

For example, a group of parents at RootBound ecovillage wants to turn one of the guest rooms in the community building into a clubhouse for teens. In the presentation phase, someone would present the idea, reasons for having such a space, what might be in it and how it might function, who would provide the funds and so on.

Discussing the Issue

Groups often skip over or neglect this phase, but in my experience, it is the most important part of a consensus decision. A full discussion allows what Quakers call “the sense of the meeting” to form. When the discussion is open, honest, lively and creative, when everyone has a chance to be heard and to have their ideas considered and concerns addressed, when the proposal that emerges truly arises out of the sense of the group, the more structured part of the meeting will flow easily, and the group will support the decision wholeheartedly.

When discussion is skipped or truncated, when people jump to a proposal that has not emerged organically from the group, the actual decision-making phase may get bogged down as people obsess over details or try again and again to amend a proposal that was simply not well-formed in the beginning.

There are many tools for discussion ranging from free-form, open talking to highly structured forms of priority setting. Discussion might also benefit from using some other process, such as a World Cafe or a Council, before attempting to make a decision. But the goal of the discussion section is to get all the

ideas, reactions, responses and concerns out on the table. Discussing the issue means testing for enthusiasm — are people excited enough about it to warrant going on for a full decision-making process? If people aren't asked to express their enthusiasm, they may simply withdraw, a decision might be made without the necessary energy to carry it out. I'll never forget one meeting where the facilitator announced, "We're an action group — we do consensus, but we do it fast. So — tomorrow morning, 6 AM, we blockade the road. Everyone on board? Any concerns, objections, blocks? No? Great!" And it was great, until 6 AM the next morning when he was the only person on the road. No one objected and no one raised any concerns because no one else ever intended to do it!

Discussion should also bring out objections, concerns and strong negative feelings or potential blocks. Providing there is a base of enthusiasm and excitement, the group should attempt to address disagreements and resolve concerns. If there are strong, moral objections that could lead to blocks down the road, now is the time to hear them. In discussion, we also want to hear other ideas, and find ways to either synthesize them or choose among them. Hearing the full range of ideas early on, we can come up with the most creative option that best meets our needs.

When everyone has been heard, when people are beginning to repeat themselves and when the creative work has been stewing long enough, someone will synthesize a proposal. A *proposal* is an action statement: We will do _____. A proposal can incorporate many clauses, conditions and aspects, but ultimately, it's a statement about what we're going to do:

We will hold a fundraiser on January 25, serving a locally grown, organic, vegetarian breakfast featuring eggs from our chickens, with a separate vegan option.

Groups often flounder when they do not allow enough time for open discussion and instead try to jump to the proposal stage, or even begin with proposals. Consensus works best when we make room for creativity and for many people to come together.

A proposal may be formulated at the end of the discussion period or at the beginning of the decision-making meeting. When the two phases are combined, the tendering of a proposal shifts the group into phase three. The facilitator may ask that the proposal be held if she feels like it is being put forth prematurely. When the phases are separated, the proposal might be put forth at the end of

the discussion meeting, or the facilitator might ask the group to return to the decision-making meeting with a proposal or proposals formulated.

In the discussion phase about the teen hangout room, many new ideas may come up. Jane wants to include a billiard table; Edward advocates for air hockey. Justin, Jane's 14-year-old son, makes a passionate speech advocating for the teens' right to decide themselves what will be in the space. "What if they want a TV?" Marcie asks. "I'm morally against letting our teens be brainwashed by canned entertainment!"

"TV can be educational!" Sarah counters, and a lively and heated discussion ensues.

"What about drugs and alcohol?" Edward asks. "Will we have a policy on drinking?"

"Better to have them drink at home than drinking and driving,"

"Our insurance could be cancelled if we sponsor underage drinking," Betty worries.

The discussion goes on for another half an hour, while all aspects of the idea are thoroughly examined and arguments are heard. At the end, Justin formulates the proposal:

Rootbound will set aside room A in the community house as a teen hang-out space. We teens will create our own agreements for how we use the space and how to share it, reserve it, etc. We'll set our own policy around intoxicants, and bring it back to this meeting for approval. RootBound will provide the space, and a number of individuals have offered chairs, tables and an old sofa. If we want other amenities, such as a TV, DVD player, games etc., we'll raise funds ourselves to pay for them.

Making the Decision

Once a proposal has been made, the meeting shifts into a more formal decision-making process. The proposal should be clearly stated, and the facilitator asks if everyone understands the proposal. The facilitator then tests for:

Enthusiasm: Is there energy and support for the proposal? If not, go back to discussion and try again.

New concerns: Are there concerns, disagreements, reservations or possible repercussions we haven't already considered when we discussed the issue?

Additions: Now that the proposal is formulated, is there anything we've missed that should be added, any slight changes that might improve it?

Reservations and Objections: Now is the time to state any remaining fears, doubts and disagreements.

Justin reads the proposal to the meeting, and they spend a moment in silence, considering it.

"How do we feel about it?" Jenna, the facilitator asks. Around the room, lots of people twinkle and smile. "I'm seeing a lot of enthusiasm. Any new concerns?"

Marcie frowns. "I'm just worried that they'll fill the room with electronic junk and plug in instead of relating as people."

"Hey, when I'm plugged in to Facebook, I am relating to people!" 15-year-old Heather counters.

"Can anyone address Marcie's concern?" Jenna asks.

"They may do that," Jane admits. "But truthfully, Marcie, most of them have all that stuff already. I doubt that there's a teen in this place who doesn't have a cellphone equipped to text message, an iPod and a computer. If we give them a place to hang out, I think it will encourage more direct relating that might prove more attractive than texting and Facebook."

"I never thought of that," Marcie acknowledges.

Discussion continues on any new concerns that are raised.

Amending the Proposal

As new concerns and ideas are heard, the proposal is amended to meet them. Anyone can propose an amendment — the person who framed the proposal can decide whether or not to accept an amendment. If it is accepted, the proposal is changed, and should be restated. If it is not accepted, the suggestion can be dropped or the group can look for another way to address the concerns.

If the discussion phase has been carried out well, this phase will be short. But if concerns and alternate ideas have not been adequately addressed in formulating the proposal, this phase can become long and tedious as people try to rebuild something that was not quite rightly put together.

"Any additions or friendly amendments?" Jenna asks.

"I have an old billiard table in storage," Edward says. "I'd be happy to donate it, provided once in a while I could have a game. Will adults be admitted?"

Justin and Heather exchange glances with the other teens.

“By invitation,” Heather says.

“I accept that as a friendly amendment,” Justin agrees. “Adults will be admitted by invitation.”

This phase continues until the proposal is crafted as well as it can be.

Testing for Consensus

When we’re ready to test for consensus, the facilitator asks the notetaker to restate the proposal. After a long discussion, when the proposal has changed many times, people may need to hear again what the final version is.

The facilitator then asks for any unheard concerns. Sometimes, at this point, new concerns will still surface, and the proposal may be amended yet again. But if the group has had the opportunity to raise their concerns in both the discussion and the process of amendment, they should have been addressed long before we get to this point.

The facilitator asks for reservations and objections. Again, these should already have been heard, and at this point the purpose of raising them is not to change the proposal yet again, but to state them for the record. A few concerns or objections do not kill a proposal, but if there are many people objecting, the group may want to revisit the idea.

The facilitator asks if anyone wants to stand aside. To *stand aside* is to abstain, to say, “I won’t stop the group from going forward, but I won’t take part myself.” People may stand aside for any number of reasons, from a feeling that the proposal is not in alignment with their personal values to the fact that they might be planning to be out of town when the planned event takes place. Again, a few people standing aside don’t kill a proposal, but if there are lots of people who stand aside, the consensus will be weak. Generally, if the facilitator checks for enthusiasm along the way, during the discussion and amendment phases, the lack of excitement and support will have been noted and addressed long before this point.

