foster these similar patterns of personal change? First, communities are small social entities so the social relationships among members are intimate and intense. And because community groups are self-selecting, inevitably more homogeneity is present than in the culture at large. And most communities are, to some degree, socially self-reliant.

Two other less obvious but profound differences between mainstream society and communal living have far-reaching effects on the emotional well-being of members. One is a sense of physical safety; the other is generally feeling accepted. (Feeling accepted, it seems, is different from feeling a sense of belonging.)

There are almost no reports of attacks or physical violence at all in any of the com-

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Community is a brutally accurate mirror.

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munities I have visited or have knowledge of. Except for survivalist communities, the members of every community I'm familiar with appear to be open and trusting. Compare this to the often constant caution and awareness of potential danger present in mainstream culture. Fear limits our thinking and behavior in subtle and insidious ways; the removal of fear releases much physical and mental energy.

Another byproduct of living in mainstream culture is the sense of being cut off from contact with other people—variously called alienation, isolation, or anomie. While members of communities may not always find the intimacy they desire, communitarians at least seem to accept each other and encourage personal challenge and exploration. In community, without fearing of harsh judgments or negative consequences, it's much easier to take personal risks. Many community members find this profoundly liberating.

All of these factors taken together seem sufficient to explain why community members may become more confident, are better able to communicate, develop a broader perspective, and become more responsible. But why should living in community make them more aware of personal limitations?

I suspect it's this: community living provides a brutally accurate mirror. We see each other, and we see our selves in more detail than most people were accustomed to before coming to community. Some members can't handle this incidental and unavoidable openness, and leave, seeking more privacy.

But for most of us, observing that even wonderful people around us also have glaring imperfections is a release from our own expectations of perfection, and from self-punishment for our failings.

The community mirror reveals our capabilities and keeps us from effectively hiding our shortcomings. We tend to blossom with previously unknown strengths, and accept and shrug off the revelation of any shortcomings, rather than being devastated by them.

What about the quirky bit of information that community living tends to make people less idealistic rather than more idealistic? In talking to visitors or members new to community, I have come to identify two kinds of idealism—idealism about community living, and idealism about political action, or more grandly, a desire to change the world for the better.

It seems that people who come to community with visions of utopia have a very difficult time adjusting to the often petty and aggravating realities of daily community life. I suspect that many come to community expecting to find only fully self-actualized, profoundly spiritual people who will, by example, provide virtuous examples to help them achieve a fulfilled, moral life. Instead they find people with some of the same insecurities and negative behaviors the new member had to deal with on the outside. This can lead to feelings of betrayal, and certainly, to a diminishing of one's fantasies.

Another boon: increased self-confidence.

Even in very homogeneous communities there are differences in philosophical outlooks. It is difficult to discover that my closest friends may not share my deepest convictions. It is also difficult to realize that even in community, idealistic change often comes about through political machinations. Members with dogmatic ideologies often become frustrated and burn out. More pragmatic idealists tend to narrow their scope from "changing the world" to "cleaning up the neighborhood." The process of living in community tends to dampen one's idealistic vision of profound global transformation. "If I can't change my community, how can I hope to change the world?"

Now, what is it about community living that promotes clearer thinking? I have found it to be a joy to talk to almost any seasoned communard since they can typically speak and think coherently about any number of topics (not just issues involved in communal living). I suspect this is due to the necessary realistic thinking and immediate feedback inherent in living with a group of people. Community members are, almost daily, called to voice their opinions, and to defend them. Few blatantly nonsensical opinions are allowed to pass unchallenged. In community we are neither engulfed in nor protected by bureaucracies, so complex issues come up which need decisions. The consequences of past decisions in a community are readily apparent and help guide thinking about future decisions. Communicating daily and making important decisions tends to hone the mind.

Ex-community-members invariably tell me that living in community was a life-altering experience and they are better people for having done it. Yet there are certainly exceptions—ex-members who feel that they were treated unfairly, or their time in community was a setback, or valuable time in their life was lost when they could have been building a career.

It is true that not everyone is cut out for community, and I doubt that any one communitarian will experience growth and change in his or her life exactly as I have outlined. (This is certainly no rigorous empirical study.) In any case, I would be delighted to hear people's responses to these observations, and whether or not their own experiences are consistent with these. Ω

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Finding a Community To Call Home

by W. J. Schlicht, Jr.

Recently I visited 14 communities in the Eastern United States while looking for a community to join for at ast the next few years. During my search a number of conderations emerged which are listed below. Some of these sues are phrased as questions you might ask various mem-:rs of the communities you visit, or questions you might k yourself.

Any visit to a community for the purpose of seeking a me will have to be long enough for you to get a good idea how the community operates. I believe this can be done in o days, but some communities feel that a much longer riod, sometimes up to two weeks, occasionally as much as eral months, may be required to get to know the comnity well enough to make decisions about major lifestyle nges.

If you plan on moving into a community with a partner or h a family, I believe it is important that your partner and children involved accompany you on all visits. Bear in d during all community visits, particularly when asking stions, that decisions about community membership are essarily *mutual decisions!* The community has to want as a member in the same way that you have to decide to part of the community.

No doubt the most important issue has to do with the quesof how well you get along with the community members. you feel accepted generally by the group? Is at least some st effort made to welcome you? Many communities have ecific member designated to be responsible for visitors. even when this is not the case, some members, if not all, ld make an attempt to meet your effort to get acquainted. laturally common sense applies here; if you visit a comity that is in the middle of a major project such as comon of large-scale construction, then you should lower expectations of the amount of time community memwill be able to spend with you. Any visitor, however,

who expects to be waited on by the community members is no doubt due for a disappointment — and rightly so. Plan on helping out with some of the community work, especially in meal preparation or chores, if your help seems welcome.

In most communities your work contribution is expected and provides a wonderful opportunity to see how well you can work cooperatively with at least a few of the members. Do not imagine that you have VIP status, but do anticipate that at least some of the people will want to know something about you and what you are doing.

It seems to me important to trust your basic instincts about the vibes that community members put out to you. Do they seem simpatico? Are they "your kind of people"? This is not to say that you should look for a community of people just like you. Far from it. There is great benefit to be found in living with people who have divergent backgrounds and viewpoints. But there is no point in trying to fit in with people who are so different that there is insufficient common ground to form a basis for mutual communication.

How well do different members of a community get along with each other? Do they tend to share feelings with each other? Or is there a pattern of covering up feelings and dealing only with material concerns and things that need to be done? Are community members generally supportive of each other? Do you get the feeling that members are genuinely concerned that each of the other members is able to grow along self-defined paths? If a member asks for special assistance, are others eager to volunteer, or is it difficult to get cooperation?

Are there splinter groups within the community who have negative feelings about the community as a whole? The question of equality among the membership is very important. Of course some communities have definite hierarchical structures with designated leadership. But if there is inequality of position, with some members working to support other com-

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munity members who exploit leadership positions, the community may not provide support for personal growth among the working members. Generally, a community that gets caught up in viewing some of its members as second-class citizens is a community that is bound to develop serious interpersonal problems.

Is the community you are considering made up mostly of families or mostly of singles? Depending upon your own status, this can be an extremely important consideration. If you are single and a majority of the community is made up of family units, you are likely to be lonely. However, if the community is located close to a fairly large population center, then this need not be a major concern. Likewise, if the community offers frequent programs of some kind that attract large numbers of people who visit for extended periods, such activities may provide the needed social contact with other people who are not in families. Speak to one or two single members about their life in the community.

Many people are drawn to a community that is spiritually oriented. If you fit into this category, then ask yourself whether you want a community that has a specific spiritual orientation or one that has a more general spiritual outlook. For example, you might consider a monastery or a lay community that follows a particular religion.

Alternatively, there are communities with a general spiritual orientation that have great respect for the need of individual community members to follow their own particular spiritual practice. In such communities, you may find Chris-

tians, Sufis, Buddhists or other religious living together with people following spiritual disciplines that are entirely unique.

Just how community-oriented do you want your community to be? Some communities are little more than land co-operatives where people build individual homes around a central building and land owned in common. Co-operative members may see each other only rarely, may hold business meetings monthly or less frequently, and may not know each other very deeply. More intimacy is required among those who frequently share meals and work together inside the community. Based on these and many other factors, the degree of interpersonal involvement and intimacy varies enormously among different communities.

Communities can be found in the hearts of the largest cities as well as in the most remote rural areas. If you want access to museums, concerts, libraries and a varied social life, you won't be as likely to find contentment out in the boondocks.

Climatic changes should be explored when considering intentional communities in unfamiliar regions of the country. What may appear as a beautiful climate in the late spring will look different with two feet of snow on the ground.

What size community are you seeking? If you are looking for some variant of an extended family, then you should probably consider communities of no more than 20 people. That would be a large family indeed! But if you want to live in a neighborhood similar to the small villages existing long ago, then a larger community would be more suitable. Be aware, however, that in a community of 50 or more people, there will be members with whom you are only slightly acquainted, even after you've lived there several years. So you will need to be comfortable with a wide variety of intimacy levels in your social contacts if you choose a larger community.

The practical question of how much it will cost to live in a given community is of great importance. You will need to know the cost of personal maintenance in cash and personal labor. What are the job opportunities available in the community or nearby? It is vital that financial arrangements be clearly understood well in advance of any decision to join a community.

What is the overall economic condition of the community that you are considering? If there is a desperate struggle each month to pay the bills, you will need to decide if you can handle routine financial pressure. Take a careful look at all the buildings owned in common by the community. Are they in good repair? Are the water and heating systems adequate and usually operable? Are tools, appliances, farm implements and vehicles in good shape?

What are the expectations of incoming members about financial and labor contributions to the community beyond the cost of basic food and lodging? Some common treasury, or income-sharing, communities require that new members

Do you get the feeling that members are genuninely concerned that each of the other members is able to grow along self-defined paths? If a member asks for special assistance, are others eager to volunteer, or is it difficult to get cooperation?

A Checklist for Those Wanting to Join a Community

by Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson

Are you wondering if you're a community person? Do you think you would fit in with a community? No matter who you are, the answer is probably yes, as there's undoubtedly a community somewhere for every type of person. However, here are a few qualities that are generally needed in most communities, so you can see how you'd fare in one:

1. A willingness to think and act in terms of the good of the whole, not just in terms of personal needs and opinions — in other words, good old-fashioned unselfishness (or at least a willingness to grow in this direction).

2. Tolerance for differences and open-mindedness toward different points of view.

3. A willingness to work out conflicts and not hold grudges, with a realistic belief in the possibility of resolving differences to mutual satisfaction.

4. A somewhat adventurous and courageous spirit, open to change, flexible and adaptable.

5. A generally social nature — liking to be with people much of the time (hermit types would climb the wall!).

Although perfection in all of these qualities is hardly expected (and rarely achieved), a willingness to change and grow into these qualities is important.

How would you know if community living were right for you, even if you had the above qualities? What should you look for in a community? This depends on what your personal values are. Here are some things you might want to explore and reflect on as you read about and visit various communities:

1) If you are mainly looking for a supportive and loving environment with lots of good friends, then spend as much time as you can on a one-to-one basis with members of each community you visit. Get to know the members personally to see if you share an easy and natural harmony with them. If you don't feel a good heart-to-heart connection at first, it may be more difficult to become close friends later.

If an active social life is your interest, check out how much harmony or conflict there is among the community members. Observe how much time the members spend hanging out with each other, sharing social activities like parties or sports events. And feel out the "vibes" — the general atmosphere — of the community when you first arrive. Your intuition will tell you whether it could be "home" for you. Even though the community members you visit may be good people with whom you share common ideals and values, you may not have a basic "resonance" with each other on a personality level. So if support and nurturing are high on your agenda, keep looking until you find your "family."

2) If spirituality is a central value for you, then explore the common beliefs and practices of the community. Are these in harmony with your own? Are there regular meditations or prayer times, study groups, yoga practices, a library of spiritual books? Are spiritual practices required or left to individual choice? Are they structured or unstructured? If practices are not required or structured, do you have the necessary self-discipline to practice on your own? If you seek some kind of authority structure or guru, are you ready to submit without rebelliousness?

Notice what happens day-to-day in community life. Do members actually work at *living* their spiritual beliefs? Do they inspire you? Is the general atmosphere uplifting and positive? Although many communities proclaim spiritual

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Corinne and Gordon are authors of the intentional communities reference book *Builders of the Dawn: Community Lifestyles in a Changing World*, and numerous published articles. The teach courses on community lifestyles through Hampsire College and the University of Massachusetts. Corinne, a former editorial assistant at *Rolling Stone* magazine, is director of Sirius Publishing. Gordon is director of the CERES, the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economics, which is described in the compaion article, Home or Activist Community. Other versions of this article have been published previously. (Copyright, 1985, Sirius Publishing, reprinted by permission.)

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Gordon Davidson/Sirius

ideals — love, sharing, brother/sisterhood — you have to ac-
tually spend time in each community to see how their ideals
work out in practice.

3) If equality, shared governance and decision-making
are important to you, then explore how power and leadership
actually function in the community. Again, go beyond the
theory and the words and look at the practice. Are there
authoritarian leaders or dependent, subservient followers?
Who really makes the major decisions? By what process?
How involved is the whole membership in decision-making?
Is there openness to feedback in the leadership? Are mem-
bers taking their fair share of responsibility, or leaving it to a
few leaders? How decentralized is power in the community?

