CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

My training in Consensus Decision Making came in Albany during the Occupy Wall Street movement. The first half-hour crash course took place under a tree with two young facilitators. They laid out the steps of the practice and advised to take small steps on involvement in the process, such as helping the facilitator by taking notes, stacking the interventions, counting hands in a temperature check, and pointing to people who stood aside or objected in order to hear them. Handling a large crowd in the open implies a large collaboration.

Having taken the small steps for some three or four general assemblies, I stepped into the disconcerting/exhilarating experience of facilitating a fluid audience of individuals at all levels of experience with consensus. When a topic would come back for a further stage of consensus, the crowd may have been very different from the original one. This may sound like a losing proposition, as I thought at first. And in fact, it may be hard to get past the repeated breaches of process from one individual or another, the length of some interventions, and the need to go back and forth between the steps. But something else stands out if one observes over a period of time. A process of collective education takes place. The "unruly" individuals who seem to cause the greatest problems are often those who care the most about an issue. When they relax into the experience of being heard, their attitude changes. Many start in fact realizing the nature of the process and the collective benefit it generates; they turn out to be potential assistants to the facilitator. Though not a linear process, progress is visible over a number of general assemblies.

Of the processes we will present here, consensus is one of the simplest since it is, generally speaking, the one that can be accomplished, at least potentially, in the shortest amount of time. Consensus Decision Making has its origin in Quaker practice and has been in use for three and a half centuries. In its highest form Quaker consensus tends to be seen as part of the religious experience at a collective level; it is the avenue for possible spiritual breakthroughs. Thus, it is in a different form that it has been adapted for work in groups and organizations that do not have a spiritual mission. Among those who adapted it first, credit is often given to the feminist and antinuclear

movements of the 1970s, who gave it the shape from which it has evolved at present.[1]

Typically a consensus process occurs around an agenda item in one meeting, though often the process has to be prepared beforehand and/or repeated over time. We will look at the simplest example of a simple, noncontroversial proposal in a single meeting. In a successful scenario, submitting a proposal in Consensus Decision Making implies the following steps:

- Presentation of the proposal and clarifying questions (these are fact based, nonemotional) to assure a shared understanding of the factual basis of the proposal.
- Raising of concerns and constructive criticism.
- Exploring of alternatives; offering of amendments
- Eventual acceptance of "friendly amendments" to the proposal.
- Testing for consensus and reaching consensus: the possible options are acceptance, standing aside (neutral), and blocking (negative).
- If there are no blocks, implementing the consensus decision to some degree; this may or may not entail further iterations of the process.

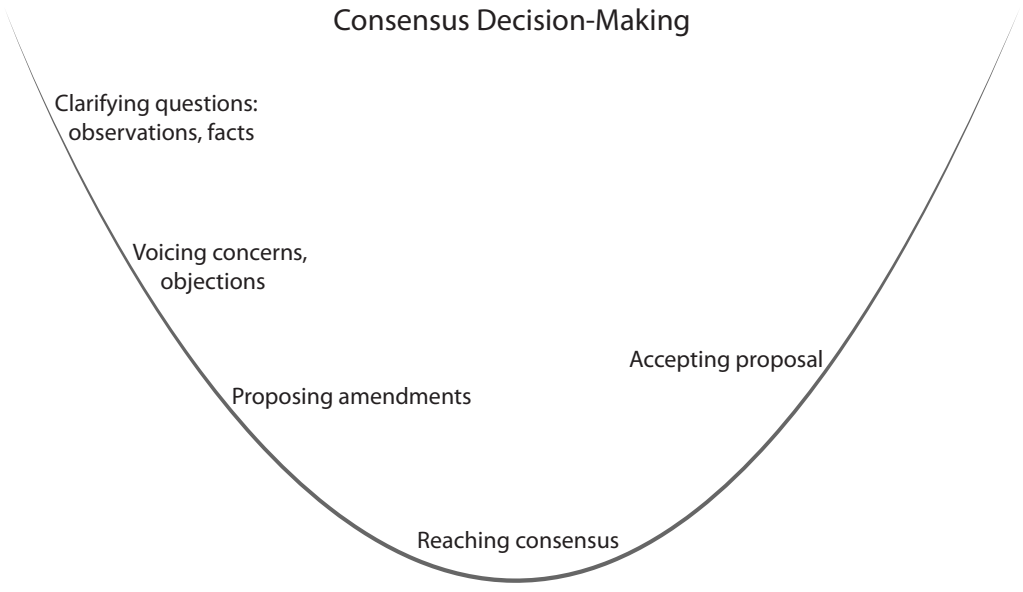

Figure 22: Consensus Decision Making

[1] For a book on consensus see Larry Dressler, *Consensus Through Conversation: How to Achieve High-Commitment Decisions* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehlers, 2006).