The facilitator calls for consensus. The notetaker restates the proposal, and everyone is asked to verbally or visually affirm their consent.

Celebrate, cry hurrah! and do the consensus dance!

The notetaker should then record the decision and read it back. Nothing is more disheartening than spending an hour reaching consensus at one meeting,

and spending three hours at the next arguing about what it was because no one can clearly remember.

“I think we’ve thoroughly discussed this, and we’re at the end of our time,” Jenna says. “I’m going to call for consensus. Mark, will you read back the proposal with the amendments?”

Mark, the notetaker, reads, “Rootbound will set aside room A in the community house as a teen hangout space. We teens will create our own agreements for how we use the space and how to share it, reserve it, etc. We’ll set our own policy around intoxicants, and bring it back to this meeting for approval. RootBound will provide the space, and a number of individuals have offered chairs, tables, and an old sofa. If we want other amenities, such as a TV, DVD player, games, etc. we’ll raise funds ourselves to pay for them. Adults will be admitted by invitation.”

“Any new concerns?” Jenna asks.

No one raises a hand.

“Any reservations or objections?”

“I still have reservations about the electronics,” Marcie says. “I won’t block the proposal, but I want to state for the record that I believe TV and computers are destroying our imagination and abilities to concentrate.”

“Noted,” Mark says.

“Anyone stand aside?” Jenna asks.

Marcie raises her hand again.

“Any blocks?” Jenna asks. No one raises a hand.

“Then we have consensus!” she announces happily. Everyone jumps up and for two or three minutes does an impromptu swing-your-partner hoedown, which is RootBound’s own tradition of consensus celebration. Then Mark rereads the proposal, noting that there was one objection and one stand aside.

Now discussion can shift to how to implement the decision. Included in this discussion are several key questions:

- Who else needs to be informed?
- Who will communicate the decision, and how?
- What action steps need to be taken, and who will take them? By what time?
- How will the group know that the commitments have been kept?

Answering these questions will help make sure that the decision is carried out, avoiding much potential conflict and disappointment down the road.

Consensus may seem cumbersome at first, but with practice, it can be a smooth, empowering and surprisingly efficient way to make decisions that the whole group takes part in shaping.

Multiple Proposals

Consensus is designed to synthesize a proposal from multiple ideas and to refine it by hearing concerns. However, at times a group will instead come up with multiple proposals that may be conflicting or competing.

Suppose Jenna is faced with three proposals when the group comes back to the decision-making meeting: One for a teen hangout space in the common building, one to build a new cob structure for the teens in a series of natural-building workshops, and one to pursue a grant for a larger, well-equipped space that could serve the neighborhood. What's a poor facilitator to do?

Look for Common Ground

Do the proposals preclude one another, or complement one another? “The proposals are all different, but they each share one overriding idea: of creating a space or spaces for the teens,” Jenna might say. “Can we agree in principle that we want to create some sort of teen hangout space?”

Jenna might suggest that the proposals don't have to preclude one another. “We might go for the space in the common house right now, and continue to consider the other two for the long term. So, could we set them aside for the moment, and talk about the space in the common house?”

Use Straw Polls

“We've got three different ideas on the table,” Jenna could say. “I'm going to take a straw poll to see which one we're most excited about, and start with that. So — we have the room in the common house, the cob structure and the neighborhood center. Let's see hands — who's most excited about the common house room? The cob structure? The neighborhood center?”

She could also use straw polls to help structure further discussion.

“OK, I'm seeing lots of excitement about the common house room right now. Let me ask, if we decided to work on either the cob structure or the neighborhood center in the long term, who has enthusiasm to work to make them happen? The cob structure? The neighborhood center?”

“OK, I’m seeing that we have lots of energy around the common house right now, so we’re going to take up that proposal. I also see quite a number of people who are interested in the cob structure, so let’s put that on the agenda to discuss for the long term. I’m only seeing a couple of hands for the neighborhood center, so I’d encourage you to do some more work on that idea and possibly bring it back at a later date.”

Refer the Matter to Committee

Jenna could say, “We’ve got three different proposals on the table. I’d like to ask the framers of each proposal to have a little conference over the break, and see if you can synthesize them into one.”

Spokescouncils — Consensus in Larger Groups

Consensus works best in smaller groups, where everyone has a chance to be part of discussions. In a large group, there simply isn’t enough time to let everyone speak. So large groups may divide themselves into smaller subgroups or cells, who send representatives to a spokescouncil.

We have organized many large mobilizations in this way. In the 1970s, Movement for a New Society, a group of Quaker-based trainers rooted in non-violence, brought this form of organizing to groups protesting against the nuclear power plant at Seabrook, New Hampshire. From there, it spread to Diablo Canyon and to nonviolent direct action groups organizing to protest nuclear weapons and US military interventions in many arenas. Veterans of those movements organized the successful blockade of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999. Movements from global justice blockades to forest defenders to queer liberation and many, many more have used this form of organizing.

A spokesperson (or spoke) is, in a sense, a representative of the group. But there are some crucial differences between spokes and elected representatives. The role of spoke often rotates. The same person is not always the spoke for a group at every meeting. The spoke may or may not be empowered to make decisions and commitments for the group. In a classic action spokescouncil, spokes sit in the center and carry on discussion — members of their group sit behind and when a decision is needed, the groups can quickly confer. The spokes report results back to the larger group.

Outside of actions, when groups cannot instantly meet to discuss a proposal, a spokescouncil can become very frustrating if spokes are not empowered to make

at least some decisions on the spot. Decisions become unwieldy and impractical when they must be conveyed back to groups far away and when work can be undone by members who have not been part of the give-and-take of proposal crafting. At times an extended process might be necessary and desirable — when a group is making a major decision that impacts its founding principles, for example, it may be well worth taking the time and trouble to send ideas back and forth. But in general, I favor investing some trust and autonomy in our spokes to make decisions for the group, and to trust their wisdom in recognizing which ones are too big and must be brought back to the whole membership.

Modified Consensus

Classic consensus may not be appropriate for every group. Here are some common ways to modify consensus.

Limiting Who Can Block

If any individual can block consensus, the group could be open to disruption from infiltrators, from individuals with personality disorders or crazy people who wander in from the street. So groups may limit the right to block in some of the following ways:

The Right to Block Must be Earned

It can be earned by group membership, by fulfilling certain responsibilities, by attending a certain number of meetings first, by being chosen as a delegate by a subgroup or by other conditions the group sets. Since blocking is very rarely done in consensus, this is often more symbolic than functional, but symbolism can be important. When Reclaiming holds its semi-annual large meetings, everyone who shows up is invited to take part in group discussions and to help formulate proposals, but to block, you must be a delegate from some other subgroup of at least three people.

A Subgroup Must Reach Consensus to Block

Blocking may be limited to subgroups, who must reach consensus to block a proposal. This is more likely to be used in mobilizations, when affinity groups may send representatives to a spokescouncil but remain on hand to quickly discuss issues and proposals.

Fallback to a Vote

Some groups do their best to hear everyone's voice and meet concerns in the discussion phase and to achieve consensus in the decision phase. But they may include a fallback option: if consensus cannot be reached, the group can fall back to a majority vote, which might be a supermajority, such as 70% or 80%. This prevents a few individuals from stopping the group from going forward.

Consensus Minus One or Consensus Minus Two

What does a group do if it includes someone who is consistently disruptive or at odds with the overall group goals and values? A group may choose to form itself with the option of consensus minus one, or two, so that if necessary they can decide to ask someone to leave without that person, or that person and their best friend, blocking the decision.

