Consensus Challenges:

Rx for Meetings That Are a Pain

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CANBRIDGE

a process collective

(Consensus And Network Building Resolving Impasse and Developing Group Effectiveness)

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1. Cultural Context

Consensus is a decision-making process whereby groups do not move forward in the presence of a principled objection.

Consensus works best in a cooperative environment, where information is willingly pooled and people believe that the collective wisdom is superior to individual ideas. Unfortunately, most of us have been raised in a culture that is competitive, adversarial, and hierarchic—not one that is cooperative and egoless.

In consensus you are trying to develop an inquisitive atmosphere which welcomes new information and creative ways of putting things together—where individuals trust that their input will be heard and respected (though not necessarily agreed with).

The bad news is that developing a cooperative culture is not easy. The good news is that it's possible. We were not born competitive and adversarial; we learned that behavior. And what can be learned can be unlearned.

While parliamentary procedure in some form goes back centuries, it's most dominate form today—Roberts Rules of Order—is only a bit more than 100 years old. In contrast, consensus has two main roots: the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), going back about 300 years, and a number of Native American traditions, which go back even further.

Who's to say what form of decision-making is most natural? The point is we have a choice. Over time, whatever you practice will become what feels natural.

☞ **Top Secret**: The trick to getting good results with consensus is to develop a culture where people come to meetings with an open mind, eager to hear new ideas that will change their mind about how they think. This is *totally* different than the mainstream model where the ideal meeting participant is seen as the person who is self-assured, unshakable in their beliefs, and persuasive about their point of view.

2. Once More, with Feelings

Few groups discuss how they want to handle emotional input—by which I mean expressions of feelings about the topic at hand. And few groups have a clear idea about how to successfully navigate emotional waters. There's a whole lot of foundering on the shoals of hard feelings.

Emotions can be tricky to work with. For some people emotions are a major mode of knowing and working with information; if you disallow or marginalize the expression of feelings, it can be crippling. At the same time, strong feelings are often associated with aggression and people are afraid of verbal violence or abuse if emotions are sanctioned. Talk about how you want to handle this.

The point of paying attention to emotional input (if you're willing to give it a try) is to take advantage of both the information and energy in the feelings, and to apply these directly to the issue at hand.

☞ **Caution #1**: You are not just looking for a cathartic moment. Remember: it's a meeting, not a therapy session. The point of making room for the feelings is that it allows you to usefully engage on a topic about which there are strongly held differences.

—In assessing the value of plenary time devoted to rooting out undercurrents of distress and dissent, don't limit your focus to the time spent in meeting. You must also consider the quality of implementation. It's a poor bargain to reach decisions quickly in the meeting if it's followed by lackluster or halfhearted implementation. Look at the whole picture.

☞ **Caution #2**: Just because there are strong feelings in the room doesn't mean it's necessarily a good idea to spend a lot of time exploring them. You have to evaluate: 1) whether the distress is sufficiently great that it's negatively affecting the person's (or the group's) ability to hear and share well; and 2) whether dealing with the distress is crucial to making solid progress on the topic. Sometimes just naming the feelings will be enough to allow the people involved to relax and return good attention to the topic at hand.

☞ **Top Secret**: Consensus meetings don't have to be a battle between "product" and "process"; you can bake your cake and eat it too. In fact, good process should result in both solid product and thorough buy-in with the decisions.

3. Problem Personalities

People, of course, come in an amazing variety of personalities. Styles that are comfortable for some are infuriating for others, and as far as I know there is no personality which no one finds problematic. So the challenge is to figure out how to cope, and not let personality quirks get in the way of the dialog.

Having said that, it is nonetheless worthwhile for groups to discuss the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Some things are relatively easy to

exclude (no throwing chairs); others are more problematic (what about raised voices?).

It is often useful for a group to discuss if family of origin or cultural differences are gumming up the works. For example, among Black, Hispanic, Italian, or Jewish families, normal conversation may be high-spirited, with many talking at once. Among families from northern European cultures, normal conversation means one person speaking at a time, in well-modulated voices. In the former, speaking calmly and slowly means you're not feeling well. In the latter, interrupting with animation means you're angry or out of control. There is no right or wrong here, and your group may unwittingly be favoring one style over another, effectively (though unintentionally) shutting down a big portion of your group. Pretty expensive.

