http://ecovillagenews.org/wiki/index.php/N-Street_Couhousing%27s_Solution-Oriented_Consensus_Model
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Is Consensus Right for Your Group? Part I

By Diana Leafe Christian

What's the best way ecovillagers can use consensus? *(Photo of meeting at Kommune Niederkaufungen, Germany)*
How can the most number of people get the most of what they want, most of the time?

I'm intrigued by how the folks at N Street Cohousing in Davis, California practice consensus. They seem to get the best of this decision-making method without any of the exhausting and demoralizing aspects that sometimes plague other communities. This is important to me because, ideally, in ecovillages and other intentional communities the most number of people would get the most of what they want, most of the time.

And while N Street is not an ecovillage, some aspects of community life — such as decision-making — are common to all kinds of intentional communities, including ecovillages. We can learn something from these folks!

Consensus Decision-Making — a Double-Edged Sword

Almost every intentional community I know of in North America uses pure consensus as their decision-making method. This means, of course, people can support the proposal, stand aside from it, or block it. If someone blocks the proposal it doesn't pass.

Of course ideally a group doesn't just "use consensus"; ideally they would need to first meet the three requirements for consensus:

1. They have a common mission and purpose (including guiding principles and perhaps guiding goals) which are written in clear, unambiguous language — so everyone is aligned in what they're doing together as a community and how they're doing it.

2. People have equal access to power. There is no single leader or group of leaders; no one is the boss and the rest employees; no one is the landlord and the rest tenants.
3. And group members have been thoroughly trained in consensus so everyone understands that blocking should be used only when one believes the proposal would harm the community or violate its mission and purpose, rather than blocking because of personal interests.

The common house at N Street Cohousing faces into the large shared backyard.
However, even with a common mission and purpose, equal access to power, and a great consensus training program for all new members, the group can still be stopped and stymied by people blocking inappropriately and too often, especially when one member consistently blocks proposals that everyone else wants.

Or the group can experience what I call the “Dreaded P.P.D.” (“Premature Proposal Death”), where someone simply intimates they would block an idea, and it is never drafted as a proposal, never gets proposed on an agenda, and is killed before it is even born.

These unhealthy ways of blocking consensus can leave everyone feeling weary and disempowered. Attendance at meetings can drop to a trickle.

Then there are communities where its mission and purpose is so vague its like a Rorschach ink blot — subject to multiple interpretations — so blocking a proposal “because it violates our mission and purpose” becomes damn-near meaningless.

Or new people aren’t trained in consensus before they have the power to block, and can unfortunately wield that power like a chainsaw.

Consensus was developed in response to power-over situations, and as an alternative to majority-rule voting, where minority views are not included in the decision and you can have “tyranny of the majority.”

And when consensus is practiced poorly, you can have what in the communities movement in the US is sometimes called “tyranny of the minority.”

N Street Cohousing

N Street cofounder, Kevin Wolf.

But this doesn’t happen at N Street Cohousing. I learned a lot more about their method in August, when cofounder Kevin Wolf gave me a tour. In this community, 50 adults and 15 children live in 20 different houses and second units on one block in a tree-lined neighborhood in Davis. The original neighborhood developer built each house with a kitchen-living room facing the backyard and all bedrooms facing the street.

Kevin and his wife Linda were the first residents, buying their home on N Street in 1984. Over the years their friends and friends of friends bought other homes and now community members own or lease almost the whole block.

Backyard fences were taken down, creating a mega-backyard for everyone, with a path meandering around the perimeter passing by the kitchen-living rooms of each home. Large trees, gardens, and children’s play areas are everywhere. Laundry facilities are at one end of the common yard, a sauna is at the other, and the group’s common house (with kitchen, large dining room, and a large patio with a barbeque grill just out the back door) is in the middle.

People are often outside gardening, visiting each other, finding their kids, and going to and from the laundry room or common house spontaneously meeting one another. Much of the community business and social life takes place in informal conversations along the path.

Small-Group Solution-Seeking Meetings

I asked these folks if they liked their decision-making method. They did!

At one of N Street’s monthly meetings, when the facilitator calls for consensus on a proposal and no one blocks, the proposal passes.

If someone blocks, the person blocking is obligated to meet with small groups of other members, usually two to four people, to think through the issues and mutually agree on a new proposal that addresses the same problem. They present the new proposal at the next monthly meeting. The small groups are required to meet up to six times every two weeks.

The people who supported the proposal can send representatives to these meetings, but they don't have to attend all of the meetings like the blocking person does.

