

Essays on Consensus

Consensus is Primary to Group Facilitation

Freeman Marvin

The role of consensus decision making in facilitated groups has recently emerged as a controversial issue within the IAF. Participants in the Ethics and Values Think Tank (EVTT) worked together for the past year to draft a set of core principles to help guide the ethical behavior of IAF members in their practice of group facilitation—a Statement of Values and Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators.

EVTT participants found it relatively easy to agree that group facilitators should strive to maintain confidentiality, continuously improve their competence, show respect for the group, and avoid conflicts of interest. Other issues evoked some debate: whether or not a facilitator can or should remain content-neutral, guarantee a safe environment for the group, serve both the client and the group members, or ensure the participation of all relevant stakeholders. The EVTT drafted tentative positions on these issues.

One issue was unexpectedly controversial and remains unresolved—is the decision-making method used in facilitated groups an ethical concern? In particular, should decision making by group consensus be an ethical principle for group facilitators?

Some facilitators see consensus as one of a number of techniques that a facilitator and group members can use to make decisions. For them, consensus building is simply a group process that facilitators may use during the convergent stage of a meeting. However, groups determine for themselves how and when to reach decisions.

Other facilitators see the practical benefits of reaching decisions by consensus, so they prescribe it to their groups. They believe that consensus decision making leads to better implementation and to higher performing groups. But they don't consider consensus an ethical issue.

I see consensus as both a practical group process and as the only ethically sound decision-making technique that facilitated

groups should adopt. I believe that consensus decision making is a core value for facilitators and that building consensus is a requirement for ethical group facilitation. Here's why.

1. Our leading practitioners have learned that consensus decision making is at the heart of facilitation.

From my bookshelf, I recently selected a dictionary and three of my favorite books by practicing facilitators to see what they had to say about consensus. First, my dictionary defines consensus as "An opinion or position reached by a group as a whole; agreement; accord; consent." This implies that consensus means *unanimous agreement*.

Ingrid Bens, in *Facilitating with Ease!*, says, "Consensus generates a decision about which everyone says, 'I can live with it.'" (Bens 1997, 116) Many facilitators use this more flexible definition—everyone in the group either agrees with the decision or can accept and support it. This practical definition of consensus makes a distinction between "agree-ability" and "acceptability."

Ingrid Bens goes on to say, "At its core, facilitating is a consensual activity." And, "Consensus is the best way to get participation and 'buy-in' to the generated solutions."

Still, she identifies six decision-making options for groups (in reverse order of their relative value): unanimous, one person decides, compromise, multi-voting, majority voting, and consensus. She argues "that each option has its place" and that the group (with the facilitator's help) should "choose the most appropriate method before each decision-making session." However, "There are many situations where the decisions being made are of such magnitude that consensus needs to be designated as the only acceptable method of decision making" (Bens 1997, 115-116).

Allen Moore and Jim Feldt, co-authors of *Facilitating Community and Decision Making Groups*, write, "Facilitators

are managers of group discussion and creativity, working toward a level of agreement or acceptance of alternatives for problem solving and decision making. Agreement is reached through discussion of issues, needs, barriers, and possible solutions.” (Moore and Feldt 1993, 76)

And then, “The facilitator...tries to get a sense of support for options by using some technique to quickly see where interests converge. Voting or win-lose techniques are held off as last resort processes. Small and large group discussions about alternatives, options, and new ideas are used to get more participation and eventually ownership of priorities and potential solutions which the group will implement. These are some of the strategies that facilitators use to achieve consensus, not unanimous but general agreement, to support an idea, option, or solution.” Finally, they state that, “Accommodating different points of view while working toward a solution, which the group can really get behind and support, is one of the primary goals of facilitated problem solving” (Moore and Feldt 1993, 82).

Like Ingrid Bens, they do not exclude other decision-making options, but for several practical reasons regard consensus as the method of choice.

Roger Schwarz, author of *The Skilled Facilitator*, is one of our best known “theory-based” facilitators practicing today. Roger Schwarz says “consensus is at the heart” of the ground rules for a facilitated group.

“Consensus means that everyone in the group freely agrees with the decision and will support it. Even if one person cannot agree with a proposed decision, the group does not have a consensus.”

“Consensus ensures that each member’s choices will be free choices and that each will be internally committed to the choices. Consensus decision making equalizes the distribution of power in the group, because every member’s concerns must be addressed and every member’s support is required to reach a decision.” His assessment seems to be that consensus is more than just an effective group technique—it is required to stay consistent with the axiomatic value of “free and informed choice” by a group.

He goes on to say that “Voting is inconsistent with consensus decision making, but the group can take straw polls to see whether it is close to consensus and to see which members still have concerns about the proposal” (Schwarz 1994, 83-84).

Clearly, the experience of these practitioners is that reaching decisions by consensus is one of the best, if not the best, decision-making techniques for facilitated groups because of its many practical benefits. Moreover, it follows directly and flows

from a coherent set of axioms of group facilitation. But is it the ethical way to make group decisions?

2. Consensus is an ethical principle for facilitators because other group decision-making methods violate the “pact of participation” that facilitators make with group members.

