

# THE POWER OF CONSENT

---

John Croft

update 6<sup>TH</sup> April 2014



This Factsheet by John Croft is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/). Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at [jdcroft@yahoo.com](mailto:jdcroft@yahoo.com).

**ABSTRACT:** *We urgently need alternative ways of decision making to help us build the win-win games necessary to shifting our culture. This explains how to create a different types of decision making for the Great Turning.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION TO CONSENSUS .....	2
STYLES OF DECISION MAKING .....	2
DEFINING CONSENSUS .....	2
FACTORS WHICH PREVENT CONSENSUS .....	4
USING CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING STYLE.....	5
SELF-ORGANISING STRUCTURES .....	7
OTHER RESOURCES .....	7
CONCLUSION: WHERE TO FROM HERE .....	8

## INTRODUCTION TO CONSENSUS

The skills of consensus decision making, in groups of all kinds is a very important skill for activists or those running community projects. (One of THE BIGGIES folks!) Many people reacting to the very ordered process of making decisions by majority rules, think that consensus decision making is unstructured, but this is far from the truth. People who are familiar with the process make it look easy, and in Aboriginal culture, for instance, it can appear almost magical. But that is only because the rules are so well known and implicit that they appear almost invisible. The following way is just one structure for achieving consensus. The more skilled you are at this, will overcome all kinds of problems later in community groups working for sustainability.

## STYLES OF DECISION MAKING

In voluntary "activist" groups, we cannot allow decisions to be made in such a fashion as it creates a "disaffected minority" whose interests are not protected. But "majority rules systems" always leads to the minority opinion being over-ruled by the majority one. Majority rules always produces a disaffected minority (eg. government versus opposition), whose interests are in the sabotaging of the majority will. In voluntary groups this may be fatal. These people that will have interest in sabotaging the decision that was made - or may vote with their feet and leave the group.

In such circumstances, "win-lose" (or "zero-sum" games) produce a "lose-lose" (or "negative sum game") outcome. Remember a zero-sum game occurs when your winnings are cancelled out by someone else losing. In a negative sum game - two people working together produce a result less than two people could achieve working alone. A zero sum game is when two people produce a result equal to that achieved by two people working alone. A positive sum game occurs when two people working together produce a result better than two people working alone.

## DEFINING CONSENSUS

"Consensus is a group decision - which some members may not feel is the best decision but which they can all live with, support, and commit themselves to not undermine - arrived at without voting, through a process whereby the issues are fully aired, all members feel that they have been adequately heard, in which everyone has equal power and responsibility, and different degrees of influence by virtue of individual stubbornness or charisma are avoided, so that all are satisfied with the process. The process requires the members to be emotionally present and engaged; frank in a loving, mutually respectful manner; sensitive to each other; to be selfless, dispassionate, and capable of emptying themselves; and possessing a paradoxical awareness of both people and time, including knowing when the solution is

satisfactory, and that it is time to stop and not re-open the discussion until such time that the group determines a need for revision."

