

Consensus Builds Emotional Acceptance

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First printed in the May 2003 issue of Eco-Community News

Exploring a method of decision-making that transcends "Majority rules" and builds emotional acceptance. Having everyone agree on the direction to be taken ensures the action is in the best interest of the whole group.

Consensus is the process where group decisions are arrived at through agreement, with no voting, and no need for a showing of hands. Everyone in the group more or less agrees with a proposal, and thus form a consensus. The definition of the word is 'to give consent', which means that the entire group approves as a whole. This method of decision making is gaining in popularity even among mainstream culture.

In the conventional methods of decision making where majority rules, actions often proceed with only partial support, so the direction may not be in the best interest of the whole group. Consensus however, proceeds only when all agree on the direction to be taken. The process takes longer because emphasis is on the future effects of the decision and the genuine concerns of the participants.

When my partner, Gisele and I lived in an intentional community, the term was unknown to us, however our overall actions revealed how consensus can be an unconscious process when people share a common focus. Thus our unconscious consensus kept our mind, body, and spirit working together towards a common goal.

For example: we were both fortunate to have spent ten months in New Zealand, where we learned from the Maori, what they referred to as, Emotional Consensus. This method is rooted in their culture, and forms the basis of their decision making process. It was explained to me that their ancestors used this method at a time when taking a week to reach a consensus became an extended social event. But even with today's busy lives, their five step method for Emotional Consensus still applies.

- First, the elders need the talent to sense the real purpose for having the discussion without getting pulled into the debate.
- Secondly, everyone is encouraged to express their position whether in agreement or disapproval. They are encouraged to share their true motivations without fear of judgment or alienation by anyone in the group. Even a hint of an unresolved disapproval is best dealt with. If an issue isn't important enough to devote the time required to reach emotional consensus, then chances are the issue is too trivial to enact.
- Thirdly, when a participant makes a proposal that is not acceptable to the group, then perhaps it is simply a matter that the group is not ready for the proposed idea. There is no such thing as defeat, only opportunity to try again.
- Fourth, agreement is not what consensus is about. It's about emotional acceptance.
- Lastly, the group cannot forget why they were having the meeting in the first place. They shared a common focus with their friends, and that common focus is more significant than the individual details being addressed.

This method has stuck with me over the years, and back in Canada during work on a large construction project I was often called upon to use my Maori method in settling disputes among some very big egos. In each instance, emotional consensus worked, without anyone ever hearing those words. In short, I focused on the objections made to a proposal by pulling out of each individual their true emotional concerns.

In all cases it was fear that prevented them from jumping fully behind an initiative. Once they voiced their fear they were set free, and able to partner with the construction team, with only minor reservations mixed with bewilderment that they were being so agreeable and enjoying it, even though in some cases it was costing them money. Our common focus was to construct a building, and even there the Maori method worked just as I had been taught it would.

I have discussed the consensus process with many communities in North America, only to learn that most resort back to the old majority rules method, partly because of time restraints. My Maori friends might say "Consensus without emotional honesty is merely unfinished business."

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