

Proposed Process for Consensus at Gaia Community

July 23rd, 2006

Proposal/question should be distributed in full and in writing to the congregation, before the meeting if possible. Roles should also be assigned prior to meeting, particularly facilitator.

- I. Meeting begins.
 - A. Select other roles (recorder, vibes watcher, doorkeeper, advocate, etc) if needed.
 - i. Vibes watcher should face no objections from the group; ask someone else.
 - B. Post and read agenda, including any time constraints.
 - i. Ask if clarifications are needed on agenda or timeframe.
 - ii. Call for consensus on agenda.
 - iii. If there are concerns, collect them, address them, and call for consensus again.
 - a) If one or a few people are confused, ask if they will go with the doorkeeper to have it explained individually, without disrupting the timeline.
 - C. If the question is open-ended, solicit answers from the group.
 - i. Go around group repeatedly until no one has any new answers to give for a full circuit.
 - ii. Recorder documents all answers during this brainstorming session; may need help.
 - iii. Attempt to group similar or identical answers.
 - a) Ask those who posed the answers if this is acceptable.
 - b) Use narrowing or polling to shrink possible solutions.
 - D. If a proposal is already made, post it in writing for group.
 - i. Ask if clarifications are needed.
 - ii. Recorder documents any clarifications that are not explicitly answered in the text.
- II. Call for consensus on the proposal as it is now written publicly.
 - A. "Are there any concerns or objections?"
 - B. Recorder documents all concerns and objections publicly (may need help).
 - i. Now is not the time to try to offer solutions!
 - C. Attempt to group similar or functionally identical problems.
 - i. Ask those who posed the concerns/objections if this is acceptable.
 - D. Address first problem/type of problem as a group.
 - i. Solutions may be proposed, or clarifications offered.
 - ii. One person speaks at a time, except (if needed) facilitator or vibes watcher.
 - iii. The problem is now before the group, and does not belong to one person.
 - iv. If solved to everyone's satisfaction, move on to next problem.
 - a) Remember to document any changes to the proposal that were needed for resolution.
 - E. If all objections have been addressed, call for consensus again as in A.
 - i. Some persons may wish to stand aside; record any outstanding concerns with the final accepted proposal.

III. If there are unresolved objections and time/energy is flagging, three options exist:

- A. Meet again at a future date to try to resolve remaining problems.
- B. Refer proposal back to a working group (including people who objected).
- C. Address the nature of any blocks as a group.
 - i. This may be a good place to utilize the advocate, to help the blocker
 - ii. If it addresses the values/goals of the community and cannot be resolved, there is no consensus.
 - iii. If the group feels it is individually based or unrelated to the group's values/needs/goals, that person may be asked to stand aside. Consensus must record the remaining objection/concern.
 - iv. If more than one person remains as a blocker with independent concerns, use options A or B instead.

IV. Evaluation

- A. Did the group accomplish anything?
- B. If not, why not?
- C. Are we sticking to the problem-solving process?
- D. Are all members participating?
- E. Are we listening to one another?
- F. How well did the facilitator or facilitators do?

Roles:

- **Facilitator**- Runs the meeting, makes sure processes are followed, ideally is neutral about the question. Can interrupt if necessary.
- **Recorder**- Takes all permanent notes, ideally is neutral on the question.
- **Vibes watcher**- Keeps an eye on the emotional level of the group and individuals. Can interrupt as necessary. Can suggest use of advocate. Must be neutral on the question.
- **Doorkeeper**- Catches up people on the status of the discussion if they arrive late, have to go to the bathroom etc.
- **Advocate**- Helps someone speak their objections or concerns, if they are unable to do so themselves for any reason.

Definitions:

- **Call for Consensus** - regardless of when it is used or for what (agenda or major proposal) always means asking “Are there any concerns or objections?” Avoid asking directly “Do we have consensus?”, as this can lead to groupthink.
- **Concerns** - may be minor, can be addressed with more information, minor amendments, or merely being noted in the meeting notes. May be worth standing aside for, in the end.
- **Objections** - may be major and worth blocking consensus. **Must** be addressed before consensus can be reached; will likely result in amendments to question/proposal.
- **Stand Aside** – Member uses this option when they have concerns about the proposal but does not wish to block. These concerns may be a personal matter, not necessarily related to the needs of the group as a whole. Some may be addressed after implementation.
- **Block** – Member uses this option when they feel strongly that the proposal is detrimental to the group, not just for personal reasons.
- **Groupthink** – A tendency to operate as a single unit, discouraging healthy discussion or debate, and excluding outsiders or views contrary to group norms.

There are further readings associated with this proposal, which follow. Thanks to Jari Holland Buck of Majestic Wolf Consulting (<http://www.majesticwolf.com/>) for materials and training, and the Formal Consensus group of C.T. Lawrence Butler and Amy Rothstein (<http://www.consensus.net/>) for consensus process suggestions.