☞ **Caution**: It is typically not enough to have an agreement such as "no threatening behavior." What it threatening to one person may simply translate as animation to another.

The key here is not to develop definitive guidelines for what's acceptable; it's to have a clear idea about how to have a constructive conversation when someone perceives another to be acting inappropriately. The trap is that the person whose behavior is being criticized will often hear the feedback as "You're a bad person" rather than as "I'm having a problem with your behavior." If you can talk well about the tension, you're well along toward not letting personalities get in the way.

What does it mean to "talk well about the tension"? Start with the assumption that the person with the triggering behavior is not wrong for being like that, and the person with the objection is not wrong for having the reaction. You have to negotiate how to proceed without either being "the problem."

☞ **Top Secret**: While there is such a thing as malevolence in the world, bad intent is far less common than people presume. If you can develop a baseline assumption that everyone is doing the best they can and assume good intent, you can significantly increase the chances of a constructive exchange with someone who has personality traits you find irritating. If you believe good intent is present, you will be much more likely to find it—even if you have to peel back several layers of gross or combative behavior to reach it.

4. Addressing for Success

While there are exceptions to everything, here's a highly serviceable sequence for working through a topic in plenary:

1. Presentation of the issue (why is this matter worthy of group attention?)

2. Questions (did everyone understand what was said?)

3. Discussion (this is where the bulk of the work is done and can be a wide variety of things; while open discussion is the most common choice, it is by no means the only format to consider)

4. Proposal (after hearing all the input, what do we want to do about it?)

5. Decision (where you don't find a consensus that wraps things up, identify next steps and pick up wher you left off next time it surfaces on the agenda; repeat as needed)

6. Tasks, deadlines, and budget (don't leave the topic until you pin down these elusive, yet essential details!)

Note that the proposal comes fourth, not first. Many groups insist that something arrive in proposal form before it's worthy of agenda time. (And many groups experience frustration in what gets talked about—don't let that be true of your group.) This is a common trap.

Words of caution:

o Don't get hung up on the difference between steps two and three. Be gentle.

o Do get firm about not entertaining potential solutions (proposals) before all the input and factors have been flushed out. If you permit dancing back and forth between the two, it is highly chaotic and inefficient.

Trap: as a group gets rolling, it is often irresistible to micro-manage, for the shere thrill of accomplishing things.

☞ **Top Secret**: As soon as you have addressed all issues pertaining to the full group, get that sucker off the plenary floor and move onto the next topic. Either you will have resolution, or are ready to delegate.

☞ **Top Secret**: The heavy lifting is almost always done in Step 3 (Discussion) and Step 4 (Proposal). The former is expansive and has a completely different energy than the latter, which is contractive. In Discusio it’s OK t allow advocacy and im on he soap box; in Proposal you want to set advocacy aside and are only intersted in bridging—what are the potential ways to link and balance the factors that surfaced in Discussion?

When delegating, be sure the mandate and authority are clearly captured in the minutes. That is, answer all of the following questions that apply:

—Is the committee ad hoc or standing? If ad hoc, will the committee be automatically laid down when its mission is accomplished? If standing, for how long will committee members serve?

—What qualities are valuable or desirable for people serving on this committee (Hint: distinguish between qualities that are important that *someone* has, from those that are important that *all* have)?

—How will committee members be selected?

☞ **Caution:** If the committee is doing work that requires balanced representation and/or high trust from members, be careful about just asking for volunteers to fill slots.

—Is the committee empowered to self-organize (do you want committee decisions to be made the same way that plenary decisions are; are committee meetings expected to be open to all group members, or can the committee close them—and if so, under what circumstances)?

—Is the committee expected to have a convener (the person responsible for calling meetings, drafting the agendas, making sure that minutes are kept and posted, and answering questions about the committee)? If so, who will serve as the start-up convener (at least until the first meeting, at which time ongoing responsibilities can be discussed and assigned)?

—What is the committee expected to accomplish?

—Are there deadlines for when committee work is expected to be completed?

—What resources will be made available to do this work (this can include money, labor, skills, access to equipment and information…)?

