

Excerpted from articles appearing in the Communities magazine series, "Busting the Myth That Consensus-with-Unanimity is Good for People," 2012-2013, and from revisions of chapter 6 the French and Russian editions of *Creating a Life Together* by Diana Leafe Christian.

What Can Go Wrong in Consensus Decision-Making

Note: I call the classic form of consensus, in which one can block a proposal for any reason and there is no recourse if someone blocks, "consensus with unanimity." —Diana

Consensus trainers often claim that, when done well, consensus decision-making, in contrast to majority-rule voting, can transform meetings from overlong, frustrating, draining sessions that go nowhere and elicit people's worst behaviors, to spirited, stimulating events where everyone's ideas are valued and the group comes up with surprisingly creative and workable solutions.

However, in my years of consulting with communities in conflict and participating in meetings of my own community, I've seen consensus and some modifications of consensus *also* create overlong, frustrating, draining sessions that go nowhere and elicit people's worst behaviors. Consensus advocates often claim that because everyone's agreement is required to pass a proposal, this naturally results in trust, harmony, and connection among group members.

But I have seen many communities using consensus-with-unanimity (or some of its modifications) get just the opposite.

Consider the 15-year-old community that still doesn't have a pet policy because a member with several dogs blocks any proposal to create a temporary committee to even draft a pet policy. Or the 20-year-old group which still has no community building after several members blocked a proposal to build one because of their abhorrence of debt — even though the community borrowed money to buy its property in the first place. Or the community that has no labor requirement because one member blocks every proposal to create a labor policy, believing that if it's a *real* community everyone would work for the community voluntarily.

These communities not only have no pet policy, community building, or labor policy, they also have no consistent experience of trust and connection, as this is destroyed regularly when a few fellow community members stop what everyone else wants.

Threatening to Block and "Premature Proposal Death"

And sometimes, even if no one has ever blocked, conflict and discouragement still occurs because the possibility of blocking *exists* — since everyone knows anyone *could* block a proposal if they wanted to.

This happens when someone threatens to block before a proposal has been presented in a meeting. This can happen directly — "I'll never support that!" It can also happen as an implication, such as when someone shows disapproval or disdain for an upcoming proposal through facial expression, tone of voice, or body language. This can even happen when someone is just voicing an idea that hasn't even become a proposal yet.

When either of these occurs — directly threatening to block a proposal or idea, or an implication that someone might do so — the community suffers. People lose heart for their new ideas and drop them. Community members don't get to illuminate the issues in a meeting through discussion. An idea that could have benefitted the community or shed light on an important issue is abandoned before it's ever considered — dying before it was born.

Reasons People Block Inappropriately

I believe this happens because people often misunderstand and mis-use the blocking privilege. It is certainly appropriate, and desirable, to block if a proposal clearly violates the community's values, underlying principles, or mission, and the person can clearly show why. Or to block if implementing a proposal would harm the community in some real, demonstrable way, and the person(s) can clearly show why.

Tim Hartnett, author of *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making* (New Society Publishers, 2010), is the first consensus trainer I know of to say publicly that the benefits of consensus-with-unanimity are often

outweighed by its negative consequences. He observes, and I have seen also, at least three reasons people block inappropriately:

(1) *The blocking person interprets the community's stated mission or purpose differently than other community members.* Some members in one community, for example believed its purpose was to create a rural agrarian village and grow and raise much of its own organic food. Other members believed their community purpose was to protect the Earth from human impact, and so blocked most proposals about farming and agriculture. Still others knew theirs was primarily a spiritual community devoted to processing conflict and emotions in meetings.

(2) *A proposal violates a member's personal values rather than the community's agreed-upon shared values.* In this same community people have blocked proposals because of a personal distaste for the insurance industry, a devotion to ecofeminism, or a contempt for small cottage industries offering onsite jobs for members.

(3) *The blocker has a perhaps subconscious wish for attention — even negative attention — or to otherwise express a painful but suppressed emotional issue.*

People can also block inappropriately because they need more time to consider the proposal, or because a proposal seems too confusing to understand what it actually means. In these cases, rather than blocking, the person simply needs ask for more time to consider the proposal, or request that it be revised for clarity.

For whatever reason, when people block proposals inappropriately, it demoralizes the group.

Having "Complete Power Over the Group"

"Requiring unanimity," Tim Hartnett writes, "is usually intended to ensure widespread agreement. When unanimity is blocked by a small number of people, however, the group actually experiences *widespread disagreement* which has toxic effects on the group."

He observes that no matter how well and accurately a group practices consensus-with-unanimity, doing so does not ensure unanimous approval of the final, modified proposal. The blocking principle, he says, is often considered a way to equally share power in a group, but he notes that giving people equal power to control the group's ability to make a decision can actually create *inequality*. "It necessitates that all group members have the ethics and maturity to use this power responsibly," he writes. "This may not be a realistic expectation."