4) If economic equality and sharing of resources is impor-
tant, then note how income is generated and where it goes. Are
incomes pooled and all bills paid out of a common treasury, or
do individuals maintain separate incomes? Is everyone re-
quired to work an equal amount of time? Is all work equally
shared and valued — including things like cleaning and child
care? How are land, houses, vehicles, machinery and other

resources owned — communally or individually? Or is there
some mix of communal and individual ownership? How do
members feel about their economic system?

5) If privacy and individual freedom are high on your
list, then check out housing and financial arrangements. Does
everyone live in one big house, or are there individual dwell-
ings? Are these privately or communally owned? If houses
are shared, are bedrooms and/or other spaces in the house
designated as private? Is there internal soundproofing suffi-
cient to provide privacy? Are members quiet enough when
time alone is needed?

Are all meals eaten communally or individually? Is there
personal choice of lifestyle? Or does everyone live in the
same way? Do all members have the same spiritual and politi-
cal values, or is there room for diversity? How much time and
work energy are required for membership? How frequent are
required meetings?

6) If a simple lifestyle with appropriate technology, or-
ganic gardening, recycling and "living lightly on the earth"
is what you desire, explore how homes are built and how they

Independence Day Celebration at Sirius Community, MA

Resonating Values to look for in a community:
- Personal support
- Spirituality
- Equality
- Group Economics
- Privacy
- Simplicity
- Fe/Male Roles
- Child Support

trade-offs between a totally nuclear family setting and an active life in the community? Are there children of similar age to your own? Are there community playgrounds or spaces just for children? Is there a general sense of happiness and harmony among families in the community?

are heated. How many appliances and gadgets are in use? How is kitchen waste handled—is it recycled into compost? Is food home-grown and organic, or is it store-bought? How vital and productive is the garden? Are furniture, clothing, equipment, tools mostly new or recycled (used)? How extensive is the use of wind, water and solar energy?

7) If feminist values are important to you, then observe who does what jobs in the community. Do men share cooking, cleaning, child care? Are women working in administrative and leadership positions and sharing heavier work like construction and mechanics? How is sexuality viewed in the community? Are there a majority of celibates or families? Singles or gays? Are women's opinions as highly valued in the community as men's? Are certain behaviors deemed more appropriate for just one sex? Is there freedom of expression?

8) If a supportive and safe environment for children and/or shared child care is what you're looking for, then observe who has responsibility for children — individual parents, the whole community or somewhere in between? Notice also whether child care is structured or informal, and whether there are good teachers and schools in the community or nearby. Are there adequate accommodations available in the community or nearby for families?

How much time commitment is asked of community members, and does this leave time for family? What are the

No one community is Utopia, and no one community will meet your ideal arrangements in all of the areas discussed above. Each community has its special focus, based on its own values and philosophy. If you find a community you really like, but are disappointed that it doesn't provide something you feel is important, then perhaps it's a message to you to do something *yourself* to change or improve it, if the community members agree.

It's easy to throw stones from the sidelines. It's harder — and yet more rewarding — to create something better. So, make a gift to all those who will come later to the community. Consider joining to help provide focusing energy for that special something you feel would make the community better... another step closer to Utopia.

If you find that no community seems to live up to your ideals, then perhaps it's best to turn within and ask whether you are living these ideals yourself. Maybe you are searching in vain for something outside yourself that only can be found within. Perhaps that is the place to begin. Otherwise, you may visit any number of communities without ever finding your own community home. ❖

(Builders of the Dawn: Community Lifestyles in a Changing World, 365 pages, is available for $17.95 plus $1.50 postage and handling from Sirius Publishing, Baker Road, Shutesbury, MA 01072)

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Consensus Ingredients

by Caroline Estes of Alpha Farm, Deadwood, Oregon

During the past few decades, while we have been searching for new ways of doing things in order to be inclusive, the decision-making process nown as consensus has begun to be used increasingly and in many different situations. Government is using it to try to find ways that do not involve ourt cases on controversial laws, such as in the orest Service. Hewlett-Packard uses it in its factoes; and many social services are beginning to use it in their work.

In simple terms, consensus refers to agreement on ome decision by all members of a group, rather than majority or a select group of representatives. The onsensus process is what the group goes through to ach this agreement. The assumptions, methods, id results are different from Robert's Rules of Order traditional parliamentary procedure.

Over the past nearly 40 years, since I was first troduced to the use of consensus in Quaker busiss meetings, I have been in widely different situaons in which it has been used, and I have been ching it for the past 15 years. The Greens Party of rth America used it in the beginning of its orgaation, and the bioregional movement of North nerica uses it exclusively in its biennial meetings. iny intentional communities use the process, as ll as the board of the Fellowship for Intentional mmunity (FIC). Departments within government d universities, school faculties, and administra-is are beginning to find it useful and efficient.

The Basis

Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and no one has all of it (no matter how much we like to believe that we ourselves know it all). It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered.

In our present society the governing idea is that we can trust no one, and therefore we must protect ourselves if we are to have any security in our decisions. The most we will be willing to do is compromise, and this leads to a very interesting way of viewing the outcome of working together. It means we are willing to settle for less than the very best— and that we will often have a sense of dissatisfaction with our decisions unless we can somehow outmaneuver others involved in the process. This leads to a skewing of honesty and forthrightness in our relationships.

In the consensus process, we start from a different basis. The assumption is that we are all trustworthy (or at least can become so). The process allows each person complete power over the group. For example, the central idea for the Quakers is the complete elimination of majorities and minorities. If there are any differences of view at a Quaker meeting, as there are likely to be in such a body, the consideration of the question at issue proceeds with long periods of solemn hush and meditation, until slowly the lines of thought draw together toward a point of

unity. Then the clerk frames a minute of conclusion, expressing the "sense of the meeting."

Built into the consensual process is the belief that all persons have some part of the truth in them, or what in spiritual terms might be called "some part of God." We will reach a better decision by putting all of the pieces of the truth together before proceeding. There are indeed times when it appears that two pieces of the truth are in contradiction with each other, but with clear thinking and attention, the whole may be perceived including both pieces, or many pieces. The traditional either/or type of argument does not advance this process. Instead, the consensus process is a search for the very best solution—whatever the problem. That does not mean that there is never room for error—but on the whole, in my experience, it is rare.

The consensus process makes direct application of the idea that all persons are equal—an idea that we are not entirely comfortable with, since it seems on the surface that some people are "more equal than others." But if we do indeed trust one another and do believe that we all have parts of the truth, then we can remember that one person may know more of the truth at one time, while another person may know more at another time. Even when we have all the facts before us, it may be the spirit that is lacking; and this may come forth from yet another who sees the whole better than anyone else. Everybody's contributions are important.

Decisions which all have helped shape, and with which all can feel united, make the necessary action go forward with more efficiency, power and smoothness. This applies to persons, communities and nations. Given the enormous issues and problems before us, we need to make decisions in ways that will best enable us to move forward together. When people join their energy streams, miracles can happen.

The Process

How does the consensus process actually work? It can be a powerful tool, yet like any tool, this process needs to be used rightly. To make the most of its possibilities we need to understand the parts and the process.

Consensus needs four ingredients—a group of people willing to work together, a problem or issue that requires a decision by the group, trust that there is a solution, and perseverance to find the truth.

> Built into the consensual process is the belief that all persons have some part of the truth in them...

It is important to come to the meetings with a clear and unmade-up mind. This is not to say that prior thinking should not have been done, but simply that the thinking must remain open throughout the discussion—or else there is no way to reach the full truth. Ideas and solutions must be listened to with respect and trust, and must be sought from all assembled. This means everyone, not just some of the group. Consensus is the practice of oneness for those who are committed to that idea, or it is the search for the best possible solution for those who are more logic-based.

The problems to be considered come in all sizes, from "who does the dishes" to "how to reach accord on limiting the arms race." The consensus process begins with a statement of the problem—as clearly as possible, in language as simple as possible. It is important that the problem not be stated in such a way that an answer is built in, but that there be an openness to looking at all sides of the issue—whatever it may be. It is also necessary to state the problem in the positive: "We will wash the dishes with detergent and hot water," not "We will not wash the dishes in cold water." Or "We need to wash the dishes so they are clean and sanitary," not "The dishes are very dirty, and we are not washing them correctly." Stating the issues in the positive begins the process of looking for positive solutions and not a general discussion of everything that is undesirable or awful.

The meeting needs a facilitator/clerk/convener, a role whose importance cannot be too strongly emphasized. It is this person whose responsibility it is to see that all are heard, that all ideas are incorporated if they seem to be part of the truth, and that the final decision is agreed upon by all assembled.

Traits that help the facilitator are patience, intuition, articulateness, ability to think on one's feet,

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The facilitator needs to be able to keep the discussion from being dominated by a few and to encourage those who have not spoken to share their thoughts.

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and a sense of humor. It is important that the facilitator never show signs of impatience. The facilitator is the servant of the group, not its leader. As long as the group needs the clerk, he/she should be there. It is also important for a facilitator to look within to see if there is something that is missing—a person who is wanting to speak but has been too shy, an idea that was badly articulated but has the possibility of helping build the solution, anything that seems of importance on the nonverbal level. This essence of intuition can often be of great service to the group by releasing some active but unseen deterrent to the continued development of a solution.

The facilitator must be able to constantly state and restate the position of the meeting and at the same time know that progress is being made. This helps the group to move ahead with some dispatch.

And last but by no means least—a sense of humor. There is nothing like a small turn of a phrase at a tense moment to lighten up the discussion and allow a little relaxation. Once you have found a good clerk or facilitator, support that person and encourage them to develop their skills as much as possible. Often there are participants who want to talk more than necessary and others who don't speak enough. The facilitator needs to be able to keep the discussion from being dominated by a few and to encourage those who have not spoken to share their thoughts. There are a number of techniques for achieving this. One method is to suggest that no one speak more than once, until everyone has spoken; another is for men and women to speak alternately if those of one gender seem to be dominating the discussion.

However, it is not good to use any arbitrary technique for too long. These methods can bring balance into the group, but artificial guidelines should be abandoned as soon as possible. For instance, the technique of alternating men and women speakers might be used in only one session. My experience is that a single two- or three-hour session using such techniques will establish a new pattern, and there will be little need for guidelines to be continued any longer.

No matter how well the discussion is carried forward, how good the facilitator, and how much integrity there is in the group, there sometimes comes a point when all are in agreement but one or two. At that point there are three courses open. One is to see whether the individuals are willing to "step aside." This means that they do not agree with the decision but do not feel that it is wrong. They are willing to have the decision go forward, but do not want to take part in carrying it out.

If more than two or three persons start to step aside from a decision, then the facilitator should question whether the best decision has been reached yet. This would depend on the size of the group, naturally. At Alpha it is OK for one person to step aside, but as soon as others step aside also, the facilitator begins to watch and to reexamine the decision. At such a time the facilitator might ask for a few minutes of silence to see if there was another decision or an amendment that should have been considered but had been overlooked, something that would ease the situation.

Another possibility is to lay aside the issue for another time. Although this alternative always seems to raise serious questions, we need to have some perspective on what we are doing. It is likely that the world will continue to revolve around the sun for another day, week, or year, whether we come to a decision at this moment or at another. The need to make a decision promptly is often not as important as the need to ultimately come to unity around a decision that has been well seasoned.

Personal experience has shown me that even the most crucial decisions, seemingly time-bound, can be laid aside for a while—and that the time, whether a few hours or days, is wisely allowed if a later meeting can create a better decision than was possible in the first attempt.

The third possibility is that one or two people may stop the group or meeting from moving forward. At that time there are several key considerations. Most important, the group should see those who are with-

FIC board meeting, November 1994.

son concerning alignment of basic values and goals.

Consensus is a very conservative process—once a decision has been made, another consensus is required to change it. So each decision must be well seasoned and generally be relied on for some time. While decisions should not be made in haste, they can be tried on a temporary basis by including expiration dates. At Alpha Farm we have made temporary decisions on a number of occasions, usually trying the decision for a year and then either making a final decision or dropping it entirely. This necessitates keeping minutes, which is another aspect of consensus that needs consistent attention.

Minutes on each decision should be stated by the clerk, facilitator, or minute-taker at the time of the decision, so that all present know they have agreed to the same thing. It is not sufficient for minutes to be taken and then read at the next meeting, unless there is to be another meeting very soon. Copies of the minutes should be distributed promptly, because those who make the decisions are also the ones to carry them out. If the minutes are not distributed until the next meeting, some of the original decision makers may not be present. The minutes may or may not be correct, but the time for correction is past. This is a particularly important but little respected part of the process.

Several years ago, I was privileged to facilitate the first North American Bioregional Congress, held in Missouri. Over 200 persons arrived from all over the continent, and some from abroad. We worked together for five days, making all decisions by consensus. Some of those present had used the process before or were currently using it in the groups they worked with at home, but many had not used it. There was a high degree of skepticism when we began as to whether such a widely diverse group of

holding consensus as doing so out of their highest understanding and beliefs. Next, the individual(s) who are holding the group from making a decision should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other such feeling. A refusal to consense should be based on a very strong belief that the decision is wrong—and that the dissenter(s) would be doing the group a great disservice by allowing the decision to go forward.

This is always one of those times when feelings can run high, and it is important for the group not to use pressure on those who differ. It is hard enough to feel that you are stopping the group from going forward, without having additional pressure exerted to go against your examined reasons and deeply felt understandings.

