

# UNDERSTANDING CONSENSUS

by *Starhawk*

All over the country, people are flocking to the streets to join occupations demanding a just system for the 99%. It's an inspiring vision: thousands of people participating in direct democracy, making decisions, having their voices heard. And it's a potential nightmare—thousands of ordinary Americans being subjected to really bad, ponderous consensus meetings, fleeing in frustration and anguish and ready to accept any tyranny over the prospect of more long meetings!

Consensus process can be wonderful—or terrible. At it's best, it can be empowering, creative and efficient. But for that to happen, people need to understand and agree upon the process. Facilitators need training and skill. And the group as a whole needs to invest some trust in the facilitation team. If no one in the group has experience with consensus, get training. If you can't find training, at least form a facilitators working group to find ways to practice and refine the process and to think about meetings beforehand. Or just vote.



## Why Consensus?

Consensus is a creative thinking process: When we vote, we decide between two alternatives. With consensus, we take an issue, hear the range of enthusiasm, ideas and concerns about it, and synthesize a proposal that best serves everybody's vision.

Consensus values every voice: The care we take in a consensus process to hear everyone's opinions and weave them into a whole is a living demonstration that each one of us is important. It's a counter to systems that tell us some people count while others don't. In consensus, everyone matters. But for consensus to work, we must also be flexible, willing to let go. Consensus means you get your say—it doesn't mean you get your way!

Consensus creates a sense of unity: When we all participate in shaping a course of action, we all feel a sense of commitment and responsibility. Unity is not unanimity—within consensus there is room for disagreement, for objections, reservations, for people to stand aside and not participate.

## Talking vs. Talking about Talking

People are eager to talk to one another—about politics, about plans of action, about what we learn each day in the occupation. That's talking—with real content. But people get really bored and frustrated when we're talking about talking—deciding which agenda items should come first, or whether or not to break down into small groups, or how long to take for lunch. Consensus works best when the group invests some trust in the facilitators to make judgment calls that smooth the process and allow the group to get to the talking. It bogs down when we are talking about talking.

## Roles in a Consensus Meeting

**Facilitators:** The facilitators guide the process, keep people on track, and decide how to facilitate each item. They balance the need to hear every voice with the need to keep moving forward. Facilitation of big meetings is a skill and training and practice are needed. Facilitators need the support of the group to do their job. Big meetings are best served by having cofacilitators. Facilitators remain neutral and do not take a position on the issues.

**Stack taker:** Keeps track of who wants to speak, and takes names or gives people numbers.

**Notetakers and Scribes:** Note takers keep the minutes of the meeting, being especially careful to record any decisions made. Scribes may write up crucial information large so everyone can see it.

**Timekeeper:** The timekeeper keeps track of time and of how long we are taking for each agenda item, and alerts the group when it runs over time.

**Dragons:** Guard the boundaries of the meeting and run interference with those who might distract or interrupt: drunks wandering in, police, etc.

**Straw Polls and Temperature Readings:**

Full consensus takes time and energy. Save it for important issues. For simple decisions and process questions, use straw polls—quick, non-binding votes, or temperature readings—are we in favor of this, neutral or disapproving. Democracy is not served by trying to get a large group to do a full consensus process on every detail of a meeting—for people who have limited time and energy will leave and be denied their opportunity to weigh in on important issues.



## Running a Consensus Meeting

Set an agenda and choose facilitators beforehand:

For big meetings and general assemblies, collect agenda items beforehand so the facilitators have time to think about a logical order for the agenda, and how to approach each item. There can always be room on the agenda for new items, but setting a full agenda in a huge group will take lots of time that could otherwise be used for actually talking about the items. Some things commonly on agendas for general assemblies: Welcome, reports from working groups and committees, action reports, next action planning, etc.

Welcome people.

Present the agenda, ask for any additional items, and ask for approval with a simple straw poll or temperature reading: ‘twinkles’ or thumbs up or down. If a lot of additional items come up, ask people to bring them up to the co-facilitator to set an order. **DO NOT** let the whole group discuss the order or the times—ask their permission for the facilitators to do this service so the group can discuss issues.

Review how the process works

When many people are new to consensus, it’s worth spending some time to review how the process works and to clarify any misconceptions.

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## Running a Consensus Meeting

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### Presenting Issues in a Consensus Meeting

Someone, NOT the facilitators, tell the group what's under discussion. What information do we all need to know?

Discuss the issue: Facilitators call for enthusiasm (sometimes with 'twinkles'), support, additional ideas, concerns, reservations, strong feelings, moral objections. Out of discussion a proposal emerges.

Decide the issue: Someone makes a proposal that synthesizes the discussion as an action statement: "We will do \_\_\_\_\_."

The facilitator asks for a show of support, then for new concerns, or friendly amendments. The proposal can be tweaked and refined to accept additions ( or reject them) and to meet concerns.

Call for consensus:

- Restate the proposal in its final form.
- Ask for a show of support.
- Ask for any unheard concerns, reservations or objections which can be stated for the record.
- Ask for stand asides — meaning "I won't participate but I won't block."
- Ask for blocks. Blocking consensus does not mean "I disagree," it means "This proposal is so counter to our founding principles that I cannot let the group go forward." When discussion is done well, objections will come up much earlier and blocking is rarely an issue. Some groups may use a modified form of consensus — meaning that a 90% vote (or another number the group chooses) can override a block.
- Celebrate!
- Restate the proposal, record it. Decide who will implement it, and who communicates it to others who need to know.



### Announcements

People always want to make announcements, and they often can go on and on and become a huge energy sink. Big sheets of paper where people can write up details can help with this.

### Soap Box

People love to make statements and speeches. When time allows, setting a time at the end of the agenda for people to do this can help keep other discussions on track.