When Consensus Gets Stuck

Besides meta-talking, there are other reasons why consensus may grind to a halt. Recognizing and naming them can sometimes allow people to let go and move forward.

Lack of Information

When we find ourselves spinning our wheels in discussion, it may be because we don't have the information we need to make a decision. Many years ago, a group of us set out to stop a missile launch at Vandenberg Air Force Base by hiking into the security zone. Unfortunately, we forgot to bring a map. High in the hills, we sat down to decide by consensus where the base was. This did not work! Gather information, send out scouts or acknowledge that you are steering through the fog.

No Good Options

A group will never be able to decide by consensus whether to be shot or hung. Instead, they'll come up with a proposal to die in bed after a long and fruitful life. When options are limited and creative ideas cannot be synthesized, consensus will be cumbersome and frustrating, and a straw poll or vote may be a better option.

Too Many Good Options/Issues of Personal Preference

How do we decide what color to paint the kitchen? There's no overriding reason to choose yellow over purple, no best answer to synthesize. A straw poll, a vote or

even flipping a coin may work better than trying to reach consensus, for synthesizing yellow and purple may result in mud!

Conflicting Underlying Values

When a group cannot come to agreement, the surface issue may actually be a reflection of deeper conflicts of underlying values. Joan and Edward want to keep meetings closed, to develop a sense of intimacy. Elaine and Jim want to open them up and invite more people to recruit new members and broaden the group. Naming the disagreement, acknowledging that both values may be good and that together they might yield an important dynamic balance, can sometimes bring about a solution: alternating open and closed meetings, or bringing in new people one by one, by invitation. The conflict is not Good vs. Evil but Good vs. Good.

Suppressed Emotion

Sometimes groups will fixate on details, going over and over some minor aspect of a plan when underneath, people are simply scared, or enraged or in grief. It's easier to fight about what time the demonstration will begin than to admit that we are terrified of how the police might respond. After a trauma or loss, we may argue about the wording of the memorial invitation rather than sinking into our deep sadness. A talking stick or council process, removed from decision-making, can create a space for people to give voice to the underlying emotions and connect from the heart.

Hidden Agendas

If someone is trying to use the process purely to exert power, or to sabotage the process for whatever ends, if someone is too deeply disturbed to listen to others and negotiate, they may derail the discussion. Skilled facilitators can often intervene, or the group may decide to use consensus minus one.

Sociocracy

Sociocracy, “also known as dynamic governance or dynamic self-governance, is a method of organizing and governing ourselves using the principle of consent.”¹² “Consent means there are no argued and paramount objections to a proposed policy decision”¹³ A paramount objection means that the proposal would interfere with the workers’ ability to do their job, or with their safety.

Sociocracy was started by a Dutch Quaker, pacifist and civil engineer, Kees Boeke. Boeke became an educator and in 1926 founded the Children's Community Workshop on sociocratic principles. He adapted his principles from Quaker consensus but was looking for a method that could work even when people did not share a spiritual connection or common values, but nonetheless wanted a say in the governing of their workplace.

Consent simplifies the complexities of consensus and streamlines the process, making it more applicable to running a business or a company. Sociocratic businesses have a complex system of interlocking circles. Workers are part of circles in their own domain — the set of responsibilities for their area of work. Circles are double-linked to higher order circles that make larger scale decisions, with representatives that are fully empowered to participate in decision-making. It's as if, in a conventional corporate structure, the line workers had representatives who made decisions in the managers' meetings, and the managers had reps who participated fully in the CEO's inner circle.

Boeke tested his theories in his own company, Endenberg Electrotechniek, and they have been widely taught and adopted in the Netherlands and around the world. Sociocracy addresses the key issue of workplace democracy and provides a viable model with some of the advantages both of consensus and voting.

RIGHT FACILITATION

For consensus to work well, and for many of the other processes we've discussed to be effective, they need facilitation. Below I will discuss in detail the role and skills involved in facilitating consensus meetings, but many of the tools and insights apply to other forms of facilitation: training, teaching, and leading many sorts of groups.

Facilitation is Skilled Work

Back at Diablo Canyon in the early 1980s when we were young and enamored of consensus and ideals of equality, we would often pick someone out of the crowd to facilitate even large meetings with huge pressures. Sometimes we were lucky, and the facilitator did a great job. Other times, the meeting did not go well, conflict erupted, people grew impatient and the new facilitator ended up feeling like a failure. Rapidly, we realized that facilitation requires training and practice, and throwing a new person into a situation they were not prepared for was not empowering but humiliating and destructive.

Fast forward 25 years to the protests against the G8 meetings in Scotland in 2005. A collective called Seeds of Change offered trainings throughout Britain for a year beforehand in many aspects of organizing, including consensus and facilitation. During the week of mobilization, we called for volunteers to form a pool of skilled and experienced facilitators. We had enough people on call so that no one person facilitated more than a few meetings, and we could pair less experienced people with more experienced facilitators. At times, the encampment held up to 5,000 people, but by organizing them into smaller neighborhoods called *barrios* and using a mix of general meetings and spokemeetings, we were able to make decisions smoothly and effectively. People went away feeling empowered and feeling hopeful that directly democratic processes could work.

Training, practice and apprenticeship can help a group develop those skilled people to call upon. Many resources exist for learning facilitation, and many trainers would be happy to help a new group develop a pool of skilled people. Just as it is worth a group's time to learn consensus, it is also worth devoting time and resources to training facilitators.

When we begin facilitating, we can start with smaller groups and meetings which are not highly charged. Facilitators work in pairs or teams, so newer facilitators can pair up with more experienced people. Gradually, as we develop experience and confidence, we can take on larger groups and more difficult issues.

Facilitation is a Role of Power

The facilitator in a group holds a great deal of social power. That power ultimately resides in the group itself. The group lends its power to the facilitator when it consents to let her or him fill that role.

Facilitation rotates in most collaborative groups, so that more than one person has the opportunity to earn the social power that goes with the role. And most facilitation is really co-facilitation: two or more people share the role, to model shared power and to help one another keep track of all the varied factors in a meeting.

Facilitators are Neutral

Facilitators do not take a position on the issues in the meetings or sections of meetings they facilitate. Because facilitation itself is a position of high social power, they do not use that power to push through their own pet projects or ideas.

In small groups there may not be enough people at a meeting to let one person remain completely neutral. In that case, the group has several options. Facilitation can rotate throughout the meeting. People can take turns facilitating items that they feel less investment in, and step back from the role in order to speak to those issues they have most knowledge of or most deeply care about.

But in larger groups, or when trust is thin and issues are controversial or highly charged, a facilitator must maintain neutrality or step out of the role entirely for that meeting. If facilitators are perceived as misusing the role or stacking the deck for their own ends, the group will lose trust and withdraw its consent for them to function.

What Facilitators Do

One way to think about what good facilitators do is to imagine them as waiters. Facilitation, like waiting at table, is a role of service. Facilitators do not direct nor control the group, but serve at its pleasure.

They set the table, present each course as it is ready, judge the pace of the diners and are on hand to remove the dishes as each entree is finished and present the next course. A good facilitator, like a good waiter, has an impeccable sense of timing. At the end, they write up the total and present the bill — tabulate the decisions made and make sure that each can be implemented.

Plan the Meeting

Facilitators often take on the task of planning the meeting — collecting agenda items, putting them into an order and thinking how best to approach each issue. In the next section, we will delve more deeply into how to create an agenda.

The facilitator or the facilitation team may also announce the meeting and send out a projected agenda beforehand. They may arrange the meeting place, set beginning and ending times, and make sure the setting is appropriate and all needed tools are there — for example, a whiteboard and markers, chalkboard and chalk, flip chart and pens or ritual objects if needed.