In my personal experience of living with the consensus process full-time for 23 years, I have seen meetings held from going forward on only a handful of occasions, and usually the dissenter(s) was justified—the group would have made a mistake by moving forward.

Sometimes, though rarely, one person is consistently at odds with everyone else in the group. Depending on the type of group and its membership, it would be well to see if this person is in the right organization or group. If there is a consistent difference, the person cannot feel comfortable continuing, so the group needs to meet and work with that per-

> The need to make a
> decision promptly is often
> not as important as the
> need to ultimately come
> to unity around a
> decision that has been
> well seasoned.

people could work in the degree of harmony and unity that consensus demands. On the final day of the Congress, there were very many resolutions, position papers, and policies put forward from committees that had been working all week long. All decisions made that day were made by consensus—and the level of love and trust among the participants was tangible. Much to the surprise of nearly everyone, we came away with a sense of unity and forward motion that was near miraculous.

A Second Point of View
by Ianto Evans

Thirteen years of experience at Aprovecho Institute have taught us some valuable lessons about consensus and our practice of consensus-minus-one.

Initially, coming from conservative backgrounds and fearing an inability to achieve unanimous agreement, we decided to ratify decisions if all but one person agreed. We saw this as a way to get business done without some obdurate individual holding up the whole show. Our bylaws say something like "with one member dissenting." What it means is if two people oppose something, they can block it, but an individual can't.

In fact, we seldom get a dissenter, but we're protected against unaccountable insanity or temporary bouts of grumpiness. Neither has ever been an issue, but we've found that if one person strongly opposes something, we usually try to discuss it to a point where they at least feel OK about the group going ahead. Then the dissenter can say, "Well, I still dissent but I don't feel unsupported in my views."

Effectively, this gives everyone a vote, as of course they have with total consensus, but there's a difference. In total consensus, one individual can gradually take control of an organization by cumulatively swaying what doesn't get done in a direction s/he wants to see it go. By refusing to agree to black, the group is left only with white to dark grey. Later the options can be narrowed further by refusing to support darker shades of grey. Over a period, and sometimes going unnoticed, a single subversive can push the whole group to accepting only white.

Reflections on Consensus-Minus-One
by Caroline Estes

At one level, the differences between these two approaches are slight—in practice probably hardly noticeable. Yet there is a difference in spirit that harks back to the difference between unitary and adversary democracy. Total consensus assumes and requires a high level of trust and maturity. If these qualities can be developed in the group, then using total consensus is well rewarded by a bonding that goes deeper than the reserve implied in consensus-minus-one. But even with the most unpromising groups a good facilitator can do wonders.

On the other hand, there are many groups—especially with loosely defined memberships—where it would be naive to assume that every member will act in "unitary good faith," especially since our society trains us to act as adversaries. Consensus-minus-one can permit these groups to gain many of the benefits of consensus and avoid risking the subversion that Ianto fears. The lesson, it seems to me, is to have lots of tools in your toolbox, and use each where it fits. ⊕

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(*In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Cultures*, is available for $18 per year, $25 surface or $36 air mail outside the United States, from Context Institute, Box 11470, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110.)

## Consensus Decision Making: Forging Agreement, Building Trust

This past February, Caroline Estes presented a four-day Consensus Facilitiation workshop in Boulder, Colorado. I went there believing in consensus as a decision-making tool for groups of highly conscious individuals who already knew and trusted one another.

I left four days later convinced that, properly learned and facilitated, the consensus process *itself* can elevate the consciousness of a group. It can build trust, bond the participants, encourage shy people to speak up, and teach overly verbal or energetic people to slow down and wait their turn. At its best, a series of well-facilitated consensus meetings can teach a bunch of suspicious know-it-alls how to treat each other respectfully, really *listen* to other points of view, and put the group's long-term interests before their own personal needs.

We learned this from one of the most experienced consensus facilitators in North America. Caroline Estes has worked with the consensus process in both Quaker and secular activist groups for the last 35 years. She's facilitated the process for the Green and Bioregional national conferences, as well as businesses, universities, and local and national government agencies.

How it works. Consensus decision-making is not like voting. It seeks instead to create an agreement, about a particular issue, that takes into account everyone's concerns. The group members do this by modifying and re-modifying a proposal until it is acceptable, or nearly so, to

everyone. The "decision" is final when no group member has any further objection to the latest version. Consensus is not necessarily unanimity; it's more like unity, where people can unify behind a decision everyone can live with, and to which everyone consents.

A consensus facilitator, unlike a chairperson, does not join in the discussion and is not part of the decision-making process. The facilitator calls on people to speak who have raised their hands, periodically summarizes what has been said thus far, and, when it seems like the group may have reached agreement, formally calls for consensus.

The Quakers have used consensus for 300 years. It arose from their belief that there's a bit of God in each of us, and that therefore each of us has a piece of the truth. It's a conservative process: if the whole group doesn't agree, they don't change anything.

In consensus, one lone person can stop the group from agreeing on a decision, by "standing in the way of," or "blocking." But in a well-trained group, blocking is rarely used. That's because anyone objecting to a proposal would have discussed these objections quite openly beforehand. Throughout the discussion, the group would be modifying and refining the proposal to meet these objections.
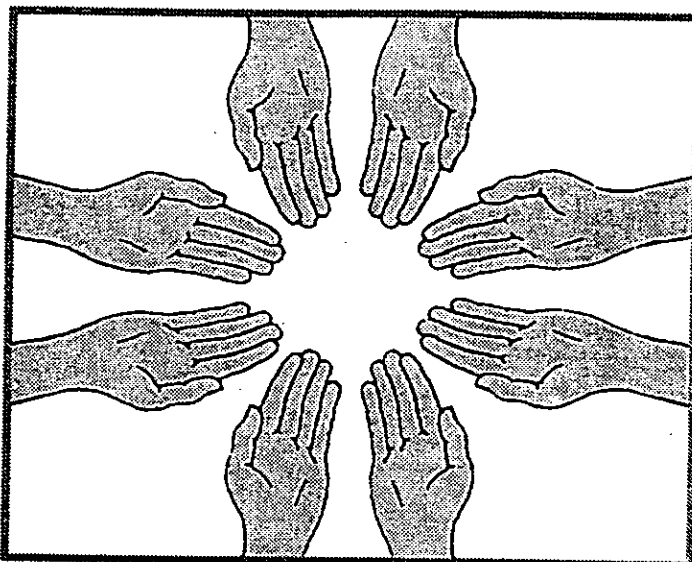
Advantages for Communities. The advantages of consensus over voting can be particularly appealing to intentional communities because in consensus everyone's ideas and concerns are valued. The facilitator draws out all members, including normally quiet ones, and doesn't let the louder, more verbal or energetic members dominate the others. Consensus empowers a group *as a group*, whereas voting tends to reward the most aggressive members.

Consensus can produce more innovative solutions than might be generated by an "either-or" voting system. It also helps generate trust, cohesiveness and strength in a group. A delighted "We did it!" can come over a group when they discover a workable or innovative solution to a previously intractible problem.

Consensus process builds trust, but it *requires* trust to start with. Caroline suggests, therefore, that an intentional community group start slowly, deciding only small, minor issues at first, such as what to have for dinner. As skill in the process and trust in each other build, the group might make larger decisions, such as whether or not to buy a used freezer.

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Thank you! —*Diana and Dan* ❧

With more trust built on mid-range decisions, consensus can be used for deciding the really big stuff: Do we buy our neighbor's land? Do we welcome the Joneses as members?

And Disadvantages. Consensus decision-making is a little like operating a chainsaw. You'll cut more wood in less time, but you have to be trained in how to operate the thing.

And not everyone should use it. For example, untrained groups—which can flounder in frustration and burnout. Many political activist groups of the '60s and '70s thought they were using consensus, but were just guessing at how to do it.

Only groups that already have a common purpose should use consensus. This was brought home when I met some folks recently at a rural intentional community that has made consensus decisions since 1963. The original members had no common purposes other than to shun the wider society, have no rules, and never use chemical fertilizers. Any new members who bought a departing member's land automatically had full decision-making rights. Over the years this community rarely agreed to take action on anything because someone always blocked the proposals, perhaps to support the ideal of "no rules!"—or sometimes for just sheer, individualistic, "*I* don't want *to!*" After several years most community projects folded, common areas were abandoned, and members lived separate lives with very little contact. Some reasoned they should revive majority-rule voting for making decisions, because then at least no one peson could stop everyone else. Unfortunately, the community hasn't switched to voting because one lone person or another has always blocked this proposal as well!

This story illustrates several significant points about consensus. First, a group must have a clear unifying purpose. Second, brand new members with

no common links or common history with the community shouldn't have decision-making privileges right away. (Alpha Farm in Oregon requires new members to attend three consecutive meetings before they can participate fully. At the first they observe silently; at the next two they can offer ideas but have no power when it comes to actual decisions.)

Finally, some members of the above community don't realize that "blocking" was not designed for the exercise of one's own personal preferences. It has solely to do with honestly feeling that the
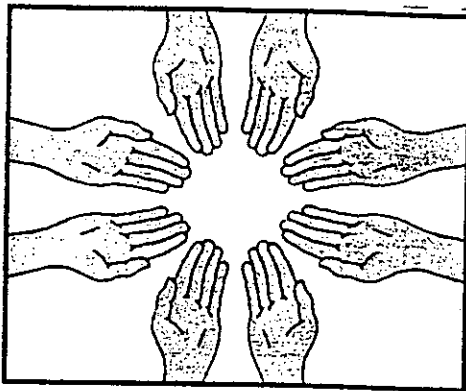
decision would not be in the long-term best interests of the group as a whole—that it would split the community, expose them to danger, hurt their reputation, bring financial disaster, or compromise the community's integrity.

The blocking privilege is for the member whose "piece of the truth" reveals something important the rest of the group hasn't seen. One uses this privilege only after a time of earnest, objective, soul-searching. ·I've heard tales of a community group, untrained in consensus process, whose members sometimes blocked proposals because, say, a member wanted *this* kind of front door and no other! This is not the consensus process. This is self-indulgence.

Attitudes. Before the workshop I had been sure consensus *wouldn't* work if some suspicious, negative person blocked most decisions out of sheer egotism, or if loud, aggressive folks steamrollered their opinions over those of timid, unsure ones. However, in a demonstration skit (in which we gleefully acted out all our worst-case scenarios), we saw how Caroline quietly, respectfully and like an Aikido master, deterred the loudmouths, drew out the shy folks, de-fused yelling matchings, trimmed the aggressors, stopped the cross-talk, and repeatedly brought us back to the task of generating our very best solutions. It was awesome.

It is true, however, that certain attitudes and personality characteristics can greatly slow down the consensus process and make it more difficult. For example, *competition*, which we've trained for since childhood; *egotism and self-centeredness,* (according to Caroline, the narcissistic person is the most difficult to work with in consensus); *the inability to feel emotions,* or feeling anxiety when someone else expresses theirs; and *wanting to "own" the ideas* you offer to the group.

Conversely, here's what works: 1) The ability to cooperate *actively* (expressing ideas or objections, rather than simply keeping quiet if you don't agree); 2) encouraging conflicting and widely divergent opinions rather than suppressing them; 3) validating, not just tolerating, feelings and emotions; and 4) being willing to let your ideas become the group's ideas.

Caroline is convinced that, under the right conditions, most groups using consensus can can build trust and rapport, empower their membership, and come up with better solutions than any one member could ever have created alone. However, in addition to a common purpose, they must have equal access to power, and a willingness to trust the consensus process and each other; experience strong emotions or outright conflict; devote enough time to the decision-making process; and learn new communication skills.

Power, Emotions, Conflict and Time. Consensus doesn't work well when one person in a group is the "supervisor" or "boss" with the power to fire or demote others, or perhaps the landowner, with the power to sell the land or evict the others.

Emotions are important because they can represent important pieces of information, or concerns that may not have reached conscious awareness. A group is discussing whether to buy a used freezer, and Joe, with a disgusted look, exclaims, "Damn! There's something about this that stinks!" Joe is not out of line here; he's reaching for a piece of information that may be valuable for the group. When the facilitator draws out the reasons behind his feelings, Joe realizes what's bothering him—buying a used freezer is itself inimical to the community's primary purpose of living a simple, resource-efficient lifestyle. No one else had seen this; they were too focused on what a bargain the used freezer was. Some people access their mental processes by feeling an emotion first, and only later knowing what they're thinking. "It takes *all* of you, not just your mind," says Caroline. "If you don't use all of yourselves in consensus groups, you short-change your decisions."

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Conflicts and differences will arise as fiercely in the consensus process as they do in any other form of decision-making. But in consensus, different viewpoints are considered an *advantage* because diversity give rise to a rich store of alternatives from which an agreement can be crafted. Different people are like the different facets of a diamond, some of which are opposite to one another. To create a really sustainable, healthy solution, says Caroline, it is important to engage all the facets.

Consensus takes time. For example, a group could take two or three hours of discussion before reaching an agreement on the used-freezer proposal. After that, they either buy the freezer or don't, and the issue never comes up again.

A voting process might have taken them only a half hour. But had they voted to buy the freezer, the thirty percent who voted against it would repeatedly bring up how using that much electricity for food storage is undermining the community's purpose. If you counted all the discussion time and conflict *after* the initial decision was made, this voting process would have cost them a great deal.

