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DEMOCRACY IN THE RAW: CONSENSUS PROCESS FOR FACILITATED MEETINGS

Facilitated meetings are the backbone of the social change movement. It would be nearly impossible to challenge oppression if our individual groups' processes were conducted in an authoritarian manner. Form and content are intimately linked. This is a detailed primer for any group to use to develop its own participatory democratic consensus process. The consensus facilitation process was developed by feminist and peace groups oriented towards action, but the format can be used whether or not consensus is required or for discussion groups where no action is planned. The main goals of the process are to:

- 1) allow everyone to participate in discussions and decisions,
- 2) keep the discussions focused on the topic at hand,
- 3) prevent individuals from dominating the process, the group, and its actions,
- 4) keeping the agenda to a set time schedule, and
- 5) making sure that actions decided upon have a mechanism for being carried out.

When a group adheres to good process, it finds that people keep coming back to meeting, leadership is developed and distributed, gender ratios stabilize close to 50/50, and the group's work is distributed well among its members.

THE CIRCLE

Facilitated meetings are best arranged so that participants can sit in a circle. This is very important both practically and symbolically. Sitting in a circle allows everyone to see and hear each other, and it visually demonstrates equality, promoting democracy.

BEGINNING THE MEETING

Beginning on time is a sign of respect to each member of the group. Late arrival says to people that you are too busy and important to give this group your time. If there is just one new person at the meeting, introductions are in order. Go around the circle and have everyone say their name and maybe a sentence or two about why they are there. This establishes to new people that they will be heard and allowed to participate.

THE FACILITATOR

After introductions, the group must choose a facilitator. The facilitator should be someone who knows how the process works, and not be a person who has to say a lot about topics likely to be discussed. Some people are better than others at facilitation, but even so, the facilitation role should be rotated from meeting to meeting to demonstrate that no one person or subgroup controls the group and to develop leadership. In small meetings, of five to ten people, the facilitator can also fill the roles of timekeeper (who makes sure that agenda items are completed in the time allotted), stack-keeper (who takes the names of people who want to speak to a topic and calls on them in order), and even note-taker. In larger meetings, it is best to share these tasks with other people.

PARTICIPANTS

Meeting participants should be prepared to speak clearly and concisely. They need to listen actively and avoid whispering with their neighbors. Personal attacks, however veiled, have no place in facilitated meetings. Tendencies to interrupt, speak out of turn, off subject, too loud, too often, or for too long, are

childish personality problems which become painfully obvious to people in a facilitated process. Participants are most effective if they have a pen and paper to take notes on the discussion and outline their thoughts before speaking, (and to avoid forgetting what they were going to speak about) and a calendar to refer to.

AGENDA

The facilitator helps the group develop an agenda for the meeting by asking for items for discussion. With the help of the group, the items are prioritized and given time allotments. It is best if the agenda can be written on a chalkboard or flip chart so everyone can see it. A typical agenda might look like:

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Review of last meeting and unfinished business
- 3) Quick and easy discussion item, or subcommittee reports
- 4) Time critical discussion/action item that may take a lot of time, be complex, or controversial
- 6) New issue for discussion and planning
- 7) Evaluation of meeting (optional)
- 8) Announcements
- 9) Closing - set time for next meeting, make a proposed agenda

Meetings should last no more than two hours, so the group should set reasonable time limits for each item. Groups that are incorporated or have another legal status are often required to post action items of the agenda for a set time before the meeting. It is the facilitator's job to make sure that items not posted are only for discussion and information, not action.

THE PROCESS

Often, the facilitator will open a discussion item by asking for an introduction to the issue, especially if new people are present. From there, discussion proceeds. If many people want to speak, or especially if people begin to speak at the same time, the facilitator often starts with a "go-round" where each participant is given the floor in turn to speak to the item. Then often the facilitator or the stack-keeper will ask people to raise their hands to be called on to speak. A "stack" or list of names is kept, and each person will be called on in order. (This is where pen and paper come in handy - people often forget what they were going to say when they raised their hand!) It is the responsibility of the facilitator to make sure that people stay on topic (For example, "This is a whole new topic - do people want to do this now, or put it on the agenda for later?" or "Let's have some focus.") The facilitator will also make sure that people don't speak out of turn ("Bob, we have a stack going and there are a couple of folks before you. Anita, your turn.") being repetitive, or from engaging in two-person dialogue, ("Let's hear from someone hasn't spoken yet" "Is everybody into this or should we subcommittee it out to Helga and Carlo?")

As the discussion proceeds, a skilled facilitator will guide the group towards a proposal that everyone can agree upon. ("What I'm hearing is this.. and ... and the other..., is there anything else we need to know? Are there any proposals?") The stack-keeper and the time keeper are the only people other than the facilitator who can interrupt the stack, and then only for the purposes of attending their jobs. ("There are twelve people on the stack and we only have five minutes left for this topic.")

Other than this, there are a few other ways to interrupt the process, basically ways of facilitating from the floor. By holding up a raised index finger, a participant is indicating that they have a "point of information" that will clarify an issue and save time in the discussion. ("Twenty-second Street Coop already has a program in place that does pretty much what we're talking about." "I just looked at a

calendar and we have a major conflict with the date we decided on.") By raising up both hands with palms facing each other (I I) indicates the need for a "timeout" and the facilitator should call on that person to see what is going on. ("Hey ya'll, the cops are here and they have a warrant for Steve.") Raising the palms facing each other with fingers touching (/ \), the participant is indicating a process breakdown that needs to be addressed immediately. ("The facilitator is not calling on people, we need someone to keep stack." "Only two people are talking about this and the rest of us are bored. Subcommittee? or "We had a proposal on the floor and it got ignored.") Silent applause or "twinkling" - holding hands up and wiggling fingers - is a non-interruptive way to show support for what is being said.