The facilitators often write up the agenda beforehand so that it can be seen by everyone, or print up copies to be handed out.

Set the Tone

Facilitators set the tone for the meeting by welcoming people, and by their own expressions, tone of voice and body language. Good facilitators are calm and

encouraging. They smile, notice people, acknowledge them and project warmth and enthusiasm.

Facilitators also assure that the meeting maintains a tone of respect. Arguments may get heated, and open disagreement around issues is exciting and can actually build trust. But if the arguments turn to personal attacks, facilitators interrupt and restore a sense of safety. Facilitators do not allow insults, name-calling or verbal violence.

Call on Speakers

The facilitators acknowledge people who want to speak, call on raised hands and/or suggest other processes that assure that everyone has an opportunity to participate.

Assure Safety

Good facilitators establish agreements and ground rules that let people feel safe from personal attack. They hold those boundaries, interrupting tirades, blaming, name-calling, racist, sexist or homophobic remarks.

Assure Fairness and Equality

Facilitators use tools to assure that everyone has a chance to speak. They notice when certain people are dominating the discussion and intervene. They may attempt to draw out quiet people, or at least create opportunities for them to speak without having to fight for their chance.

Good facilitators limit the amount of time that they speak. The role of facilitator confers the right to speak whenever you feel it's necessary, but good facilitators use that right judiciously. They do not, for example, comment after everyone's comments or respond to every report or piece of feedback.

Keep the Discussion on Track

Facilitators are empowered to break in when someone is going off topic or rambling on. Facilitators may remind the group what the topic is and where they are in the discussion.

Summarize and Restate

Good facilitators periodically sum up and restate what the group has discussed and already decided. This helps people remain focused and, in a complex discussion, can help the group maintain clarity.

Keep the Discussion Moving

Facilitators work with the timekeeper to keep the group moving forward, to complete agenda items within the times set or to contract for more time. To do this, facilitators may need at times to cut short someone's speech or to end discussion on a topic. If the discussion polarizes or bogs down, facilitators suggest processes to resolve the conflict or to allow the group to move ahead.

Find Common Ground

When issues become polarized, good facilitators look for the common ground, the places of agreement. If the group can affirm those and come to some base agreements, differences may be more easily resolved.

Break Issues Apart

Skilled facilitators may sometimes tease out the different strands of a proposal to allow the group to come to basic agreements on some while continuing to struggle with others. This often goes with finding common ground. For example, RootBound is discussing starting a small urban farm on a neighboring lot. "I'm sensing that we all have a basic agreement on wanting the farm and wanting to grow vegetables, herbs and flowers there. I'm also hearing a lot of strong and different opinions about adding bees and chickens. Can we just back up and see if we have consensus on the farm growing plants, and then we will take up the issue of animals and insects separately?"

Lump Similar Issues Together

When many different ideas and proposals are on the table, good facilitators may group them up so that they can be more efficiently addressed. And different issues may need different sorts of discussion. "I'm hearing five different ideas of what we might do for our group retreat. Now, three of these are things some people really want to do and will do anyway, with or without everybody's participation, and that many other people don't enjoy. So I'd like to ask the Opera advocates, the Bowlers and the Pub-Crawlers to simply turn your proposals into invitational announcements. I hear two others that seem more like they would need the whole group, or a large contingent, to make them happen: the beach picnic/cleanup day and the campout. Let's look at those two and see if we can synthesize something that we can all feel excited about participating in."

Cheer the Group On

Good facilitators encourage the group, cheer for it when it runs into difficulties and help support group optimism when the going gets tough. Like Polyanna, a good facilitator can always find something to be glad about. “Yes, we’re all arguing — but isn’t it wonderful that people are expressing their opinions so freely! What a lively discussion!”

Good facilitators may also, at times, acknowledge how difficult the process is. “You know, I just want to say that it may feel like we’re really stuck, but that’s because we’re trying to do something really challenging. We’re trying to end the production of nuclear weapons, and we have all the powers of the state, the media and the corporations ranged against us. So no, it isn’t easy. Why would we expect it to be? But we’re strong, and creative, and resilient, and I know we can come through this with the best possible action.”

Reframe

Reframing means shifting the context, the boundaries and the underlying assumptions we might hold around an issue or a conflict. We might reframe a problem as a solution, or a conflict as a dynamic tension.

- Look, I think we’ve gotten bogged down because we’re seeing success as actually blocking the entrance to the weapons lab, and we can’t be sure of how we can do that. But what if we define our success differently?
- We seem to be deeply polarized, because Claudia wants to use the greenest, most lasting and beautiful materials for the new center and Pine wants to keep costs as low as possible. What if we were to acknowledge that both those goals are valid and important?
- We’re talking about intervening in cases of sexual harassment, and that’s vitally important. But what if we were to frame it as supporting women’s sexual empowerment and agency?

Reframing sometimes goes with Cheering On. The single most difficult meeting I’ve ever facilitated was in Prague in 2000, at an international meeting to plan protests against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. A large contingent of socialists wanted one big march under one big banner. An even larger contingent of anarchists wanted multiple marches and autonomous actions to be carried out by affinity groups. A group of Italian activists called Ya Basta! intended to dress in

white, pad themselves with rubber tires and simply walk through police lines. Few people were well-versed in consensus process — but many of them delighted in standing up and denouncing the other side, at great length. And every denunciation, along with every other word, had to be translated into both Czech and Italian. The indefatigable woman who translated for the Italians translated word for word in lengthy detail. The Czech translator would grunt out a phrase or two. Every time we came back to the Italians, they would comment, “I do not understand why we are trying to make a decision when we have not adequately discussed the underlying political analysis.” During a break, I asked one of them how long their meetings went on back in Italy. “Oh, we often go on all night long,” he said proudly.

We spent nine hours in that meeting trying to decide whether it should be one big march or four separate marches, and periodically I would interject cheerily, “I know it seems like we’re deadlocked, but isn’t it great that we’ve got both socialists and anarchists working together on a common action!” At the end, they agreed on one large march that would split into four — a highly creative synthesis that proved tremendously effective in the action.

After the meeting was over, as I sat in a state of near collapse contemplating what to me was one of the worst meetings I’d ever seen, up came an activist from Romania who beamed at me and said, “That was the most amazing, wonderful process! I’ve never seen anything like it — that people could come to agreement like that! How I wish you could come to my country and teach it!”

Conflict Transformation

Good facilitators encourage constructive conflict — open disagreement about ideas, plans and policies, that never descends to the level of personal attack. When the group becomes deadlocked in a conflict, they find ways to take the issue out of the meeting so the larger group can move on.

Mediation

When people are embroiled in continual conflicts that disrupt the group, the facilitator may suggest mediation outside the meeting and help to set it up.

Back of the Barn

As in, “You two go out back of the barn and duke it out!” When a group is deeply polarized, representatives from the opposing factions can be sent off, as a pair or

in a small group, with or without a neutral mediator, to come up with a solution. They will be able to find a compromise more easily when they don't have to save face in front of a larger group and when they can argue openly without the time constraints of a larger meeting. When they find a solution that works for both extremes, it will work for all those who are in the middle.

A variation might be to ask: "Who actually cares deeply about this issue? Who feels invested in this discussion?" If many people raise their hands, carry on. But if only a few people want to continue talking, send them off as a subgroup to come back with a solution, and let the rest of the group go on with other business.

Interventions

Interventions are ways the facilitator might jump into a discussion, stop a speaker from going on too long or bring the group back on track. When intervening, try to avoid constantly making people wrong, blaming or shaming them. Here are some ways to remain supportive and constructive when intervening.

