

International Chairs Course – Week 2 – *Understanding Consensus Decision Making*

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These notes are rough only and intended to accompany the video of the session which you'll find on YouTube [here](#).

What is Consensus Decision Making? And Why do we use it?

What is Consensus Decision Making?

need to clarify a few words

consensus simply means = 'a general agreement'

can be a bit confusing - suggests that everyone has to agree on everything!

as we all know that is very hard to achieve – very rare

e.g. a situation where:

everyone has exactly the same priorities & values

everyone has exactly the same analysis of the situation

everyone entirely agrees on a plan of action

consensus decision making doesn't mean that everyone involved necessarily agrees but it does mean everyone *consents*

they give their *consent* to a particular proposal

i.e. means that everyone agrees *on a way forward / a plan of action / a strategy*

consent is a key idea

consent = 'permission for something to happen, or agreement to do something'

no-one is forced to agree to something that they don't think is right

a decision is made when everyone in the decision-making body consents

→ when this happens, you have moved from *a coincidence of wills to a coincidence of strategy*

A crucial point in the process

one that as chair we have particular responsibility for

Why do we use Consensus Decision Making in Triratna?

a basic fact of human life and experience → we are communal creatures

not something that only pertains to Spiritual communities

human beings organise themselves into collective activities

from educating children, to sowing crops, to playing in a symphony orchestra

there are different ways of making decisions about how these activities happen

A spiritual community is particular type of human community

aspiring to move from the 'power mode' to the 'love mode'

first precept - metta / loving-kindness

what do we mean by power in this context?

it has a range of meanings but here what is meant by it is very simple:

In this context power means simply the capacity to use force, violence being the actual use of that capacity to negate the being of another person, whether wholly or in part.'

from Sangharakshita *The Ten Pillars, the first precept*

decision making processes that are based on power are not appropriate

making someone else do something that they don't want to do

unskilful in a very fundamental way

goes against the first precept

e.g. autocratic decision making

where one person decides and everyone else follows

obviously problematic

in the realm of politics = fascism

e.g. democratic decision making

where majority rules

the majority get their way

the minority don't get their way

democratic processes are appropriate in wider society (debateable?)

leaders are accountable to the people they serve, etc

better than autocracy

but they are still based on power

the majority get their way

we need a decision-making process that facilitates the love-mode

Consensus Decision Making facilitates the love mode

Because no one is forced into an action that they wouldn't freely chose

It is based on consent

When Love-mode / Metta is the basis of communication and relationship a lot else follows that are important factors for fruitful Consensus Decision Making:

principally there is respect for, and appreciation of, the individual

This means that:

people listen

interested in the perspective of others

people are allowed to finish what they say

people aren't interrupted

not just waiting for the other person to finish so you can make your point

There is a willingness among council members to modify their perspective

no one is tries to manipulate the process to get their favoured outcome

quite difficult to do this with Consensus Decision Making

there is a recognition that what certain people say will carry more weight because they have more understanding, more experience or a wider perspective.

--> consensus decision making isn't non-hierarchical

It means that everyone has a say but it doesn't mean that everyone's say necessarily carries equal weight

There is a sensitivity & receptivity to wisdom / counsel of the wise

brings the best out in people who might usually be quite quiet

in a healthy culture where this emerges quite naturally

not asserted in advance

it can be surprising where insight comes from

might not be from the person you expect

Another principal reason for using consensus decision-making:

Consensus Decision Making enables participants to take full responsibility for their decisions

personal responsibility is fundamental to Dharma practice

we have to take personal responsibility for our *actions & decisions*

acknowledge what we did and the consequences that come from that

for good and for ill

one of the characteristics of the True Individual

In order to take responsibility council members need to make decisions *from their own conscience*

On the basis of their personal integrity

The decision-making process has to enable that

Council members have to be free to disagree to be able to meaningfully agree

Council members need to be individually accountable for those actions and decisions

not shrouded in a 'collective mist'

e.g. *The council decided ...*

for this principle to come into operation each person on the decision making body / council has a say

each member need an opportunity to speak to the matter being considered

say where they stand in relation to it

our responsibility as chair to check that this is happening

Recap

Two main reasons for using Consensus Based Decision-making:

