

Consensus Process

Approved 12/17/06

The community owes special thanks to Laird Schaub who laid this process out for us in fall 2004. Although we have re-worked and re-worded it to meet the needs of our community, Laird's work and sound advice continues to shine through, especially in the description of Consensus Options.

Part 1: When Do We Use Consensus?

The formal decision-making process, known as consensus, is the decision-making procedure used in most Cohousing communities. All Manzanita Village plenary meeting decisions are made by consensus of the community except those HOA decision requiring a vote of the lot owners (see "Manzanita Village Membership Information"). Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees with a decision but rather that all of the Villagers at a Plenary consent to have the Village move forward on an issue, even though some of us may not fully agree with it. It is always important to discern the difference between our personal preferences or what we are comfortable with and what's best for the community as a whole.

The Three-Meeting Consensus Process is used in plenary sessions when a significant, value-based issue has been brought to the Steering Committee in advance, either by a community member or a committee or team, and the Steering Committee has agreed that it meets the above criteria and is plenary worthy. The individual, committee or team that raised the issue and received the go ahead from the Steering Committee is required to make the initial presentation before the plenary group. If a serious issue comes up between the Steering Committee meeting and a plenary session, and the community agrees by simple consensus to place it on the agenda, it may be presented at the plenary.

Example (Three-Meeting Process): Manzanita Village Community wants to change the criteria for membership in the community.

Decisions that the Steering Committee or the community as a whole determines do not require the full Three-Meeting Process can be decided by the process known as Simple Consensus.

Example (Simple Consensus): The community gives a committee approval to pursue identified projects.

For day-to-day operations where committees or teams have been given the mandate by the community to work autonomously, responsible decisions are made for the good of the whole. Each committee or team is afforded the freedom to use consensus in decision-making or may utilize another method, as long as the committee or team members using simple consensus have agreed upon that method. Many decisions made in committee may be made by simple consensus of the members.

Example: The Maintenance Committee has agreed to have a work party to paint the underside of the deck.

Getting an Item on the Plenary Agenda

(See also “How an Item Gets to a Plenary Session” above)

When a group or an individual in the Village has an issue they believe is important, they take it to the Steering Committee who decides whether the topic is worthy of a plenary session.

Alternatively, the person or group can raise the issue when the agenda is being reviewed at the start of the plenary. If the assembled plenary agrees, the item can be placed on that meeting’s agenda.

Part 2: Simple Consensus Process

Simple Consensus is used to reach agreement on issues that do not require the use of the full Three-Meeting Consensus Process. Although the aims of the Simple Consensus process are the same as in the Three-Meeting Process (to gain the agreement of the assembled group) the process is compressed.

It is important to remember that Simple Consensus is not a form of voting in that the process continues until all of the Villagers present can agree to the decision presented or are willing to stand aside and allow the decision to be made. As long as one person cannot agree to the decision, consensus has not been achieved.

Procedure

1. After the issue has been presented to the assembled Villagers, they have an opportunity to ask questions and interact fully with the material.
2. Having gained a grasp of the issue, the Villagers work together to craft a proposal for dealing with it. The Consensus Model assumes that each person holds a piece of the truth we need and all members are encouraged to participate in the crafting of this proposal.
3. When the facilitator feels that the group has woven together a decision that represents the input of the entire group and reflects the spirit of the community values, he or she asks the Villagers to indicate their approval by indicating “Agreement,” “Block,” or “Stand Aside.”
4. Anyone choosing to stand aside or to block agreement has an obligation to the group to explain their reasons. The rest of those present have the obligation to hear and try to understand the concerns expressed. Often a stronger decision can be made when these concerns are considered.
5. The assembled group may re-craft the proposal to answer these concerns. Then the facilitator may again ask for the assembled Villagers to indicate their approval. This process may continue until agreement is reached or the facilitator determines that agreement cannot be achieved.
7. If agreement cannot be reached because a Villager blocks consensus, the assembled group has several options including steering the issue to a committee or team for additional consideration of the issues or re-defining the issue as requiring the full Three-Meeting Process outlined below.