Respectfully used, these mechanisms allow the group as a whole to aid the facilitator, whether s/he is experienced or not.

The facilitator can put themselves on stack to just make a comment on an issue. It is best for them to "step aside" if they might need to actively participate in an item, and to get another person to temporarily take over the facilitation role. ("I'm stepping aside as facilitator for this discussion because I have strong emotions about it. Ricardo can you take over?" "I'm too involved in this issue to facilitate. Who has the least amount of ego invested here, let them do it.") Once the item is cleared from the agenda, facilitation is usually returned to the main facilitator.

The facilitator should ask for a proposal when all concerns have been aired. After a proposal is made, the facilitator should first ask any people left on the stack if they need to speak before the proposal is developed. Often, people are ready to move on an issue by this time. The facilitator asks for concerns or friendly amendments to the proposal. The note taker is sometimes called upon to read back the proposal with any changes so people can keep track of its development. If everyone gives a "thumbs up," then consensus is achieved. The group then goes on to ironing out the details or agreeing to a task force to figure out details and logistics. ("Who is writing the media release?" "I have two spaces in my car, see me after the meeting if you need a ride," "I'll go get the stuff but we need a check first.") The facilitator should make sure that somebody can coordinate the planned actions, and remind people of what they volunteered to do.

If someone gives a "thumbs down," they are signaling a "block" to the proposed action. A block is a serious, often ethical objection to the proposal, out of concern to the group's reputation, safety or legal issues, the bigger strategy in the community, or something of that scale. ("If we lock up the consulate from the outside, we risk being charged with felony kidnapping.") The facilitator should ask for amendments that would allow the blocker to remove the block to the proposal or to "stand aside," (signaling that the person removes themselves from the group for the purposes of the action at hand), but if this is not possible, a block means that no further action is taken on the issue and the group moves to the next item on the agenda. A block is a situation to be avoided, obviously. Blocks can often arise because a proposal was brought to the table prematurely, before all issues were raised, but a skilled facilitator can negotiate this. ("Thanks, Ursula, but can you hold your proposal until after we get through this stack? We have only heard from three people and we have ten minutes left for this item") Sometimes, though, a blocker is a person who simply does not share the same values or goals as the rest of the group. Someone who blocks proposals will eventually be asked why they want to be a part of the group.

Some groups have amended the consensus model to include for "consensus minus one," or even by using majority votes for certain types of actions. This is a bigger decision that needs to be resolved, often through a group's steering committee or bylaws. Which version is used depends on how big the

group is, how diverse its members are, and how much time and patience people have. Even if consensus is not required, it should be the goal. Consensus decisions strengthen the group and inspire more commitment.

NEXT UP

As the group proceeds down the agenda, the facilitator should watch people to see if they are getting fidgety, and if needed, call for a break so people can stretch their legs, go to the bathroom or smoke a cigarette. Breaks can also interrupt the flow of a meeting, so other ways of maintaining peoples attention can be used: allowing a little chaos to break out, changing the discussion format from stack to circle go-rounds, or by changing the order of the agenda to give variety.

EVALUATION

Although this step is often skipped, it is called for especially if it has been a stressful meeting. A go-around in the circle can ask and answer questions that can be very helpful to facilitators: How did the process work? What could we do better? When this-or-that happened was it okay?

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Announcements are often done at the beginning of a meeting, but people will be much briefer if they are done at the end. Alternatively, fliers or an announcement sheet can be passed around.

CLOSING

Almost done! The meeting closing is when the next meeting time and place are set, and if possible or legally required, a preliminary agenda is sketched out.

THE FUTURE

Facilitated meetings can at first seem slow and stilted. This is because we are culturally conditioned towards hierarchical decision making. All our lives, in the family, at school, and on the job, we are taught that the largest male, the loudest voice gets the attention, the toys, the promotion, the glory. Less aggressive people are conditioned to stay out of the way, and to gripe in private if they don't like what is going on. Since self-governance is not taught, democracy and equality need to be re-learned (remembered?) and practiced. It can take awhile for individuals to realize that they are heard (so they can now stop repeating themselves, or mumbling) they do matter (so they take responsibility and initiative) and not to feel ego-threatened by other people (so creative thinking and flexibility become more possible). Once a group has mastered this way of making decisions, any version of Robert's Rules of Order will seem slow and uncreative. Obviously, there are a lot of places to take shortcuts in this process. This is alright, but if a group gets too sloppy and lazy in its meeting process, problems may begin to manifest - often in ways that seem unrelated to meetings. If disgruntlement, hurtful gossip, lack of enthusiasm, or flaking out becomes problems for the group, a return to more formal meeting process will often go a long way towards remedying the situation. Also notice that there are no rules in the consensus-style process against fun, laughter, and personal growth. Every now and then, the "group mind-meld" made possible by this format can be a spiritual process.

Although this process is designed for no more than fifty people, it has worked for groups of several hundred, even in very stressful situations. Also, adaptations like the "fishbowl" or the "spokeswheel" (where affinity or focus groups have a representative at the circle) make this process theoretically available to groups of thousands. Now THAT would be a truly worthwhile experiment in democracy!

This document was prepared by Princess Poysen Ivieeee, drawing on personal experience, several books and numerous how-to guides published by social change groups.