I divide groups into two broad types: cooperative groups and non-cooperative groups. Either of these types of groups can use collaborative or non-collaborative group processes. But we can really only facilitate cooperative groups using collaborative processes.

Members of **non-cooperative groups**, such as traditional labor-management boards, have mutually exclusive objectives. The goal in a non-cooperative group is to achieve an outcome in which the *individual* interests of the members are maximized.

Non-cooperative groups typically use non-collaborative processes such as negotiation, arbitration, and mediation—not facilitation. Decisions are best reached by compromise. “I’ll give you this if you give me that.” Ingrid Bens characterizes compromise as “no one feels they got what they originally wanted, so the emotional reaction is often, ‘It’s not really what I wanted but I’m going to have to live with it.’” Everyone accepts, but no one agrees.

Do some facilitators work with non-cooperative groups? Yes, but I don’t believe they are *facilitating* the group when they do. They are performing the role of negotiator, arbitrator, or mediator. And if they follow ethical negotiation practices, compromise is an ethical decision-making method.

Members of **cooperative groups**, such as work teams, share some common objectives. The goal in a cooperative group is to achieve outcomes that maximize the *collective* interests of the members.

Many cooperative groups use non-collaborative processes—examples are governmental bodies such as legislatures, committees, and juries. Legislatures, committees, and juries don’t use facilitators. Juries make decisions by unanimity—everyone must be in agreement. Legislatures and committees use voting to make decisions. Most members must agree, whether or not others disagree.

Still other cooperative groups, such as military staffs or executive councils, may use collaborative processes during discussions, but explicitly support decision making by a single individual, such as a commander or chief executive.

Do some facilitators work with these kinds of groups? Yes, but again, I don’t believe they are *facilitating* the group. They are performing the roles of chairman, moderator, or rapporteur.

Voting, vetoes, and “one person decides” are practical and ethical decision-making methods in groups that are not facilitated.

Facilitation is effective for cooperative groups using collaborative processes. Throughout a facilitated, collaborative process, the facilitator is the catalyst for creating a climate of participation. If the facilitator is successful, group members are induced to enter into an implicit or explicit “pact of participation” with each other. They mutually agree to “buy in” to free and open collaboration in return for equal sharing of rewards and responsibilities of the group outcomes.

Because cooperative, collaborative groups enter into a pact of participation based wholly or partially on the presence of the facilitator, it is unethical for him or her to propose a non-consensual decision-making method in the convergent phase of the group process. After a facilitator has assisted in creating free and open participation by all group members, there is no ethical way to allow a violation of the pact and let some members of the group make a non-consensual decision. The facilitator cannot, like Anne Robinson on the TV show *The Weakest Link*, just say to someone in the minority, “Thank you for your views, but you ARE the weakest link! Good-bye!”

This ethical problem means that facilitated groups should not decide what decision-making methods they will use. In addition

to the obvious problem of having no way to “decide how to decide”, much valuable time can be spent distracted from the group’s real work. The facilitator is the person who has been given the authority by the group to guide it through an effective group process. It is the facilitator, then, who decides whether the group is prepared to collaborate, and if so, helps the group to reach consensus.

I acknowledge that building and reaching consensus can be hard work for both the facilitator and the group members. Ingrid Bens says that the drawbacks of consensus building are that it “takes time, data, and member skills” (Bens 1997, 115). Too bad!

I believe that consensus is at the core, at the heart, and is primary to our profession of facilitation. It is more than a technique. It is more than a best practice. It is part of who we are when we facilitate. A facilitated group process without consensus is like inhaling without exhaling.

Should we include a principle on consensus in the IAF Statement of Values and Code of Ethics? As the wise Sioux chief says in the movie, *Dances with Wolves*, when the opinion of his tribal council is divided, “It is hard to know what to do. Perhaps we should think about it some more.” Consensus, anyone?

Consensus Depends on the Situation

John Butcher

Parents of the students of a large public school are meeting on whether to recommend to the school board that uniforms be mandatory. A mixed business-labour-government group is trying to identify approaches to manage a multi-billion dollar injured worker insurance program. A Cabinet is assessing whether evidence of global warming is sufficiently clear to require further government restrictions on vehicle emissions. The members of a small religious congregation are selecting local community projects to receive its donations next year. A large, geographically- and culturally-diffuse professional association is devising a code of ethics and values to guide its members’ behaviour.

Each group needs to make a decision. But how will it know when it has? When “50% + 1” vote in favour? When there is “general agreement”? When everyone can “live with” a

particular decision? When there is “complete support” by each person in the group?

The typical facilitator response is to assist the group to establish its own standard for its decisions, based on whatever criteria the group feels are appropriate to the circumstances. Most facilitators and many authors (e.g., Bens 2000; Kaner et al 1996; Reddy 1994; Rees 1991) take this “situational” approach. Norms and “ground rules” are generated from within the group (not set by the facilitator). While the facilitator may advise the group on the implications of different decision-making models, in the end the group picks the one it feels is most appropriate to its short- and long-term needs. The facilitator must still ensure that the group is absolutely clear about what it means by whatever model it chooses (“So how would we know a decision that we could all