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Environmental and Cultural Organization Systems

Facilitating Meetings: Dealing with Difficult Situations Using Mindful Consensus

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I'm Alan O'Hashi, I live at Silver Sage Village cohousing in Boulder, CO. I'm a cultural competency trainer and facilitator who has worked with government agencies at the local state and tribal levels as well as in the private non-profit and for profit sectors for the past 30 years. Lately, I do this work mostly for fun and personal satisfaction, but recently have found there's a niche for my approach in the intentional community market.

In a past nonprofit life, I worked with positive youth development and domestic violence prevention organizations. I melded the two disciplines and have over time, honed a hybrid set of different facilitation skills that I find work better for consensus-based meetings.

What's the difference, facilitation is facilitation, right?

Facilitating in a consensus-based and lay environment that you find in cohousing is way different than for traditional organizations including Home Owner Associations that are, generally, have top-down and centralized decision making, with voting and winning by one and limited participation from the masses. Individual bosses are empowered to make unilateral decisions. They may seek input from others, but ultimate authority resides at the top.

In consensus-based cohousing, members generally come from many walks of life experience and worked and participated in environments that are very transactional. That means, I ask you to do task x and get y in return – getting paid. Transactional organizations have a top-down leadership structure, chain of command with levels of authority – bosses, sub-bosses etc.

This transactional behavior is learned at an early age – eat your spinach or no TV - and reinforced through college and eventually into the workplace. In cohousing, decision-making is trying put a square peg – I can do what I want, into a round hole – you can do what you want, as long as everyone else wants to go along with you.

In transformational organizations such as, cohousing, theoretically, leadership is shared with high levels of input from all, with particular attention paid to minority opinions.

As many of you are likely aware, unwinding your transactional top-down orientation is tough behavior to change. When you once could paint your house whatever color you wanted, in cohousing, your neighbors will want to decide if it's latex or enamel.

That's some background as to why facilitating a consensus-based meeting is different.

While there are probably other ways to go about it, and if you adopt any of my suggestions, you'll add your own secret sauce based on your experiences.

I'll go over a few tactics that I employ when I facilitate and then we can hear your war stories and have a discussion.

1. Set boundaries

While all communities have established values and codes of conduct, I like to get those attending the meeting to agree to reaffirm their agreement to follow them. I put a list on a piece of poster paper and hang it in the meeting space

- be nice
- listen
- speak when recognized
- share the floor
- challenge by choice
- no cross talking
- Heart Keeper empowered to correct members
- get finished on time

I ask the room if anyone has any objections to these. In my experience, there hasn't been, but if there are, I would take the time and find out what it would take for the dissenter to agree, and ask again if anyone objects. I ask for objections three times for any decision.

What this does is, it makes it okay for the facilitator and others in the room to correct behavior. Since the norms and expectations are agreed, calling someone out will not be viewed as bullying or aggressive behavior.

2. Empowered Heart Keeper (Sergeant at Arms)

At Silver Sage, we have a meeting Heart Keeper. In parliamentary procedure there is a Sergeant at Arms, which is a throwback to early times in merry old England and Robert's Rules of Order.

Back then, there was a soldier wielding a mace to keep the order. Our heart keeper has a stuffed heart and a chime to ring.

I always verbalize that in the norms and expectations, the heart keeper is empowered to help keep the meeting moving. I ask the heart keeper if they are up to doing this task. You'll also figure out that there are some people who are better heart keepers than others. It takes being a bit forth right to stop a meeting.

I remember facilitating a meeting when a topic got a bit off track, I started to lose control of the crowd with lots of cross talking and needed some help. I could have stood up and yelled something, but the heart keeper stepped up, rang the chime, and stopped the meeting. Everyone took a few moments to breathe. The reason this worked is, the heart keeper was empowered to stop the meeting.

3. Space management

I'd say most groups sit in a circle, as opposed to church-style.

- I as facilitator sit at the same level as the rest of the group. In a transactional meeting, I stand, because transactional groups are more accustomed to a "leader" running the meeting.
- In cohousing, I like to emulate the flat structure and facilitate from ground level.
- Facilitate with body language. In a transactional facilitation, the facilitator is empowered to rule with an iron hand. In a transformational facilitation, iron handed meeting control is a turn off and forces the facilitator into the chaos.
- Since I'm sitting, my first move is to stand up that, generally, gets the group's attention.
- Nobody likes to be told what to do. Give people a chance to self-correct. If there are cross talkers, I'll continue to facilitate standing up and take a step or two towards the offenders, that stops the chatting and then make my way back to my seat or I'll continue facilitating while standing.
- Worse case scenario – what if members go after each other. I've had to do this at a community meeting. There was heightening tension between two community members. One got up and took a step towards the other from the opposite side of the room. I physically stepped between the two of them and that stopped it. In retrospect, while this works for cross-talkers, it was potentially dangerous for my safety. In my case, it wasn't disruptive to the meeting, the two took their seats and the meeting continued. The problem was, after the meeting there was no resolution to the interpersonal conflict nor were either held accountable for their actions.

4. Negative Polling (as opposed to Positive Polling)

I find it less time consuming to reveal disagreement in a group, rather than to confirm agreement.

- In a transactional meeting or consensus that uses positive polling, it'll be, "all those in favor say 'aye', those opposed 'no' and then there's the counting that takes time; or thumbs up or down or sideways. Then there will be discrepancies about who can vote or not, miscounts. All that is time consuming. The idea behind consensus is, there's no counting, decisions are always made with 100 percent approval. In the interests of moving the meeting forward, the "stand asides" and "can live it" people are essentially in favor. The ones who are of most concern are those opposed to the point of being blockers. If you can find out who they are, and their concerns, the process becomes more efficient.

- Negative polling fits in better with the consensus approach because it asks for comment from dissenters. What I say something like this, "Sensing there's no further discussion and we're ready to come to consensus, is there anyone who thinks this is a bad idea, is there anyone who strongly objects, is there anyone who wants to stop this from happening? Hearing no objections, it is the consensus of the community to approve the action. Again, my liturgy is to ask for dissent three times. I learned this from my first boss, Mike Enzi who, at the time, was Mayor of Gillette, Wyoming and now the senior US Senator from Wyoming.

With that, let's open it up for discussion ...