The Potential. What amazed and inspired me most at this workshop was *personally experiencing* how this very simple process—if done right—can transform meetings from overlong, frustrating, draining sessions into spirited, stimulating events where everyone's ideas are turned into surprisingly creative and workable solutions. I'm now convinced that average North Americans, trained since birth in self-centered, "rugged individualism," can learn to cooperate, respect each other's views, and forge agreements and alliances beyond what anyone could have envisioned. And have a great time doing it!

—Diana Leafe Christian

Next time, "Facilitating the Consensus Process." ᴥ

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*A fool makes mistakes over and over.
An intelligent person makes mistakes
once, and learns from them. A wise
person learns from other people's mis-
takes. —Anonymous*

HOW *NOT* TO BUILD YOUR COMMUNITY HOME

by Buzz Burrell

'VE BUILT A NUMBER OF houses in my time, including a stick-built, a rammed-earth block, and now, a pumicecrete house.

But the first house I ever built was a concrete slab that's still sitting in my front yard in western Colorado. After three months of drawing squiggley lines on graph paper all I got was a 20' x 24', 8-ton monolith. (Upon which, every muddy spring, neighborhood tots ride endless circles with their tricycles.) I've often thought of digging up the slab, but that would be expensive, and besides it's become something of a monu-ment—a never-ceasing reminder to me of how not to build a house.

Communitarians and owner-builders are usually idealists, risk-takers, and self-actualizers. Communitarians often *are* owner-builders, building their own homes and community buildings, often choosing alternative construction methods. And while building one's own home or living in community is considered abnormal and risky, these are merely returns to practices that were utterly normal for most of hu-man history.

There are good reasons for being so bold as to build your own alterna-tive home. For one, the construction industry is rife with problems.

• *Environmental:* In Colorado, for example, houses account for 22 per-cent of the total energy use, and con-struction waste comprises 25 percent of landfills. Carbon-dioxide emis-sions from home heating contribute a substantial proportion of air pollu-tion in the state.

• *Cost:* In Boulder, where I now live, the average yearly salary is $25,000, which qualifies one for a mortgage of approximately $70,000.

A well-meaning communitarian built this inexpensive dwelling 20 years ago in Dunmire Hollow community, with a living tree growing through the roof, and diagonal, diamond-shaped windows in the door. With no foundation, the wood has rotted, and wind swaying the tree has gradually pulled the house apart.

BEN UPMAN

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However, the median house price in Boulder is $229,000.

• *Alienation:* The construction industry has separated itself from its roots: nowadays homeowners basically give up any connection to their dwellings or to the process of creating them. The homeowners' function has become that of "walking wallets," who, feeling anxiety tempered with hope, watch impotently as their future home is designed, planned, and constructed with little input from them—except for the requirement that they now work without interruption for the next 30 years.

Our homes and community buildings make important statements that reflect our values, lifestyles, and goals. However, to break from the current non-sustainable pattern of stick-built, non-energy-efficient, non-solar, "production" homes and embrace strawbale, adobe, or cob is not as simple as it seems. Knowing what is wrong with a system is easy; the hard part is knowing how to do what's right. The transition from the former to the latter is trickier than one might expect—as those of us who have spent decades making assorted mistakes can readily testify.

In this spirit I offer the following top ten list of the "best" mistakes—all taken from my own personal inventory of whoppers.

1. Exploding Budget: Your house or community building is going to cost much more than you think—a lot more. How can I say this, without having seen what you've planned? Simply because, almost without fail, this turns out to be the case. The result of running out of money is extreme stress, awkward half-finished buildings, and relatives who are suddenly poorer for having known you.

2. Expanding Timeframe: Learning how to do something new takes time. Bucking the system takes time. Whatever time you have estimated or building your new house is

almost assuredly too short. This can cause career crunches, more stress, more financial difficulties, and (it's happened) failed marriages. The first summer, your out-of-state friends are happy to stop by and beat a few nails into submission, but by the second season, you are bypassed in their July vacation plans.

Cost and time overruns can occur even with celebrated buildings, such as the residence/office of the Rocky Mountain Institute in Snowmass, Colorado. This innovative, curved double-rock wall structure—once featured on the cover of *Architectural Digest*—was owner-built by Amory

Lovins, a physicist who creates model energy-efficient programs, consults for major utility companies, and testifies before Congress. Here is a brilliant man doing extraordinary work—a man responsible for shifts in national energy policy—who was astonished to discover that the project was taking twice as long as expected, and was more than 50 percent over budget.

If this can happen to the world's smartest guy, it can happen to us.

3. Innocent Arrogance: Because most communitarians and alternative-structure owner-builders see the world from a different viewpoint than that of the mainstream, one that is often more broad, insightful, and holistic, we can be tricked into thinking we know more than the carpenter down the street with 30 years' experience.

Some friends of mine in a small community were elated about their

new building material—recycled-wood wall forms that, they assured everyone, "won't burn or rot, and create 'breathable' walls." Excited about being the first in their state to use this wonderful new product, and by their innovative ideas about creating a natural, nontoxic house, they dismissed the idea of hiring an experienced building crew. Instead they decided to build it themselves with the help of a farmer and former contractor who had brilliant ideas for cutting costs and saving time, who'd work partly for cash and partly for trade. "It'll cost a fraction of a conventional house," they enthused.

My friends and the farmer/builder spent weeks redesigning the house (the original design failed to make the walls support the roof loads) and incorporating the builder's new ideas. Construction was delayed weeks, even months at a time: waiting for the engineer, for the weather to clear up, for the farmer to finish planting. Months into the project my friends realized they couldn't afford the house as designed and totally revised the plan. Then more delays. A year and a half later these folks had a hole in the ground, a half-finished foundation, a nearly empty wallet, and a serious case of humility.

"Innocent arrogance" is tricky because it's so well intentioned. It causes us to ignore warnings, not heed advice, and in general not avail ourselves of helpful professional resources.

4. Too Good to Be True. There is no shortage of articles telling us how to "Build Your Home in the Woods for $19.95." Believing these fables is the sure path to a rude awakening. If a new construction method is that inexpensive and that easy, most people would already be doing it. The building industry may be polluting the planet, but it's not stupid.

I know a successful, intelligent couple who moved to Colorado to live in a new community that had

Building your own home represents the largest single investment of money and time most people will make in their lifetimes. Without thorough preparation, owner-builders may encounter great frustration, delays, and even squander their money.

—Robert Sardinsky, Rocky Mountain Institute

advertised, "Build your dome home for $50 a square foot." In spite of suggestions that there could be more to this than met the eye, my friends pursued it. A year later they had a lovely dome home they're completely happy with—at a cost of $130 a square foot.

5. Apples to Apples. Houses *can* be built for very little money—if you don't have to comply with code; if you don't need a mortgage or fire insurance; if you get used materials; if you contribute a lot of free work, etc. When comparing building systems, suppliers, or results, beware the trap of not making a fair comparison. The straw bales for your walls may cost only $400, but that doesn't mean your completed strawbale house might not end up at $100,000+. Furthermore, those inexpensive walls will probably require more expensive plumbing, electrical work, and finish treatments.

An architect friend who specializes in strawbale design and construction gets many queries from people who want him to design their strawbale house. When he says it will cost about $100 a square foot, they're shocked. "But what about that article in Mother Earth News?" they plead.

If you want all the amenities we've come to expect in a house, and you live in a county that enforces code, then an alternative house is going to cost you the same as—if not more than—a conventional one.

6. "Bluejeans and a Beard." Please excuse the generalization, but I've noticed that if a woman owner-builder has no idea what she's doing,

she will ask for advice. If a man has no idea what he's doing, he will pretend to know. Thus, if the former encounters the latter, very bad advice may result.

Another friend is building a timberframed clay-straw house on a butte with a spectacular view in

western Colorado. She'd never built before, and asked a neighbor for advice. He convinced her to extend her greenhouse area across the entire front of the building ("It'll only cost about $800 more") and told her how to angle the rafters for the roof. Now, many thousands of dollars later, she realizes that the greenhouse extension was several orders of magnitude more expensive than quoted, and her new roof has a pitch too low for the snow load at her elevation. "Don't believe someone just because he knows *more* than you do," she advises. "That still doesn't mean he knows *enough.*"

7. New Age Prophets. If a person shares your philosophy, lifestyle, and vernacular, you will tend to follow his or her advice, even if the person has an unproven track record in building. However, your house won't notice anyone's philosophy. It will simply perform according to the laws of physics.

My same friend with the clay-straw project paid all travel expenses to bring a timberframe expert—an eloquent, even poetic, advocate of natural building—to Colorado to conduct a workshop in these arts. Halfway through the workshop she noticed there didn't seem to be enough vertical posts to support a beam over a wide expanse.

"Er, what's going to hold up the second floor?" she asked.

"It will become ... apparent," sniffed the natural building guru.

Except that it never did, and in a few weeks the beam began to sag. An engineer gave my friend a series of consultations, instructing her to install posts at strategic load-bearing points. Good advice—at several hundred dollars a pop.

8. Cheap Labor. When the plan is good and the people know what they're doing, buildings get built at amazing speeds. When workers are not experienced, things don't get built at speeds equally amazing.

The first construction crew that the Rocky Mountain Institute used was a bevy of enthusiastic volunteer interns, attracted by Amory Lovins' fame and the opportunity to work on one of the first passive-solar buildings in the country. But soon it became alarmingly clear that the Institute was spending more money *feeding* the free workers than if they had paid a professional crew full wages. The job was finished with professionals.

9. Rose-Colored Glasses. If your best and most trusted friend tells you it will cost $100,000 to build your

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proposed house, and a complete stranger says it will cost you $70,000—you will tend to believe the complete stranger. Remarkable but true.

10. Owner Malfunction. When the stress gets too high and the bank account too low, the owner/builder might finally cave in under the weight of the unfamiliar. The project now is in serious trouble. It will probably still get done; it will still turn out surprisingly well, but only after "a year of living hell," as the couple with the $130 per s/f dome recently described it.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.

With the above in mind, here are five suggestions that can lead to homebuilder happiness.

1. Cost Plus. Take your best and most realistic estimate of costs, and then add 20 percent. That is about what your house will cost, and that is how much money you'd better have available. If you don't have that much money, then cut back on the house plans—now. Once under construction, cost-cutting is a very inelegant procedure that is painful, results in a clumsy finished product, and can initiate phone calls to lawyers. If you

haven't yet done a thorough budget, then add *50 percent, maybe 100 percent* to whatever you've been thinking. And then get right on that budget—it's a more important tool to you than all the power saws in the world.

2. Time Plus. The Time Multiplier is even bigger than the Cost Multiplier, so add 33 percent to your well-researched timetable. Interestingly, this ratio is uncannily accurate at any stage of the game: whether in the initial planning stages or laying down the carpet, the move-in date is always one-third farther away than you think. Again, if you have not done a realistic timetable then it's better to *double* the estimated time to completion. If you cannot afford to be off a paying job that long, or if winter is rapidly approaching, then the best time to make a new plan is *now*.

3. Make It Easy. Reinventing the wheel is hard work. Since building houses is hard enough already, take steps to make the process more reasonable:

• Listen to criticism; it may be the most helpful advice you ever get.

• Observe failures; they offer good information.

• Talk to your building code official before you do anything else. Listen to the official's concerns, and then address them.

• Make friends with experienced locals and find out who does what in your area.

• Visit completed projects of the type of alternative construction you wish to do.

• Learn something of standard commercial building practices. These will still be the basis of your project, no matter what progressive method you will be employing.

• If this is your first building project, don't be too ambitious. The solar-collecting, heat-storing, garbage-recycling, food-producing fish pond in the living room can wait till your next house.

4. Get Good People. You're not going to do it alone, so this is important:

• Consider hiring a builder who can manage all the technical aspects. You should decide the outcome; he or she can provide the means to get there.

• It's *nice,* but not essential, to have workers who share your philosophy. It *is* essential that your workers know how to do the work.

• It is imperative to have excellent communication with the people you work with, especially your main contractor.

5. You Are the Overall Manager. Understand this role, understand its implications and requirements, and then do a good job of it. It is not necessary for you to know how to calculate the mitre-angles on hip rafters, or the correct proportions of gypsum, sand, and water in the finish coat of stucco, unless you are truly building your own house by yourself (which is uncommon). It is only necessary for you to hire people who *do* know how to do these things. Owner-builders can get caught up in fun details, and sometimes don't do the really important but boring tasks. So don't forget to:

• Create a good budget, refine it,
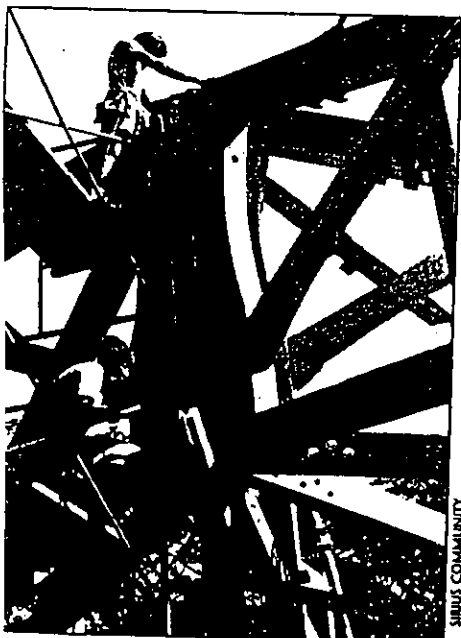
and use it continually from start to finish.

