

Salem Classical Fencing Rules of Order

The following is reprinted for reference (and included as part of the Rules of Order) from "Consensus Ingredients" by Caroline Estes. Ms. Estes has been living, teaching, and facilitating the consensus method of decision making since becoming a Quaker more than 35 years ago. She used the training and experience of Quaker business meetings to expand and develop the use of consensus with secular groups. She lives at Alpha Farm east of Florence, Oregon.

During the past few decades, while we have been searching for new ways of doing things in order to be inclusive, the decision-making process known as consensus has begun to be used increasingly and in many different situations. Government is using it to try to find ways that do not involve court cases on controversial laws, such as in the Forest Service. Hewlett-Packard uses it in its factories; and many social services are beginning to use it in their work.

In simple terms, consensus refers to agreement on some decision by all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives. The consensus process is what the group goes through to reach this agreement. The assumptions, methods, and results are different from Robert's Rules of Order or traditional parliamentary procedure.

Over the past nearly 40 years, since I was first introduced to the use of consensus in Quaker business meetings, I have been in widely different situations in which it has been used, and I have been teaching it for the past 15 years. The Greens Party of North America used it in the beginning of its organization, and the bioregional movement of North America uses it exclusively in its biennial meetings. Many intentional communities use the process, as well as the board of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC). Departments within government and universities, school faculties, and administrations are beginning to find it useful and efficient.

The Basis

Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and no one has all of it (no matter how much we like to believe that we ourselves know it all). It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered. In our present society the governing idea is that we can trust no one, and therefore we must protect ourselves if we are to have any security in our decisions. The most we will be willing to do is compromise, and this leads to a very interesting way of viewing the outcome of working together. It means we are willing to settle for less than the very best -- and that we will often have a sense of dissatisfaction with our decisions unless we can somehow outmaneuver others involved in the process. This leads to a skewing of honesty and forthrightness in our relationships.

In the consensus process, we start from a different basis. The assumption is that we are all trustworthy (or at least can become so). The process allows each person complete power over the group. For example, the central idea for the Quakers is the complete elimination of majorities and minorities. If there are any differences of view at a Quaker meeting, as there are likely to be in such a body, the consideration of the question at issue proceeds with long periods of solemn hush and meditation, until slowly the lines of thought draw together toward a point of unity. Then the clerk frames a minute of conclusion, expressing the "sense of the meeting".

Built into the consensual process is the belief that all persons have some part of the truth in them, or, what in spiritual terms might be called "some part of God". We will reach a better decision by putting all of the pieces of the truth together before proceeding. There are indeed times when it appears that two pieces of the truth are in contradiction with each other, but with clear thinking and attention, the whole may be perceived including both pieces, or many pieces. The traditional either/or type of argument does not advance this process. Instead, the consensus process is a search for the very best solution -- whatever the problem. That does not mean that there is never room for error -- but on the whole, in my experience, it is rare.

The consensus process makes direct application of the idea that all persons are equal -- an idea that we are not entirely comfortable with, since it seems on the surface that some people are "more equal than others". But if we do indeed trust one another and do believe that we all have parts of the truth, then we can remember that one person may know more of the truth at one time, while another person may know more at another time. Even when we have all the facts before us, it may be the spirit that is lacking; and this may come forth from yet another who sees the whole better than anyone else. Everybody's contributions are important.

Decisions which all have helped shape, and with which all can feel united, make the necessary action go forward with more efficiency, power and smoothness. This applies to persons, communities and nations. Given the enormous issues and problems before us, we need to make decisions in ways that will best enable us to move forward together. When people join their energy streams, miracles can happen.

The Process

How does the consensus process actually work? It can be a powerful tool, yet like any tool, this process needs to be used rightly. To make the most of its possibilities we need to understand the parts and the process.

Consensus needs four ingredients -- a group of people willing to work together, a problem or issue that requires a decision by the group, trust that there is a solution, and perseverance to find the truth.

It is important to come to the meetings with a clear and unmade-up mind. This is not to say that prior thinking should not have been done, but simply that the thinking must remain open throughout the discussion -- or else there is no way to reach the full truth. Ideas and solutions must be listened to with respect and trust, and must be sought from all assembled. This means everyone, not just some of the group. Consensus is the practice of oneness for those who are committed to that idea, or it is the search for the best possible solution for those who are more logic-based.

