

The Otesha Project (Australia)

Cycling for Sustainability

Consensus Decision Making & Facilitation

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Introduction

This document is intended to provide some ideas on how to facilitate and participate in workshops. Hopefully you can get some new ideas from this and revamp areas you think are weak. This is based on running a consensus decision group meeting or discussion.

What is Consensus Decision Making?

An awesome explanation can be found on Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making

Various Group Roles

- Facilitator
- Timekeeper
- Vibe Watcher
- Note taker
- Participants – What’s a meeting without the people!

Meeting Setup

- Good idea to sit in circles
- Allows for everyone to get eye contact
- Ensures everyone can hear each other
- Rotate facilitators so that each person feels like they are contributing and have an equal role

Meeting Participants

- To be respectful it’s good to only allow one person speaks at a time
- Sometimes it’s hard to maintain an order when hand signals aren’t use (see Hand Signals below)

Dos and Don’ts of Meeting Participation...

The Don’t List



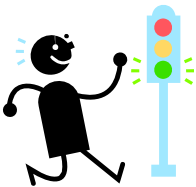
Watch out! Try to be conscious of how you are interacting within meetings and be aware of some of these attributes. They are easier to do then you might think and it creates an unfair and unsafe environment.



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- **Keep a watch on how much floor space you are taking** – Be mindful not to speak too long or contribute too many times to a discussion (it just inhibits the opportunity for others). Eye contact is a really good indication or gauge on how others are responding to the amount of time you are taking where lack of eye contact indicates disinterest.
- **Watch out for the amount of speaking you do** - Don't always offer your opinion each time someone makes a proposal, asks a question, or there is a lull in the discussion. Remember that some people just don't feel comfortable talking when others are talking. Plus it's a fun game to see how many other people think just like you and allows others to pipe up!
- **Don't speak with too much authority** - Responding to someone's comments with "Actually it's like this..." creates a situation where you are almost diminishing or correcting their thoughts. "I think what [insert name here] is trying to say is ..." makes it sound like you are more aware or have some way of communicating that others don't. These comments create a situation of power over the other person.
- **Facial expressions can be killer** - Watch out what kind of body language you are giving to others while they present their idea
- **Respond to each criticism of your proposal** - Don't be the person that makes a proposal and then responds to each criticism or question. Remember it's the group's responsibility to discuss each proposal and work through things. It's better not to take things completely personally during a discussion.

Good Do's List



This is a list of reminders for people being a part of any decision making process of things that help others feel included. And that's the entire point of collective decision-making. INCLUSIVE! Wheee...

- **Do respect other peeps** – It's a given but sometimes when we feel strongly about something we can end up hurting others in the process. So just be aware of what you are saying and how you are saying it! Respecting people no matter what they say is super important and remembering that people all come from different places.
- **Try to give the facilitator or speaker eye contact** - Anyone who has done facilitation knows that it's a hard job! Really hard! And giving the facilitator the respect and eye contact actually makes life and group



dynamics that much easier. It also helps them to gauge how interested you are. Hey we're not promoting a staring contest either :P

- **Use those hand signals** - Giving a hand signal to recognize that you agree with someone else's point is an amazing and effective way of communicating your thoughts without actually speaking. See the description of various hand signals below.
- **Share everything** - This can never be stated enough. Share your ideas, thoughts, experiences, friendship, and new hand shakes with your group. It all helps foster a greater group dynamic!
- **Be inclusive in your language** - Including people in your language is really important to make everyone feel as an equal part in our group environment. Sometimes you may not actually notice that the language you have learned growing up is slightly non-inclusive and can potentially offend others.

Hand signals

Using hand signals during a meeting is a great way to ensure that everyone has a say, and encourages equality and actually makes things flow much faster. It's a good idea to agree on a set of hand signals before hand with the group to ensure that the facilitator understands how to interpret each one.

Use "The Levi Hand Signal Technique" (LHST)

Usually there are two types of discussion comments as indicated below. By using the hand signals indicated below it really helps the flow of the conversation.

- **Direct or reactive comments** - Reactive comments need to be signalled by different hand signals than a unique fresh new idea (usually a full hand pointing towards the person)
- **General or unique comments** – A new idea that is being proposed to solve the problem (usually a finger pointing upwards)



For example: If the group is discussing what to put into salads and Shane says that there are heaps of cucumbers and they should be put in every salad to use them up. Chris could then point a full hand towards Shane while Jodi put her hand upwards. Chris would be responding to Shane's comment about cucumbers to point out later that we actually just ran out, and Jodi would be adding a new point to the discussion about the salad.



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Twinkle action

- Signifies that you agree with a point being made
- Provides a means for others to show that they agree in meetings, discussions, etc. is great for consensus.
- It's awesome because you are using your body language to agree without having to verbally agree!



For example: Amy has finished discussing a point about fair trade bananas as being healthier, more sustainable, and more considerate of worker rights. Rather than rephrasing what she has said in your own words you could simply twinkle to acknowledge that you agree with her ideas.

P gesture

- Indicates that someone has broken a setup procedure that has been outlined by the consensus group.
- Issue is addressed immediately by the facilitator when they notice the P



For example: If John speaks out of turn and then Bec holds up the P then the facilitator will speak to John and ask him to wait until it's his turn to speak.