Supportive Interrupting

When interrupting a speaker, do it with expressions of regret and support for the person and what they are saying.

- I'm so sorry, Joe, to cut you off because I'm fascinated by what you're saying, but it's my duty to bring us back on track.
- I'd love to hear the full story, Margaret, maybe after the meeting, but right now we've got to get back to the topic.

Cheer them on energetically even when you have to cut them off.

Specific Critique

The more you can identify specifically why you are stopping a discussion, the more people will learn and the less resistance you will encounter: "I'm sorry, Joe, but when you use the term 'fatso', we're moving away from constructive argument and into personal attack. Can we all take a breath, and remember that we have a commitment to keep our arguments on substance?"

Strategic Confusion

Taking the position of confusion or uncertainty is one way to gently challenge unreasonable or impossible demands or conflicting accounts of reality: "I'm

confused, Linda. I hear you say that you're unhappy with how we dealt with the swimming pool incident, but I don't yet understand what you want us to do now." Or, "I'm confused, Patti. Loren is saying that you borrowed \$50 from the food fund, you're saying that you didn't — I don't know how to reconcile these two different pictures of reality. Can you help me?"

Call to Our Higher Selves

Instead of hectoring people about how badly or wrongly they are behaving, call them to their higher selves or remind them of the group's overarching vision: "People, remember that living together in peace, respect and harmony is the heart of our vision for RootBound. We are all smart and sensitive people, and I know we have the capacity to listen with more compassion."

While these interventions are suggested for facilitators, they can also be used by other people in a meeting. We can all share some of the responsibility for keeping the meeting focused, respectful and productive.

EXERCISE

Facilitators' Toolbox

Tools for Managing Discussion

Open Discussion

People speak freely. Most human discussions throughout time have been handled this way, and an occasional free-for-all with minimal facilitation can be stimulating. Some people will tend to dominate the discussion and others fall silent. People often interrupt or talk over one another — but in many cultures, they may not mind and may even enjoy the liveliness and energy. The larger the group, the more it will tend to be dominated by a few speakers. But people can respond directly to one another without waiting, and lively debate is possible.

Facilitated Discussion

The facilitator calls on speakers. People speak one at a time and are asked not to interrupt. The facilitator has more ability to equalize the opportunity to participate, by using:

Rounds

We go around the circle and each person has a chance to speak or pass. This works well for introductions, for crucial issues involving deep emotions or core values.

Because rounds take time, they often require some limitations on how long people speak, for example: "Please introduce yourself briefly, just telling us your name, where you're

from, and one thing you want people to know about yourself.”

Often, as we continue around the circle, people get longer and longer-winded. The facilitator may have to intervene and remind people of time constraints.

Rounds assure maximum equality, but discourage debate and direct responses to questions or challenges. Aside from short introductions, rounds work well in groups up to 10 people, occasionally in groups of 10 to 20, and above 20, should be very limited.

Popcorn

People can speak in any order, but are asked not to *pop* (speak twice) before everyone has had a chance to speak.

Stacks

The facilitator or helper takes a list of people wishing to speak, or assigns numbers to people whose hands are in the air to give them a speaking order. I like to limit my stacks to five to eight people — beyond that, smart people start to put themselves onto every stack whether or not they have anything to say, on the theory that by the time the discussion comes around to them, they will have something to add.

Weighted Stacks

When it's very important to assure that one group of people do not dominate another, the facilitator can create two stacks: for example, one for women and one for men, or one for

locals and one for outsiders. Speakers are chosen in turn from each stack, regardless of how long they are. So, if 20 outsiders want to speak and 5 locals, we would take an outsider, a local, an outsider, a local, etc. until all the locals who want to speak had spoken.

Participation Equalizers

Everyone can be given a certain number of tokens. Each time someone speaks, they place one token in the center. When their tokens are gone, they cannot speak again until every person has used their tokens or indicated that they do not wish to speak.

Small Groups

One of the facilitator's most useful tools is the ability to break a large group into smaller groups for discussion or exercises. These might be:

Pairs

Pairs generate intimacy. Our most intense relationships in life are in pairs: mother and child, lover and beloved. Pairs also allow the maximum time for each person to talk, while using less time overall. In 10 minutes, each partner could speak for 5. But the time saving is lost if pairs attempt to report back their discussions to the larger group. Some ways to use pairs:

Introductions

Meeting even one other person in the group, telling your story in depth, can help strangers feel a connection to the group.

Reflecting and Responding

When startling new information arises, or when an issue is controversial, a short time to talk in pairs can let everyone have a chance to integrate the information and formulate their response.

Exercises

Many exercises work well in pairs. Pairs can offer support in facing challenges or encouragement for creative thinking. In a pair, one partner can be the active member and the other can monitor and observe. Then you can switch roles so each person gets to experience both sides of the exercise.

Resolving Conflicts

Conflicts and polarization can sometimes be more easily resolved when two parties argue out the issue. If people are asked to pair up with those who don't agree with them, they can more easily come to understand the other point of view face to face with one person than in a large group discussion.

Groups of Three

Groups of three are intimate, but a group of three is the smallest group that represents community, rather than a partnership. Tell something to a group of three, and it's as if you've told it to the world. In ten minutes, each member of a group of three could speak for three, with a bit of time for the transitions. If groups of three are asked to report back to the larger group,

however, much time will be used up in hearing from a larger number of spokes. Some ways to use groups of three:

Connecting People to the Larger Group

Tell your story to a group of three, and you now have a bond with two others who represent the larger whole.

Deeper Discussion

A group of three allows for more in-depth discussion of an issue than can take place in a larger group.

Exercises

In a group of three, two people can interact while the third observes and monitors.

Resolving Conflict

Two people in conflict can interact while a third, neutral person observes and mediates.

Groups of Five to Seven

Groups of five to seven people are small enough so that each person can be seen and heard, but large enough to represent a significant part of the larger community. In a 30-minute time period, a group of 5 to 7 allows each person to speak for 3 minutes, with some time left over to discuss commonalities and differences. Groups can be asked to name a spokesperson to report back a summary of their discussion to the whole group, with an overall savings of time. Here are some ways to use groups of five to seven.

Connecting to the Whole

A group of this size can provide a base of support, a small circle of friends and allies to whom a new person can more easily connect than to the whole.

Relieving Pressure

When groups are very large and discussion is slow, breaking into small groups can relieve peoples' frustration and impatience to speak.

In-depth Discussion

Small groups allow people to discuss an issue in greater depth, with more time for people to speak. Small groups formed by people from opposite sides of an issue may be able to more freely argue out their differences and may come to understand one another more easily than in a large group, where people tend to make speeches and hold positions.

Tackling Different Parts of an Issue

For example, groups can be asked to look at different aspects of an issue — outreach, media, food, meeting facilitation or action plan — in a political campaign.

Formulating a Palette of Responses to an Issue

The small groups can each be given the same problem to solve, area to design or statement to formulate. They come up with different answers and proposals, which can then be compared, and the larger group may decide to use specific

elements from each. In the architecture and planning world, this process is called a *design charette* — from the French word for cart.

Reporting Back

Small groups can be asked to report back on their discussions. Spokes may come to the center, sit in a circle and report in a round. Or the facilitator may call on each group in turn.

When reports are long and complex, the facilitator can ask each group to share only one point of their report in the first round. After each group has been heard from, they can then add a second point in the next round, and so forth. If each group gives their full report, the first group may take up the bulk of the available time and other groups grow impatient. Groups will tend to come up with similar insights, and if the early groups present them all the groups that speak later may feel slighted.

Reporting back take time. In allotting time for a discussion or exercise, remember to allot enough time to hear the reports and to respond and discuss them. The larger the number of groups, the more spokes will report back and the more time it will take.