The person blocking is responsible for organizing the meetings, and the meetings must take place. If the person blocking doesn't do this, the group assumes he or she doesn't care about the proposal enough to have made a responsible block. The block is considered dropped and the original proposal is put back on the agenda of the next monthly meeting to finalize. This takes some record-keeping and tracking on the part of the community, of course.

If a new, mutually agreed upon proposal is created in one of the meetings, it goes back to the whole group and is taken up as a new proposal.

But what if the person blocking and the other community members cannot come up with a mutually agreed-on new proposal during the series of small-group meetings? If this happens, the original proposal goes back to the next monthly meeting, where it can be passed by a 75 percent super-majority vote of the members present.

The same process applies if two or three people block. (If more than a few people block a proposal though, of course the proposal doesn't pass because clearly, it doesn't have enough support, and the group does not invoke this process.)

People enjoy relaxing in their newly built common house.

The six-meeting process makes anyone who wants to block take more responsibility for the effect of their block on the group. "If you've blocked," Kevin says, "you've got to be part of the solution. Anyone who wants to block has to ask themselves, 'Do I not support this proposal enough to go through all this?'"

One time a new N Street member blocked a decision before he'd been briefed on the procedure. Then facilitator told him about the meetings. "If I had known that, I wouldn't have blocked," he said (and withdrew the block).

At N Street, people don't have to attend every meeting. Within the two-week period after the meeting, anyone who didn't attend can stand aside from or block a proposal on email, as long as they state their reasons for doing so, just as if they'd been in the meeting.

This does *not* result in "hit and run" email blocking, as some communities experience, because the same rules apply.

Not requiring everyone to attend meetings, Kevin says, “means fewer people attend each time, and with only the people who really want to be at any given meeting, the meetings are more productive and enjoyable.”

Deterrence

While N Street’s method could seem like a lot of work and bureaucracy, I think it’s effective not only because it works well, but simply because it *exists.* It’s a deterrent to frivolous, personal blocking. In the 20 years since N Street was founded, Kevin estimates there have probably been about 12 blocked issues total. Of these, only two have invoked the six-meeting process. Both only reached a second small-group meeting before the participants mutually crafted a new proposal. Four small-group meetings over 20 years to deal with blocks is not bad!

The other 10 blocked proposals were resolved informally, by the person(s) blocking and those who supported the proposal discussing it in “swirling conversations” *(see below).*

Respect

I also think N Street’s method is effective because it respects both the person blocking and those who support the proposal.

It honors the person blocking because it offers up to three months of informal opportunities — and up to six formal opportunities — to share his or her views with others in a more intimate setting, mutually create a new proposal, or persuade at least 26 percent of the people that the proposal should not be passed.

And it honors the people who support the proposal because, if the small groups cannot reach agreement, the later 75 percent super-majority vote will ensure that the most number of people will get the most of what they most want. There’s no “tyranny of the minority” at N Street Cohousing.

But Is It Really Consensus?

Tree Bressen, a sought-after meeting facilitator and consensus trainer based in Oregon, teaches consensus, facilitation, and effective meeting process to many start-up intentional communities and also to existing communities having difficulties. Tree values inclusivity in community, so I wondered whether she considers N Street’s six-meeting/voting fallback method to be inclusive enough and fair to everyone.

“It seems like consensus to me,” she replied when I asked her. “And I like how it balances power with responsibility.”

Voting Fallback and the Agent Provocateur

Much community business takes place informally, in conversations along the path.

Kevin is a longtime environmental activist and wind-power advocate who actively helps consensus-based election campaign efforts locally. He knows what works well and what doesn’t in activist groups. He told me that one of the leading anti-nuclear organizations in the U.S. was taken over by a small group of far-left members by abusing the group’s pure-consensus decision-making process. It was later found out that the leader in the takeover was an agent provocateur, probably hired by the federal government. (In this context, an agent provocateur is a “spy” from the opposition who pretends to be a group member and uses the group’s decision-making process and actions to discredit and harm it.)

As a result of the successful infiltration of the anti-nuclear group, other consensus-based anti-nuclear and environmental organizations started instituting a voting fallback process so that a small minority couldn’t stop the groups from proceeding. So, Kevin says, even if an agent provocateur does infiltrate a group, they cannot derail it. Kevin told me he won’t even join a campaign that doesn’t have a voting fallback procedure after it strives for consensus, because it's too easy otherwise for someone to destroy the group’s morale and dramatically hinder the effectiveness and longevity of the group.

“Community Mental Illness”

Places to sit and chat are scattered throughout N Street’s large backyard.