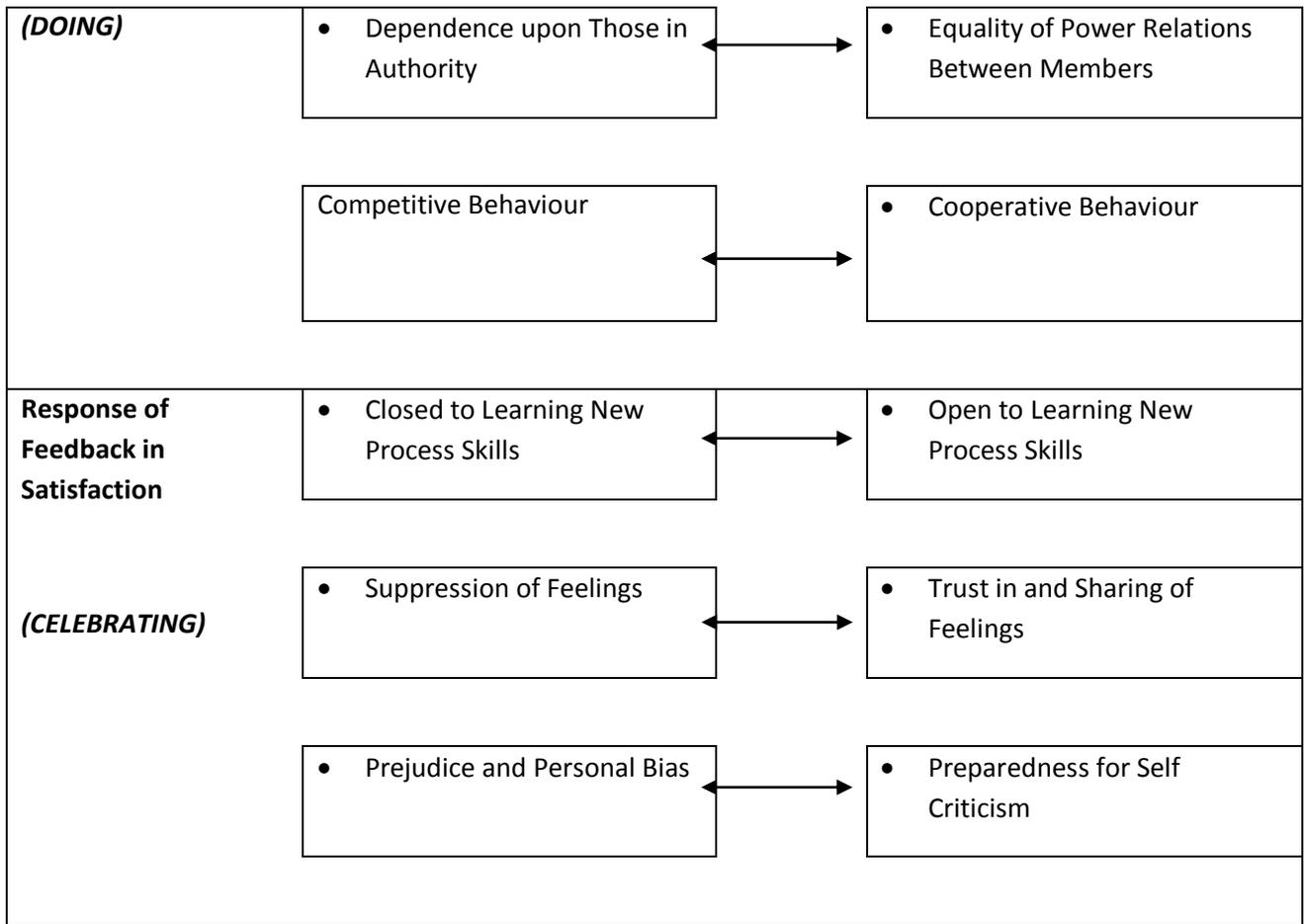
(from *Foundation for Community Encouragement*)

**FACTORS HELPING AND HINDERING CONSENSUS**

**From Behaviour Impeding  
Consensual Community Control**

**To Behaviour Assisting  
Consensual Community Control**

<b>Establishing Intention in Relationships</b>  <i>(DREAMING)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No Commitment to Personal Contribution</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to Personal Contribution</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of Interest in other People</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fascination in Other People</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal Ownership of Ideas</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group Ownership of Ideas</li> </ul>
<b>Considering Possibilities in Context</b>  <i>(PLANNING)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suppression of Conflict</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valuing and Resolving Conflict</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of Interest in Process and Issues</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enthusiasm for Both Process and Issue</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No Commitment to Other's Participation</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take Responsibility for Others' Participation</li> </ul>
<b>Action of Behaviour in Commitment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dependence Upon Experts</li> </ul>	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fairly Valuing the Contribution of Everyone</li> </ul>



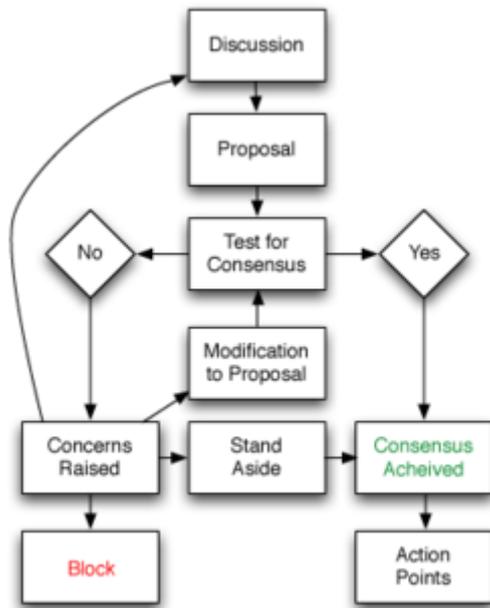
## FACTORS WHICH PREVENT CONSENSUS

There are a number of factors which prevent consensus.

Chief amongst these factors which prevent decisions being made by the unanimous consent found in consensus is the inability to recognise conflict as a resource, rather than something to be repressed, or denied. Such factors lead often to explicit win-lose games, familiar with majority rules, rather than the win-win principles upon which consensus decision making is built. Win lose games reinforce hierarchical situations and can lead to debilitating situations of expert dependency. Whilst, particularly at the early stages it may help to have a facilitator who is skilled at making decisions using consensus styles, similar to that described here, the aim of this fact sheet is to empower everyone in the basics of consensus decision making.

