

Preface

Originally, C.T. wrote this book for the Pledge of Resistance in Boston when it had over 3500 signers and 150 affinity groups. All policy decisions for the organization were made at monthly spokesmeetings, involving at least one spokesperson from each affinity group. Members from the coordinating committee were charged with managing daily affairs. Spokesmeetings were often attended by over one hundred people; they were usually seventy strong. For almost two years the process of consensus worked well for the Pledge, empowering very large numbers of people to engage confidently in nonviolent direct action. The forerunner of the model of consensus outlined in this book was used throughout this period at spokesmeetings and, particularly well, at the weekly coordinators meetings. However, it was never systematically defined and written down or formally adopted.

For over two years, C.T. attended monthly spokesmeetings, weekly coordinating meetings, and uncounted committee meetings. He saw the need to develop a consistent way to introduce new members to consensus. At first, he looked for existing literature to aid in conducting workshops on the consensus process. He was unable to find any suitable material, so he set out to develop his own.

The first edition of this book is the result of a year of research into consensus in general and the Pledge process in particular. It was mostly distributed to individuals who belonged to various groups already struggling to use some form of consensus process. The fourth printing included an introduction which added the concept of secular consensus. The secular label distinguishes this model of consensus from both the more traditional model found in faith-based communities and the rather informal consensus commonly found in progressive groups.

Unfortunately, the label of secular consensus gave the impression that we were denying any connection with spirituality. We wanted to clearly indicate that the model of consensus we were proposing was distinct, but we did not want to exclude the valuable work of faith-based communities.

Therefore, since the sixth printing we have used the name Formal Consensus because it adequately defines this distinction. We hope that Formal Consensus

will continue to be an important contribution to the search for an effective, more unifying, democratic decisionmaking process.

Formal Consensus is a specific kind of decisionmaking. It must be defined by the group using it. It provides a foundation, structure, and collection of techniques for efficient and productive group discussions. The foundation is the commonly-held principles and decisions which created the group originally. The structure is predetermined, although flexible. The agenda is formal and extremely important. The roles, techniques, and skills necessary for smooth operation must be accessible to and developed in all members. Evaluation of the process must happen on a consistent and frequent basis, as a tool for self-education and self-management. Above all, Formal Consensus must be taught. It is unreasonable to expect people to be familiar with this process already. In general, nonviolent conflict resolution does not exist in modern North American society. These skills must be developed in what is primarily a competitive environment. Only time will tell if, in fact, this model will flourish and prove itself effective and worthwhile.

We are now convinced more than ever that the model presented in this book is profoundly significant for the future of our species. We must learn to live together cooperatively, resolving our conflicts nonviolently and making our decisions consensually. We must learn to value diversity and respect all life, not just on a physical level, but emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. We are all in this together.

C.T. Butler
Amy Rothstein
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Part I
On Conflict and Consensus

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Advantages of Formal Consensus

There are many ways to make decisions. Sometimes, the most efficient way to make decisions is to just let the manager (or CEO, or dictator) make them. However, efficiency is not the only criterion. When choosing a decisionmaking method, one needs to ask two questions. Is it a fair process? Does it produce good solutions?

To judge the process, consider the following: Does the meeting flow smoothly? Is the discussion kept to the point? Does it take too long to make each decision? Does the leadership determine the outcome of the discussion? Are some people overlooked?

To judge the quality of the end result, the *decision*, consider: Are the people making the decision, and all those affected, satisfied with the result? To what degree is the intent of the original *proposal* accomplished? Are the underlying issues addressed? Is there an appropriate use of resources? Would the group make the same decision again?

Autocracy can work, but the idea of a benevolent dictator is just a dream. We believe that it is inherently better to involve every person who is affected by the decision in the decisionmaking process. This is true for several reasons. The decision would reflect the will of the entire group, not just the leadership. The people who carry out the plans will be more satisfied with their work. And, as the old adage goes, two heads are better than one.