He advocates that true equality may be better secured "by a system that ensures that *no group member ever has the power to individually control the group.*" (*Italics mine.*)

Caroline Estes also cautions that consensus "allows each person complete power over the group." When someone blocks, she adds, "they should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other such feeling." (*Communities Directory, Fellowship for Intentional Community, 1991.*)

You can see the effects of individual power over the group when committee members have worked long, hard hours on a proposal, then spent time in a series of whole-group meetings to modify and improve it, and most community members look forward to approving and implementing it. When the proposal is blocked by one or two people, most members don't feel harmony, trust, or connection. They're more likely to feel devastated. And when this kind of blocking happens often, it can result in distrust, low morale, and dwindling meeting attendance.

Many communities chose consensus-with-unanimity because — wanting to spread power widely — they value fairness, mutual respect, trust, compassion, and equality.

But fairness, mutual respect, trust, compassion, and equality are often *not* what they get. Political activists and people in the communities movement have come up with a name for what they get — "Tyranny of the Minority."

"Tyranny of the Minority"

Tim Hartnett points out more consequences of "Tyranny of the Minority." I've seen each of these dynamics too.

* *People able to endure more conflict may prevail, creating "decision by endurance."* Sometimes community members who can endure high levels of conflict have a greater chance of prevailing over those who can't bear conflict for long. When this happens, it is sometimes the ability to tolerate conflict — rather than the ability to seek deeper understanding and to collaborate — that determines whether or not a proposal is passed. "More obstinate participants may more frequently get their way," he says.

* *Disproportionate power to whoever supports the status quo.* If most people in a community support a proposal to change one or more long-standing policies, they cannot do so until they convince everyone in the group. If one or two people don't support the proposal, no matter that everyone else may want it, the original policies will remain. This gives exceptional power to anyone who doesn't want the community to change.

* *The community may stagnate, unable to evolve.* For this reason there may be little chance of revising outdated agreements. Thus whatever the group put in place in its early days — the status quo — may remain in effect for years beyond its actual effectiveness for the group.

* *Power struggles may drive out some of the group's most responsible, effective members.* When people with high levels of initiative and leadership make proposals in a community they often expect and require a timely response. If there are underlying values differences in the community, or people block for personal reasons or as subconscious bids for attention, the high-initiative people tend to stop going to meetings. They don't have the patience to spend time processing other members' anxieties or emotions. When this happens repeatedly they are often too discouraged and frustrated to stay in the community, and so leave.

Usually it is the most responsible and effective members — the community's natural leaders — who leave first.

When Using Consensus Is Inappropriate . . .

Most community-based consensus trainers advise groups *not* to use consensus unless they meet the specific requirements for it. In my experience, relatively few intentional communities actually meet these requirements (or know they exist).

"(Consensus is) not appropriate for all situations," cautions community-based consensus trainer Tree Bressen on her website. It works best "for groups that have a shared purpose, explicit values, some level of trust and openness to each other, and enough time to work with material in depth," she says. (www.treegroup.info)

Caroline Estes teaches that using consensus requires a community to have a shared common purpose, equal access to power, and training in how to use consensus properly.

Tim Hartnett is even more specific, noting that the smaller and more homogeneous the group, the easier it is to reach agreement when using consensus-with-unanimity. "Participants must trust each other and value their relationships highly," he writes. They "must be trained to participate responsibly . . . must put the best interests of the group before their own." And, he adds, to keep their relationships open, clear, and healthy they must a lot of time processing emotions in the group. And . . . as we've seen, not everyone enjoys doing this.

"Granted, only a small proportion of groups have the necessary conditions to effectively use . . . consensus," write the authors of *Building United Judgment* (Fellowship for Intentional Community, 1999). "Such groups are small, cohesive, and cooperative. . . . If attempted under the wrong circumstances or without a good understanding of the technique," the authors add, "the consensus process can result in confusion, disruption, or unrest in a group."

Using It Anyway

Why would a community use consensus-with-unanimity if they aren't small, cohesive, and cooperative or don't have a shared purpose, explicit values, some level of trust and openness to each other?

Or they don't agree on what form of consensus they're using and haven't been trained in how to use it, or some have been trained and others haven't? (Only a handful of communities I've seen require new incoming members to get adequate consensus training before they have the right to block proposals).

Nevertheless — no matter how often consensus books and trainers have cautioned against it — in recent decades many communities have chosen consensus-with-unanimity even though they don't qualify to use it. They chose it, apparently, because they weren't aware of its requirements. Or because they thought their only other choice was majority-rule voting, and the claims for consensus-with-unanimity appealed to their aspirations for fairness, equality, and a better world.

Or . . . because they weren't aware of the more recent consensus modifications and other new alternatives.

Consensus Modifications

Many consensus trainers no longer advocate consensus-with-unanimity and suggest newer methods instead.¹

1. *Supermajority vote as a fallback if consensus cannot be reached at first.* Consensus has two parts. First is the *process* — an agenda and proposals, a meeting facilitator, the intention to hear from everyone, and people asking clarifying questions, expressing concerns, and discussing, modifying, and improving the proposal.

The second part of consensus, the *decision rule*, occurs when the proposal is decided. The decision rule is the percentage of agreement needed to pass a proposal. "Supermajority" means a percentage higher than 51%. The percentages used in supermajority voting typically range from 90% to 65% and anything in-between.