## USING CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING STYLE

Before starting it is important that the group understands why that consensus is being used and what this entails. Once agreed I have found from experience that this is the best procedure. It has been tested in vary trying circumstances (eg meetings between forest blockaders and loggers, and groups of up to 7,000 in the USA)



**Step 1.** Clarify the topic to be discussed so everyone is clear on the issue. After two-3 minutes silence to allow people to consider the salient points, allow open discussion. If group is small - under 15 people, a "Red Robin" is usually a good idea as it allows everyone to have a chance - and prevents the domination of the group by the most vocal. Otherwise break into small "rap session" groups to allow everyone to have a say. (allow about 5 minutes for this)

**Step 2.** Call for a proposal. If there is no proposal, then the matter rests on the table as it is clearly not considered

important enough by the group. If there is a proposal proceed to step 3

**Step 3.** Ask is there anyone who wants to block consensus. If there is no one who wishes to block consensus, proceed to the consideration as to how the decision is to be implemented, and return to step 1 with the topic being "How is the topic to be implemented". If there is someone who blocks consensus proceed to step 4

**Step 4.** Two tasks occur simultaneously. The first individual blocking consensus has the responsibility to fully explain the reasons as to why they wish to block consensus at this time. If there is more than one, they are also required to do the same. Meanwhile the rest of the group is charged with the responsibility of listening deeply, finding a way of enlarging the original proposal to include the concerns raised by those who block consensus.

**Step 5.** After silence, allow discussion as to how a larger, more inclusive proposal that addresses the concerns of the blocker and incorporates their concerns. When a new proposal has been suggested, check with the person who made the original proposal that the new proposal does not negate the original idea they had. If it does, ask the original proposer for an explanation why and return to step 4. If not return to step 3 and ask for the proposal to be checked for consensus (is there anyone who wishes to block consensus on the matter).

**Step 6:** Record the decision and ensure there is a procedure to carry it out.

In most cases these six steps are sufficient to produce a high quality consensus decision that has unanimous consent, incredibly rapidly. In most cases this procedure will take about as long as the normal meeting procedure for majority rules (with none of the negative consequences) - which goes as follows.

Step 1. call for a proposal

Step 2. call for a seconder to the proposal

Step 3. anyone wishing to oppose the proposal. If there is go to step 6. if not go to step 4

Step 4. call for a vote on the proposal. Count the votes

Step 5. if majority rules, then proceed to step 1 with question "how is proposal to be implemented?"

Step 6. Allow speaker against the proposal, and give proposer right of reply.

Step 7. As if anyone else wishes to speak against the proposal. and return to step 6 allowing the seconder the right of reply.

Step 8. return to step 4.

## WHAT TO DO IF THINGS DO NOT WORK OUT AS PLANNED

Sometimes in consensus decision making you find that things get blocked. For consensus to work blockage needs to be "paramount and reasoned."

- (a) "Paramount" means that the objection must be directly related to the person's ability to work effectively within the group and is something they cannot give consent to.
- (b) "Reasoned" means the person must be able to explain the objection to other members of the group. Unless they can understand the objection they cannot resolve it.

Other than blockages that help sometimes it breaks down when

1. The group is unable to creatively find a solution which encompasses both ideas.
2. There is an important conflict of values between two members of the group.
3. There is someone who is just being difficult and opposing for the sake of personal psychological reasons (eg usually ego).
4. There was not agreement beforehand to use a particular consensus making style (which is why it is important that the group give its approval beforehand).

In the case of a consensus decision you need to have a "circuit breaker" mechanism agreed to beforehand. The following circuit breakers are useful.

1. Check urgency, importance and feasibility: Ask if the group is needing more time to consider the issue? If there is a proposal that the matter stay on the table until next gathering to allow people extra time to think through the issues.

2. If the matter is urgent, important and feasible. Then you ask the people who proposed and who blocked consensus to temporarily get together in a "hunker down" or caucus session to thrash out the issues together and come up with a new proposal to present to the meeting.

3. Present further information on consensus theory to get people to understand the limitations on the process, and suggest

- (a) Is the decision, whilst you recognise its weaknesses, is one you could live with.
- (b) Could you give "consent with reservations" which are recorded.
- (c) Is the decision one which could be deferred to a future decision making.

## SELF-ORGANISING STRUCTURES

Probably the most thought out method for self-organising structures is the principles of Sociocracy worked out in the Netherlands by Kees Boeke and Gerard Endenburg.

They are

1. Consent governs policy decision-making. Consent means there are no argued and paramount objections to a proposed decision.
2. Circles are the primary governance unit. Circles are semi-autonomous and self-organizing. Within their domain, they make policy decisions; set aims; delegate the functions of leading, doing, and measuring to their own members; and maintain their own memory system and program of ongoing development.
3. Circles are connected by a double-link consisting of the functional leader elected by the next higher circle, and two or more representatives elected by the circle, all of whom participate fully in both circles.
4. People are elected to functions and tasks by consent after open discussion.