This book presents a particular model for decisionmaking we call Formal Consensus. Formal Consensus has a clearly defined structure. It requires a commitment to active cooperation, disciplined speaking and listening, and

respect for the contributions of every member. Likewise, every person has the responsibility to actively participate as a creative individual within the structure.

Avoidance, denial, and repression of conflict is common during meetings. Therefore, using Formal Consensus might not be easy at first. Unresolved conflict from previous experiences could come rushing forth and make the process difficult, if not impossible. Practice and discipline, however, will smooth the process. The benefit of everyone's participation and cooperation is worth the struggle it may initially take to ensure that all voices are heard.

It is often said that consensus is time-consuming and difficult. Making complex, difficult decisions is time-consuming, no matter what the process. Many different methods can be efficient, if every participant shares a common understanding of the rules of the game. Like any process, Formal Consensus can be inefficient if a group does not first assent to follow a particular structure.

This book codifies a formal structure for decisionmaking. It is hoped that the relationship between this book and Formal Consensus would be similar to the relationship between Robert's Rules of Order and Parliamentary Procedure.

Methods of decisionmaking can be seen on a continuum with one person having total authority on one end and sharing power and responsibility on the other.

The level of participation increases along this decisionmaking continuum. Oligarchies and autocracies offer no participation to many of those who are directly affected. Representative, majority rule, and consensus democracies involve everybody, to different degrees.

1.1 Group Dynamics

A group, by definition, is a number of individuals having some unifying relationship. The group dynamic created by consensus process is completely different from that of Parliamentary Procedure, from start to finish. It is based on different values and uses a different language, a different structure, and many different techniques, although some techniques overlap. It might be helpful to explain some broad concepts about group dynamics and consensus.

Conflict

While decisionmaking is as much about conflict as it is about agreement, Formal Consensus works best in an atmosphere in which conflict is encouraged, supported, and resolved cooperatively with respect, nonviolence, and creativity. Conflict is desirable. It is not something to be avoided, dismissed, diminished, or denied.

Majority Rule and Competition

Generally speaking, when a group votes using majority rule or Parliamentary Procedure, a competitive dynamic is created within the group because it is being asked to choose between two (or more) possibilities. It is just as acceptable to attack and diminish another's point of view as it is to promote and endorse your own ideas. Often, voting occurs before one side reveals anything about itself, but spends time solely attacking the opponent! In this adversarial environment, one's ideas are owned and often defended in the face of improvements.

Consensus and Cooperation

Consensus process, on the other hand, creates a cooperative dynamic. Only one proposal is considered at a time. Everyone works together to make it the best possible decision for the group. Any concerns are raised and resolved, sometimes one by one, until all voices are heard. Since proposals are no longer the property of the presenter, a solution can be created more cooperatively.

Proposals

In the consensus process, only proposals which intend to accomplish the common purpose are considered. During discussion of a proposal, everyone works to improve the proposal to make it the best decision for the group. All proposals are adopted unless the group decides it is contrary to the best interests of the group.

1.2 Characteristics of Formal Consensus

Before a group decides to use Formal Consensus, it must honestly assess its ability to honor the principles described in Chapter Three. If the principles described in this book are not already present or if the group is not willing to work to create them, then Formal Consensus will not be possible. Any group which wants to adopt Formal Consensus needs to give considerable attention to the underlying principles which support consensus and help the process operate smoothly. This is not to say each and every one of the principles described herein must be adopted by every group, or that each group cannot add its own principles specific to its goals, but rather, each group must be very clear about the foundation of principles or common purposes they choose before they attempt the Formal Consensus decisionmaking process.

Formal Consensus is the least violent decisionmaking process.

Traditional nonviolence theory holds that the use of power to dominate is violent and undesirable. Nonviolence expects people to use their power to persuade without deception, coercion, or malice, using truth, creativity, logic, respect, and love. Majority rule voting process and Parliamentary Procedure both accept, and even encourage, the use of power to dominate others. The goal is the winning of the vote, often regardless of another choice which might be in the best interest of the whole group. The will of the majority supersedes the concerns and desires of the minority. This is inherently violent. Consensus strives to take into account everyone's concerns and resolve them before any decision is made. Most importantly, this process encourages an environment in which everyone is respected and all contributions are valued.