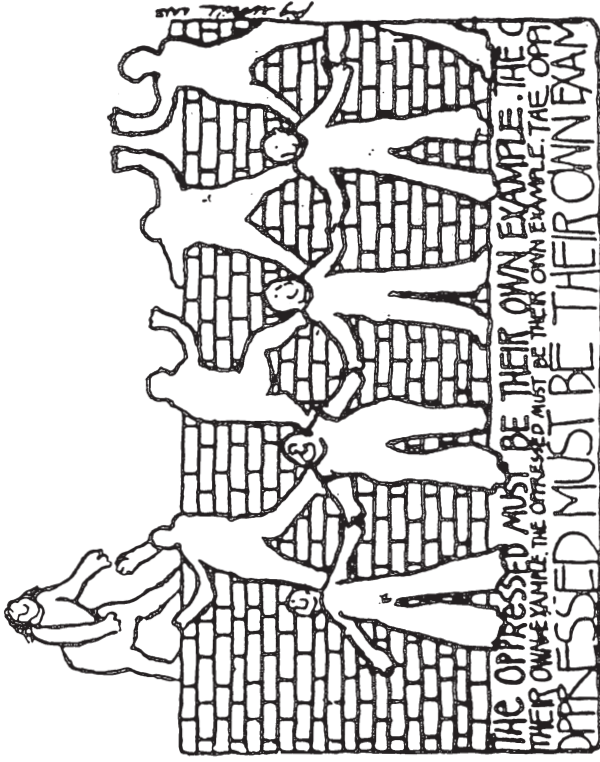
### Evaluate and Close the Meeting

Take a few moments at the end to evaluate how the meeting went.

Don't confuse the tool with the result. Any process we use is a tool to help us achieve the goals of empowerment, creativity and unity. If the tool isn't working, whether it's a hand signal, the "people's mike," or consensus itself, whether it was invented at Occupy Wall Street or has been used for thirty years in the movement, do something different.

### More Resources

Experienced facilitators have many tools in their toolbox. A free download of a more extended discussion of facilitation is on Starhawk's website at [www.starhawk.org/](http://www.starhawk.org/). See also the many resources at: [www.organizingforpower.wordpress.com/](http://www.organizingforpower.wordpress.com/)



## Process Guidelines

One major contribution of the feminist movement to current social change movements is the awareness that effective group process and meaningful personal interactions are crucial factors in developing a successful movement. Nonviolence begins at home, in the ways we treat each other.

Such an awareness stresses that relationships within the group cannot be separated from the accomplishment of political goals. Effective group process, in fact, means valuing co-operation over competition, recognizing the contributions of each individual, and decentralizing power through a non-hierarchical organizational structure.

### Process Suggestions

1. *Use go-rounds.* Equalize participation by going around the circle speaking for a specified time.

2. *Value feelings.* Include time in meetings for expressing emotions and for personal interactions.

3. *Meet separately.* Allow time for women to meet with women and for men to meet with men in order to facilitate self-awareness and strengthen each person's participation. This applies to other groups as well, such as Blacks and Whites, etc.

4. *Meet in small groups.* Allow time for meeting in small groups during larger meetings so that people who feel uncomfortable speaking in large groups can speak more freely. Small groups will give each person more speaking time as well. A spoke from each small group can report back to the larger group, particularly if proposals have been discussed.

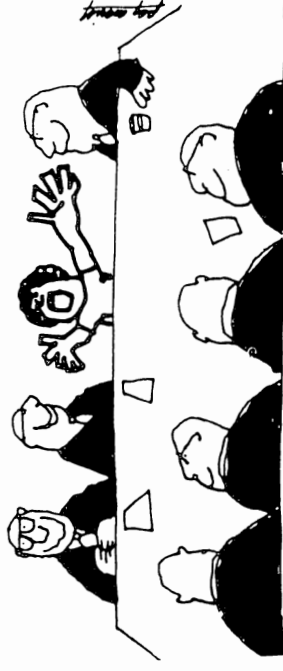
5. *Share skills, rotate responsibilities.*

# Overcoming Masculine Oppression in Mixed Groups

This guide is addressed to men, and to how we can overcome our own oppressive behavior in mixed (male and female) groups. More often than not, men are the ones dominating group activity. Our goals are to rid the society—and our own organizations—of these forms of domination.

The following are some problems for men to become aware of:

- **Hogging the show:** talking too much, too long, too loud.



- **Problem solver:** continually giving the answer or solution before others have had much chance to contribute.

- **Restating:** saying in another way what someone else, especially a woman, has just said.

- **Putdowns and one-upmanship:** "I used to believe that, but now..." or "How can you possibly say that?"

- **Self-listening:** formulating a response after the first few sentences, not listening to anything from that point on, and leaping in at the first pause.

- **Avoiding feelings:** intellectualizing, withdrawing into passivity, or making jokes when it's time to share personal feelings.

- **Seeking attention and support from women while competing with men.**

- **Speaking for others:** "What so and so really meant was..."

The full wealth of knowledge and skills available to the group is severely limited by such behavior. Women and men who feel less assertive than others

or who don't feel comfortable participating in a competitive atmosphere are cut off from the interchange of experience and ideas.

As men, we can be responsible to others and ourselves in groups by taking only our fair share of talking time, listening attentively and not interrupting other speakers, giving our ideas in an equal rather than an arrogant manner, minimizing our critical tendencies, and interrupting the oppressive behavior of other men.

If sexism isn't ended within social change groups, there can't be a movement for real social change. Any change of society which does not include the freeing of men and women from oppressive sex role conditioning, from subtle as well as blatant forms of male supremacy, is incomplete.

(adapted from an article by Bill Moyer)