Kevin believes that when someone in a community consistently blocks proposals that others support, they have a community-style mental illness. The person would certainly not be considered

"mentally ill" in mainstream culture, they would function normally at work and among families and friends. But in a community context, Kevin says, if the person consistently cannot let go of what they personally want in favor of the greater good of the community — as defined by how the other members see the community's mission and purpose (including its values, goals, and principles) — they are "mentally ill" in a community context. "You can't let 'community-mentally ill' people bring down the morale and functioning of the group," he says.

Caroline Estes is a renowned consensus teacher who has taught many of the community-based consensus trainers in the US, who also lives in Oregon. Caroline says that if someone consistently blocks proposals that everyone else wants, they are in the wrong group. The person belongs in a different community, she says, whose mission and purpose, vision and values, more closely match their own.

But how does a group induce a "community mentally ill" person to become "community sane?" And how do they convince someone who's ended up in their community by mistake to sell their financial interest in the community and join a group that suits them better?

I don't think they can. People who are so un-self-aware and un-interested in the well-being of other people that they block consistently are not likely to change. And people who have somehow landed in the wrong group but don't recognize it are not likely to leave.

What a group *can do*, however, to ensure that the most number of people get the most of what they most want most of the time, is to adopt a form of decision-making that honors both those who support a proposal and those with dissenting views. *This* is what excites me most about N Street's method.

"Swirling Conversations"

N Street resolved a block by moving a round patio table into the common house for awhile.

Kevin is also an advocate of permaculture, and its principles permeate N Street from gardens to governance. One permaculture principle is to observe nature, and then go along *with* how nature functions in order to increase fertility and yield in the landscape, rather than going against nature as most conventional gardening and building practices do.

One of the things N Street members observed was that during breaks, or as soon as a meeting was over, people would gather in small groups of three and four and buzz with conversation about the meeting topics. This seemed to be the way human nature functions. So they institutionalized this tendency of human nature, and now "swirling conversations" are a part of the informal governance process at N Street, used whenever there's an upcoming proposal that has a lot of emotional charge for people, or when a proposal has been blocked.

Over several weeks people meet with two or three others — most often informally and spontaneously — to talk about the proposal or the problem. “Then these members ‘swirl away’ to another group to share what they learned and advance the discussion and search for solutions,” Kevin says. They encourage each other not to talk negatively about another member, but instead to ask each other, as permaculture designers might do, “What is the fundamental problem here? What’s a solution?”

“Ideally, most of the members who care about the issue will have participated in one of the swirling conversations and thus become much more informed and help contribute to the inevitable solution,” he adds. “The idea is not to polarize or bifurcate the group, but to get everyone to talk to everyone else about the issue, and allow the most creative solutions to arise.”

Once there was a widely supported proposal to use round tables in N Street’s dining room because everyone seeing each other around a table might foster good conversations. But someone blocked it, saying that round tables take up more space in a room than square or rectangular tables.

Before the group could even start the six-meeting method enough swirling conversations arose to informally come up with a good solution: they’d move a few round outdoor tables from the patio into the dining room to try it for awhile. The solution was informal, outside the meeting, and easy.

Swirling conversations, and six solution-seeking meetings backed up by a 75 percent super-majority vote — not a bad way to make effective, widely supported decisions and more richly enjoy community life!

Part II in the next issue, will look at the alternative to consensus used at Ecovillage Sieben Linden in Germany, which addresses the problem they formerly had of people agreeing to proposals they really didn’t support.

Diana Leafe Christian, editor of this newsletter, lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina, US.

Related articles:

Is Consensus Right for Your Group? Part II — Jan '09
The Feeling, Thinking, and Business Meetings of Ecovillage Sieben Linden — Jan '09

Is Consensus Right for Your Group? Part II

More on how the most number of people can get the most of what they want, most of the time.

By Diana Leafe Christian

In warm weather Sieben Linden members meet in their amphitheater.

The consensus method practiced by N Street Cohousing in Davis, California uses a 75 percent voting fallback. But this only happens if, after a series of small-group meetings between the blocking person and advocates of the proposal, they cannot create a new mutually agreeable proposal. *(See Is Consensus Right for Your Group? Part I).*

N Street has only needed to use this small-group meeting method twice in 20 years! Thus they've never gone to a 75 percent vote. And the N Street members I met with in August, 2008 said they like and appreciate their decision-making process.

As I see it, N Street's form of consensus seems ideal for communities hamstrung by one or more people blocking too much.

A Different Problem at Sieben Linden

A few years ago Ecovillage Sieben Linden near Poppau, Germany replaced their consensus process with a new method they developed — not because people blocked too much, but because they didn't!

