

Pitfalls of Consensus Decision Making

-Adapted from Handbook for Nonviolent Action, article by Bill Moyers-

Despite our best attempts to be perfectly healthy and inclusive people, we still carry the baggage of our upbringings and cultures, and need to do explicit work to help our communication in groups. Some common problems found in group decision making:

- **Hogging the show.** Talking too much, too long, too loud. Voicing your opinion on every issue.
- **Problem solver.** Giving the answer, or a proposal, before others have had much chance to contribute.
- **Speaking in capital letters.** Giving one's ideas or opinions as the final word on the subject, using overly strong language, tone of voice and body posture.
- **Defensiveness.** Responding to contrary opinions as personal attacks.
- **Nit-picking.** Picking out minor flaws in statements of others; stating the exception to every generality; blowing someone's differing idea out of proportion to make one's point
- **Reverting to Oppression.** Falling back on one's status in a dominant group (white, heterosexual, upper-class, male, able-bodied, etc.) to sway others to other's opinions; using oppressive stereotypes to prove one's point
- **Holding Out.** Prolonging discussion so that the group will follow one's will, simply out of exhaustion
- **Restating.** Especially what another person has just said perfectly clearly.
- **Attention seeking.** Using dramatics - anger, tears, sullenness, etc. - to get the spotlight.
- **Task and content focus.** Overly focusing on the process to the detriment of nurturing individuals or the group.
- **Negativism.** Finding something wrong or problematical in everything.
- **Condescension and paternalism.** "I used to believe that, but now..." Using experience or age to (silently or overtly) diminish other's contributions.
- **Focus transferring.** Shifting the focus of the discussion to one's own pet issues.
- **Residual office holder.** Hanging on to former powerful positions.
- **Self-listening.** Formulating a response after the first few sentences, not listening to anything from that point on, and leaping in at the first pause.
- **George Custerism.** Intransigence and dogmatism; taking a last stand for one's position on even minor items.
- **Running the show.** Continually volunteering for tasks before others have the chance to step forward.
- **Graduate student-itis and one-upmanship.** Protectively storing information - to promote oneself, or to further one's agenda.
- **Speaking for others.** "A lot of us think that we should..." or "What she really meant was..."
- **The Silent Treatment.** Withdrawing participation in a decision so that one can later deny there was full consensus; "I told you so..." "I never thought that was a good idea"

The Beatitudes of Consensus

Blessed are those...

- Who acknowledge that theirs is both a small sliver,
but also an invaluable piece, of the truth
 - Who avoid both dissociating and domineering
- Who acknowledge and work with difficult dynamics and strong feelings,
rather than avoiding or stepping around them
 - Who fully listen to other's truths - even when that truth is long-winded
or difficult to hear - rather than impatiently waiting for a break to speak
- Who take personal responsibility to interrupt and address oppressive language
 - Who take the time to ensure a full, rather than lukewarm, consensus
 - Who give the invaluable gifts of eye contact, loving affirmation,
and moderate language to the group
 - Who occasionally as introverts "step forward" or
as extroverts, "step back" during discussions
- Who relax, knowing that history is vast, God is present, and their voice will be heard
 - Who commit to the good of both the group, and each individual within it

Reflection Questions

1. You can certainly think of your fellow community members' flaws reflected in "Pitfalls". What pitfalls do you sometimes express? Is there a pitfall that your community often encounters? How can you address it?
2. Which of the Beatitudes is most challenging for you personally? Which comes easily to you? Do you hope to improve at any Beatitude in particular?