The pattern of the U is here echoed in the following way:

- Step I: Open Mind: facts are presented and clarity is sought so that everybody can agree on an objective basis.
- Step II: Open Heart: surfacing the emotional content raised by the proposal.
- Step III: Open Will: working to incorporate everybody's concerns for a better final decision; willingly letting go of favorite solutions in favor of what are seen as better ones.
- Step IV: Presencing; the magic of reaching true consensus.
- Step V: accepting proposal.

It is important to underline that in what is called *pure consensus*, a decision can be blocked even by a single person. For this reason it is important to distinguish between pure consensus and consent. Though the steps are very similar in the two variants, the results can be vastly different.

Suffice it to say here that they can be the ends of a spectrum. *Consensus* in the loosest understanding of the term can refer to the possibility of airing objections—and blocking consensus—based on purely personal reasons, or without a reference to clearly articulated and accepted parameters. At the other end of the spectrum, *consent* refers to working within a range of tolerance, without recourse to blocking. As in the case of Sociocracy, which we will see at the end of this chapter, this means being able to object only upon a common set of agreed-upon criteria. Moreover an accepted decision can be linked to sets of criteria and terms of review. The more concerns a decision presents, the more criteria will be added and the shorter the terms of review will be.

Consensus in Action

The form of Consensus Decision Making I have referred to in relation to Occupy Wall Street is not significantly different from the way in which consensus is used in a community or organization. Only the scale of its use and the fluidity of the settings are different.

It is interesting for our purpose to see how the particular form of consensus at Occupy Wall Street emerged. On August 2, 2011, before the occupation of Zuccotti Park in the Wall Street neighborhood that would lead to the Occupy Wall Street encampment, twelve people of the "process committee" met on

Bowling Green to project a form of direct democracy to use in the General Assemblies. The daring idea was born to facilitate assemblies of hundreds for collective decision making. Many, even among the twelve, thought this impossible.[2] They envisioned securing the process through spokes-councils in which people send their "representatives" rather than doing it 'live." Nothing of this sort had been done at this scale before.

The General Assembly became the de facto decision-making body for the occupation at the park, renamed Liberty Plaza. Through this form of Collective Decision Making, the paradoxes of equality of input and diffuse leadership are reconciled to a great extent. Nathan Schroeder, who has lived this experience up close, concludes: "Working toward consensus is really hard, frustrating and slow. But the occupiers are taking their time. When they finally get to consensus on some issue, often after days and days of trying, the feeling is quite incredible. A mighty cheer fills the plaza. It's hard to describe the experience of being among hundreds of passionate, rebellious, creative people who are all in agreement about something."[3] He is in effect describing the moment of presencing that forms the culmination of the first part of the U process, and the transition into the second part.

Conversation Cafes

Vicky Robin, Susan Partnow, and Habib Rose, three friends living in Seattle, first evolved the Conversation Café format in the summer of 2001. Each of them simply held conversations around topics of relevance in various coffee shops once a week. The method was soon tested in carrying out conversations for defusing the tensions around 9/11. Soon after Conversation Cafés spread to Toronto, St. Louis, Tucson, many other cities in the US, Canada, and Europe.

The method, though quite simple, is so effective that it can be used successfully to tackle thorny political issues such as in bridging the "red-blue divide" as it is done by Let's Talk America. It has also been used at Bioneers Conference, many Green Festivals, PBS, and even in the British Parliament, not to mention *myriad other conferences and meetings.*

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[2] David Graeber, "Enacting the Impossible: On Consensus Decision-Making," *The Occupied Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2011.

[3] Nathan Schroeder, "How It Came About, What It Means, How It Works and Everything Else You Need to Know about Occupy Wall Street," *The Nation*, September 29, 2011, https://www.thenation.com/article/occupy-wall-street-faq/.

Conversation Cafés are held in groups of five to eight individuals; the format is structured in four rounds: two introductory rounds to hear each participant at turns around a question. The third, and longest, round is an open exploration; the last, short round serves to gather insights, new questions, and closing remarks. The method can be learned by going to http://www.conversationcafe.org/, where you will also find the manual (http://www.conversationcafe.org/wpcontent/docsPDF/docHostCompleteManual.pdf), tips, video training, and more. Having mastered this, you could turn to World Café next.