Formal Consensus is the most democratic decisionmaking process.

Groups which desire to involve as many people as possible need to use an inclusive process. To attract and involve large numbers, it is important that the process encourages participation, allows equal access to power, develops cooperation, promotes empowerment, and creates a sense of individual re-

sponsibility for the group's actions. All of these are cornerstones of Formal Consensus. The goal of consensus is not the selection of several options, but the development of one decision which is the best for the whole group. It is synthesis and evolution, not competition and attrition.

Formal Consensus is based on the principles of the group.

Although every individual must consent to a decision before it is adopted, if there are any objections, it is not the choice of the individual alone to determine if an objection prevents the proposal from being adopted. Every objection or concern must first be presented before the group and either resolved or validated. A valid objection is one in keeping with all previous decisions of the group and based upon the commonly-held principles or foundation adopted by the group. The objection must not only address the concerns of the individual, but it must also be in the best interest of the group as a whole. If the objection is not based upon the foundation, or is in contradiction with a prior decision, it is not valid for the group, and therefore, out of order.

Formal Consensus is desirable in larger groups.

If the structure is vague, decisions can be difficult to achieve. They will become increasingly more difficult in larger groups. Formal Consensus is designed for large groups. It is a highly structured model. It has guidelines and formats for managing meetings, facilitating discussions, resolving conflict, and reaching decisions. Smaller groups may need less structure, so they may choose from the many techniques and roles suggested in this book.

Formal consensus works better when more people participate.

Consensus is more than the sum total of ideas of the individuals in the group. During discussion, ideas build one upon the next, generating new ideas, until the best decision emerges. This dynamic is called the creative interplay of ideas. Creativity plays a major part as everyone strives to discover what is best for the group. The more people involved in this cooperative process, the more ideas and possibilities are generated. Consensus works best with

everyone participating. (This assumes, of course, that everyone in the group is trained in Formal Consensus and is actively using it.)

Formal Consensus is not inherently time-consuming.

Decisions are not an end in themselves. Decisionmaking is a process which starts with an idea and ends with the actual implementation of the decision. While it may be true in an autocratic process that decisions can be made quickly, the actual implementation will take time. When one person or a small group of people makes a decision for a larger group, the decision not only has to be communicated to the others, but it also has to be acceptable to them or its implementation will need to be forced upon them. This will certainly take time, perhaps a considerable amount of time. On the other hand, if everyone participates in the decisionmaking, the decision does not need to be communicated and its implementation does not need to be forced upon the participants. The decision may take longer to make, but once it is made, implementation can happen in a timely manner. The amount of time a decision takes to make from start to finish is not a factor of the process used; rather, it is a factor of the complexity of the proposal itself. An easy decision takes less time than a difficult, complex decision, regardless of the process used or the number of people involved. Of course, Formal Consensus works better if one practices patience, but any process is improved with a generous amount of patience.

Formal Consensus cannot be secretly disrupted.

This may not be an issue for some groups, but many people know that the state actively surveils, infiltrates, and disrupts nonviolent domestic political and religious groups. To counteract anti-democratic tactics by the state, a group would need to develop and encourage a decisionmaking process which could not be covertly controlled or manipulated. Formal Consensus, if practiced as described in this book, is just such a process. Since the assumption is one of cooperation and good will, it is always appropriate to ask for an explanation of how and why someone's actions are in the best interest of the group. Disruptive behavior must not be tolerated. While it is true this process cannot prevent openly disruptive behavior, the point is to prevent covert disruption, hidden agenda, and malicious manipulation of the process. Any

group for which infiltration is a threat ought to consider the process outlined in this book if it wishes to remain open, democratic, and productive.