Consensus Decision Making facilitates the love mode

Consensus Decision Making enables participants to take full responsibility for their decisions

Based on two central Dharma teachings:

Metta

Personal responsibility

Some other considerations

The reality of power-based approaches to decision making

as well as being unskilful

→ in the long-term *they simply don't work*

they don't create Sangha

they sour the atmosphere

they sow the seeds of division

people mistrust and resent the person or people they perceive as being 'in charge'

the communication that should have happened in the council meeting happens elsewhere

'back channels'

it causes division

people talk!

crucially Sangha members won't be able to get their energy behind the strategy

because they have unacknowledged, unexpressed reservations they won't participate

e.g. they won't come to the classes & retreats, etc

might be out and out opposition

the strategy won't be effective

Bhante – in Vision & Transformation

Noble Eightfold Path series

Perfect Vision

Perfect Emotion

Perfect Speech

Vajrayana - three centres:

head
throat
heart

throat centre is in the middle

between

head representing intellect

heart representing feeling & emotion

shares the nature of both

Speech gives expression both to the head and the heart

thoughts and emotions

(slightly different point to the one Bhante makes)

need to talk to bring the two together

discussion enable this

integration force

within people – their own psyche

and *between* people

Trying to get to situation where the proposal / strategy is animated by *conviction!*

people need the space and time to talk things through to get to conviction

necessary for members to get behind any proposal / any strategy

Consensus Decision Making is a spiritual practice

basic human activity

Triratna – Q. why do we have all these meetings?

→ because human beings have meetings

our views come in to contact with other people's views

Brings up deep forces within us

creatives forces, also destructive and unruly forces

in Triratna we acknowledge that if we want to achieve total transformation

for self and other

we need to engage directly with these energies

we include collective decision making in our conception of what the Dharmalife is

yes its difficult – but also hugely transformative

its dynamite

Questions:

Q. Is this your understanding of consensus?

Q. How well does your council employ consensus decision making?

Q. What could improve the culture of consensus decision making in your council?

What is the role of the Chair within Consensus Decision Making?

Three Spiritual Qualities:

love

clarity

determination

How do these qualities relate to what we been discussing?

→ exemplification

one of the means of unification - *Samgrahavastus*

→ *samanarthata*

metta/love

creating a kindly atmosphere

you as chair have the decisive influence here

your communication will set the tone for the meeting

make sure your heart is in the right place

if it is you don't need to worry too much

you'll naturally want to communicate

other will want to communicate with you!

You could put your council in your metta bhavana when you are doing your morning meditation

Or, all chanting the mantra of your yidam

kindly speech – *priyavadita* – another of the *samgrahavastus*

communication is a two way thing

speaking *and* listening

other side of kindly speech is *sympathetic listening*

demonstrate that you have heard the person

go out of your way

make it explicit

people may have a history of being ignored

or not taken seriously

people need reassurance

e.g. *'Can I just check that I've heard you right?'*

make sure that people have been heard by *other* council members

need to hear *each other*

e.g. *'I'm not sure you've heard what she was saying just now'*

invite people to speak

draw people out

check that everyone's views have been heard

e.g.

'how do you feel about what has been said so far?'

'how does that land with you?'

notice who has been speaking and who hasn't

sometimes the people with the least amount to say make the most relevant points

they might not think much of them themselves

and vice versa!

Some people might need reigning in to make space for others

'I think we've got your point now and we need to move on?'

You can summarise what they are saying so they know they've been heard

clarity

about *who* is taking the responsibility for the decision

i.e. the *whole* council

remind people that it is *their* responsibility

danger of passivity

especially if you are a strong chair

not just a rubber stamping your ideas

not yours alone

e.g. 'how do you feel about this because you might need to explain the situation to someone else?'

don't let your council put it all on you

invite them to engage

might need to *provoke* them to engage

e.g. 'what do you think? It's your decision.'

determination

keep moving the conversation on

keep it on track

to point where a decision is made

keep your eye on the end point

creative tension between this and making sure everyone has been heard

at least try and make some progress

might not get to where you hoped to get to

might have at least clarified what a problem is more clearly

or established some points that everyone agrees on