

Consensus Meetings: Roles, Structures, Tools

Roles

Facilitator

The facilitator plans the agenda, keeps the group moving forward and on task, and acts as a positive presence in leading the group through the agenda. See “Facilitating” section for more.

Vibes-watcher

This role can overlap with facilitator, but the vibes-watcher is explicitly aware of the underlying tensions, habits of the group, body language, and physical layout issues. She notices the tone of the meeting, pointing out underlying feelings, points out frustration or weariness, and recommends changes (“I’m noticing that people seem to be feeling tired/un-engaged/angry. Should we take a short break/discuss next time/break into small groups to discuss?”) The vibes-watcher is aware of group dynamics - introverts, extroverts, opinionated or dissociative people, etc., and tries to promote balanced, equitable input. She interrupts oppressive behavior/domineering/put-downs/bulldozing (“Can I interrupt you?”)

Notetaker

The notetaker summarizes the discussion, noting any reservations, and clearly writes the decision, how it will be implemented, and any other pertinent discussion or details. It’s sometimes necessary for the group to pause to give the notetaker time to record all this. Also, it’s nice for the facilitator to be aware of the notetaker’s double duties and draw her into discussion to ensure full consensus.

Other Roles

Depending on the group, other roles may help the process, especially those dealing with the physical space: scheduling the space, cooking dinner, welcoming new members, providing snacks, planning prayer, or doing clean-up. Some groups use a Co-facilitator to assist when the facilitator is stuck or not engaged, or if the facilitator would like to express an opinion.

General Meeting Structure - a sample

Different meetings have different needs. This is a basic outline for a regular item-oriented meeting. In this structure, before the meeting, the facilitator has organized agenda items, with estimated time for each item. See “Facilitating” for more on this process.

1. The meeting starts! (on time!)
2. Connect with each other
 - This can include a game, dinner, song, ritual, prayer, sharing (different options include “How was my week? How am I doing overall? Weather report - how am I in one word?”).
3. Choose roles (notetaker, timekeeper, vibes-watcher, etc.)
4. Agenda review (the group reviews, modifies, and agrees on the agenda presented by the facilitator)
5. Step through the agenda (see “The Flow of Making a Decision”)
6. Notetaker reads the decisions, group members offer any clarifications or edits
7. Evaluation of meeting by each group member

- There's nothing worse than leaving a meeting with pent up frustrations, resentments, or hurt feelings. It's essential to provide time for participants to reflect on the group process, acknowledge any interpersonal dynamics, and name both positive and negative aspects of the meeting. Members can ask themselves "How was my participation? What could I have done better? What am I carrying with me after this meeting?" Using nonviolent communication, people can also name issues or concerns. For example, "I feel ... (an emotion), when I heard (an observation, without judgement on a comment), because I have a need for (name a need) I wonder if we could (provide a suggestion for action or request for suggestions)". For example, " I feel frustrated when the meeting went over time because I have a need to be on time to my other commitments. Does anyone have any ideas about keeping us on time?"

Some groups use a first round for people to express their own experience, then a second (or third) round for people to respond or ask questions, about comments made in the first round. Often the group will uncover an idea for future discussion during this time.

8. Closing (game, song, prayer, etc.)

The Flow of Making an Individual Decision

Once the agenda is approved by the group, dive into the first item!

1. Issue presented by the facilitator or designated person
2. Open discussion - people offer a diversity of ideas, concerns, and perspectives
3. The facilitator notes points of agreement and disagreement, themes of discussion
4. Synthesize possible proposals
5. Evaluate the different proposals until one idea seems best - new concerns, additions are expressed.
6. Facilitator tests the proposal for consensus: "Do we have consensus?"
7. Establish how the decision will be implemented
8. Restate the decision for the notetaker (who reviews all decisions at end of meeting)

Agreement, Blocking and Standing Aside

When a proposal moves towards a decision, people can have all kinds of feelings and opinions. Ideally, everyone feels like the proposal is the best option. Agreement can range from an enthusiastic "yes!" to the agreement of "I can live with it."