The problems to be considered come in all sizes, from "who does the dishes" to "how to reach accord on limiting the arms race". The consensus process begins with a statement of the problem -- as clearly as possible, in language as simple as possible. It is important that the problem not be stated in such a way that an answer is built in, but that there be an openness to looking at all sides of the issue -- whatever it may be. It is also necessary to state the problem in the positive: "We will wash the dishes with detergent and hot water," not, "We will not wash the dishes in cold water." Or, "We need to wash the dishes so they are clean and sanitary," not, "The dishes are very dirty, and we are not washing them correctly." Stating the issues in the positive begins the process of looking for positive solutions and not a general discussion of everything that is undesirable or awful.

The meeting needs a facilitator/clerk/convener, a role whose importance cannot be too strongly emphasized. It is this person whose responsibility it is to see that all are

heard, that all ideas are incorporated if they seem to be part of the truth, and that the final decision is agreed upon by all assembled.

Traits that help the facilitator are patience, intuition, articulateness, ability to think on one's feet, and a sense of humor. It is important that the facilitator never show signs of impatience. The facilitator is the servant of the group, not its leader. As long as the group needs the clerk, he/she should be there. It is also important for a facilitator to look within to see if there is something that is missing -- a person who is wanting to speak but has been too shy, an idea that was badly articulated but has the possibility of helping build the solution, anything that seems of importance on the nonverbal level. This essence of intuition can often be of great service to the group by releasing some active but unseen deterrent to the continued development of a solution.

The facilitator must be able to constantly state and restate the position of the meeting and at the same time know that progress is being made. This helps the group to move ahead with some dispatch. And last but by no means least -- a sense of humor. There is nothing like a small turn of a phrase at a tense moment to lighten up the discussion and allow a little relaxation. Once you have found a good clerk or facilitator, support that person and encourage them to develop their skills as much as possible. Often there are participants who want to talk more than necessary and others who don't speak enough. The facilitator needs to be able to keep the discussion from being dominated by a few and to encourage those who have not spoken to share their thoughts. There are a number of techniques for achieving this. One method is to suggest that no one speak more than once, until everyone has spoken; another is for men and women to speak alternately if those of one gender seem to be dominating the discussion.

However, it is not good to use any arbitrary technique for too long. These methods can bring balance into the group, but artificial guidelines should be abandoned as soon as possible. For instance, the technique of alternating men and women speakers might be used in only one session. My experience is that a single two- or three-hour session using such techniques will establish a new pattern, and there will be little need for guidelines to be continued any longer.

No matter how well the discussion is carried forward, how good the facilitator, and how much integrity there is in the group, there sometimes comes a point when all are in agreement but one or two. At that point there are three courses open. One is to see whether the individuals are willing to "step aside". This means that they do not agree with the decision but do not feel that it is wrong. They are willing to have the decision go forward, but do not want to take part in carrying it out.

If more than two or three persons start to step aside from a decision, then the facilitator should question whether the best decision has been reached yet. This would depend on the size of the group, naturally. At Alpha [Farm, a community near Florence] it is OK for one person to step aside, but as soon as others step aside also, the facilitator begins to watch and to reexamine the decision. At such a time the facilitator might ask for a few minutes of silence to see if there was another decision or an amendment that should have been considered but had been overlooked, something that would ease the situation.

Another possibility is to lay aside the issue for another time. Although this alternative always seems to raise serious questions, we need to have some perspective on what we are doing. It is likely that the world will continue to revolve around the sun for another day, week, or year, whether we come to a decision at this moment or at another. The need to make a decision promptly is often not as

important as the need to ultimately come to unity around a decision that has been well seasoned.

Personal experience has shown me that even the most crucial decisions, seemingly time-bound, can be laid aside for a while -- and that the time, whether a few hours or days, is wisely allowed if a later meeting can create a better decision than was possible in the first attempt.

The third possibility is that one or two people may stop the group or meeting from moving forward. At that time there are several key considerations. Most important, the group should see those who are withholding consensus as doing so out of their highest understanding and beliefs. Next, the individual(s) who are holding the group from making a decision should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other such feeling. A refusal to consense should be based on a very strong belief that the decision is wrong -- and that the dissenter(s) would be doing the group a great disservice by allowing the decision to go forward.

This is always one of those times when feelings can run high, and it is important for the group not to use pressure on those who differ. It is hard enough to feel that you are stopping the group from going forward, without having additional pressure exerted to go against your examined reasons and deeply felt understandings.

In my personal experience of living with the consensus process full-time for 23 years, I have seen meetings held from going forward on only a handful of occasions, and usually the dissenter(s) was justified -- the group would have made a mistake by moving forward.