• Hire, consult, or form some type of relationship with a qualified builder, mentor, or advisor.

• Perform adequate research and feasibility studies. Check people's references.

• Write and sign clear contracts with all your contractors.

• Set the best example you can—of happiness, honesty, excellence, humility, and courage.

Building your own home is much like having a child: it's an instant reality check on your self-image; it's a path of great pain and great joy; it's something that used to be easy but in today's world is quite tricky and expensive; and it's a process of incredible growth and learning. The practice of building our own homes is what this society needs to re-establish, not only for the sake of our environment, but for the sake of our souls.

Without question, the world needs people like you, who are ready and willing to apply their personal philosophies to the real world. It can be done—you can physically manifest what your heart, spirit, and ideals envision—but not without a great deal of skill, energy, help, and intelligence. We must synthesize the home-building knowledge that exists now with the home-building knowledge that has come before: that is the future. Ω

Having never before built even a birdcage, Buzz Burrell constructed his first house (a canvas geodesic dome) in 1974. He recently finished a solar adobe house, is currently building a 5,300 s/f house using pumicecrete, and is project manager for and member of the Geneva Community, a cohousing project on 176 acres north of Lyons, Colorado.

GORDON DAVIDSON

The goal of conflict resolution is not to eliminate differences, but to arrive at a resolution that is acceptable to everyone.

The Challenge of Conflict

by Julie Mazo

ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST HERB IS outraged by Allan's provocatively stated preference for an omnivore diet. Lou worried that the influx of new members will destroy the community as an extended family, and Betsy fears the community becoming an exclusive and exclusionary enclave. John is a vocal advocate of borrowing money to purchase additional land for the community, while Susan values the community being free of debt.

The experience of interpersonal conflict is almost universal, unless we choose to live in isolation. All interactions hold the potential for expression of our very human differences, and therefore provide fertile ground or conflict. It may be that intentional communities generate even more conflict than

impersonal, mainstream environments. It's not that communitarians are more contentious, but rather that the enmeshing of our lives makes our differences more readily apparent, and joint decision making highlights them. When people live together, work together, play together, and determine together the use of common resources, interpersonal disputes and opposing positions about community actions are to be expected.

This being so, communities have a special need for conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills. As a mediator and facilitator by training and profession, I've spent decades helping people to deal effectively with conflict, and have trained countless others in the valuable skills of the field. This background should come in very

handy, right? Well ... not necessarily. The longer I live in community, and the more history I develop with other members, and the more invested I become in group issues, the more challenging it becomes to exercise my skills. Sometimes it seems that life as a communitarian would hold fewer frustrations if I knew less about conflict resolution. In case this raises any eyebrows, let me explain.

In the world outside of my community, I automatically shift into "mediator mode" whenever I deal with conflict. The attitudes and approaches of mediation fit like old, comfortable shoes, so well have they been integrated over the many years. It's second nature for me to empathize, yet remain neutral; to hear contradictory stories without

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judgment. I clarify communication, redress power imbalances, ensure that positions are heard and understood, and engage all the many other skills of mediation. In short, my detachment from the content (the "what") of the dispute enables me to effectively facilitate a process (the "how") for its resolution.

At home, it's different. Even with no personal axe to grind when mediating a dispute between two members, my relationships with them carry the potential to compromise my neutrality—and therefore my effectiveness. Sympathy or antipa-

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The enmeshing of our lives makes our differences more readily apparent, and joint decision making highlights them.

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thy, whether conscious or unconscious, can affect the balance which a mediator needs to contribute to the process. It's not enough for me to exercise caution that I don't express or demonstrate bias or judgment. I must also guard against the tendency to over-compensate; that is, to swing too far in the opposite direction when my personal feelings are engaged.

Disputed community issues are even more problematic. It's rare that I don't have my own view about "right" and "wrong," since community decisions influence my life. Naturally enough, I have a personal stake in what the community chooses to do. When the community is polarized by a contentious issue, I can walk into a meeting telling myself, "OK, this time you're going to stay cool." Hah. It doesn't take much for me to find myself drawn into heated partisanship. This tends to compromise my ability to listen and respond to opposing views with openness and sensitivity. Advocacy and objectivity don't combine well. More often than I like to remember, post-meeting reflection has left me regretfully aware of missed opportunities to put into practice my large repertoire of peacemaking skills.

My goals (and perhaps yours) are to be a responsible, effective agent for resolving differences in my community, and to strengthen community support and community skills for dealing with differences constructively. Are these goals achievable? Yes, I think so. It will take more discipline than I manage to practice consistently, but a more harmonious community is surely worth that effort. And there are things we

all can do to encourage movement in that direction.

Raising consciousness

Do you ever walk away from a meeting saying to yourself, "Yuck, that was awful!" or "Wow! Why can't it be like that all the time?" Whether the process is satisfying, frustrating, or somewhere in the middle, there's much to be learned by taking time to reflect as a group on what we've just experienced. For example, when during the meeting did we feel positive or negative, and why? Which comments left us feeling more open and flexible or more rigid and defensive? Can we identify the nature of the statements that influenced us one way or the other? Did we feel that the group heard and truly understood our position? If not, what was missing for us? Was there enough space to say what was on our minds? Did it feel safe to put forth our views? If not, what would have helped us to participate?

These kinds of questions can stimulate a useful evaluation. Answers will deepen both individual and group awareness, provide timely feedback, and generate insight that can improve future meetings. Since we are all experts about our own experience, expertise about group dynamics is irrelevant for an evaluation process to be worthwhile. Everyone's input is valuable. Over time, as consciousness grows about the kinds of participation that influence the group in positive or negative ways, the potential for constructive participation expands. And that's what we're after.

Developing and spreading skills

Take a course in mediation or in group dynamics to enhance your knowledge base. Your community probably includes others who don't like the way conflict affects the group. Bring in a trainer, or organize a study group for you and other interested members to learn what you can on your own. The more people are exposed to the skills of managing conflict, the greater understanding and support there will be for your efforts, and the quicker the community's style of handling differences will become more satisfying and comfortable. Also, as communitarians well know, it's fun to work towards a common goal with others.

Observing the process

If you identify with my struggle to disengage from the content in order to be more effective with process, give yourself permis-

sion to observe and take notes on what's happening during a heated discussion. Good observation requires the use of eyes and ears, not mouth. The paper and pencil in your hands for note taking can do wonders as a reminder to reserve your content opinions for another occasion.

Pay careful attention to both verbal and nonverbal language and write down enough detail to help you remember particular moments. Thoughtful observation can increase your personal sensitivity to the nuances of what escalates or reduces hostility, exacerbates or soothes hard feelings.

Observations can also be offered to the group when appropriate. For example, during a discussion you might interject, "I thought Ann was talking about A-B-C, and Joe's comment seemed to be about X-Y-Z. I'm confused about what we're trying to accomplish." You get the idea. As you think it would be helpful, you present your observations to achieve clarification, facilitate understanding, etc.

Another useful occasion for presenting observations is during evaluation or debriefing after a meeting. You might share with the group the tension you began to feel at a certain point, or express that, "It seemed to me we lost our focus when...

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Eliminating differences is not the goal ... their absence would deprive the community of the richness that diversity brings.

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Did anyone else experience it that way?" You're not criticizing, blaming, or judging, but simply offering your perception. Including a question with your observation opens a door for others to reflect on what was going on with them during the meeting.

Many good models for process observation are available. Visit your local library to research "group dynamics," or write to me for references. As other community members become intrigued by what you're doing, they can become observers, too. This would not only multiply the insights, but would also allow you to trade off. That is, you observe for 15 minutes, then Joe takes over while you become free to contribute your thoughts about the issues in dispute.

Partnering for support

In preparation for an upcoming meeting, tell someone else who will be present about your intention to remain detached from the content in order to focus on the process and ask her/him to keep an eye on you. If it becomes necessary, your partner can send a nonverbal message (like pulling an ear) from across the room to serve as a signal that what you just said sounded to your partner like advocacy.

An interesting outcome of partnering: just knowing that our partner will be giving careful attention to our behavior helps us stay in the role we have chosen for ourself. The partner can also provide feedback afterwards, and help us fine-tune our efforts for the future.

Using outside facilitators

However much you know about resolving conflict, and however well you use your knowledge, it may be that an especially difficult issue calls for an external person with appropriate skills. An outside consultant comes with a good measure of authority and credibility simply by virtue of having been invited, and communities are often more willing to accept process guidance from an outsider than from one of its own members.

When I am invited to another community in the role of outside consultant, I walk in "clean" of direct experience with the issues or investment in any particular outcome. The group's assumption of my neutrality gets us off to an easier start. To be effective, I then have to demonstrate that I have what it takes to help the group accomplish its purposes.

Eliminating differences is not the goal. Even if that were possible, their absence would deprive the community of the richness that diversity brings. The challenge is to work with the whole spectrum of opinions and views to arrive at a resolution that respects all positions and

can be accepted by those concerned. To meet that challenge requires skills to help both sides walk in the shoes of the opposing parties and thereby gain a greater appreciation of the other's experience. It requires nurturing the perception that mutual satisfaction is more desirable than having winners and losers. It requires stretching ourselves, reaching beyond our

habitual patterns, learning new skills, and using them mindfully. It can be done. Let's do it! Ω

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LIVING IN SIN-CERITY

JONATHAN ROTH

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We're looking for people who feel confident and good about themselves, who have achieved a degree of emotional maturity, and who can get along with others in a group situation.

We're interested in people who don't feel that they've been harmed or taken advantage of by others. Who don't frequently feel angry with or blame others for hurting them. People who don't get feedback that they are moody, or touchy. People who are willing to say what they want and need, what they don't like, and what, ideally, they'd like changed.

In our experience, what works well in a community are people who feel good, ask for what they want, and don't often feel victimized by others.

The 31-year-old Findhorn Foundation in Scotland uses statements in its brochure and ongoing personal interviews to screen new people. Here's an excerpt from its brochure for its Foundation Year:

Our aim is to embody, demonstrate, and teach aspects of personal and world service. The demands and challenges of living in this community require emotional maturity and spiritual awareness.

We are looking for those who have moved beyond a sole concern for their own growth and are ready to live, act and work in a collective environment, making a difference in the world. Before you commit for one year … we require that you participate in the Experience week and … complete three months in the Living in Community Programme.

You will either leave at the end of the year with a toolbox for personal and spiritual growth and deep understanding of service, or agree to stay for another year and join our staff training. It is necessary that all concerned feel a mutual sense of rightness.

Findhorn's brochure also states, "Participation is not guaranteed in advance."

In screening for potentially compatible new community members, look for a good history of love and work. How can you tell? By asking questions.

Past behavior is the best predictor, according to psychological studies, of future behavior. Let's say your community has published "admissions standards" like the first example above. Community members

might ask the new person: How have you supported yourself financially until now? Can you describe some of your long-term relationships? What was your experience in high school or college? How much schooling did you complete? If you chose to leave, why was that? Have you pursued alternative educational or career paths such as internships, apprenticeships, or on-the-job-trainings? Where, and for how long? Did you complete them?

Asking such questions benefits new people as well as the community. It can help potential members look at and plan their lives. And it sets a tone for the community. By directly stating what you want, you help manifest it.

Manifestation requires first visualizing what you want in a rough form, and then spelling it out in detail, often out loud or in writing. Asking for strengths, whether real or potential, *articulates* that your community has individual and community goals.

To put it another way, if your community front door is difficult to enter, healthy people will strive to get in. If it's wide open, you'll tend to attract unhealthy people, well versed in resentful silences, subterfuge, manipulation, and guilt trips. Once these people are in your community, the energy of the group may be directed to getting them out again. In the process, both the bouncers and bounced can get hurt.

Consider this. A new member who is later rejected and asked to leave may be deeply scarred. However, if the person wasn't accepted for membership in the first place, he or she is just disappointed. A big difference.

Another process from the Findhorn Foundation that's worth passing along: If a potential new member doesn't make it during the trial period, he or she is gently told, "Not now. Work on your issues that you've identified here and come back later."

Fair? Yes. Loving? Yes.

An ideal solution in a perfect world? No.

In my opinion such a world doesn't exist—in or out of community.

But our goal as communitarians, and that of our prospective members, is to try. Ω

If your community front door is difficult to enter, healthy people will strive to get in.

Conflict Resolution
Part II: Revisiting the Basics

By Pat Wagner

What went wrong? Over a two-year period, this successful community had deteriorated to the point where it was running solely on past achievements. The group meetings were tense, and simple issues were taking months to decide. The community had split into two warring camps, and despite the intentions of many people, the good feelings members had had for each other were slowly dying. No one seemed to have the energy for fun.

For years the community had relied on a single conflict management model based on the personality and wisdom of the founder. When she left, the remaining members decided to go to a more collaborative model, where all of the adults would make the important decisions together. After one year, community meetings had become shouting matches; needless to say, few decisions were being made.

What had happened to turn this kind, good-humored intelligent and committed community into a group of confused, angry and ineffectual adults?

Learn how to run meetings. Community members had received no training on how to run meetings and make decisions. *(See "Facilitating a Meeting," p. 8.)*

Because the group was college-educated and most of the participants had experienced therapy and various kinds of growth work, they didn't think they would need specific education in conflict management, negotiation, consensus-building, etc. They didn't realize how much they had relied on their founder.

