



Amazing Graces' Guide to Consensus Process

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Note: the use of the term "Web" in these pages generally refers to the [Web of Oz](#), not to the [World Wide Web](#).

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The style of consensus process that we describe here is a blend of what we have done and what we have read. Just because some technique is or is not used in the Web doesn't mean that it is a good or bad technique. For example, the Web has little experience with small groups and committee work. We have nevertheless included these methods based on the suggestions of Starhawk and others. Our experience with breakdown of the process, in and outside the Web, is also reflected in this article, and we have offered suggestions that we hope will prevent the kinds of failures that we have seen.

What is it?

Consensus is a group decision making process that calls for equal participation from everyone in the group. It assumes that everyone's point of view is valid, and that each person's contribution to the group is valuable. It differs from voting in several ways.

- It avoids the phenomenon of the dissatisfied minority. Proposals are modified until they are acceptable to all members.
- Rather than simply deciding between two options, we are able to compromise or to think creatively of other alternatives.

There are no "sides" in consensus process, no winners and no losers. Individuals may have pet ideas, but each person's goal is ultimately to arrive at a decision all can share.

Consensus happens informally in small groups all the time. For example, let's imagine that three good friends, Joan, Jane and Jean, want to see a movie together. Joan wants to see a comedy. Jane wants to see Halloween 2000. Jean doesn't care what movie it is as long as it's not a splatter movie. The three will probably not vote, or say, "Tough, Jean. Stay home." Probably they will talk until they've decided on a movie. This is because to them, their friendship is more important than which movie they see.

Consensus process is basically a non-hierarchical tool. No one voice is more important than the others. There is no boss who decides what to do. Decisions are shared.

Admittedly, consensus process can be hard work! It requires more effort than voting or leaving decision making in the hands of a powerful few. It almost always takes more time. So why do it?

Why we do it

1. It avoids the "dissatisfied minority" problem. People who have a course of action forced upon them, whether by being outvoted or by being drafted, are likely to complain, drag their feet, or even sabotage the planned activity.
2. Consensus process allows for the development of a "group mind"---very important to magic. By listening to each other, and by being heard ourselves, we get to know each other.
3. One of the fundamentals of consensus is respect for all voices. In consensus we are practicing a better way of dealing with each other. Magically, this generates good energy. When we listen and talk respectfully and honestly to each other there is that much more good energy in the world. If we generate bad energy by not listening to or caring about one another, again there's that much more of that kind of energy floating around.
4. If we didn't do consensus, some people would never be heard, and others would be heard all the time. Consensus process is a tool for avoiding this. Consensus is an equalizer.

How it works

The group assembles, gets comfortable, and breathes together. Usually there is a "check-in," a time for each person to introduce himself and to say how s/he is feeling.

In order to stay on track and to make sure all are given a chance to voice their ideas and their concerns the group appoints a facilitator. The facilitator's job is to keep one eye on the agenda and the other on the floor. The facilitator says things like, "That sounds like an item for Council agenda," or, "We need to decide this point before we move on," etc... Occasionally the facilitator will call for a break, re-state proposals to make sure all clearly understand them, and may give a "meeting so far" update. The facilitator also keeps track of side issues that surface and sets aside time for them if possible. The facilitator gets the privilege of testing for consensus, that is, gets to ask, "Do we have consensus? Does anyone object?"

It is best if the facilitator is neutral about the issue being discussed. Otherwise s/he may become more concerned about getting a turn to speak than in making sure that everyone in the room has one. It is possible to switch facilitators several times during a meeting, or appoint co-facilitators at the start of the meeting who can trade off.

Note-takers are indispensable for meetings. Someone (not the facilitator) should be jotting down everyone's ideas in order to make sure none is forgotten or overlooked during discussion. The notetaker puts the group's decision in readable form and reflects back to the group what it is doing. It is also a good idea for each person in the meeting to keep hir own notes.

Vibeswatching is a job that can be done by everyone in a small group. In a large group, vibeswatcher looks for signs of fatigue, restlessness, irritability and suggests breathing and grounding, break time or other ways to cope with this. S/he watches for emotions that need to be brought out, personal attacks, hidden agendas, and for ways to smooth interaction. S/he asks questions like, "What do you need to feel better about this?" or, "It sounds like you're really mad about this, do we need a round on it?" or, "Can you restate that? It hurts some peoples' feelings."

Peacekeepers, or graces, function in rituals, actions and extra-large meetings. These people keep alert for crises. They act as bouncers, mediators and guides for new people.

There may also be a timekeeper or "reality check" person, especially at a large meeting or where time is at a premium.

Rounds are for when everyone in the room wants to talk about a particular issue. A wand or other item is passed and all are silent except the person holding the speaking item. Sometimes a time limit is set, other times it is not. It is easier to have two rounds than to try to hold a round on two different topics.

You can tell when it's time to move from discussion to round when

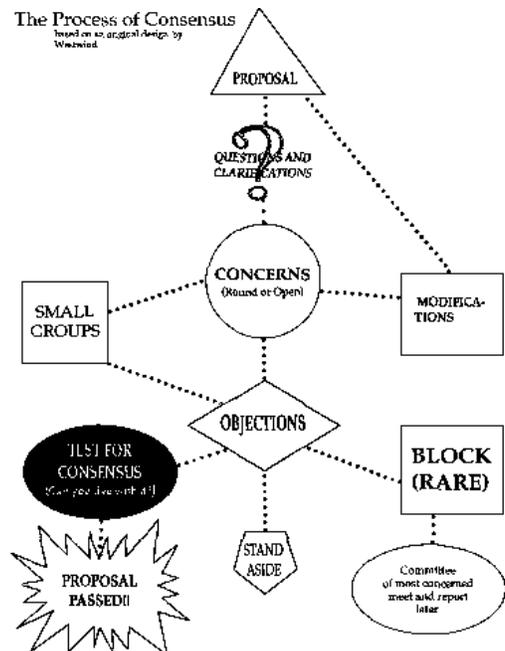
- too many hands are in the air and no one is listening to the speaker, or
- the facilitator is having trouble keeping track of who speaks next.