Members should not merely by-pass the lack of consensus by “voting” on an issue on which they cannot reach consensus.

Part 3: Three-Meeting Process

Approved 10/15/05

The Three-Meeting Consensus Process is used in plenary sessions when a significant, value-based issue has been brought to the Steering Committee in advance, either by a community member or a committee or team, and the Steering Committee has agreed that it meets the above criteria and is plenary worthy. The individual, committee or team that raised the issue and received the go ahead from the Steering Committee is required to make the initial presentation before the plenary group. If a serious issue comes up between the time the Steering Committee has created a plenary and the plenary session, a community member or a committee or team can request at the beginning of the plenary session that the issue be added to the plenary agenda. If the assembled community agrees by simple consensus to place the issue on the agenda, it may be presented at the plenary.

The responsibility to be an active participant in the decision-making process using the consensus model rests with each individual member, whether on-site or off-site.

This Consensus model assumes a three-meeting (or three-phase) format, allowing for a mandatory pause to consider the issue after the first meeting and a second pause after the second meeting where the proposal is presented. According to this model, when a group or an individual in the Village has an issue they believe is important, they take it to the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee decides whether the topic is worthy of a plenary session (a session of the whole community). Alternatively, the person or group can raise the issue when the agenda is being reviewed at the start of the plenary. If the assembled plenary agrees, the item can be placed on that meeting’s agenda. Since each “meeting” represents one whole phase of the process, there will be times when a particular phase may require more than one meeting to complete and the overall number of meetings will be greater than three.

First View

1. Present the issue:

The presenter has either been given the go-ahead by the Steering Committee, prior to the meeting, or the assembled plenary has agreed to hear the issue during the course of the meeting. At this stage, a proposal would be premature.

2. Invite questions:

The presenter, with the help of the meeting facilitator, makes sure all the Villagers in the meeting understand what is being presented and that all have a chance to ask questions and interact fully with the material.

3. Discussion:

Villagers present try to consider every implication of the issue and look at all points of view. If those present feel that more concentrated, small-group attention is needed, they may decide to create a new committee. While the new committee is likely to be made up of the original presenter or folks who were originally concerned about the issue, anyone can volunteer to join the new committee/task

team at this time. Alternatively, those assembled at the plenary may decide to keep the issue in the larger group setting until it is resolved.

Mandatory Pause:

At this point, we communicate with the full membership so that those who were not present understand the implications of the issue fully. Our communication includes the questions we have raised and all sides of the discussion so that all Villagers have an equal opportunity to discuss and reflect on the issue.

Within the time we designate—which will always involve a minimum of forty-eight hours—off-site Villagers send their input back to the community. In cases where the issue has been delegated to a committee, off-site Villagers, as well as on-site Villagers, communicate their input directly to that committee. In preparing for the Second View of the issue, on-site Villagers will consider all the input received.

The on-site Villagers will strive to ensure that each off-site Villager's voice is heard and that their opinions are welcomed and included. All Villagers will strive to create efficient and user-friendly channels for these communications.

Second View

4. Craft a Proposal:

In light of all the input received from those present during the First View, as well as that of off-sites who gave input after interacting with the results of the First View, the time is now ripe for a strategy to emerge for moving the whole group forward. Proposals are now in order, and everyone present is encouraged to pitch in. In cases where the issue has been delegated to a committee, this committee is welcome to bring draft proposals to "meeting two" in order to help the group focus the ensuing discussion.

Please note that the proposal comes *fourth* in the sequence and not *first*. The trap in beginning with proposals or arriving at them prematurely (that is, without first going through the other recommended steps in the process) is the increased likelihood of investment (individual or collective) in a particular solution before the full community has had the chance to discuss all the angles of an issue or even to collect everyone's thoughts on what we might need to take into account. The Consensus Model assumes that each person holds a piece of the truth we need.