Brainstorms

A brainstorm is designed to generate creative thinking. *Brainstorm* is often used informally to mean "let's make a list" as in "Let's brainstorm an agenda for the meeting," instead of saying, "Let's list the things we want to talk about."

A real brainstorm is more than a list. It's short — generally five minutes, not more than ten. People are asked to quickly throw out ideas, even crazy and whacky ones, and recorders scribble them up on a board or onto a flip chart. During a brainstorm, no discussion or evaluation is allowed: the idea is to simply generate the widest and wildest spectrum of ideas.

Brainstorms are often misused, because facilitators violate a basic rule: *A brainstorm must always be followed by some other process which weighs and evaluates the ideas that have been generated.*

Unless a list of ideas will be put to use, generating it is pointless. A brainstorm should never be followed by a second brainstorm, without some prioritizing or evaluating in between. Groups that brainstorm this and then brainstorm that and then brainstorm the other thing end up with a stack of useless lists and a lot of frustrated people.

Straw Polls

A straw poll is a non-binding vote. In consensus, we may poll the group to determine enthusiasm: "How many people are excited about this issue? Raise your hands." We can poll to find out levels of commitment or determine energy or resources: "How many people would help to organize the fundraiser? How many people would come? Would bring their friends and family?" And a straw poll can also be taken to help decide on a non-essential question: "How many

people want a 15-minute break? How many want to take half an hour?"

A straw poll can be conducted by asking people to raise hands. Some groups use hand signals: thumbs up to signify agreement or approval, thumbs down to signify disagreement, thumbs sideways to indicate neutrality or undecided.

Priority Setting Processes

When a group has a list of multiple possibilities, there are many simple processes they can use to identify both priorities and areas of concern:

- Write the list up on a board or paper, large and visible.
- Give each person a certain number of positive votes — for their favorite one, or two, or three or five — depending on how many possibilities there are overall. For example, if RootBound is trying to decide on a new design for a central gathering space, they may have a list of fifteen different things people would like, and a budget for no more than three. So each person could be given three votes, for their three highest priorities.
- Voting can be done by counting hands, but it can also be done more quickly visually, by giving each person three gold stars, and asking them to place them beside their three top priorities.
- People can also be given negative votes — asked to vote for or place red stars on any

ideas they have strong concerns about or reservations. Again, this can be done either by counting hands, or visually. Usually we allocate fewer red stars than green, fewer negative votes than positive ones.

- When the votes are tallied or the stars are placed, the group can quickly see what the top priorities are. They can also see which ideas generate the most opposition — and can either resolve the concerns that are raised or drop those ideas.

A priority setting process is often an excellent way to follow a brainstorm.

Spectrums

A spectrum or spectogram is a quick way to bring out many sides of an issue, and to get people up on their feet and moving. In a spectrum, first two poles are identified on opposite sides of the room, and people are asked to stand up and place themselves according to where they fall in relationship to a particular scenario or question.

As an example, we've often used this technique in nonviolence training, to address the wide variety of opinions people hold about violence and nonviolence. So we might put a big V on one end of the room and an NV on the other, and give people a scenario: "You're in a demonstration, and a young woman next to you starts screaming at the cops and calling them pigs. If you think that's really violent, go stand against the wall with the V. If you think that's completely nonviolent, stand under the NV. If you're

somewhere in between, place yourself along the imaginary line between them — so if you think it's a little violent, you'd be just past the middle, if you think it's mostly nonviolent, you'd be toward the back there."

When people are placed, the facilitator interviews the person on each end, asking, "Why did you choose that position? Tell us why you think the act is violent or nonviolent." Then, interview the person in the middle. Finally, ask if there are positions that haven't been heard yet.

The facilitators remain neutral, and avoid implying by tone of voice or body language that one position is more right than another. The goal is not to come up with a *right* answer, but rather to learn what people think, to demonstrate that even people with whom you might disagree have well-thought-out philosophical and strategic positions on these issues.

Once the first spectrum has been established, the facilitators may add a cross-grid of two other opposing qualities: "OK, staying where you are on the first line, we're going to ask you to say whether you think the woman's actions are effective or ineffective. Here's a big E on the east wall — if you think they are highly effective, you'd move toward this wall. And here's a big I on the west wall — if you think she's totally ineffective, move in that direction."

Once people find their positions on the cross-grid, the facilitator interviews the four corners — or the closest people to the corners: violent/effective; violent/ineffective; nonviolent/

effective; nonviolent/ineffective. Then they interview the person closest to the middle of the group. They may also point out to the group as a whole that the configuration represents a visual picture of how much support there is for each position.

Variation: People can be asked, at the end, to pair off with someone who was on a different point of the spectrum from them, and to talk about the issue, using active listening to hear the other person's point of view.

A spectrum can also be used to visually map other kinds of spectrums of opinions: "How much of RootBound's budget should we allocate to the new building project? If you think we should devote the entire budget, you'd stand under the 'All' sign on the north wall. If you think we shouldn't devote any money to it, you'd stand under the 'None' sign on the south wall. If you're somewhere in between, find your place on an imaginary line."

Some considerations in using a spectrum:

Visually marking the poles in some way is very helpful. It's surprising how quickly people can forget which wall represents which position.

The spectrum is easier to do than to explain, so be careful to keep instructions simple and clear. In the first round, start with one line and get the process established before you add the cross-grid, to

avoid confusing people. If you add subsequent questions, you can go right to the cross-grid as people will have experienced it and know what to expect.

A spectrum may be used with a sequence of questions or scenarios that bring out different aspects of an issue, for example, we could follow our question around violence with several other scenarios: throwing rocks at the cops, blocking workers from a coal mine or breaking the windows of a corporate building. Formulating the right sequence of questions is key to how effective the spectrum will be. The questions or scenarios should build in intensity, should be ones that elicit a broad range of possible opinions and positions and where disagreement is likely. Asking the group if it thinks bombing the World Trade Center was violent or nonviolent is not going to bring forth much of a range of opinion. Asking whether breaking a window in a demonstration is effective or not will likely create a far more interesting discussion.

Fishbowls

A fishbowl means placing a small group of people who carry on a discussion in the center of the room, while other people sit in a larger circle around them and listen. There are many variations on the fishbowl.

A Selected Fishbowl

A fishbowl can be a way for a small group who is especially invested in an issue to hold a

discussion while the larger group watches. The fishbowl members are selected from those who are most involved in the project or embroiled in the conflict. This form is useful when some people have a lot of information, experience or interpersonal dynamics that others might not share.

A Fishbowl With an Open Seat

A fishbowl may have an open seat, so whoever wishes to can step in and join the discussion, with the understanding that others will step out as they have made their points. A *selected fishbowl* may open a seat after the original participants have shared enough relevant information with the larger group. This form is useful to allow more free-ranging, in-depth discussion of an issue or a conflict than can happen in the large group as a whole.

An Alternating Fishbowl

A particular subgroup may be asked to be in the center and to speak about their experiences, as others listen. For example, the women might speak about how they feel in the group. After their round, they would step back and let the men come to the center and speak about their experience. A third round could happen for those who are questioning gender. RootBound might use a fishbowl to let long-time members speak and be witnessed by newcomers; then turn the table and let new members speak as old-timers listen. I've used this technique

successfully in a mediation between self-identified anarchists and "peace people" in an antiwar organization. Each group has a chance to speak from the heart and be witnessed without being argued with or attacked.

Role-Plays

Role-plays are more generally used in trainings than in decision-making meetings, but they can sometimes be useful by letting a group play out possibilities. They are generally lively and more fun than sitting still and discussing an issue.

