

decision making by consensus

'The Order is a free association of individuals... It is founded on the principle that spiritual community can be created only by free will and mutual aspiration. Therefore all decisions within the Order are made by consensus.'

TheBuddhistCentreOnline

Though decision making by consensus is an important principle in the order and movement, it takes skill and experience to do it well.

Consensus does not, for example, mean that everybody has to agree before a decision can be made. Nor does it mean that one individual can permanently block a decision being made.

It does mean that everybody who shares the responsibility for a given project has the opportunity to participate in the decision-making: understands the proposal made, and has a chance to share their views. Consensual decision-making asks the participants to 'give their consent' – it may well be that the final outcome is not what you wish yourself, but you can see that the mood of the meeting is inclining to a certain decision and you consent to go along with it.

There are a number of stages to effective consensual decision making: one option is outlined here.

Preparation

Is this a decision that needs to be made consensually?

Decisions involving important principles, or where there needs to be a high level of support for what is proposed, should always be made consensually.

Some less important, practical decisions might be better delegated to a smaller group, or an individual might take on a particular task.

Who needs to be involved?

In a Triratna Centre most important decisions are taken by the council, or the equivalent body, which has the formal responsibility for the centre. The wider group of Members have their own specific responsibilities, especially the election of the Trustees.

But there may be no need to involve the whole council in a decision regarding, say, fire safety, or in making a decision about a festival day, if it needs someone with experience to know what's needed. Start by being clear who needs to be involved in making the decision.

The meeting

Decide who is attending.

Do we need to consult others outside the Meeting?

Who is chairing/facilitating the discussion?

How much time will this need for everyone to participate and reach a decision?

When is a decision needed?

What do we want to minute/record?

1.1

Present the Proposal

'If I had an hour to save the world I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute finding solutions'. Einstein.

Start by defining a vision or problem, not by offering a proposal

What decision needs to be made? Why?

Give the background and history.

What are the aims?

What is at stake?

What are the options?

1.2

Discussion

Exploration of the issues, different approaches and opinions.

Check that everyone's point of view has really been heard.

The chair, or another participant, sums up the discussion, and makes a concise proposal for action.

Ask if there are any improvements to the proposal.

1.3

Address Concerns

Take up questions to clarify. Express and explore issues about the proposal.

Make friendly amendments

The proposal can be modified or withdrawn, with the consent of the proposer.

1.4

Test for Consensus.

Restate proposal including any amendments.

Ask if we can all support the decision?

Check there *is* agreement, even if general atmosphere is positive.

Consensual decision-making is about asking the participants to 'give their consent' – it may well be that the final outcome is not what you wish yourself, but you can see that the mood of the meeting is inclining to a certain decision and you consent to go along with it.

If there are no concerns or amendments, consensus has been reached.

2.1

Address Issues and Concerns

'You can't ever obtain absolute agreement, but I think most Order members – I hope in fact all Order members – are reasonable enough to give way in the face of the feeling of the greater number of Order members present, unless it is something of really great importance.' Sangharakshita, Order Convention 1974

There may be different levels of disagreement with a proposal:

i

Declare reservation:

the softest form of disagreement. The dissenter(s) wishes to be heard and considered, but if the group is not swayed, s/he agrees to allow the proposal to move forward, having been heard. The decision is made in peaceful disagreement.

ii

Stand aside

an individual(s) has a serious disagreement with the proposal, but is willing to let the motion pass. Modifications are often made in such cases. In standing aside, the individual is also agreeing to let the emotions and consequences pass, so there isn't a "grudge" or "disgruntlement."

In both of the above positions, the person agrees to support the decision by their actions, since the meeting has decided it is the path forward.

If there is a significant number of people with reservations, or standing aside, then there is not yet consensus.

iii

Block

a participant is not willing to let the decision go forward.

A block is a stand of last resort, and has considerable weight and big effects. It should only be used when significant harm to the organisation or individuals is perceived. The blocker holds enormous responsibility to create understanding and solutions. If the proposal gets blocked, ask the ones who are blocking for their objections and possible solutions. Try to incorporate solutions or suggestions from others into a revised or new proposal.

A guide is that an individual should only use three or four blocks in a lifetime.

2.2

Test again for Consensus

Consensus Reached

Check for agreement.

Repeat the decision that has been reached.

The decision should be written down along with any concerns, reservations, or stand asides.

Options

If there is still no consensus, the chair and the group have a number of options.

3.1

contract for more time

It may be that the meeting feels the issues can be resolved with further discussion in the group. One option is to 'go round' to hear from everyone in the group, and once all points of view have been heard, to test again for consensus: the people who have concerns may find their position changes when they hear from the whole group.

3.2

delegate the proposal to a subgroup

It may be good for the one who is blocking to work with the presenter of the proposal outside of the meeting (with other interested parties) to see if they can come up with a workable alternative or compromise proposal to bring back to the group.

3.3

judge the mood of the meeting

If it's possible, consensual decision making will get the highest level of support and unity from the group.

3.4

Vote

In exceptional cases, it may be that the issue is important enough, and urgent enough, that the feeling of the meeting is to want to call a vote. In that exceptional case, the chair can call for a supermajority vote.

A recent recommendation from the College was that a vote on any matter which was likely to cause significant division in a a centre or the wider order should be part of a wider consultation, with the Centre President or the Area Council, before being implemented.

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