

Consensus Is Not Unanimity: Making Decisions Cooperatively

by Randy Schutt

What is consensus? Is it a cooperative, loving, nonviolent process in which people share their best ideas and come up with superior decisions? Or is it a coercive, manipulative, time-wasting process in which those who are most treacherous, are most verbal, or have the most time can get their way? Or is it an idealistic fantasy where every problem always has a good, simple solution that incorporates everyone's ideas (no matter how ridiculous) and satisfies everyone completely? These are the questions often raised by progressive activists.*

As a nonviolent activist since 1977, I have, of course, heard all these views expressed. I've been at some wonderful meetings that used consensus and some horrendous meetings that (ostensibly) used consensus. There seems to be quite a bit of confusion and ignorance about what the consensus process is, how it should work, and when we should use it. In this paper, I will outline what I've learned in studying and practicing consensus over the years and try to dispel some myths.

Consensus is Not Unanimity

Many people think of consensus as simply an extended voting method in which everyone must cast their votes the same way. Since unanimity of this kind rarely occurs in groups with more than one member, groups that try to use this kind of process usually end up being either extremely frustrated or coercive. Decisions are never made (leading to the demise of the group), they are made covertly, or some group or individual dominates the rest. Sometimes a majority dominates, sometimes a minority, sometimes an individual who employs "the Block." But no matter how it is done, this coercive process is **not** consensus.

Consensus is a process for deciding what is best for a **group**. The final decision is often not the first preference of any individual in the group, and many may not even like the final result. But it is a decision to which they all **consent** because they know it is the best one for the group.

Consensus is a Cooperative Process

Consensus is a process for people who want to work together honestly in good faith to find good solutions for the group. It cannot be used by people who do not, can not, or will not cooperate. Consensus should not be attempted in a group with people who want to dominate or control others or who want to maintain their privileges at the expense of others. In these situations, nonviolent struggle would be a more appropriate process.

Consensus is a Valuable Step Toward Democracy

Consensus is a process that allows everyone in a group to participate and work together nonviolently to make decisions — the ultimate realization of a true democracy and very attractive to anyone who has ever been dominated or oppressed. It gives people the power to make decisions and also demands that they take responsibility for those decisions. Rather than abdicating

power to a leader or representative, it demands that we take complete responsibility. To me, establishing and modeling democratic and responsible governance is important, as valuable as ending war or establishing justice.

Consensus is Better than Other Processes

If not consensus, then what? Usually, people offer voting as a reasonably democratic alternative. But voting is not a meeting process, it is only a procedure for tallying preferences. Kenneth Arrow received a Nobel prize for proving it is impossible to come up with a decision in a logical, fair, and equitable way by combining the (existing) preferences of a group of people except under very simple circumstances — for example, situations when there are only two possible options. Even in these few situations, voting fails to consider the intensity of preference each individual feels — it does not take into account that one person may feel very strongly opposed while many are mildly in favor. It fails to consider the uneven distribution of consequences a decision may impose — it fails to protect the rights of people not to be hurt or killed if they are in the minority. It also does a poor job of protecting the rights of future generations, the environment, or any other party not voting. Whenever there is a disagreement, voting necessarily means that the minority will not get what they want, and if the majority severely tramples them, they may leave the group or retaliate.

Voting can therefore only produce satisfying decisions if there is unanimity of opinion, if everyone is extremely tolerant, or if one person can persuade everyone else of the validity of her perspective and her solution. But if people are enamored with different proposals or there is competition for power in the group, the process will often bog down, factionalize, or slide into coercive manipulation.

Good consensus process avoids these problems by allowing the members of the group to explore in depth the complete range of options and concerns in a non-adversarial, cooperative atmosphere. Discussions in small groups allow everyone, even those who are not verbally adept, to express their ideas, concerns, and opinions. Members of the group get a chance to learn from each other's experience and thinking, empathize with other's experiences and backgrounds, and gracefully change their minds as they hear new ideas and arguments. They can challenge dumb, obsolete, or immoral assumptions and solutions, and they can explore unusual solutions (radical transformations, compromises, bargains, etc.) that are often overlooked when the discussion gets polarized or restrained by formal proposals. Individuals can offer to give of their time or wealth or to suffer a loss for the good of the group. And people can be persuaded, inspired, loved, or counseled out of their prejudices, biases, and other rigidities or, if this fails, nonviolently prevented from acting immorally.

Of course, a good process that ends with a vote can also have all these cooperative aspects. In fact, a good voting process may be indistinguishable from a good consensus process until the final step. But non-consensual processes usually rely on formal proposals, debates, and other parliamentary procedures that interfere with cooperation. Knowing there will be an up-down vote at the end often polarizes the discussion. People may argue

* See for example, Allen Smith, "The Hidden Dynamics of Consensus: Drawing Members in or Shutting Them Out?" *The Nonviolent Activist*, War Resisters League, New York, January-February 1990. I originally wrote this paper as a response to Smith's article.

for an extreme position so they can compromise to their true goal.