They now know that learning the art of community building is a lifelong process that is greatly helped by using the resources of those outside the community with experience and wisdom.

Support leadership when it emerges. The real leadership had left when the founder left; unfairly, her ghost was being asked to make things work.

The same people who had been quick to criticize the somewhat controlling style of the former leader had nothing to give as an alternative. When she first departed, many people felt relieved; they did not realize that freedom is not an end but a means. As a group and as individuals, there had been no investment in creating and supporting new leadership via conversation and structured activities.

Keeping the community going via shared leadership means engaging in a process of sometimes painful dialogues. Also, it means those who do have a strong vision need to step forward and share that with everyone in the group. Sadly, unless someone has both the vision and the influence, things will be rocky for quite a while.

Create bonds of friendship outside of meetings. Communication had broken down among members of the leadership team. Only a few of the people had responsibilities that caused them to interact on a daily basis with the other community members. More and more, they relied on the weekly group meetings to both solve problems (productivity) and create relationships (community). One result was the growth of cliques of four of five people; which clique would take what side in a dispute became predictable.

Community members must purposely seek each other out as individuals and create bonds of friendship and respect outside of formal meetings. Of course, one may feel closer to some people than to others. But it is easy, even in a relatively small group, to leave certain people out; these people can feel like strangers after a while, particularly during a dispute.

Be specific about desired behaviors. There were all kinds of guidelines about how people should feel (internal, intuitive), but little information about how people were actually to *behave* (external, behavioral).

A lot of "ought to" was creeping into the conversation, a good dose of mind reading, and with it some self-righteousness. It was coded in the jargon of the group so as to sound both vague and important at the same time. "We ought to cherish each other." "We ought to value what is important in each other." Nice words, but they had not kept people from screaming insults at each other from across the room at their last community meeting.

Now, during this period of rebuilding, community members are more willing to fall back on language that is less flowery and more precise. "Agendas will be limited to three items." "No meetings will last more than two hours." "No interruptions while someone else has the floor, except clarifying questions at the end."

Take responsibility for how you affect people. During a program on communication skills, the instructor asked each person to decide what he or she was going to do differently in order to help the community stay together in both a loving and a productive manner. Some members found it very difficult to understand how their actions were contributing to the current problems.

We forget how the details of our communication style can matter to others. Do you say hello to everyone? Are you conscious of the tone of your voice and the look on your face when you confront another person? On the other hand, do you make allowances for other people's errors? *To succeed, community members must re-learn courtesy. And forgiveness.*

Laugh and play together. Finally, the sense of joy had been lost. Humor was sarcastic and spiteful. There was no energy left for play.

In an article about sex and headaches, the author said that since sex is a great way to flood the body with pain-numbing endorphins, headaches should be an excuse for making love! By the same token, when community members told a consultant they called in that they were too tired and angry for fun and joy, The consultant told them that joy is a prescription for creating energy and creativity.

Laughter, good humor, kindness and all of the other positive characteristics we lump with joy are a way to measure the success of a community. If all of the resources are going into the grim business of only surviving, something is seriously wrong.

Most people in the Middle Class of Western culture have uncountable riches and choices. Our spiritual poverty is another matter. Many communities on this planet that do not have the luxuries that we consider basics—clean water, plumbing, readily accessible food, and dry, warm shelter—still find time for music, laughter, ritual, theater, and yes, prayer and worship together. These acts create the environment for sane and humane problem-solving.

In brief, the community in trouble had forgotten the basics. Once they began to renew themselves with the simpler wisdoms of life, conflict management became much easier.

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By Pat Wagner

What is the best way to mange conflict in a community? How about not limiting ourselves to only one way! No one model of human behavior and interaction can provide us with all the information we need to resolve disputes; human beings are too complex to fit into neat textbook diagrams.

All models are limited by being unable to deal with data that falls outside the model. For example, someone who is immersed in Transactional Analysis will tend not to see and hear what is going on except in terms of Parent, Child and Adult. Someone who uses the work of Albert Ellis might not appreciate how spiritual values might affect a situation. And many people who use the NLP cognitive and behavioral tools won't pay enough attention to such homely information as how much sleep everyone had the night before.

However, models offer a handy shorthand in discussing action. But are there any techniques that do not require everyone to take the same training or experience the same psychological tests? **Finding out what we want.** We can help grow a community that stays resourceful and flexible by *repeatedly paying attention to the preferences individuals have for resolving conflict.* As a formal activity, *determining preferences* has proved very useful at uncovering potential problems and diagnosing existing miscommunications.

In this process, each person in the community is given the opportunity to discuss in the larger group how they would want to be treated if someone else were upset with them. The person speaking is asked to provide information that focuses on external, observable behavior, so as to make it as easy as possible for other people to act accordingly.

This is done in the spirit of sharing information, and listeners make no judgment; however, they are allowed to ask questions to clarify what the person means.

What do people say? Here are some real examples, taken from dozens of workshops on communications in communities and workplaces.

"I am not a morning person, so please don't start the day telling me everything I have done wrong. Wait until lunch; I will be much more receptive."

"Some people want you to wait until you 'cool down' to discuss a potential problem. Not me. I would rather you
raise your voice and vent a little than wait; I hate knowing someone is angry and not knowing why."

"Just the facts; no emotion please!"

"Don't tell me what you want me to do. Tell me the problem, so we can share the solution."

"Sleep on the problem, then tell me first thing in the morning."

Although most people seem to agree that they preferred to be told in personal and privately, and that they want to be the first to know, it is interesting how varied the details can be from person to person. Only a small percentage of people who have gone through this exercise don't state a preference, and a sizeable percentage are sure their way is the "reasonable" or "best" way.

How this can help. First of all, a friendly group setting where people talk about how to solve problems in the future is a wonderful opportunity to learn about each other before a nasty situation occurs. It is not as important that everyone remember what everyone else said, but it is important that the community gives permission for people to ask each other.

Also, just talking out the preferences seems to lessen the pressure people feel. For example, in one setting, a very results-oriented member requested that she be sent a computer message when someone felt angry at her! After a little friendly teasing, she admitted that she had a hard time dealing with other people's emotions because she was afraid she would lose control. The outcome was that she agreed she would try not to take bad news personally, while the rest of the community offered to send friendly messages to her on her computer, not just negative news.

In another situation, two people discovered that their very different preferences were hurting their ability to solve problems. The first person wanted everything resolved in one sitting, while the second wanted to have several meetings to discuss the situation. After the general meeting, they went off together for a cup of tea and a discussion of how to accommodate each other.

Notice how little jargon is necessary during this process. We don't have to use Meyers-Briggs, VAK, or left-brain/right-brain terminology to discuss preferences. It should be as simple as saying, "I prefer ice cream with my pie," or, "I prefer to sleep with the windows open."

Finally, leadership in a community can encourage flexibility. When someone says "never," the group can respond with, "and what if . . . ?" The person who only deals with issues through emotions might concede that writing things down once in a while is not a bad idea, and the strict rationalist might learn to have a box of tissues handy when tears flow.

This method should not be used as a way of classifying people or imposing one model of behavior on the group. Instead, it can be a neutral and caring way to learn about one another constructively.

By the way, it works in personal relationships, too.

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more effective as group facilitators. We get to embody in ourselves what we hope to nurture in the group: the realization that our greatest good lies in service to the whole of which we are a part, and that we serve best when we are fully nourished and have fully developed our own inner abilities.

EXCELLENT.

To refine & confront the...
(can idea... ...co...)

SIX INGREDIENTS FOR COMMUNITIES
That Help Reduce Conflict Down the Road
by Diana Leafe Christian

Diana Leafe Christian has studied intentional communities and eco-villages intensively since 1992. She has edited *Communities Magazine* in North America since 1993, and was former publisher/editor of *Growing Community* newsletter. She has contributed articles for the *Fellowship for Intentional Community's* (FIC) 1995 *Communities Directory*. She has presented her workshop, 'Six Ingredients for Forming Communities That Help Reduce Conflict Down the Road' at sustainable communities conferences, permaculture design courses, alternative colleges, regional educational centers, and for forming community groups all over North America, as well as for the FIC's regional Art of Community gatherings and at the Findhorn Foundation's 1998 Sustainable Communities Conference. Her book on how to form new communities, *Together We Can Make It*, will be out in 1999.

Diana has written articles on health and consciousness for *New Age Journal*, *East West Journal* (now *Health Consciousness*), *Yoga Journal*, *Shaman's Drum*, and other alternative American magazines. She formerly worked for Fritjof Capra's Elmwood Institute and the Institute of Noetic Sciences. She lives in and is co-founder of a small community in Colorado, in the US.

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According to my estimate, approximately one out of ten newly forming intentional communities or eco-villages in North America seem to actually get built. That's very few, compared to the numbers of inspired and visionary people who make the attempt. Sometimes a community or eco-village disbands because it doesn't have enough money or because mistrustful

neighbors prevent the group from getting a needed zoning variance. But mostly, newly forming communities dissolve because its people can't get along with each other.

I've met with, read about, or interviewed hundreds of people involved in newly forming communities and eco-villages, as well as founders of existing ones, and noticed the same thing over and over. Most of the groups that disband do so in conflict. Or conflict and heartbreak. Or conflict, heartbreak, and lawsuits.

A major factor in the dissolution of new communities and eco-villages is what I call structural conflict, as distinct from interpersonal conflict (which I see plenty of too). Structural conflict arises when founders didn't explicitly agree upon certain important issues before they got started. Several weeks, months, or even years later, the group runs into a problem that having had that system or agreement in place would have largely prevented. But now it's a crisis. It's as if a time bomb has been ticking away until the community stumbles over it, then, 'Boom!'.

Communities and eco-villages have had great difficulty, and sometimes floundered and sank on the shoals of such issues as: "What do you *mean* I can't get my money out again when I leave?!" "What, my brother can't live here? What do you mean he has to pass through normal new-member application channels. He's my *brother!*" "Oh, I'm *sure* Raffy didn't bite your child. He wouldn't hurt a fly! I'm not getting rid of my dog; no way!" "I have to move my piles of scrap lumber off the land? But I didn't agree to that! Who decided that?! I didn't vote on this!"

In all the disbanded and dissolving would-be communities and eco-villages I saw this same kind of structural conflict – and much of it preventable if the founders had included six ingredients in the early days:

1. They identify their vision and create a Vision Statement.

2. They learn what things they need to know in order to take on this complex task.

3. They use a fair, participatory decision-making process in which they've had some training, and they have a trained facilitator for their meetings. If they use decide to use consensus, they learn *how* to do it first.

4. They draw up clear agreements, in writing.

5. They learn good communication skills, and they make clear, clean communication a priority. This includes ways of reducing and mediating conflict.

6. They select for emotional maturity in co-founders and members.

1. VISION AND VISION STATEMENT: "WHAT WE ARE ABOUT?"
A group's vision is a compelling idea or image that inspires and motivates. It is not verbal, but rather a feeling tone, an 'energetic presence'. It gives

voice to the founders' deeply held values and intuitions. It is their group's picture or 'feel' of the kind of life they'd like to lead together.

The vision is not the same thing as a Vision Statement. The Vision Statement is the vision articulated – it's the vision written down.

In my opinion it's most potent if it's short, 20 to 40 or so words. (It can certainly include accompanying paragraphs of description.) The Vision Statement is a clear, concise, compelling statement of overall purpose and goals that everyone can identify with, and which serves to unify the group's effort. The Vision Statement helps focus the group's energy like a lens. It gives them a reference point to return to in decisions or during confusion or disagreement. It keeps the members inspired, as it reminds them why they're creating a community. When times get tough, the Vision Statement helps awaken the vision as a energetic presence. It communicates the group's core purpose to others quickly: "*This* is what we're about; *this* is what we hope to accomplish." It allows the group to be specific about what it is – and is not. It's what potential new community members want to see first. Ideally, the Vision Statement is memorized; every member can recite it. It is the 'who', the 'what', and the 'why' of the forming community. (It doesn't contain the 'when', 'where', or 'how'; that's in the strategic plan). Some examples:

"We have joined together to create a center for renewal, education, and service, dedicated to the positive transformation of our world."
Shenoa Retreat and Learning Center, California

"We are a group of individuals, couples, and families desiring to live and participate responsibly in a cooperative housing community."
Nyland Cohousing, Colorado

"We are creating a cooperative neighborhood of diverse individuals sharing human resources within an ecologically responsible community setting."
Harmony Village Cohousing, Colorado

"We are a neotribal permaculture village, actively engaged in building sacred community, supporting personal empowerment, and catalyzing cultural transformation... We share a commitment to a vital, diversified spirituality; healthy social relations; sustainable ecological systems; and a low-maintenance/high-satisfaction lifestyle."
Earthaven Eco-village, North Carolina

Notice that these Vision Statements are all fairly concrete and specific. I've found that the greater the amount of generalized, idealistic non-specific language, the greater the likelihood the eco-village or community will disband early or never get off the ground. But when the Vision Statement is concise, concrete, specific, and grounded, the eco-village or community tends to actually get built.

It is quite possible that people in a newly forming group have more than one vision among them – which means they're more than one potential community. It's crucial to find this out early – *before* the group buys land. Imagine the conflict that emerges when people become land partners only to find out they have two distinct visions: "We are a demonstration site that teaches permaculture to others, with regularly scheduled workshops – and we live in community to do it." "We are a community of supportive friends valuing privacy and quiet that practice permaculture together." Once they find this out, who gets to live on the land and who has to move away?

