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Models of Consensus

A brief guide by Autumn Brown

Simple/Basic Consensus

Basic consensus is the model taught by Autumn Brown and other members of the Signals Network. It includes a basic, but flexible, structure for coming through the decision-making process and a series of tools for groups and facilitators to actively use in facilitating the process. This process is cyclical, in that when a major concern or block is voiced, the group can circle back to another step in the process to develop a new proposal with the concern/block in mind. The group is seen as synthesizing ideas and information towards a unique proposal that belongs to the group, rather than individual members. Emotional information is considered valuable information. This model is similar to that used by many radical lefty groups, as well as many intentional communities, though there are differences depending on training and practice.

Modified Consensus

For many groups, coming to a complete and unified consensus is not considered feasible. These groups modify what it means to have consensus. Consensus Minus One, for instance, means that if only one person blocks a decision, the decision will still stand. In these situations, at least two people must block a decision in order to stop it from moving forward. Other modifications include Agreement-Seeking (using consensus techniques to generate a proposal, and using a vote if consensus cannot be reached), 90% Consensus (a super majority), and 2/3 Majority Rule.

Spiritual Consensus

For many communities around the world, the practice of consensus is located in their spiritual or religious understanding of being in community with others. The Quaker practice of consensus emphasizes trustworthiness and plain speech, and centers on the idea that all individuals have some part of the truth, or 'some part of God.' Meetings are characterized by long periods of silence and meditation between speakers, until slowly lines of thought draw together in a point of unity. The clerk frames the conclusion by expressing 'a sense of the meeting.'

Council-Based Consensus

Council-based consensus is a form of consensus that uses representation, meaning that a smaller group of people (a council) makes decisions by consensus, and the individuals of that small group represent a series of much larger groups. When direct action groups are working together on a major event, like protesting the IMF, they will often hold spokescouncil meetings where spokespersons of individual affinity groups meet together, share information, and make decisions. This form of consensus can also be friendly towards leadership. All voices are included and valued, and there is usually a specific and unique place for elders and leaders. The Iroquois Confederacy, a historical example of indigenous

council-based consensus, was a union of nations, each of which remained independent in matters pertaining to its own government. The Confederacy made decisions through a Great Council of Elders, or Sachems, who were equal in rank and authority, and who made decisions by consensus. Each Nation had its own Council, which could convene the Great Council, but the Great Council could not convene itself.

Education by Consensus

Many free schools use consensus decision-making as a part of school governance. Free schools are spaces where the education is learner-led. Instead of a single curriculum used for all students, students and teachers in a free school work together to decide what the student will study and how the course of study will be completed. In many free schools, students and staff express themselves freely and make decisions through a directly democratic process during weekly school meetings; this process is intended to protect both the needs of the individual, and the needs of the school group. Conflicts are often processed through mediation and judicial committees before disciplinary measures are taken. In more traditional educational settings, there has been some success using consensus techniques amongst staff – for example, in Haiti many teachers meet together and use reflection circles to discuss curricula.

Consensus Societies

There are many examples of consensus used to make decisions and provide good governance across large territories of land. The Zapatista movement in Chiapas makes decisions through a public power called "la consulta". This group – comprised of all men, women and children 12 and over – holds local meetings where discussion is held and all the members make the final decision. Women's and youth caucuses are used to ensure that the voices of those who are traditionally marginalized from participatory methods are heard. Another example is the village assembly, a part of the traditional political structure of many African nations. In the village assembly, issues are debated until decisions are reached which are binding on all members of the village, including the chief.

Formal Consensus and formal Consensus

Many groups say they are using 'formal consensus' if they use any kind of consensus decision-making structure. This is true, and it is also different from 'Formal Consensus' (notice the capital F), a model taught by C.T. Butler, and elaborated in the book he co-authored with Amy Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus*. This model is differentiated by the following: 1) blocks must be based on the principles of the group, and must be accepted by the group; 2) proposals are developed in subcommittee before being brought for decision by the main body of the group; 3) meetings happen in Levels, each of which serves a different purpose. For instance, at one Level, only discussion for hearing concerns is allowed, and members are discouraged from offering solutions, because this is seen as limiting the discussion of concerns.