



Editor's Note: Consensus decision-making or some form of collaborative decision-making is used by virtually every cohousing community in the U.S. (and maybe Canada!) Yet, for all its widespread adoption, it is one of the most contentious aspects of living in cohousing. Perhaps it is because it is often misunderstood and misused. In this guest blog by Martie Weatherly of Liberty Village Cohousing in Libertytown, Maryland, she identifies five common areas upon which groups having difficulty stumble. You can download a pdf of this blog post from the MAC website.



- Is consensus decision-making a challenge for your community?
- Are you unable to come to agreement on a topic?
- Do members say they will block a topic if you bring it up?

Collaborative decision-making is challenging!

Here are the top five pitfalls to consensus:

Number 5: Allowing threats “If you bring that up, I will block it.”

That person is talking veto -- not consensus. Coming to agreement by consensus is a creative process requiring members listening to each other's points of view. Consensus requires curiosity and welcoming diversity from which a new solution arises.

Number 4: Delegating tasks to a committee and then overriding the committee's decision; failure to delegate altogether.

Have a clear “box” of what the committee can do, how much it has to spend and how to report to the community. Then, let them do it. Trust them with what you asked them to do without second-guessing them. A secondary issue is failure to delegate thereby trying to decide everything in a plenary session involving everyone. This wastes time and erodes enthusiasm for meetings.

Consensus is not good for deciding matters of taste such as choosing colors of paint or for urgent decisions. Delegate those decisions to a team.

Number 3: Using plenary time for many details so everyone gets tired of the subject and gives up.

Create an agenda that has enough time for topics and is clear on the purpose of each topic. Don't allow long-winded discussions or going off-topic. Pick the low hanging fruit so you get agreement on some things, even if not all the items on the topic.

Having well-trained facilitators who can keep the discussion on topic is key to having consensus decision-making work. Budget money for facilitation training.

Number 2: Avoiding concerns, not allowing disagreements or pushing passed concerns and disagreements.

Instead, welcoming concerns and disagreements and seeing them as broadening the discussion. Trust the "wisdom of the group." This means allowing concerns to come up, not resisting them, particularly from those who seem to have concerns all the time. Listen to those concerns and respect them. They will help the group find the best solution.

Number 1: Allowing a block for a personal reason, not a community value.

The process to override a block must be hashed out ahead of time. Having a clear pathway to consensus is critical. This includes taking care of the blocker so he/she feels heard and respected. It also means taking care of the community handling what should be a very rare occurrence. If you are experiencing blocks frequently then there is something in the process or in the shared values of the group that must be addressed.

More on blocking in future blog posts.

Here is to great consensus decision-making and having it work as well you know it can

For information, contact Martie at (301)538-6811 (cell) or martiew@earthlink.net.

###