A community can use supermajority voting as the next step after a proposal is blocked. Many cohousing communities in North America have a supermajority voting fallback if they don't reach consensus.

2. *Using a supermajority vote instead of testing for consensus.* When it's time to make the decision the facilitator doesn't ask if anyone will stand aside or block; instead the group simply votes. Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina does this.

3. *Blockers and proposal advocates co-create a new proposal.* When it's time to decide, the group first tries for consensus. If there are one or more blocks, those who've blocked and one or two people who support the proposal hold a series of solution-oriented meetings to create a new proposal that addresses the same issues as the first proposal. They must do this within a certain time period, such as two or three weeks or months. If they create a new proposal it comes to the next meeting. If they don't create a new proposal the original proposal comes back to the next meeting for a supermajority vote.

4. *Criteria for a Valid Block.* The community has both an agreed-upon criteria for what constitutes a valid block (sometimes called a "legitimate block" or a "principled block") and a way to test blocks against this criteria. (*I don't recommend this method for reasons noted below, but describe it since it's sometimes mentioned in consensus resources.*)

Some consensus trainers suggest the following criteria for a valid block: (1) The proposal could harm the community in a specific way, such as legally, financially, or in terms of its physical safety or its reputation, and the blocking person can show why. (2) Or the proposal violates the values or mission and purpose of the community, and the person can show why.

One way to test a block against this criteria is for the facilitator to go around the group several times asking each person in turn whether or not they think the block meets the community's criteria for validity, and why. After two or three rounds of hearing everyone's opinions, they vote, with a supermajority decision rule of, say, 85%. In this case, if 85% or more considered the block to be valid, it would be declared valid and the proposal wouldn't pass. But if 84% or fewer people considered the block valid, that wouldn't be enough for it to be valid. The block would be declared invalid and the proposal would pass.

Some communities test a block by requiring the blocking person to convince at least one other person in the meeting (other than their spouse or partner) that the block is valid. If at least one other person is convinced, the block is declared valid and the proposal does not pass.

Another method for testing a block is to ask the community's steering committee to decide whether or not the block is valid, which they do in the next steering committee meeting.

Although testing for a block's validity may seem reasonable (and Dancing Rabbit uses it and likes it), I dislike this method because it can sometimes introduce *more* conflict. People can argue about what does or doesn't constitute harm to the community or how the proposal does or does not violate its values or its mission and purpose.

For example, people with different levels of tolerance for risk will have completely different ideas of what is meant by "harming the community." Consensus trainer Tree Bressen suggests it is legitimate to block a proposal if passing it would pose a grave danger to the community, but not if it would only create risk. Especially cautious, risk-averse members could see a proposal as "posing grave danger" whereas others could see the same proposal as merely offering an acceptable risk, and vice-versa.

Confusion and conflict can also occur when trying to determine how a proposal might violate a community's values or its purpose and mission statement.

The idea to have criteria for a valid block was originally created for activist groups with a single, specific, clearly defined mission, such as political or environmental activist groups. Let's say, for example, an anti-war/peace activist group committed to nonviolence was considering a proposal to create a dramatic media event where they would throw chicken blood on politicians who wanted a war. It would be reasonable — and necessary — for one or more people to block, because this proposal clearly violates their value of nonviolence and mission as advocates of peace.

But unlike activist organizations, intentional communities are complex, multi-faceted organizations that provide many tangible and intangible benefits which fulfill many needs, and thus the group will have many different purposes. These can include community members, housing, roads, parking, a community building, shared ownership of land and equipment, a place to live and express one's values and enjoy a sense of community, a place to raise children and to grow old safely, as well as a place with policies for finances, labor contributions, land use, membership, promotions, conflict resolution, and of course governance and decision-making. Rural communities are also places to grow and raise food and create cottage industries. Communities with an educational mission are also places to offer tours, classes, and workshops.

There is so much room for interpretation of the values and purposes of entities as complex and multi-dimensional as this that some community members could argue a proposal violates their mission while others could equally argue it fulfills it. Especially if — as is often the case — the community's mission statement was so vague, idealistic, and theoretical that people could project onto it anything they want, like the community where some thought they were supporting agriculture, or stopping agriculture, or doing neither but processing emotions in meetings instead!

I believe that trying to use criteria to assess a block's validity in an intentional community can be too murky to determine easily and the group can end up with even more confusion, frustration, and arguments than they might have had in the first place.

Two decision-making methods, the N St. Consensus Method and Sociocracy's Consent Decision-Making, bypass all this.

The N St. Consensus Method simply requires those who blocked a proposal and some who supported it to cooperate enough to create a new proposal. Thus people who've blocked get several opportunities to contribute to a solution, and if they don't, the community is not stopped but moves forward anyway.

Sociocracy's Consent Decision-Making requires that when there are objections to a proposal (and objections are not blocks and serve a different purpose), people resolve the objections, which can include modifying the proposal.

¹*Two older methods are consensus-minus one, in which it takes two people to block a proposal, and consensus-minus-two, in which it takes three people to block a proposal. However, I don't recommend either of these because they can lead to many of the same problems that occur when using consensus-with-unanimity.*