

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.

The consensus facilitation process was developed by feminist and peace groups oriented toward 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 1) allow everyone to participate in discussion and decisions, 2) keep 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 actions decided upon have a mechanism for being carried out.

When groups adhere to good process, they find that people keep coming back to meetings, 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 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, "I am too busy and important to give this group my 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.

Facilitator

After introductions, the group must choose a facilitator. The facilitator should know how the process works, and not be a person who has a lot to say about topics 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 Junta controls the group. In small meetings, five to ten people, the facilitator can also fill the roles of timekeeper (who makes sure agenda items are completed in 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 notetaker. In larger meetings, it is best to divvy these tasks to other people.

Participants

Meeting participants should be prepared to speak dearly and concisely. They need to listen actively and avoid whispering to their neighbors. Personal attacks, no matter how veiled, have no place in facilitated meetings. Tendencies to interrupt, speak out of turn, off-subject, too loud, too often, or too long, are childish personal problems that are embarrassingly obvious to people in a facilitated process. Participants are most effective if they have pen and paper to outline their thoughts before speaking, 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 chalk board or flip sheet so everyone can see it. A typical agenda might look like:

- Introductions
- Announcements (Quick notices that don't require discussion)
- Review of last meeting and unfinished business
- Quick and easy discussion items, or subcommittee reports
- Time critical discussion/action item needing immediate attention
- Discussion/action item that may take a lot of time, be complex, or controversial
- New issue for discussion and planning
- Evaluation of meeting (optional)
- Announcements
- 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.

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 or the stack-keeper will ask people to raise their hands to be called on to speak. A “stack” or list of names will be kept, and each person will be called on in order. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to make sure people are staying on topic. S/He will also stop people from speaking out of turn, being repetitive, or from engaging in a two-person dialogue.

As the discussion proceeds, a skilled facilitator will try to guide the group to a proposal that everyone can agree upon. (“What I'm hearing is this, that and the other, is there anything else we need to know?”) The stack-keeper and time-keeper are the only other people who can interrupt the stack, and then ONLY for the purposes of attending to their jobs. (“There are 12 people on the stack, and we only have five minutes left for this topic”...). Other than that, there are two ways to break the stack. By holding up an index finger, a participant is indicating that s/he has a “point of information” that will clarify an issue, and save time in the discussion. By raising up both hands with palms facing each other (||) or with the fingers touching (^), the participant is indicating a “process breakdown” that needs to be addressed immediately. (“The facilitator isn't calling on people,” “Only two people are talking about this, and the rest of us are bored,” or “Some people keep insulting the eurosocialist feminazis in the group, and we want it to stop,” or simply, “Nobody is talking about the agenda item, let's stay on the subject.”) Silent applause or “twinkling” - holding hands up and wiggling fingers is a non-interruptive way to show support for what is being said.

The facilitator should ask the group for a proposal when all concerns have been aired. After a proposal is made, the facilitator should first ask the people on the stack if they need to speak before the proposal is developed. Usually people are ready to move on an issue by this time. The facilitator asks for concerns or friendly amendments to the proposal. The notetaker is often called upon to read back the proposal with amendments, so people can keep track of its development. After amendments are made, the facilitator checks for consensus. If everyone gives the “thumbs up”, then consensus has been reached, and the meeting goes on to ironing out the details. (“Who's going to write the press release?”, “Can so-and-so bring their car?”, etc.) Make sure somebody can coordinate the event and remind people of what they volunteered for.

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 for the group's reputation, legal or safety issues, the bigger strategy in the community, or something of that scale. Unless amendments can be made that will convince the person to either remove the block or “stand aside” (signaling that the person removes him/herself from the group for the purposes of this issue), a block means that the group takes no further action. This is a situation to avoid, obviously. A person who blocks proposals very often will eventually be asked if they really want to be in the group.

Some groups have amended the facilitation process 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 before a group moves to action items. which version is used depends on how big a group is, how diverse its members are, and how much patience its members 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 restroom, or get a drink of water. Breaks can also interrupt the flow of the meeting, so other ways of maintaining people's interest can be used: allowing a little chaos to break out, changing the discussion format (from stack discussions to circle go-arounds,) 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 happened was it OK?

Announcements

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

Close

Almost done! The meeting close is when the next meeting time and place are set, and if possible, 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 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. Democracy and equality need to be re-learned (remembered?) and practiced. Once a group has mastered this way of making decisions it will never go back to "Roberts Rules of Order" because it will seem too inefficient and uncreative!

Obviously, there are a lot of places to take shortcuts in this process. This is all right, but if a group gets too sloppy and lazy with its meeting process, problems may begin to manifest - often in ways seemingly unrelated to meetings. If disgruntlement, hurtful gossip, lack of enthusiasm, or flaking out start to become a problem for your group, a return to more formal meeting process will often go a long way to remedy the situation. Also notice that there are no rules in consensus-style facilitation against fun, laughter and personal growth. Every now and then, the "group mind-meld" made possible by this format can be a spiritual experience.

Although this process is meant for no more than fifty people, adaptations like the "fishbowl" and the "spokeswheel" (where affinity or focus groups have a representative at the circle) make this consensus process theoretically available to groups of thousands. Now THAT would be a worthwhile experiment in democracy.