Or, imagine founders of a community with no Vision Statement who buy land, move on, put up a few buildings – and then start to run out of money. Now they must decide how they'll spend their remaining money. But they can't agree on priorities. Some want to finish the community building because they believe that creating a sense of community is the primary reason they're together, and know that having a community building will focus their community spirit. Others want to finish the garden and irrigation system because they see their primary purpose as becoming food self-reliant. Different members have different visions, which they each assume all others share. The group is like a hydra-headed monster in Greek mythology, with each head presuming it knows what the creature wants. Now there's lots of conflict, but at the core it's structural; it's *built into* the system. The group is arguing mightily, and it looks like interpersonal conflict. But at it's core, this is a built-in 'time-bomb' kind of conflict, with members unable to see that it's not 'so-and-so being unreasonable' or 'so-and-so being irresponsible', but each person operating on a different bottom line about why they're there.

I know a small, rural income-sharing community that didn't create a Vision Statement, but launched themselves enthusiastically, borrowing money for their land from a large, successful community nearby. Five years later the bottom fell out of the market for the product they manufactured in their primary community business and overnight they lost 45% of their annual income base. Now under severe financial strain, they had long meetings to figure out what to do. Unfortunately different members had vastly different ideas about this. Major conflict time. The community had no touchstone to return to. With different members having vastly different ideas of their purpose, they couldn't agree. Because they use consensus for decisions, some members couldn't impose their vision on others who saw it differently, unlike a newly forming community in which people with different visions were free to go their separate ways and create neighboring communities. This place was their home, and no members were going to force others out because they had different ideas about what the community should be. Several members saw no way out, and left. Now the community had two crises – not enough money and not enough members to carry out the duties of their other labor-intensive community businesses!

If a community doesn't identify its vision and articulate it in a Vision Statement at the beginning, it inevitably asks for conflict down the road. Please make creating your Vision Statement the *first* thing you do.

2. KNOW WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Founders of successful communities know the range of skills and information that they'll need to master in order to pull off a project of this magnitude. In my opinion, forming an eco-village or community is like simultaneously starting up a new business, entering into a marriage, and undertaking a long, involved overseas trip. It is a complex and time-consuming process and to not know that – or to not know *what* you will need to know – is another common reason many forming communities and eco-villages fall apart in conflict.

I can't tell you the number of times I've seen spiritually oriented community founders present inspiring ideals and compelling visions, but can't create a budget or timeline, or don't know how to buy land or get a bank loan. Or the number of times I've seen founders with technical or business expertise build a composting toilet or create a strategic plan, but can't get anyone to go along with their ideas and don't know the first thing about effective communication. Or, the times I've seen both crash and burn when it comes to conflict.

These folks didn't know what they needed to know! Forming communities or eco-villages need both kinds of skills – although not necessarily in the same individuals. And not necessarily in their own group. If the members of a forming community don't have these skills among their own members, they can always hire them.

Forming a community or eco-village also takes a great deal of committed time and hard work. Even if the group meets weekly, they often need people on various committees – gathering information, drafting proposals, and so on – in-between regular meetings. In my experience this amount of work is equivalent to one or more group members having a part-time job. Eco-village founders need to know 'heart' aspects and 'head' aspects of forming a community:

- Good communication skills.
- Fair, participatory decision-making.
- Methods for reducing conflict and dealing constructively with conflict when it arises.
- Community agreements.
- Budget, timeline, and strategic plan.
- Legal structure(s) for land ownership, and for any planned community businesses or non-profit activities.
- Local zoning or land-use laws.
- Finance and real estate.
- Site planning.
- The land development process (roads, power, water, sewage, etc.).
- And if it's raw land, building design and construction.

Complex and time-consuming? Yes. Overwhelming? Probably. Can your forming community afford to do without it? I don't think so.

3. FAIR, PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

Many conflicts occur in communities because people whose lives are affected by certain decisions didn't feel that they had enough say in them. Or, that they participated in the decision, but their input wasn't sufficient to affect it. These people end up feeling powerless, and powerlessness, real or perceived, leads to resentment. And resentment is the acid that can eat away at the heart of any community. So the third 'ingredient' for newly forming groups to prevent conflict later on is to choose a decision-making method that's fair, so that each person has a say in, or can influence to some degree, decisions that will affect his or her well-being down the road.

Most people in the West think 'majority-rule voting' when they think about fair ways to decide things. I'd like to suggest that majority-rule voting isn't the best way to ensure that all community members feel empowered in the process of making a decision. With majority rule, up to 49% of the members can be unhappy with a decision, and that same 49% will have to implement and live with a decision they may have been diametrically opposed to.

On the other hand, many forming communities choose consensus as their decision-making process. Unlike voting, in which people argue for and against a proposal and then cast their votes and it's either passed or not, in consensus, the proposal itself is modified as people express their concerns about it, until, ideally, everyone can unify behind it. If everyone can agree to the revised proposal, it passes. If one person blocks the proposal, it doesn't pass. Consensus is therefore a conservative process, which only passes proposals that the whole group feels fine about, and can implement without resentment.

Unfortunately, groups who believe they're using the consensus process are often practising what I call 'pseudo-consensus' – when they are untrained and doing it incorrectly. Pseudo-consensus can drive people right up the wall. Some examples of pseudo-consensus:

- *Everything* we decide on must be decided by consensus. It betrays consensus to use any other method. (*Consensus is our religion.*)
- *Every* group should use consensus; it's the best way to decide things. (*Consensus is the only religion.*)
- We're going to stay in this room until we make a decision – no matter how long it takes! (*We must go from initial proposal to final decision in one fell swoop. Consensus is a tyrant.*)
- *Everyone* in the group must be involved in every decision, no matter how small. (*Once we've chosen consensus, we must use it for everything.*)
- "I block! This proposal just won't *work* for me." (*One blocks for personal reasons, simply because one personally dislikes the proposal.*)

Consensus is like a chain saw – it can chop a lot of wood; it can also chop your leg. So while majority-rule voting can create conflict in communities because almost half the members can be unhappy with a decision, improperly learned consensus can *also* create conflict.

Keep in mind that other decision-making methods exist: 75% voting, 85% voting, 95% voting, consensus-minus-two, consensus-minus-one, and so on.

My favorite method is pure consensus, however, in a group well-trained by a professional consensus teacher and facilitated by a skilled facilitator. Ideally everyone in the group has equal access to power: one person isn't the landlord, and the rest tenants, or the boss, and the rest employees. If the group can't agree, the proposal is dropped or sent to committee for further refinements. Blocking is used rarely, and only when someone feels that the proposal would be morally, ethically, financially, legally or in some other way harmful to the group in the long run. Whatever the decision-making process a forming community chooses, it will help reduce 'structural' conflict later on if the method is fair and participatory. And if it's consensus, *please* get good training in doing it properly.

4. CLEAR AGREEMENTS, IN WRITING

As you can imagine, many eco-villages and other communities have floundered and broken down when people don't have a written agreement as a reference, and simply try to remember what they agreed upon months or years before. Unfortunately even those with the greatest goodwill can recall a conversation or an agreement in such divergent ways that each group in a dispute may wonder if the other is trying to cheat or abuse or manipulate them. This is one of the greatest stumbling blocks in newly forming communities and eco-villages – yet so easily prevented. Please, write out your agreements, read them, and *then sign what you've agreed to.* Keep these agreements in a safe place and refer to them as needed.

Many agreements must be in writing, because they're embedded in legal documents such as corporation bylaws or lease agreements. Others are in private contracts, which are legally binding in a court of law. Others are simple agreements with no legal 'teeth', but which still help the participants stay on track with each other nevertheless.

Forming communities need to agree who their members are. What are the qualifications to become a member and what is the process to do so? Do people need to attend a minimum number of meetings to be approved by the others? How are new members brought up to speed? How are decisions made, and who gets to make them? How will your meetings be run? How are records kept? Who takes notes, how are they distributed, and to whom? Does your group have a record of decisions to show new members? How are tasks assigned to members, and how are people held accountable for them? What are expected expenses and how will they be paid? Is there a dues structure? Many groups have found that a non-refundable investment of some minimal amount such as US $100 differentiates the 'just looking' folks from those willing to commit time and energy to the project. Who will keep records of what has been paid? Are such monies refundable? A forming community with these and other issues in writing (as well as all legal issues in writing) can save all kinds of misunderstandings in the months and years ahead.

5. GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Some people are naturally skilful and effective communicators. Others, probably most of us, need to unlearn many of our habitual ways of communicating. Unfortunately, Western culture tends to systematically train people away from any innate tendencies toward cooperation, open-heartedness, and compassion. We're taught to be competitive, to seek to win at all costs, and that we're either winners or losers. It's no wonder that nine out of ten attempts to create cooperative communities often end in conflict and heartbreak.

Fortunately, however, there are plenty of books, courses, teachers, and workshops on methods of communicating that are heartful, inclusive, and not conflict-provoking. In my experience, the higher the degree of communication skill a forming community or eco-village group has, the higher its chances of success. I recommend that a forming community agree upon and practise some form of conflict resolution – ideally learned in a workshop with a trainer – early on when there's little or no conflict, for the same reason school children practise fire drills when there is no fire.

This is also a way of preventing structural conflict because, if mastered at the beginning of the group's life, it can help reduce the severity of conflict later on. Members of every community and eco-village experience conflict, even (especially!) those who mistakenly believe, "In true community, there would be no conflict". I believe a healthy community or eco-village is one that views conflict as normal, and, if handled right, as a bridge to further harmony and closeness.

Conflicts usually arise as the result of a misunderstanding, or when someone wants something he or she is not getting (or wants something to stop), and refuses to speak up about it, or, asks for it in a way that alienates others. The actual conflict is the misunderstanding, or a request for a change in a situation, or in someone's behavior or attitude. Unfortunately, most people's unskilled way of communicating about these issues generates far more conflict than was there in the first place.

My favorite conflict resolution method is Nonviolent Communication[1], developed by Marshall Rosenberg. He suggests that the way most of us respond to conflict is with an attitude and language that, directly or subtly, criticizes the person we're communicating with, even if that's not our intention. Nonviolent Communication is a four-step process that disarms the other person by using certain kinds of words and phrases that defuses the offering openness, understanding, and non-reactivity, and thus defuses the level of conflict in the situation. We can still discuss the core conflict – the misunderstanding, the thing we want changed or that someone else wants us to change. But we're doing so neutrally and compassionately, eliminating the 'secondary' conflict that arises out of the way most of us handle conflict.

6. SELECT FOR EMOTIONAL MATURITY

This is controversial, because some feel it's not really 'community' unless we're inclusive and open, and anyone can join. I heartily disagree. I have seen, over and over, forming communities (with great Vision Statements,

fine communication and business skills, and good training in consensus) break apart in conflict and lawsuits because someone didn't have the minimum level of self-esteem to get along with others.

When a person is wounded and having a difficult time in life, he or she can certainly benefit from living in community, and, ideally, can heal and grow because of the support and feedback offered by others. But a certain level of wounding appears to be too deep for most groups to handle. One deeply wounded person appears to be far more powerful than ten healthy people, in terms of that person's destructiveness to the group, and ability to derail its agenda and drain its energy.

This is especially true of someone who has been seriously abused as a child and hasn't had much healing before walking into your community meeting. The person may be desperately seeking community, perhaps assuming it will be a safe haven that finally makes things right. Such a person frequently feels needy, and tends to interpret other people's refusal or inability to meet those needs as further abuse. The person expects to be victimized, and tends to trigger anger and annoyance in others and then concludes, "See, I knew you'd abuse me".

How can you determine the level of emotional maturity in prospective members? One way is through interviews. Irwin Wolfe Zucker, a psychiatric social worker and former Findhorn member (writing in *Communities*, Fall 1997), suggests asking: "How have you supported yourself financially until now? Can you describe some of your long-term relationships? What was your experience in high school or college? How much schooling did you complete? If you chose to leave, why was that? Have you pursued alternative educational or career paths such as internships, apprenticeships, or on-the-job trainings? Where, and for how long? Did you complete them?" I also suggest asking for references, from former partners, employers, landlords, housemates, and former traveling companions. I also recommend 'long engagements' – provisional memberships of six months to a year, where the group and the prospective member can continue to get to know one another. "If your community front door is difficult to enter," writes Zucker, "healthy people will strive to get in. If it's wide open, you'll tend to attract unhealthy people, well-versed in resentful silences, subterfuge, manipulation, and guilt trips." Once these people become community members, the energy of the group may be tied up in getting them out again. In my view, creating healthy, viable communities is one of the finest projects we can undertake. And, we can learn to set systems in place – right from the beginning – that give us the best chance of succeeding at this.

[1]   *Center for Nonviolent Communication*; Barbara Kunz, Orchidea Lodge, Postfach232, CH–4418, Reigoldswil, Switzerland. Email: cnvc@compuserve.com

CONSENSUS
A Tool for Building Harmony
by Betty Didcoct

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Everyone goes to meetings... but most people don't like them because
"they are too long and boring", "we get mired down in too many details",
"nobody cares what I have to say anyway", "all we do is argue", "my ideas
are never used", "a few people dominate all the discussion", or "the decisions
won't get carried out anyway, so why bother".