Role-plays can also be used for practice in preparing for a difficult situation, or in formulating plans, strategies and responses. For example, a media team might role-play an interview to prepare for an appearance on a talk show. There are a number of different ways to structure role-plays.

Hassle Lines

A hassle line is a simplified role-play. Two lines are formed, facing one another. Each line is given a particular role: for example, the line on the left is asked to be members of the general public, the line on the right is asked to be climate change activists trying to persuade people to join a march. Hassle lines are often used in nonviolence training, to bring out ways that verbal language and body language can escalate or de-escalate a conflict.

Hassle lines have three ground rules:

- Only interact with your partner.

- Don't walk away from the interaction — don't play someone so disinterested that they simply move on. Stay with it.
- No physical violence.

The facilitators make the group aware of an end signal, for example: "When I hoot like an owl, that's time to be silent." They call "Go" and give the group time to interact — a short time, not more than two to five minutes. They give the end signal, then debrief the group. Some useful questions might be:

- How did it feel to be in your role?
- What did your partner do that was effective?
- What could they have done differently that might have worked better?

Then switch, and let each side take the opposite role, or some similar role. The former activists become the general public, and the former public become activists. Again, give them time to run the scenario, then stop and debrief.

With hassle lines, as with other forms of role-plays, the real learning comes from the discussion afterwards.

Extended Role-Plays

When a group is planning a direct action or a complex event, taking time to rehearse by playing it out may be time well spent. In setting up a role-play, think ahead of time of what roles might be useful or required: for example, workers, blockaders, police, bystanders, media.

Prepare any props or costumes that might be useful or helpful.

Establish safety. Ask if people have physical considerations that might make them vulnerable to being jostled or knocked around, and assign them roles that offer protection.

Create a *safe word* — a word people can say if they want to stop whatever is happening to them.

Establish a *stop word* or sound the facilitator will use to end or freeze the role-play.

Give instructions. Make them simple and clear, and make sure everyone understands the scenario.

Begin the role-play and let it go on long enough to develop some complexity — generally at least 15 to 20 minutes, or longer.

Stop the role-play, and debrief, asking:

- What happened?
- What did you do? Not do?
- How did you feel in your role?
- What choices were made?
- What could have been done differently?
- What have we learned?

Again, the real learning comes from the discussion and reflection afterwards.

Energy Shifters: Games, Songs, Breaks

Facilitators may suggest something to warm up the group or to release tension. A song can bring a group together, or a 10-minute dance break. Quick, non-competitive games can illustrate key

concepts or help people get to know one another. A short dance break can get people moving, relieve tension and build group cohesion.

Breaks are important in meetings. Not only do they give people a chance to relieve their bladders, stoke up their blood sugar and caffeine levels and move around, but they also provide an opportunity for the informal discussion that often moves an issue forward. Facilitators and vibeswatchers pay attention to body language and energy levels that indicate when a break might be needed.

Humor

Humor can be a wonderful tool for shifting group energies, when used sensitively. Our ability to laugh at ourselves can help us find perspective — and can ease painful situations.

Humor can also be destructive and disastrous. The wrong kind of humor can be a vehicle for racism, sexism and other forms of attack. Humor that ridicules other people or rejoices in their humiliations is not appropriate in collaborative groups, and certainly should never be indulged in by facilitators in a meeting. Humor at the expense of groups who have historically been oppressed is simply hostility thinly disguised.

But the type of humor that does work arises when we recognize a shared truth. When I facilitate a group and bring in some of the examples from my experience, people often laugh because they recognize their own stories. Knowing that others have faced the same problems we face,

and made the same mistakes, takes some of the sting out. Some people have a natural gift for humor, and when they bring it into their facilitation in the right way, meetings can become much more lively and pleasurable.

Here's an example from master trainer George Lakey about how he effectively used humor with a group in Russia shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union:

I could tell, though, that most participants had ambivalent feelings about learning democratic practice. On the one hand, they were eager to put the bad old days of Stalinism and the Brezhnev stagnation behind them, with its corruption, power-over, and pretense of democracy. On the other hand, many felt some humiliation, losing status in the world of nations while the dysfunction of their country was exposed. Yes, they wanted to learn how to practice genuine democracy, but how could they know it will work in their culture?

We didn't have the container yet that would support direct work on the ambivalence, but it would be foolish of my Russian colleagues and me to ignore the resistance to learning that was present. The participants needed to release feelings, soon! How?

I turned to the Golubka collective. "Let's do a skit with two parts;" I

suggested. “You sit in the middle of the circle, like a fishbowl that participants can observe. In Part One, I’d like you to mimic the features of the worst meetings you’ve ever attended. If people start to laugh, exaggerate some more. You do need to be serious and stay in character. The more they laugh, the better. Then in Part Two, show them what a genuinely democratic group process looks like. Then we’ll debrief. OK?”

The Russian participants nearly fell off their chairs laughing when they saw a lifetime of painful meetings unroll before their eyes. My Golubka friends were born comedians, and they played it to the hilt. After Part Two, we debriefed for the differences, which allowed the group to return again and again to the funniest parts of Part One, with fresh gales of laughter.

The discharge of feelings opened the way to a high-impact workshop. The wet-eyed hilarity of those Moscow participants made space for something new, and they eagerly tried out practices in the workshop that might support democracy.¹⁴

Spirit in Meetings

Many spiritual techniques can be helpful in meetings, if people are open to them. Grounding, centering, singing, holding hands in circle,

offering meditations or guided visualizations can all be ways a group may come closer together and connect on a deeper level.

Because I’ve written so extensively in so many books on this subject, I’m not going to go too deeply into it here. I suggest that my earlier book *Truth or Dare* makes a good companion volume in this area.¹⁵

If a group is not open to anything it considers religious, woo-woo or too embarrassing, it’s best not to force such things upon them. But there are ways to subtly bring in that sense of deepened heart connection and commitment. A song or poem might begin a meeting. People might be asked to name one thing they deeply care about, one thing that keeps them going or to share a moment that inspired them to do the work. Anything that encourages people to speak from the depths of their emotions and to listen to one another with respect and compassion can link us to the spiritual.

Indigenous communities and organizations almost always begin their work with prayer, ceremony, thanksgiving and offerings. Sometimes people who resist spirituality from their peers will accept it when it comes from another culture. It can be a gesture of respect to ask an elder of the indigenous people of the land to open a meeting or a conference — it can also be disrespectful tokenism if that community is not a meaningful part of the work being done.

RIGHT AGENDA

The agenda is the design for a meeting. A facilitator who plans an agenda is a designer, an artist. Like a novel or a film, a meeting must have pace, drama, variety and an arc of excitement. A good meeting will have use a variety of tools and processes to keep participants engaged, reach a climax and find a resolution.

Collecting Agenda Items

In small, informal groups, people sometimes craft an agenda on the spot, calling for items of discussion, writing them up and then assigning them an order. Informality and spontaneity can work well when a group knows one another and engages in ongoing work together. But for larger, infrequent or crucial meetings, facilitators generally like to have time to prepare, to consider what's on the agenda and how best to facilitate it.

Agenda items can be collected at the end of a meeting to be placed on the table at the next meeting. They can also be solicited ahead of time by e-mail, in person or through phone calls. Room can always be left for unexpected items or issues that suddenly arise.

Tools and Times

Once the agenda items are collected, facilitators look them over and consider how best to approach each issue. How best can each topic be facilitated? Is it a simple report, that just needs a few moments to be made and for questions to be asked? Is it a potential hot-button, controversial item, like the issue of new rules for membership? Does it need a decision? If so, is this is the meeting to present the item, discuss or attempt to come to consensus upon it? Does it, perhaps, call for some other approach, perhaps a feeling-sharing round with a talking stick to honor the death of a member, or a brainstorm followed by a priority-setting process to come up with our goals for the next year?