Mandatory Pause:

Again we communicate with the full membership (including each off-site Villager), in order to present the proposal as clearly as possible, invite and entertain questions and explain how the input gleaned during the first "mandatory pause" has been taken into account in the crafting of the new proposal.

Within the time we designate (always a minimum of forty-eight hours), off-site Villagers communicate their final input back to the community. Since this is the final opportunity for those who have not been present at the meetings to give feedback, on-site members make a good faith effort to ensure that off-site members feel heard and included. Villagers are encouraged to employ any of our support tools during this process, including our Conflict Resolution Model, when appropriate.

Final View

5. Decision:

Villagers present at the plenary session (or sessions) comprising Final View of this process are the ones who will now attempt to achieve consensus on a final proposal or resolution...in other words, a decision. In arriving at this decision, on-site members continue to review and consider in earnest all input of every size and shape one final time, weaving it into a beautiful design, reflecting our core values. Since proxies are not used in consensus models, Villagers who are absent during this Final View will not be asked to indicate "Yes," "No" or "Stand Aside."

6. Tasks, Due Dates and Budget:

At this point, we must take care not to lose our focus, until we lay out a clear road map for implementing each aspect of our decision. It is essential that we do this prior to concluding this stage of the process, so that everyone leaves the meeting sure of what we decided and when and how we decided to accomplish it.

Conclusion

7. Communicate our decision:

Again, we must communicate clearly with the entire Village (on-site and off) so that everyone is made aware of the consensus of the Village and will be able to stand behind the decision made in the best interest of and on behalf of the whole community.

Part 4: Consensus Options

Approved: 10/15/05

There are three choices that a member can make when the group reaches the point of asking for consensus on a proposal:

- Agreement is indicated by the "thumbs up" gesture.
- Stand aside is indicated by a "thumbs to the side" gesture.
- Block is indicated by a "thumbs down" gesture. Blocking of consensus should be rare if the community has listened to and considered the concerns of all the members of the community.

a) Consent

While there may be considerable range of enthusiasm for the proposal (from the greatest thing since pockets on shirts to lukewarm support), this choice indicates you are at peace with the decision going forward.

b) Stand Aside

Typically, members stand aside in either of two situations: (1) a member has a personal objection to the proposal but does not believe it will be a mistake for the group to proceed; or (2) a member is uncertain or uneasy about their view on the proposal, yet does not feel that the matter is sufficiently serious to ask the group to delay making a decision.

When standing aside, you have an obligation to attempt to explain your reasons, and the group has an obligation to make a good faith effort to make room to hear and understand your concern. This is important for several reasons:

First, the group may help you understand your concerns, which could lead to a resolution.

Second, the group may be persuaded by your explanation to reconsider some aspect of the proposal or to lay the item over for further reflection.

Third, making the effort to encourage the reasoning to come out will go a long way toward helping the member with the stand aside feel held by the group as it is one thing to have a viewpoint that is not aligned with the rest of the group; it is another to feel that the group does not want to hear your viewpoint.

c) Block

When someone blocks consensus they stand in the way of the proposed action. Blocking must be rooted in the sense that the proposed action will violate an explicit group value. The blocker *must* explain his or her use of the block and explain how it violates a group value. If the blocker cannot tie their objection to the Village Vision/Mission Statement or if no one else in the room can see the link between the objection and the Vision/Mission Statement, then the block is considered invalid.

Normally when someone blocks consensus it is because the proposal hasn't dealt with all the issues and concerns raised in Meetings Two and Three.

Aside from confusion about legitimate grounds for blocking, there are two main ways groups get into trouble around blocking.

First, there tends to be sloppiness around use of the term. In consensus it means a *value-based objection* to a proposed action *after* full discussion of the issue. It should not be used to refer to concerns or irritations with someone's position at the outset of the conversation (as in hearing someone say ahead of a meeting that they intend "to block so-and-so's proposal to have a party where the whole neighborhood is invited"). Concerns do not become blocks until everyone thinks the discussion has been completed. In a healthy group, blocks are quite rare (because healthy groups rarely develop proposals that haven't already addressed blocking concerns).