If you have nothing to say on an issue, pass. It saves time.

Here is an outline to follow during a meeting.

1. Check in.
2. Breathe. Choose facilitator, vibeswatcher, notetaker and timekeeper.
3. Set time, place and date of next meeting.
4. Review the agenda or call for agenda items, establish priorities, set times for each.
5. Work through the agenda.
6. Take breaks, call for rounds, check periodically to see how everyone is feeling.
7. Evaluate the meeting.
8. Close.

We have included a [flow chart](#) showing the way that the process flows. Consensus process begins with an issue that is of concern to some or all members of the group. The diagram begins with a proposal of some action regarding the issue. The proposal may have developed out of group discussion, small group brainstorming, or one person receiving a divine revelation. When processing a proposal, keep the original issue in mind. Some steps in this process may overlap or come "out of order." This just shows that consensus is not always a linear process.



It is a good idea to clearly distinguish the proposal from more general group discussion. We do this in the Web by stating proposals somewhat formally to ensure that the proposer has everyone's attention. It is important for everyone to understand exactly what is being proposed, so the facilitator might restate the proposal and ask for questions. These questions may be answered by anyone who feels qualified, not just the proposer.

Once the group reaches agreement on what the proposal is, the next step is to bring up any concerns or objections or questions of the "how does this work?" variety. Either a round or open discussion is appropriate here, so long as everyone has a chance to be heard. This part of the process may lead to modification of the original proposal. If so, be sure that everyone is clear about what the revised proposal is, and continue processing.

Serious objections might shape up, and it could become obvious that there will be no consensus on the proposal. A large group might decide to break up into smaller groups to either think of ways to address these objections or come up with alternative proposals to handle the original issue. A time limit might be set on this. The issue could be tabled until the next meeting to give everyone a chance to think about it.

After a proposal has been discussed (and possibly modified) for awhile, eventually it will be time to test for consensus. By now it is probably obvious whether or not the proposal will pass, but don't assume either way. This is the last chance for any concerns to be expressed, and we can't stress often enough that this is the whole point of consensus process. If people still have concerns about the proposal by this time, it's just as well that they aired them, since there can be no consensus until all concerns are addressed.

Having said that, now let's talk about the three possible responses to a test for consensus.

- You can consent to the proposal. This means that you agree to the proposal, or at least you are comfortable with it. You have no serious objections to it and all of your concerns have been addressed. This also means that you are willing to participate in the implementation of the proposal. Once everybody consents (or some "stand aside" but nobody blocks) the proposal is passed and the group can go on to the next agenda item. Yippee!
- You may choose to "stand aside" on a proposal if you are not entirely comfortable with it, but don't feel strongly enough about it to block consensus. Even though "standing aside" is not the same as blocking, it is also not quite the same as consent required to pass a proposal. If everyone "stands aside," then the proposal should be dropped for lack of consent.

"Standing aside" is the path to take after you have had all your concerns addressed but still don't want to be associated with acting on whatever project is under discussion. This choice puts distance between you and the plan, and you are then under no obligation to help carry it out. Notice that sometimes a plan has only a few enthusiastic backers but is passed because most people "stand aside." These few might complete the project, and they deserve the credit for it. The project might quietly wither away, and that's just the way it goes sometimes. Or they might come around later trying to get more people involved in the project with varying degrees of success. This is where things could get interesting. The possibilities are, as they say, outside the scope of this paper.

While it is usually safe to "stand aside" on a proposed project, doing so when the proposal is a policy or group commitment can be hazardous. A project might be something that will not affect everybody in the group, but a policy or group commitment almost always will. Although you may feel ambivalent about the policy when it is passed, your concerns could come back to haunt you when the policy has some direct effect on you. Consensus process invites, nay requires, active participation. Don't be left out.

- The third option is to block consensus. Please use this option with caution, as it is generally the last resort. It is usually unnecessary, since discussing a proposal and all the relevant pros and cons will show whether or not the proposal has enough support to be passed. If some group members are strongly advocating a proposal and you feel that your objections are being trivialized or ignored, then stating an intention to block consensus will probably bring the group's attention back to your objections. But proposals are rejected by group agreement more often than by being blocked.

Beware that whoever actually does block consensus will be in the hot seat, and should be prepared to be clear about whatever his objections are. A 5 to 10 minute break might be in order here so people can collect their thoughts. A group breath or some other grounding and centering will help to release obstacles to achieving a group mind. If it sounds like blocking consensus is a big deal, that's because it is. But that does not mean that you should never block, only that you should do so wisely.

The block is not a means for one person or a coalition to impose their will on the group! If you have stated your concerns and given the others in the meeting a chance to address them, but you still can't live with whatever the proposal is, then you might choose to block consensus. However, it is irresponsible to block consensus before a proposal has a fair hearing!

Outright blocks are rare in the Web, and a blocked proposal is usually dropped. Another option is for those most interested, including the person(s) who blocked consensus as well as those who advocated the proposal, to get together to work out alternatives to bring back to the next group meeting. This does not mean holding fast to the original proposal and arguing about it until one side backs down! This means brainstorming and working until some other plan is developed, keeping in mind the original issue that spawned the proposal. Remember, the goal of consensus process is not to get everybody to think alike, but to think together.

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