When the facilitators have considered which tools to use for each topic, they may also assign rough times. Will this report need five minutes, or is it confusing and complex and may need more time? How long should we allow for this discussion?

Be sure to also assign some time for unexpected items that may emerge.

Ordering the Agenda

Once the items are collected and rough times are assigned, the facilitators put the items into an order. In setting the agenda, I think about:

Logic

Are there certain items that need to come first so that we can understand other items. For example, do we need to hear the financial report before we can discuss next year's budget?

Energy Flow

Do we want to take several short items first, to build momentum, or are they likely to drain energy before we get to the big, controversial issue? Can we follow a dense, technical discussion with something fun and active? When will we need breaks and for how long? In setting times, remember that there is no such thing, in reality, as a 5-minute break. A 5-minute break takes at least 10 to 15 minutes. Count on it.

Time Stress

If there are crucial items that need to be addressed, or big controversies waiting to happen, I place them early on the agenda to avoid running into a huge time crunch if we wait to address them until the end. I don't put them first, because I like the group to have something simple to connect around before they tackle a difficult issue, but I might put them second or third. Given the opportunity, people will tend to avoid conflict by spinning out discussion on other minor issues beforehand. So take on the big ones when people are relatively fresh, still have energy and when the end of the meeting is not looming.

Beginning the Meeting

Just as a movie generally starts with the titles, a meeting generally starts with a welcome, some form of introductions and a review of the agenda.

Welcome

The welcome is generally quick, but it sets the tone for the meeting. The facilitator may welcome people, or a member of the group. A warm, cheery welcome can help people feel comfortable and appreciated. Here's how George Lakey welcomes a group:

I want to welcome you to this workshop. I'd like to welcome those of you who came from a distance to be here, and also welcome those who live nearby. Welcome to the youngest participants here — what, are you

teens? Welcome! And welcome also to those of you in your twenties, and in your thirties, and your forties, and fifties, and sixties, and seventies! Welcome if this is your first workshop of this kind, and welcome if you've done this kind of thing before.

Welcome if you are 100% enthusiastic and glad to be here, and welcome if you feel a pull not to be here because of other things on you right now. I'd like to welcome you if you are a Native American, or African American, and if you're Asian Pacific American, and also if you're from a Latin background, and also if you're European American — all of you are welcome here. Welcome to those of you who are female, and the males, and welcome to you if the usual gender categories don't work for you. Welcome if you have a lot of schooling in your background, and welcome if you haven't done much with school — everyone belongs here. Welcome to the lesbians here, and the gay men, and bisexuals and queers, and those whose sexuality doesn't label easily, and welcome also to heterosexuals.

I'd like to welcome those with hidden disabilities as well as those whose disabilities are apparent. There's a lot of diversity here, and I'd like to welcome those parts of ourselves which might show up in this workshop: the sad parts, the cheerful parts, the anger and despair, the hopefulness, the silliness and the solemn parts — we can be ourselves here. Are there aspects of our diversity that I've left out? [Include what's suggested from participants.]

Yes, and finally I'd like to welcome the ancestors who lived in this land where we are just now. The indigenous people whose homeland we're sitting in just now; I'd like to acknowledge them and welcome their spirits to this place. Thank you.¹⁶

Icebreaker, Spiritual Moment or Cultural Offering

Some facilitators start with a game or a 'light and lively' to connect people and set a friendly tone for the meeting. Some groups like to begin with a song, a meditation, a poem or some other cultural offering.

Introductions/Check-In

In a new group or a public meeting, the facilitators may want to allow time for people to introduce themselves. This can be done in many ways.

A Round of Introductions

If the group is around 50 people or less, we might go around the circle and have people say their name and where they are from.

If the group is 20 or less, we might ask people to say one quick thing they would like people to know about them.

If the group is 15 or less, we might ask people why they came and what they hope to get from the meeting, or something similar.

If the group is 10 or less, we can ask people to introduce themselves more fully.

Introductions in Pairs

People are asked to pair off with someone they don't know, and they're given time to introduce themselves. Then each person is asked to introduce their partner to the group, sharing one interesting thing they learned about their partner. This works well in groups of up to around 30 people. In larger groups, people can still be asked to pair off and introduce themselves, but partners might be asked simply to name their partner or to create a one or two-word adjective to describe them.

Step in/Step Out

This is a relatively quick way people in larger groups can get to know something about one another. The group stands in a circle. People are given the opportunity to step forward and say their name and one thing they would like people to know about them, or to connect around: for example, "My name is Starhawk, and I am fascinated by groups and meetings." Other people who share that fascination step into the circle, and we can look around and see who we are.

Then we step out, and someone else steps in. This exercise rapidly builds some group bonds and allows people to find others who share their interests.

Check-Ins

In ongoing groups where people know one another, the meeting may begin with a time for everyone to check in, to say a bit about how their life is going and to make others aware of factors that might affect their participation. This process can get long, but it can be a way even a work-focused group builds deeper and richer connections. For me, it's often the part of the meeting I most enjoy. Following the lives, the triumphs and setbacks of my fellow members is more fun than following a really good series on TV, and it keeps us coming back. A check-in allows us to be seen as whole people.

Weather Reports

When a group is larger, or when time does not allow for a full check-in, a group may choose to do a weather report. In the way you feel right now, we ask, were a state of the weather, what would it be? Rainy? Sunny? Foggy? Stormy? In one or two words, we can get a quick picture of everyone's state of mind.

Agenda Review

After people have introduced themselves and checked in, the facilitator presents the agenda to the group. Ideally, it is written up or printed out so each person can see. This is also the time to ask for additional items. As noted above, I'm not a fan of group-created agendas done on the spot, or of spending group time arguing about whether to give an item 10 minutes or 15. I prefer the facilitators to do that work and simply ask for the group's approval and permission.

Running the Meeting

Once the agenda is approved, dive in to the first item. The timekeeper should alert people when the end of the allotted time for each item approaches. The facilitator keeps the group on track, the vibeswatcher keeps alert for emotional needs and the recorder takes notes.

Ending the Meeting**Ending Tasks**

When the agenda is complete, or the ending time reached, the facilitator makes sure certain tasks are done:

- A date for the next meeting is set or a process is created to set one.
- The recorder has made note of any decisions that have been made.
- The group has asked, "Who else needs to be informed of what has happened at this meeting? Who is going to communicate to them, how, and by when? How will we know when that has been done?"

Evaluation

Groups may wish to hold a short evaluation of the meeting itself, to celebrate its accomplishments and to learn from any mistakes. The facilitator may call for a short round, popcorn or open discussion on three questions:

- What worked well?
- What could have worked better?
- What have we learned?

Closing

If the meeting has begun with prayer, ceremony or spiritual connection, some form of benediction should be used to close it. Alternatively, a song, poem or cultural offering can end a meeting. (But when time gets tight and the guitarist gets pushed off the agenda, hurt feelings may result.) A dance break, a drum circle or a simple ritual can also create a closing. One group I know all rub their hands together and then on a count of three, clap in unison — a very simple but effective ritual of unity.

THE FIVE-FOLD PATH

Meetings: love them, hate them, but the work of the world cannot get done without them. The time, thought, effort and training we invest on making our meetings positive and productive will be well-rewarded by greater connection, satisfaction and productivity throughout our organizations.

Right people, right container, right process, right facilitation, right agenda — get these all right, and meetings will flow smoothly, be lively and vibrant and serve the work of the group. We cannot change the world alone, and when we ally with others, the attention and care we invest in how we work together will strengthen our effectiveness and expand our vision.

Endnotes

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