We probably have all participated in organizations and groups which
were doing wonderful work to find creative solutions to some of the challenges
in our society – only to see the group dissolve or become ineffective because
of ego battles, people feeling left out or becoming frustrated by unproductive
meetings. Meetings often become competitive battlefields to 'win' a decision
and gain just enough votes to put an idea through.

In the early '70s I was fortunate to be part of the staff for Argenta Friends
School (AFS), a small residential Quaker high school in the mountains of
British Columbia, Canada. I had always been interested in meeting structure

and process, and I often conducted meetings or served as parliamentarian in groups where decisions were made by a majority vote. But my time at AFS opened a whole other way of conducting business – consensus.

Consensus is about people making decisions *together*. It is based on cooperation rather than competition and seeks solutions where everyone benefits. Consensus decisions build unity from diverse viewpoints by honoring and integrating the contributions of each person.

For the most part, our ways of making decisions together have changed little in the last 400 to 500 years. We still operate with competitive 'win-lose' styles and 'power-over' structures. We have been well conditioned by our competitive cultures and hierarchical power structures. We have learned to focus on getting results. We do not value how we do things (the process), but judge ourselves and others by the results we get. Even though we might leave a meeting with hurt feelings and angry thoughts, if the results were acceptable, the meeting was considered a success. Getting results is primary – more important than the people and their feelings.

We have convinced ourselves that voting is the most efficient way to make decisions, when actually it can be wasteful of time and result in inferior solutions. Voting generally leaves a dissatisfied minority, which can make implementation difficult and time consuming. Because everyone's point of view is not integrated, we may not have reached the best and most creative solutions possible. Certainly our decisions will not be as long lasting if some members of the group do not feel heard and become alienated.

But things are changing. Today, all over the world, we are being asked to give up old ways of hierarchical decision-making structures and seek new methods of sharing responsibility and power. Many corporations have shifted to team-based management. In this climate, I have found a rising enthusiasm for working with consensus and other participatory decision-making structures because they offer systems which are inclusive and encourage the participation of all.

Consensus is not an easy meeting form nor a panacea for all meeting ills, and its pathway is paved with many misconceptions which can result in unsatisfying experiences. We are so deeply steeped in other styles of decision-making, most predominantly autocratic or majority voting, we tend to mix up these styles with the consensus philosophy and process. This can lead to trouble.

Many groups desire to be inclusive and use consensus, but work with it as if it were a unanimous voting process. Or pressed by time and impatience, they adopt decision-making styles such as 'consensus minus one' (or two or some number they feel they can live with) which ultimately defeats the core value of respecting everyone. It can still leave a disenfranchised minority. Commonly groups fall into demanding agreement around tiny details as we learned in working with *Roberts Rules of Order* and other parliamentary procedures.

Until I experienced how much better decisions could be when using consensus, I must admit, I was skeptical. At first I was frustrated with the extra time it took to resolve concerns and differences, but I soon learned that once

we *had* reached a decision, implementation went much more smoothly and decisions were much longer lasting.

I learned how a decision does not move forward until everyone finds it acceptable. Our AFS meetings were attended by students, who were in grade 11 and 12 (aged 15-18), by faculty, and occasionally by members of the larger Meeting community. Even though the group was diverse in age, viewpoints, experience, and wisdom; the input of everyone was encouraged and honored. I saw the process stimulate-creativity to find much better solutions than anyone dreamed possible before the meetings began.

WHAT IS CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING?

Consensus is a decision-making technique in which all members of a group actively participate in reaching unity (agreement). It is based on the belief that each person holds some part of the truth of the group; no one person holds it all. It is not a unanimous voting process; in fact there is no voting at all. It eliminates majorities and minorities and avoids the potential polarization of 'yes' and 'no' factions created by voting.

The consensus process seeks the synergy of the group to reach the highest and best solution, rather than compromising to a middle ground or settling for the lowest common denominator. While it works best in an atmosphere of cooperation, the process itself can build trust and create a spirit of community within the group.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF USING CONSENSUS?

- There is no disenfranchised, unsatisfied minority.
- Consensus gives the opportunity to reach carefully considered and more creative decisions because all viewpoints are explored.
- It motivates more participation and a higher level of investment in the decisions because everyone participates.
- It saves time in the implementation of the decision.
- It uses disagreement to help develop a clearer understanding of the issues and to resolve conflicts.
- It reduces polarization. When concerns are explored, it is rare that issues are only two-sided with a yes-no answer.

WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF CONSENSUS?

- Meetings can take longer, as there is more input to consider.
- It can be too conservative for some, because consensus is needed to make a change (although there are mechanisms to try out decisions).
- If the facilitation of the meeting is poor, time can be wasted in unfocussed discussion, the group being dominated by outspoken participants, or issues not drawn out of conflict situations.
- If trust is low in the group, it is more difficult to come to a consensus. You will need to count on extra time to build the trust.

WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONSENSUS PROCESS?

Consensus is based on a clear set of values which serve much more than just a decision-making system. Central to consensus, as expressed in its Quaker roots, is the spiritual belief that there is 'that of God' in each person. When the Quaker meeting process was moved to the secular world in the USA during the protest days of the '60s and '70s, this core value was translated to 'everyone has a piece of the truth', which did not necessarily communicate the essence or importance of respecting one another.

Deep respect fosters the participation of everyone, encourages careful listening (on many levels), builds trust, gives everyone equal access to power, and invites a holistic integration of the head, heart, and spirit. The process builds a sense of community and enhances group spirit.

Embodying and *practising* the core belief of deep respect and that 'everyone has a piece of the truth' is no easy task, but in it rests the potential for us to truly experience the spiritual philosophy 'we are all one'. If we believe there is God (or spirit, or a higher self, or good, or whatever expression you are comfortable with) in each person, then we can be open to hear insights and understandings from the most unexpected sources.

I realize these are idealistic words. If I read this description with newcomer's eyes, I can hear myself saying, "It sounds great, but how can it possibly be done?" Our years of training in competitive structures are hard to break. It has become 'natural' to constantly divide our worlds into 'we/they' groupings and to fiercely protect our individuality so we don't get lost in the group. As we grow spiritually to more fully understand our oneness, we do not always bring the fruit of that understanding into our daily lives – much less into our everyday meetings.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR CONSENSUS TO WORK WELL?

- The group should be clear about and have agreement about their purposes. These agreements are the foundation from which consensus is built.
- Each person needs to act with respect for others, and a trust that each person is doing their best.
- Each person needs to be willing to work for the good of the group and engage on the issues.
- There needs to be sufficient time to work. Good decisions cannot be rushed.
- The group needs a skilful facilitator who can hold a neutral position and understands they are a servant to the group. The facilitator does not lead the group to a decision, but assists the group to explore its differences and to build *its own* solutions and decisions.

In my experience I have seen that with a little education, an openness to the possibility, and the willingness to make a good faith effort, any group can put consensus decision-making into practice. When people join their commitment and their energy, the results can be truly amazing!

How can you be a productive and supportive meeting participant?

- Respect the input and opinions of others. Don't assume there is conflict just because there is disagreement.
- When someone disagrees with you, don't avoid them or make them into the 'other side'. Explore your differences together. I have been inspired by Stephen Covey's book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and his habit which says, "Seek first to understand, then seek to be understood."
- Value differences as an opportunity to gain more insight and clarity about the issue. (Rather than "That idea can't work", what about, "Help me understand how you see that working"?)
- Put your ideas into the center of the circle, then break your emotional attachment. When you give an idea to the group, it becomes the property of the group.
- Let go of petty hurts. The greater the maturity level of the group, the more efficient the process will be.
- Be flexible, keep an open attitude. Be willing to 'sit in the other person's shoes' and understand their perspective.
- Be responsible for contributing your piece. Decisions will not be as good as they can be if you withhold your insights, reservations, or ideas.
- Look at solutions and decisions with two viewpoints in mind:
    a) Is this decision something I can live with, even though every detail does not meet my greatest desire?
    b) Will this decision serve the group? (Rather than, does it serve me?)

After you have experienced quality and power of consensus decisions, it will be difficult to go back to voting.

BUT HOW DO YOU RESPECT OTHERS WHEN YOU DON'T AGREE WITH THEM?

The essence of consensus lies in the way disagreement and conflict are handled. Differences, emotions, and conflict are natural in any process of decision making. They cannot and should not be ignored. In fact, they are the 'grist' for finding clarity and opening the door for more creative solutions.

It is important for the facilitator to encourage the group to view differences and conflict as an opportunity to get clearer about issues, to be more creative about embracing a wider point of view, and to improve the quality of decisions.

As disagreement emerges, you can ask yourself some questions: "When someone disagrees with me, do I cave in, smile sweetly and agree only to withdraw my support behind their back? Does disagreement become 'me against them'? Do I try to sway everyone I can to my side, without first understanding their point of view?"

What would happen if you approached those who disagreed with you with a curious, open mind? What if first you tried to understand their position before asking them understand yours? Can you find the good points in their ideas? Can you find ways for your ideas to work together?

Do you know the 'whys' behind their position? Do you understand fully the motivations behind your own position?

WHAT IF, AFTER ALL THIS WORK TO EXPLORE AND INTEGRATE DIFFERENCES, WE STILL CAN'T AGREE?

Each person has the responsibility to express concerns throughout the discussion, so the group can work with the reservations. But if these are not satisfied and you do not feel in accord with the decision, you have two choices: to stand aside or to block the decision.

Standing (Stepping) Aside

When you feel the decision is acceptable for the group, but you are personally not comfortable with it or unable to support it due to other commitments, you can choose to 'stand aside'. A person who steps aside may be excused from carrying out or supporting the agreement. Too many people stepping aside is probably an indication that the decision still needs more work.

Blocking

If you feel that *the group* is making a mistake by the decision, then you have the right and the responsibility to 'stand in the way of' or block the decision. A block will stop the decision from moving ahead. This is a position of great responsibility and conscience and is rarely used in groups which fully understand the consensus process. A block only appears after considerable work has been done on the issue. (I have seen it used only twice in 25 years of working with consensus and both times it was proved that the wisdom of the block was correct.)

The person who holds a block must state their reasons. Generally the group will see a block coming and can alter the proposal to address the concerns, refer it to committee for further work, or agree to let the proposal drop.

Some people are fearful that a person might block repeatedly, preventing the group from getting anywhere. If this happens, it often is appropriate to explore the possibility that the person is not in alignment with the purposes of the organization. This might not be the group for them.

CONSENSUS AS A TOOL FOR TRANSFORMATION

It is a radical notion that everyone can agree. It is radical to satisfy the minority view. If we can create a world (or just a piece of the world) where everyone is truly heard and truly respected, we could revolutionize the way people interrelate and the way people relate to the planet. The way we work together – our process – is a key to transformational ideas becoming a reality. Good process can open up the doors for miracles to happen.

The consensus process is more than just a decision-making technique. It is a way of being, a way of listening, and a way of understanding. Working with consensus has given me hope that we *can* overcome our differences and difficulties and create a more harmonious world.

PRACTICALITIES OF CREATIVE COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY LIVING
by Catherine Widdicombe

Catherine Widdicombe has been a member of the Grail community for over forty years. She was recently President of the English Grail, an extended network of people in Great Britain with a residential community near London. The Grail is basically Christian but open to people of all faiths. She was co-founder of Avec, an ecumenical agency for church and community work and for the past twenty-five years has been engaged in consultancy, training and facilitation work with clergy, religious and lay people. She is co-author of *Churches and Communities – An Approach to Development Through the Local Church*[1], author of *Group Meetings That Work – A Practical Guide to Working with Different Kinds of Groups*, and is currently writing *Setting Up Small Religious Communities – A Practical Handbook*. For her M Phil she researched over thirteen years work with those trying to implement the changes of Vatican Two in the Roman Catholic Church.

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In the Grail one of our growing interests is in living more ecologically and using our ten acres in suburban Pinner[2] to explore with others how we can live more harmoniously with the earth. This desire led me to participate in the 1995 Eco-villages and Sustainable Communities week at Findhorn. As I listened to the speakers, led a workshop, and conversed with people it was increasingly born in on me that the ideas which have become central to my life and work in building community, have a practical application to those in eco-villages and communities.

Living in community involves a plethora of activities: hammering out aims, working at tasks, making decisions, eating and celebrating together,

MANUAL

Guidelines on forming
an
"Intentional Community"

MANUAL

Contents

Short title on forming formation
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$ Info. from IC Gathering 1998
* "Towards ----"
* "Eco" Process
(* Short Reading List.
(Organisation Contacts etc

Vol. 1. The Social Compact
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References

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Index   Intro/explanation, Added Manual?. Put 'Head Heat'
                                          Head at ful[?]

8. A Checklist for [Reviewing to join a] Community [...] McLaughlin & Gordon Davidson

9. "Consensus Ingredient" Caroline [...]

10. "Consensus Decision Making: Voting Agreement; Building Trust" Diana Christian

11. "How Not to Build Your Community House" [...] Metcalf

12. "The Challenge of Conflict" Julie Mazo

13. Our Community's "Rule" of Respect & Responsibilities" Jim [Buckman]

14. "The Peripatetic Communitarian" - Geoph Kozeny

15. "Admission Standards for Communities" Irwin Zucker

16. "Conflict Resolution" Pt. I, II & III" Pat Wagner

17. Six Ingredients for Communities - That Help Reduce Conflict Down the Road" Diana Christian

18. "Consensus; A Tool for Building Harmony" Betty Didcoct.

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