According to Sieben Linden member Kosha Anja Joubert, too many people were silent when they didn't like a proposal because they didn't want to stop others from having what they wanted. “Lukewarm” is how she describes their consensus decisions. “We developed a wish for more outspokenness and clarity,” she wrote in *Beyond You and Me* (Permanent Publications, 2007), the GEN/Gaia Education book on the social aspects of ecovillages. *(See Review: Beyond You and Me this issue.)*

How Sieben Linden’s Four-Option Method Works

Two-thirds of the members must choose ”fully positive” for a proposal to pass. *(Here, a meeting of the 2008 GEN-Europe General Assembly held at Sieben Linden.)*
Sieben Linden members have four options when a facilitator calls for a decision:

1. Fully positive.
2. Not fully positive, but I’ll support the proposal.
3. I don’t support it, but I’ll stand aside.
4. I’m blocking it.

For a proposal to pass, two-thirds, that is, 66 percent, of the members present must be fully positive.

If two-thirds are not fully positive yet no one blocks, the proposal is set aside. It may be brought up again in the future.

When Someone Blocks

Someone who blocks must organize a series of small-group meetings with proposal proponents. *(Another meeting at the 2008 GEN-Europe General Assembly at Sieben Linden.)*
If someone does block, the proposal is put on hold for two weeks while the blocking person tries to find at least one other person to also support the block. If this happens, the proposal is considered blocked. If not — no one else supports the block — the proposal is considered passed. (Thus, having to find a second person to support the block functions like consensus-minus-one.)

If the proposal is blocked, the two blocking people have until the next whole-group meeting four to six weeks later to meet with others to craft a new proposal that addresses the same issue.

“The person who sees the proposal as enough of a problem to block it must then be part of the solution,” Kosha said.

Sieben Linden uses the four-option/two-thirds voting fallback method only in whole-group meetings, although not in committees, which decide by consensus.

Who This Helps

This four-choice method, Kosha says, seems to help those who want to express their lack of full support for the proposal but not block it outright.

I asked Kosha whether this method also helps those who might otherwise have blocked a proposal, but now don't need to block because they have two other, less extreme options. She said she thinks that this may be so.

“It all boils down to trust.”

A night meeting of the GEN-Europe General Assembly.
Even though this decision-making method helps more Sieben Linden members get more of what they want more of the time, sometimes there are still problems, Kosha said. Because Sieben Linden members have a wide diversity of views and practices, they have quite consciously set up committees with members who are diverse in their values and opinions. In this way their committees function like a representative democracy. Committee members work long and hard to create proposals that will be agreeable to their widely diverse membership, and, as noted, make committee decisions by full consensus. But sometimes a committee’s proposal to the whole-group meeting can be misunderstood, delayed, or stopped.

This happens when people in the whole-group meeting don't fully understand – or trust – what the committees are doing. “Do they read the committee minutes first?” I asked. I was going by what happens at Earthaven. I assumed that if most Sieben Linden members read committee minutes, they’d know the deep consideration of ideas and hours of research that went into the proposal, and the ideas the committee had already considered and rejected.

But at Sieben Linden many people don't read committee minutes. “How many minutes do you want to read?” asked Kosha. “If people placed more trust in the committees, they wouldn't have to read committee minutes so much. It all boils down to trust.”

This happens at Earthaven too. A few members have expressed distrust for some of our committees, and these tend to be the same people who consistently block decisions.

Yet consensus trainers point out the need for trust among group members in order to use consensus.

- “Foremost is the need for trust. Without some amount of trust, there will be no cooperation or nonviolent resolution to conflict.”

  —*U.S. consensus trainer C. T. Butler in his book* On Conflict and Consensus. *(Food Not Bombs Publishing, 1991.)*
- “In the consensus process, . . . the assumption is that we are all trustworthy (or at least can become so)”

  —*U.S. consensus trainer Caroline Estes in her article, “Consensus Ingredients.” (Communities Directory, 1990.)*
- “If consensus is to work, group members must strive for trust in one another.”

  —*Members of the Wisconsin-based Center for Conflict Resolution in their consensus manual* Building United Judgment. *(Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981.)*

Fortunately, the tendency to block proposals with too little information is countered by a natural consequence at Sieben Linden. “If a person blocks often, it takes up a lot of group time in subsequent meetings to create a new proposal,” Kosha told me. Thus the person who blocks frequently pays for it socially, she said, as they lose “social capital” in the community. And that happens at Earthaven too.

Ah, community life.

“*Is Consensus Right for Your Group? Part III*” *in the May, 2009 issue of this newsletter, will look at ways to build trust among ecovillagers, both in terms of governance . . . and in who joins us.*

Diana Leafe Christian, editor of this newsletter, lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina, US.

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