Making Decisions

The ideas suggested below are meant as ideas that can be used to guide the decision making process for your group. In the process of being together each group can collectively create their own hand signals (the main idea behind each is usually preserved to respect the various sides of an issue that people might take).

- **Thumbs up** represents an individual's agreement on the proposed solution



- **Arms crossing chest** indicates a motion that you are not in agreement with the decision and would like to discuss it further (and know you'll be asked to explain why you are not in agreement)
- **No hand signal** indicates that you are standing aside on the decision and even though you are not in agreement you don't want to discuss the point further and will go along with any decision being made



For example: Assume that you were travelling with a new group of people and had to decide what type of meals you would eat collectively. As a group the facilitator has proposed that meals be created as vegetarian except on days off where people can choose for themselves. Around the room there are 70% thumbs up, 2 blocks by Kristin and Shane, and John has no gesture. Basically, this means that Kristin and Shane aren't in agreement with this and would be asked to explain their positions which is that they are both vegans and would like to propose that the meals be vegan friendly (cheese separated) accept days off. John has decided to not reign in his opinion even though he does not agree and in this case wouldn't be asked to comment.

Your role as facilitator (or team facil as they call them)

It's your role as a facilitator to really guide discussions and ensure (by watching the group) that everyone is able to contribute to the discussion.



General Group Dynamics

- **Start with FUN FUN FUN games** - This will help get peoples attentions and get people ready to start contributing – YEAH! Find a balance between fun and discussion and take breaks when needed!
- **Ensure everyone’s opinions are expressed**
- **Line up your speakers** – Let everyone know who the next three speakers are by saying something like “I'm going to take comments from Angela, Bec, and then Duncan.”
- **You are responsible for signalling the next person to speak**
- **Be aware of people who have direct responses**
- **Let everyone have a turn** - If you see that someone hasn’t spoken in a while and puts there hand up its safe to bump them up in the discussion quo as you want to empower each member to contribute.

Your Emotions

As a facilitator you should have some level of emotional distance from all issues being discussed.

- **Hold back those comments** - Facilitators shouldn’t really provide comments during consensus meetings to ensure that what they are saying to everyone is unbiased and thoughts summarized from the group.
- **When the need is there** – Sometimes it’s really **important** for the facilitator to comment. Indicating to the group that you are “taking off your facilitator hat for a second to comment” is essential. This tells everyone that the comment is coming from you.
- **Being in tune with your emotions** - When you recognize that a topic is quite emotional for you it is sometimes more important to step out of the facilitator role then to stay in
- **Summarize what you hear at key points** – Try to determine what you think everyone is trying to propose and summarize those thoughts. Ask for a vote when you think that all the appropriate thoughts have been expressed (twinkles are a good indication for this) *Usually waiting for about 30 seconds is a good idea it’s generally during this time that people who don’t normally speak will add very useful comments (Silence is your friend here!!)*



- **Taking a vote** – If you have any blocked motions you need to address those first and reformulate your proposed solution (once some consensus has been made again). Also if there is a great deal of stand asides on an issue that can be an indication of a poor decision and should be addressed.
- **Manage disagreement** - It's your responsibility to guide the group, re-channel irrelevant comments, and stop circular discussions. Everyone wants solution-oriented dialogue and sometimes don't realize that they aren't really contributing that way!
- **Off topic points** – It's bound to happen but placing these items on the "bike rack" for discussion at the end of the meeting is a good way to prevent them from interfering with the existing discussion.
- **Dealing with all sorts of individuals** – It can be difficult to have to deal with various types of people that might make it harder for flowing discussions to take place.
 - *Ramblers* - Depending on time it may/may not be important to cut these individuals off. If you do feel it's important to end their contribution get eye contact, motion to them, and then try and summarize what they are saying and move on (make sure they agree)
 - *Interrupters* - Best way to deal with them is to interrupt them and not let them speak by noting the rules.
- **Mitigating contentious issues** – Generally it's a good idea to do one solid **go-around** with the group to allow everyone the opportunity to speak. Allow people to respond (using direct response) and point out when you feel things aren't getting anywhere.
 - Propose solutions to problems with compromises where you see fit (creativity is key)
 - **Still not on the same page** - Ask dissenters to speak their peace (sometimes good points), bring out peoples ideas and help to make the best possible solution, and don't **force** solutions because people will get upset and feel like angry ants afterwards.
 - **Just like shampoo bottle slogans** - It's kind of like the dumb slogans on shampoo bottles "rinse, lather, repeat." With consensus, it's "go-round, propose solutions, twinkle, repeat" each time refining/filtering the process until there's one solution that is obviously going to be acceptable for everyone.



- **Follow up is key** - Make sure that decisions and action plans will actually be implemented by having people commit to doing any follow-up tasks, by a specific time

Vibe Watcher

This is a really important role but not always used in consensus decision making. Having a vibe watcher makes it easier for the facilitator because their main goal is to watch the vibe.

- Individual monitors group emotions
 - Watch facial expressions
 - Body language
- Brings up any vibes they feel might be occurring in group discussion and proposes a solution (i.e. games, break, identifying tension, etc)
- Helps to bring to attention any tension during discussion
- Allows group to rectify problem without it being addressed

Licensing

- Yep sorry to drop this one but it's a creative commons license so please abide by it -- <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>

Resources

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making
- <http://www.otesha.ca/bike+tours/guides/meeting+facilitation.en.html>



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