Second, in the event that a block does surface, it is typically challenging for everyone to create and maintain a constructive atmosphere for examining what the block is about. There tends to be frustration about failing to achieve resolution, and this is often directed at the blocker, encouraging (if not pressuring) them to stand aside or otherwise rescind their objection, so the group can move on. It is tough to create a mood of grace and open consideration in the presence of a block.

Looked at the other way, the blocker can feel terrific pressure from the group because they are preventing the group from moving forward. Having the group spotlight focused on them can be excruciating, and more than many can tolerate (on top of which, they are expected to articulate an unpopular viewpoint). It is quite easy for a group to inadvertently create a culture that suppresses dissent because there is no good model for working constructively with blocking dynamics.

If people fear that moment, they may be highly reluctant to speak their blocking concerns. This will show up in weakly implemented decisions. In the extreme, people who felt pressured into agreeing may even sabotage agreements.

Part 5: Dealing with a Block to Consensus

Approved 7/3/05

Consensus is the established and trusted decision-making process in Manzanita Village in all situations where issues have significant, value-based impact on the entire community. Given our community Vision, Mission and Principles, we agree to make all such value-based decisions in plenary sessions as defined in the three-meeting consensus process outlined above.

While working to achieve consensus, a person can agree, stand aside, or block a decision. (See explanation above). It is only in rare instances that a person may choose to block consensus and only if he or she truly believes that the proposed action would violate the Vision, Mission or Principles of Manzanita Village. If a person chooses to block a decision based in the belief that the proposed action will violate an explicit community value, then the group will proceed according to the following procedure.

If at any point in this process the blocker chooses to withdraw the block, the community can again attempt to achieve consensus. If consensus is achieved, the community will complete the process as outlined in Part 2 above.

Meeting 1

It is not sufficient for someone to block and then not explain what the objection is based on; nor is it acceptable for others to override the block simply because they are uncomfortable with the objection or frustrated with the individual. The group is obliged to make a good faith effort to understand the block, and the blocker is obliged to make a good faith effort to explain it. If it is possible to work through the issue(s) presented by the blocker, then the community may be able to proceed with consensus.

If the group cannot reach consensus, then the community will ask the blocking member to bring to the next plenary meeting a complete explanation of all the reasons why the proposed action appears detrimental to the good of the community in light of our agreed-upon Vision, Mission and Principles. The community will also ask the blocker to provide a constructive counter-solution, showing how his or her recommendation would be for the good of the entire community and would be reflective of the Vision, Mission and Principles of Manzanita Village.

Meeting 2

At the next plenary meeting, the community will listen respectfully to the reasons given and consider every point made, asking for clarification where needed without challenging the blocker's presentation.

If the blocker does not present an explanation for the block and a counter proposal to at this meeting, then it will be assumed that the block has been withdrawn and consensus reached.

Mandatory Pause

At this point the community will pause to reflect on the ideas presented by the blocking member and to discuss with others the counter-proposal offered.

Meeting 3

At the next plenary, the blocking member will re-state their counter-proposal and the community will respectfully consider it.

In the best case, the members will be able to incorporate the concerns of the blocking member as expressed in the counterproposal into the proposal and will be able to move toward consensus according to the steps outlined in Part 3 above.

If, however, the members at the meeting do not support the counterproposal or are not able to incorporate the concerns of the blocker into the original proposal but continue to hold their original position on the action to be taken, the blocker may 1) join in consensus, 2) stand aside or 3) maintain his or her block. If the blocker maintains the block, the members at the meeting may choose to use a super-majority vote of the members present at the meeting to resolve the issue.

The members at the Plenary are not *required* to use a super-majority vote to resolve the issue. They may instead decide that the issue be set aside or sent to a committee or task team for further consideration.

Super-majority: In the event the community cannot reach consensus on an issue due to an unresolved block by a member, the community may choose to vote to resolve the issue. Such a vote will require 85% of the individual Villagers present at the plenary meeting.