

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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Diversity & Consensus

By Betsy Raasch-Gillman

Picture this: a group of activists who've been planning a direct action come together for a regular meeting. Tensions are high, because two members posted something on their e-mail list that offended a potentially key ally. At this meeting, the group has to decide, by consensus, what to do about the incident, and reactions to the incident are split in several directions. It's not an easy meeting. Accusations fly, defenses are up. Some people are silent because they don't know what to make of the situation or hate getting involved in conflict. Others offer suggestions or solutions that are shot down one after another.

Gradually, though, emotions cool, and everyone agrees on some next steps – facilitated by a half-apology by one of the two people who caused the uproar in the first place. Is this a victory for consensus process? In some ways, certainly. After all, no one stomps out and a solution emerges which no one foresaw when they came into the meeting. They make an implementation plan and people leave with more confidence in their ability to deal with a challenge together. Basically, they can be proud of the result. However, this group in question is relatively homogenous. They are young, European-American, male-bodied, and college-educated. This shared background probably contributed to their ability to resolve a conflict through consensus. There's no big surprise in this: a group will achieve the highest level of agreement the quickest when everyone comes at issues from the same frame of reference. Differences of opinion on a particular issue are less likely to be exacerbated by fundamental differences in values, culture or world views.

Are Consensus and Diversity at Odds?

Over the following months, this group finds themselves unable to attract and keep many members who don't fit the profile of the dominant identities in the group. How might their decision-making process play into their lack of diversity? The use of consensus decision-making often works to create even more homogeneity. Consensus is a powerful group-builder; when you invest your energy in listening and struggling with others it's natural to become more attached to your sense of belonging in the group. The downside is that it often -- alas! -- this increases the pressure to go along and agree with things, even when you have your doubts, because you are afraid of alienating yourself or disturbing the feeling of togetherness. Moreover, consensus is a conservative force – it conserves the status quo until everyone is persuaded to a different point of view. If you are consistently the only one (or even one of a sub-group) whose life experiences and convictions are at odds with those of the group as a whole, consensus can make you feel powerless and crazy rather than included and valued for the different perspective you bring. White groups often puzzle over how they can become more ethnically diverse, groups of adults may wonder about how to include more youth, and groups of college-educated people may struggle to figure out how to work with working-class people. Yet an organization cannot expect to increase its ethnic, age or class diversity if it's not used to accommodating other kinds of diversity: diversity of opinion, diversity of experience, diversity of attitude, diversity of behavior. A consensus model of decision-making can get in the way of creating inclusion if the group lets the pressure of time and limits on patience squelch diversity of opinion in favor of group coziness.

Acknowledging Conflict and Rank Diversity and consensus can be compatible but a group must be able to value and tolerate a high level of conflict. This may require everyone to distinguish between anger, violence, and punishment. Many of us, as children, unfortunately, learned that anger brings blows with it, or at least unpleasant consequences. That makes it hard to experience someone else's anger simply as an emotional expression or to be angry ourselves, without wanting to make someone else suffer as a result. When we add this emotional baggage to other experiences with oppression or prejudices we may have internalized, group dynamics can get complicated very quickly. However, when groups try to suppress anger or conflict, the people who usually suffer the most are those on the margins; members with deep differences of opinion and/or culture to are less likely to feel valued when they get mad. Another step towards combining diversity and consensus might be letting go of the myth of equality. Here's where a facilitator can really help a group. Many groups use consensus decision-making because they dislike hierarchy and authority. The truth is that merely wanting everyone to hold equal rank doesn't make it happen. A facilitator can remind the group that some inequalities that may be felt in a group are socially-defined (like inequalities based on perceived gender, skin color, physical abilities, and class). Other difference in rank result from life experiences, expertise on the topic at hand, spiritual discipline, leadership roles and emotional maturity. All of these are juicy sources of diversity, and all affect consensus decision-making. A facilitator can encourage a group to talk honestly about rank, over and over and over again, and can make observations to the group about how differences in rank may be influencing the process. Using the word "rank" gets away from the concept of privilege, which generally carries baggage of resentment and guilt, and often stops a difficult conversation dead in its tracks. Replacing judgment and certainty with curiosity is another habit which can honor diversity and build consensus at the same time. When we hear something which is unfamiliar, or doesn't immediately make sense in our world view, we naturally think, "That's wrong!" or "That's undemocratic!" or make some other judgment about it. (By now, perhaps readers of this article are thinking exactly those kinds of thoughts!) Any member of the group can model curiosity, and when the facilitator does so, it's particularly influential. Curiosity opens the door to people who feel marginalized, and builds a deeper consensus, when consensus is necessary.

Explore the Options Even with the best facilitation, consensus may not be the best option for a very diverse group. Groups committed to consensus often have a fall-back option for voting, when it takes too long to come to consensus. One white activist who started out being deeply committed to consensus worked for years in a small collective at a radical publishing house, which undertook a serious effort to diversify along ethnic lines. Things got harder and harder. When they finally moved to majority voting as a decision-making method, he couldn't conceal his relief. "There's such freedom," he sighed, "in just saying I disagree with a course of action, and stating why, and then moving on. No one strong-arms me into agreeing with something that I really don't agree with. People don't get mad at me and stay mad at me because I won't come around to the majority viewpoint. I can simply disagree!" For a group containing a lot of diversity another options is to begin with voting, and progress to consensus once the group has established trust in their communication with each other and the ability to handle conflict. For people quite unfamiliar with consensus decision-making, the more familiar "majority rules" form of democracy may allow a greater chance to be heard. At the very least, activists need to be aware of how one strong value (consensus decision-making) can conflict with another strong value (building diverse groups), and look for ways to honor both values.