—If reports are expected, what are they supposed to address, how and to whom will they be disseminated, and when are they due?

—What license does the committee have to make decisions without coming back to the whole? (The flip side: when is the committee expected to come back to plenary for additional guidance?)

—To what extent is this committee expected to coordinate or share authority with other committees?

—Is it clear how group members not on the committee can offer input on committee topics? Is the committee empowered to establish drop dead dates, such that the committee is not obliged to work with input arriving afterwards?

5. License to Kill (disruptive behaviors)

What are the group's agreements about the role of facilitator (make sure you know them if you are new to the group)?

Meetings are just like 9th grade: much more likely to go well if you've done your homework.

Use Ground Rules (even if you have to roll your own): they give you authority to act in tense moments.

☞ **Top Secret**: Tell the group what you're struggling with at the beginning and ask for their help—not only will they immediately try to protect you (and themselves in case you stumble), but you'll be more relaxed having admitted your biggest fear and therefore, less likely to have a problem with it!

Sample Ground Rules

- Emotional expression is OK; aggression is not
- If confused about what's happening, ask
- Raise your hand to speak
- I'll try to call on people in the order in which they raise their hands, but may alter that based on who has not spoken recently or to follow a thread
- Silence = assent (at least for procedural decisions)
- If we're undecided about what to do, the facilitator will make the call
- I'm here for <u>everyone</u>
- I may interrupt people if I perceive them to be repeating themselves
- I'll keep people on topic
- I'm agreement prejudiced
- Assume everyone's good intent
- Silence electronic devices

6. Getting to Carnegie Hall

Comedian Lily Tomlin does a sketch where she plays a bag lady on the streets of New York City. At one point her character is approached by a

stranger who asks, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Her reply: “Practice!” It’s the same answer I give when anyone asks how a group gets good at consensus, or an individual becomes a crackerjack facilitator. In fact, given our competitive upbringing, becoming facile with consensus requires a lot of *un*learning bad habits; not just learning good ones. As far as I know, nobody was born being good at it.

What do I mean by bad habits? Here are three:

—Starting sentences with “But...” [Try to see what you like in a statement before exploring your objections. The object of the meeting is not to pick a fight; it’s to find the common ground upon which a solid decision can be built.]

—Defining a “good meeting” as one where you’re persuasive and get your way. [Better is to have meetings where you learn something and your contributions are improved upon. It’s not about you looking good; it’s about the group doing its best work. Try to be curious about differences instead of combative.]

—Insisting that the group always uses the same format for exploring topics. [People vary widely in how they know things, how long it takes them to process information, and their degree of comfort and articulation in how they express their opinions. If the group does not embrace a variety of ways in which you handle topics, you will assuredly (though inadvertently) be favoring some over others. It won’t be fair at all.]

Don't expect consensus to go smoothly with people new to the process. Budget time and money to train people. When new folks join, assign a buddy to explain norms and the arcane art of consensus. [☞ **Caution**: This is much more than just giving someone a copy of the House Rules.]

For groups new to consensus, having skilled facilitation (by people savvy about consensus) can make a world of difference in both the energy and the product from meetings. This is a powerful point of leverage in getting good results early on. Budget time and money for people to learn and improve their facilitation skills.

☞ **Top Secret**: If you want to develop your ability at neutral summarizing and distilling comments to their nuggets, volunteer to take minutes—it's the same skill.

7. Consensus Takes Forever, Right?

One of the most common criticisms of consensus is how ponderous it is. It's trial by meeting, where decisions are made those with the strongest bladders or the last ones standing. It doesn't have to be that way.

There are several key things to watch for in managing plenary time well, and to help see the full import of what you accomplished in plenary:

—Make sure you're delegating effectively and not chewing on things that needn't be handled by the whole group.

—Don't let things get on the agenda without meeting clear standards of maturity and appropriateness. This should be some committee's job, and they should be available to help people think through how to get an item ready for plenary, and how to make a concise presentation.

—Insist on product at all meetings. If you haven't made definite movement on all topics, you haven't had a good meeting.

☞ **Caution**: I didn't say, "If you haven't *finished* all topics… " Don't confuse completion with progress.