Sometimes, though rarely, one person is consistently at odds with everyone else in the group. Depending on the type of group and its membership, it would be well to see if this person is in the right organization or group. If there is a consistent difference, the person cannot feel comfortable continuing, so the group needs to meet and work with that person concerning alignment of basic values and goals.

Consensus is a very conservative process -- once a decision has been made, another consensus is required to change it. So each decision must be well seasoned and generally be relied on for some time. While decisions should not be made in haste, they can be tried on a temporary basis by including expiration dates. At Alpha Farm we have made temporary decisions on a number of occasions, usually trying the decision for a year and then either making a final decision or dropping it entirely. This necessitates keeping minutes, which is another aspect of consensus that needs consistent attention.

Minutes on each decision should be stated by the clerk, facilitator, or minute-taker at the time of the decision, so that all present know they have agreed to the same thing. It is not sufficient for minutes to be taken and then read at the next meeting, unless there is to be another meeting very soon. Copies of the minutes should be distributed promptly, because those who make the decisions are also the ones to carry them out. If the minutes are not distributed until the next meeting, some of the original decision-makers may not be present. The minutes may or may not be correct, but the time for correction is past. This is a particularly important but little respected part of the process.

Several years ago, I was privileged to facilitate the first North American Bioregional Congress, held in Missouri. Over 200 persons arrived from all over the continent, and some from abroad. We worked together for five days, making all decisions by consensus. Some of those present had used the process before or were currently

using it in the groups they worked with at home, but many had not used it. There was a high degree of skepticism when we began as to whether such a widely diverse group of people could work in the degree of harmony and unity that consensus demands. On the final day of the Congress, there were very many resolutions, position papers, and policies put forward from committees that had been working all week long. All decisions made that day were made by consensus -- and the level of love and trust among the participants was tangible. Much to the surprise of nearly everyone, we came away with a sense of unity and forward motion that was near miraculous.

Caroline Estes' article nicely states the decision making process for Salem Classical Fencing. Here is an outline of consensus as it applies to SCF.

Required ingredients:

- a group that willing to work together
- a problem or issue that requires a decision by the group
- trust that there is a solution
- perseverance to find the truth

Arrive at the meeting with a clear and unmade-up mind

Problems should:

- be stated in such a way that an answer is not built in
- have an openness in their statement that allows members to look at all sides of the issue -- whatever it may be
- be stated in the positive

The meeting needs people to fill the following roles:

- facilitator
- secretary
- decision makers (everyone!)

The facilitator's role is to:

- see that all are heard
- see that all ideas are incorporated if they seem to be part of the truth
- see that the final decision is agreed upon by all assembled
- serve the meeting, not lead it
- constantly state and restate the position of the meeting as it progresses
- prevent the discussion from being dominated by a few
- encourage those who have not spoken to share their thoughts

The secretary's role is to:

- record decisions as they are made, noting persons who choose to step aside
- read the decision on each issue back to the group as soon as it is made and correct the minutes as necessary on the spot
- distribute copies of the minutes to all promptly (ideally within 24 hours) so that people know what they need to do

The decision makers are everyone in attendance who has a right to vote. Their role is to:

- have faith in the consensus process
- examine their thoughts on the issue carefully, and honestly speak them
- separate personalities (including their own) from issues
- act in the best interests of the stated purposes of the group
- carry out the decisions that they participate in

Many decisions will be arrived at easily after little or no discussion.

Sometimes all may be in agreement except for one or two people. When this happens, there are three courses open:

1. See if the dissenting individuals are willing to "step aside", which means that they are willing to have the decision go forward, but do not wish to participate in carrying it out. More than one person stepping aside is a cue for the facilitator to question whether the best decision has been reached yet.
2. Lay the issue aside for a time. This might be for an hour or two, a day, or a week or more. Often time produces a perspective that results in a better decision than one that is rushed.
3. Refuse to "consent". One or two people may believe very strongly that the decision is wrong and that they would be doing the group a grave disservice by allowing the decision to go forward. Note that this should be a very rare occurrence. This should not be done out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, etc. Likewise, the rest of the group should not pressure the dissenter(s) to go against their closely examine reasons, but should understand that they are withholding consensus based on their highest understanding and beliefs.

Decisions made by consensus require another consensus to change.

The default position is the *status quo* (i.e. failure to reach consensus means that no decision was made, so therefore nothing changes).

ADOPTED by the Board of Directors on this 8th day of May, 2004.

President

Secretary