The encouragement of dissent is essential to an effective consensus process. Any member has the ability, and the impetus, to "block" the passage of a proposal if she or he feels that the proposal will violate the group's stated values, or if the proposal will be "catastrophic" for the well-being of the group. These two qualifications should ensure that blocks, and threats of blocking, are extremely rare. According to Tree Bressen, the Quakers say that one should only block "after a sleepless night and the shedding of tears, and at most a few times in a lifetime." One of the most common misstep groups can make is to allow a block that is in reality based on an individual's personal preference or values, rather than on the group's well-being and values. Groups can decide specific practices around blocking, including who can block (brand-new members?) how often (limiting blocks from one person to one a year?). It's essential for the group's values to be clearly understood, and for the group to have a clear process for members to express different shades of dissent. When a block is appropriate, most trainers suggest that the blocker participate in a process to find an alternative proposal.

"Standing aside" is another avenue of dissent that allows a group member to express disagreement or concern with a

proposal, while allowing the group to move forward on it. This option says “I don’t agree with this, but I won’t prevent the group from doing it.” Someone who stands aside is still bound to follow the decision, but is not necessarily expected to take leadership in implementing it.

Discussion Toolbox

1. Regular Decision making: Formats for Discussion

When an item is not a “quickie”, here are some tools to use for discussion:

- Go-around the circle - Members name individual opinions and feelings.
- Popcorn- open discussion, but no one talks twice until everyone has been heard
- Small Groups - Break up into 2s or 3s to discuss the issue for 10-15 minutes. Gives more people a chance to speak in-depth, and can allow group to tackle different aspects of a complex problem. The groups then report highlights back to the larger group.
- Straw Polls- A non-binding vote that can be used in consensus to determine members’ enthusiasm for a proposal: “How many people have energy to make this proposal happen? Raise your hands.”
- Fishbowls
 - A small group openly discusses an issue, surrounded by the larger group. The fishbowl is useful when some people have a lot of information, experience or interpersonal dynamics that others might not share. People who are most involved or impacted, or who are embroiled in the conflict are typically “in” the fishbowl. Modifications include **fishbowl with an open seat** (someone from the outer circle can briefly join to make a point or ask a question), or **alternating fishbowl** (a sub-group speaks about their experiences -helpful to promote understanding between men/women, newcomers/long-term members, etc.)
- Brainstorms
 - Five to ten minute session where members throw out every idea they have. To be effective , the brainstorm should be followed by a discussion that weighs and evaluates the ideas. A priority setting process should be used to follow the brainstorm: “Let’s each name our top three priorities out of this list”. The group can then discuss the top priorities in a more manageable way.

2. When we Disagree

Sometimes groups get stuck - too many ideas are proposed without a clear consensus of how to move forward, people have strong opposing opinions, or the group just can’t see a best option. Here are some ideas for opening up discussion.

1. Advantages/disadvantages chart
2. “Devil’s advocate” questions for different proposals
3. Take a break: take 2 full minutes of silence, table the item for a week, move the item to the end of the agenda. This gives emotions time to cool.
4. “Back of the Barn!” Coined by Starhawk for our purposes, two disagreeing members spend time outside the meeting, with or without a mediator, to hash out feelings, underlying assumptions, and possible solutions.
5. Clarify the issue, to narrow down what the issue really is. Ask, and write down, for clarity’s sake, the answers: Is this an issue of personal preference, or one that is central to the group’s values? Could we try one proposal and re-evaluate it? What are the proposals, and why do people support each of them?

6. Start from scratch: Brainstorming Session with visual notes
7. Give the issue space; make sure to have social gathering where you don't discuss the issue

3. When we Still Disagree

Sometimes, groups will encounter an issue that seems foundational and insurmountable. Here are some ideas to find consensus.

1. Enlist the help of an outside, trained, facilitator or mediator (source)
2. Small-groups discuss the issue - the groups can be people of opposing or mixed opinions to encourage clarification and understanding
3. Hold a separate session to discuss the philosophy or values underlying the issue
4. If one or two people are dissenting, they can meet with a few others to create an alternate proposal. This helps avoid the "tyranny of the minority," in which one or two people frequently disagree with the group but have no responsibility for helping the group to move forward.