Consensus is Not Conflict-Free or Painless

Good consensus process relies heavily on problem-solving, questioning, empathy, self-sacrifice, and nonviolent direct action. In a good process, conflict is not ignored or covered up, but encouraged. Issues and proposed solutions are thoroughly thrashed out until a good solution is found. Like any good non-violent action, ideas are severely challenged, but the people involved are listened to, loved, and supported. When there are no easy solutions, then individuals must be willing to sacrifice their preferences for the good of the group or the group must divide or disband. When one person or a group (a majority or minority) refuses to or is unable to work cooperatively, everyone else must boldly, yet tenderly, resist and challenge them, or if necessary, push them out of the group (ideally, offering support and guidance to their next endeavor).

Consensus Can Be Efficient

Many groups feel that they must allow every person in the group to fully discuss every possible perspective on every issue. When there is little trust in a group of people, this may be justified. But consensus does not require this. In a cooperative, trusting group it is possible to allow individuals or committees to make most decisions with little or no discussion in the larger group. When the group is pressed for time, quick — though less ideal — decisions, can also be tolerated.

Consensus Requires Skill and a Desire to Cooperate

In a world made up of people who were all knowledgeable, skilled, rational, loving, and cooperative, a group of people could easily practice consensus well. But in our social change organizations we find instead regular people who have been reared in our violent society. Most are, therefore, ignorant of many important aspects of consensus process and have little experience using it. Moreover, they are often overworked, irrational, and fragile, having been squashed and battered throughout their lives.

To overcome these limitations, consensus is best practiced by a group of people who are all committed and accountable to the group and willing to spend time and energy to help it thrive. No one should ever be given the power to block a group unless he also accepts responsibility for working with the group to come up with something better. Members of the group should all agree to learn about consensus and practice their skills — preferably at separate workshops, not in marathon meetings. They should all agree to listen carefully to each other, draw out those who are shy, support each other with love and respect, challenge each other's silly ideas, and cooperate for the common good.

They should agree that whenever they find themselves acting irrationally or violently they will restrain themselves or leave until they can work out their emotional difficulties. And they should agree to challenge and/or throw each other out of the group whenever they don't adhere to these conditions.

Learning and practicing these skills and behaviors requires some effort beyond what people usually know, so the group must also decide explicitly that the consensus process is valuable enough to devote substantial time and energy for sorting out problems and learning new skills. Members should particularly agree to spend some time evaluating every meeting so the decision process can be continually improved.

Groups That Should Not Use Consensus

Groups with poor decision-making processes usually have not met these conditions. These groups often allow anyone to join the group and its decision-making process without any instruc-

tion or screening. New members may not know the group uses consensus or they may not truly agree to work cooperatively with others. They may be very emotionally damaged (crazy) or have a hidden agenda to destroy or co-opt the group. In these groups, ideas about consensus are often passed along in a haphazard way and often contaminated by notions from childhood voting exercises or from hierarchical work experiences. The group may neglect or avoid evaluating their meetings whenever time or tempers get short.

When conflicts arise, group members often avoid dealing with them. Then as the process deteriorates, members are often too afraid to resist manipulation or coercion. When they finally do act, they often attack, belittle, or ostracize those who have erred.

In any group that cannot or will not meet these conditions, I suggest they use another process:

(1) **Voting** — using a group process that is as cooperative as possible, but may need to be as rigid as Robert's Rules of Order.

(2) **Collaborative Group and Manager** in which everyone discusses the issues, but if there is an unresolvable problem, the manager makes the final decision. The manager, which could be a steering group, can be chosen by election, rotation, seniority, level of performance, level of dedication, or some other method. This is the process now used by many enlightened businesses and some social change groups.

(3) **Benign Charismatic Leader** in which an inspiring person tells members what to do. If they don't like it, they leave. There are a few sterling people out there who really might make good benign dictators. A steering committee can also serve in this role.

(4) **Federation** in which people work together as much as they can, but go their own ways whenever there is disagreement.

There are many good articles and books on meeting process. I suggest:

Michael Doyle and David Straus, *How to Make Meetings Work: The New Interaction Method*, Berkeley Publishing Group, New York, 1976.

John Gastil, *Democracy in Small Groups*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1993.

Brian Auvine, et al., *A Manual for Group Facilitators*, Center for Conflict Resolution, 1977 (available from New Society Publishers).

Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1977.

Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Penguin Books, New York, 1981.

Joreen (Jo Freeman), "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," found in Anne Koedt, ed., *Radical Feminism*, Quadrangle Books, New York, 1973.

Irving Janis, *Groupthink*, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1982.

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