## OTHER RESOURCES

The Quakers have evolved a series of hand signals that are useful in Consensus Decision Making. For example, while raising the hand has been often useful in determining votes, Quakers have modified this with a wave of the hand. Strongly agree is shown by waving both hands. Hands lowered then mean disagree, and both hands lowered also indicates the strength of that decision. Rolling the arms, one over the other indicates boredom, and means "come to the point". Raising a closed fist indicates a desire to

Speak, and two closed fists indicate a desire to speak urgently. Making a "T" with one's palms means that the speaker wishes to raise a technical point. A Guardian Article explaining these usages can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/10/hands-up-to-protest>.

The Dragon Dreaming files have an excellent section on consensus culled from most of the major books and other materials available.

The **BEST BOOK** on consensus is "Building United Judgement" produced by the Centre for Conflict Resolution (the book was even written using consensus!). It is available in the Gaia Library at Gaia House.

Also good on Sociocracy is John Buck and Sharon Villines "We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy, A Guide to Sociocratic Principles and Methods."

I have found the links below are helpful. Have a look at these internet documents.

They do have some weaknesses.

1. They portray consensus as difficult - it isn't difficult - it is just that culturally we are unfamiliar with consensus
2. They portray consensus as being time consuming - this isn't necessarily so (if the method I presented above is followed). It can take more time depending upon the quality of decision desired (and the degree to which people are prepared to "accept" decisions which are not "perfect")
3. They allow discussion "after the proposal". I feel discussion should occur before the proposal - allowing general discussion after is a time waster - why not check to see if people are in agreement with the proposal FIRST as then if everyone agrees, there is no need for further discussion.

## CONCLUSION: WHERE TO FROM HERE

As I mentioned above - being skilled at consensus decision making is an essential tool for activists. I recommend (as homework)

1. Take the time to become familiar with different styles of decision making, consensus, difficulties and other matters about this.
2. Practice using consensus decision making with convening a group meeting of your two members of your support team for Dragon Dreaming in order to negotiate and clarify support you will need for your own Dragon Dreaming Project.
3. Learn to "play" with these ideas - evolve your own personal style that you feel comfortable with - keep pushing your limits.

.....

Instead we could practice our capacity to sense each other, to be aware of the collective pictures we are painting with our differences, to see things through all of our eyes, and to feel through all of our hearts. This is a new way to understand the “consensus process” – consensus as a mode of enquiry, of common research, rather than a focus upon the products or outcomes which arise from the inquiry. Thus we need to recognise that any decisions that arise from the consensus are just “temporary nodes in a process of flow”.

Like scientific enquiry, living consensus is a way of seeking understanding, clarity and coherence, of building a deeper knowledge together. To see it as merely agreement is to diminish it, impoverish it and rob it of its life. Thus living consensus becomes a dance between inquiry and agreement, between convergence and divergence, uncertainty and knowledge, ignorance and knowing, a way of maximising the deep discovery of “Aha!” moments. What we are co-sensing is the landscape of our differences, in which consensus is coming to terms with the realisation that the deepest truth is different from anything we could choose ourselves, simply because it lies in the realm of what we don’t know that we don’t know. Such a living consensus arises as we build upon our common humanity and explore our individual differences. What we share is our ability to recognise our emotions, our individual needs and challenges, and our shared humanity. Facilitating a trusted space where every voice is heard is required, and this was the role of the elders in earlier tribal communities. The Transition Movement in their London Conference in 2010, invited Ed Milliband, who is in 2012 the Leader of the Opposition and was then Minister for the Environment, as a “keynote listener”. Atlee suggests “it is helpful to understand the role ... of the ‘dedicated listener’, someone whose work is to listen deeply to all participants and to ‘take all sides’ in order to support that natural self organising process, that leads to ‘co-sensing’” (p.243).

Such co-sensing needs to reflect the same tensions that already exist in the wider communities. When this happens the wider community can accept and recognise the deep truth in this “common sense”. Such a new form of decision making does not immediately overthrow traditional adversarial and representative forms of decision making, but because such methods have been found impotent to resolve the major issues of peak oil, climate change, biodiversity loss and economic crisis effecting us all, we need to face the facts that we need something different. To truly explore what democracy means requires is through citizens deliberative councils, in individual projects that expand to explore personal growth, community building and service to the earth, we have a hope for building the sustainable life supporting future that we all want.

[http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus\\_decision\\_making](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision_making)  
<http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html>  
<http://www.npd-solutions.com/consensus.html>  
<http://www.welcomehome.org/rainbow/focalizers/consensus.html>  
<http://www.casagordita.com/consensus.htm>  
<http://www.reclaiming.org/about/consensus/invert.html>  
<http://www.ballfoundation.org/ei/tools/consensus.html>

