Meeting Process Manual

Updated Aug, 2005

Introduction

This manual has been assembled to provide participants with a common basis for developing effective group decision-making techniques.

It is hoped that it will be useful both as a means of orientation for new participants and as a reference for veterans. This manual is intended to provide a point to develop from. Input and suggestions are needed and requested. Modification and improvement of this manual should be an ongoing process. Most of the concepts presented herein originated in other groups. The democratic consensus method of group problem solving has a long history. Quakers have used it for over 300 years. John Dewey developed a more scientifically oriented approach in the 1930s. Recently, the Movement for a New Society has developed some very useful guidelines and the Center for Conflict Resolution has also done some excellent work.

The following text is divided into two parts: Functionaries and Process. The first deals with duties the members of the group may perform to help make the meeting run more smoothly.

The Process section is mostly a menu of techniques to be used as needed to make decisions in a large group.

Nothing is "set in concrete." Everything presented herein can and should be modified when necessary to make it more useful in any given situation.

Functionaries

The Greens have traditionally used four types of functionaries: facilitators, co-facilitators, notekeepers, timekeepers, and process observers. Their roles are reviewed below.

FACILITATOR/CO-FACILITATOR

Basically, they act as a conductor for the meeting. Orchestrating the flow of input is their primary task.

Other tasks include: calling the group back to the agenda, keeping member comments short and to the point, restating comments for clarity as needed, applying various processes and rules when appropriate, being attentive to the needs and input of the timekeepers, notekeepers, process observers, starting and stopping the meeting on time, and generally keeping things moving along at a timely pace.

In some situations (large meetings, highly charged issues, inexperienced facilitators, etc.), it is helpful to have a backup facilitator. The two co-facilitators can then divide the duties and stress to make a difficult situation more manageable.

Facilitators must remain non-partisan and objective. If they percieve a conflict of interest or become emotionally charged by a particularly intense exchange or agenda item, they should relinquish to a co-facilitator for a "cooling-off" period.

TIMEKEEPER

They do exactly what you would expect them to do. Occasionally, they may have to keep track of several things at once. For example, timing a general agenda segment, a subsegment's overrun period, and the length of a speaker's comment. Or, if the sense of the meeting is more informal, they may only be keeping track of an agenda segment's starting and stopping time.

Generally, the use of visual signals to indicate how much time remains is best since it does not interfere with the spoken information flow. A gentle sound the group recognizes is a fairly unobtrusive way to let the group know when a time limit has been reached. If that signal is ignored, the timekeeper may need to become vocal.

PROCESS OBSERVER

These functionaries are objective observers. They are not directly part of the discussion so they are in a position to catch things those more closely involved may miss.

They are attuned to the emotional climate of the meeting and should keep track of moods, point out "hidden agenda", individual power struggles, role playing, extrinsic conflicts (conflicts not related to the discussion item), etc. when they become impediments to the group's progress.

Often when groups go awry and the atmosphere becomes tense, it is because the agreed upon process has subtly broken down thereby creating frustrations. An outside observer can sometimes more easily spot these breakdowns and bring them to the attention of the group.

Process observers inject their comments when necessary and are called upon during the evaluation phase of a meeting to present their general observations.

NOTEKEEPER

If meetings are recorded on audiotape, the tasks for the notekeeper become more focused as a result. The facilitator should indicate when the group has reached a decision by consensus or vote and this decision should be recorded by the notekeeper. These decisions can then be read back as needed during the meeting. The general content of major discussions should also be so noted.

The minutes should be typed up (best on disk) and sent to the appropriate local, regional, or state GPA organization in a timely manner.

As an aid to the notekeeper, a proposal that is adopted by the group should be written up in its final form and submitted to the notekeeper for inclusion in the minutes by the delegate making the proposal. This guarantees that all agreed upon items get included and frees the notekeeper for other duties.

Notekeepers, in whatever format is most appropriate, list ideas generated during brainstorming, list names during "stacking" (see Process), and post other relevant data so it is visible to the entire group during discussion. The co-facilitator may more efficiently provide some of these functions, if one is present.

Process

There are a variety of process mechanisms that groups using consensus decision making may apply. The appropriateness of each is unique to each group and each situation. They should be selected and applied only as need dictates.

AGENDA REVIEW

Assuming a suggested agenda has been assembled by a working group prior to the meeting (a recommended procedure), a copy of that agenda should be posted on large sheets of newsprint or on a blackboard so it is easily visible to everyone at the meeting. The entire agenda should then be reviewed by the group with presenters providing clarification as needed. The facilitator should then call for limited discussion to arrive at: the appropriateness of the initial items on the agenda, those items to be added or deleted, the order of the items, the amount of time each item should be allotted, and, if necessary, the priority of the items.

INTRODUCTIONS

Everyone should position themselves wherever they feel most comfortable in a circle (the preferred configuration for effective communication) and introduce themselves, stating their names, the group they belong to, and their status at the meeting, ie, voting member, delegate, observer,etc.

DISCUSSION

In a large group format, several formalized processes have been used successfully to help make the discussion process workable. The process of stacking is a means of ordering members' input. Those wishing to speak raise their hands. The facilitator generally uses body language to acknowledge them, and either logs the order mentally or, perhaps with assistance from the notekeeper or co-facilitator, records them on a list and they are called in that order. This helps equalize participation. Periodically, the facilitator may wish to state the order of the stack or inform the group of the number of people in the stack.

There are variations and exceptions. Generally, no participant should speak twice on an issue until all participants wishing to do so have had an opportunity to speak. However, when discussion is heated, people often become too eager to speak or respond to allow proper attention to be paid to other's input. In this instance, "limited exchange" can be allowed afer the person in the stack has spoken. The facilitator, however, must carefully guide it so that it doesn't get out of hand. When a "limited exchange" should be terminated, the facilitator so indicates and calls on the next person in the stack.

Other allowed interruptions in the stacking process or in general discussion include "point of information", "point of clarity", and "point of process." If a participant has information unknown to the rest of the group that is immediately relevant and necessary to what a speaker is saying, that participant should interrupt by saying, "point of information". The facilitator should then allow that participant to briefly and concisely present their strictly informational, non-opinionated input. Following this interruption, the regular sequence of discussion is resumed.

If a participant is unclear about what has been said or what is going on and interrupts with "point of clarity", the facilitator may suspend discussion briefly to respond to that participant's question. If the facilitator is unable to clear up the confusion, another participant may be recognized to briefly offer the necessary information. This allows the participant seeking clarity to be brought up to speed so their input can be included in the ongoing discussion. Once the issue is resolved, or reasonable effort has been expended trying to do so, the facilitator should direct the group back to the regular sequence of discussion.

The call for "point of process" should come from any participant who sees a problem developing due to the process breakdown. Once recognized by the facilitator, the participant should briefly indicate what "point of process" is involved (such as an impending time limit, straying from the topic, dealing with a non-agenda item, etc.) and offer a proposed solution.

TIME LIMITS

When an issue is hot and everyone wants to address it, the facilitator may need to impose time limits. Generally, limiting each speaker to one or two minutes forces speakers to be concise, emphasize only the most important ideas, and not dwell on long, rhetorical arguments or rebuttals.

PROPOSALS

Proposals may come complete from a single author, group, committee, or may be formed through discussion and brainstorming during the meeting.

During discussion of a particular item, a "sense of the meeting" often emerges that can be put into words. When a participant feels that it would be helpful, s/he should state their understanding of the "sense" as a proposal. A proposer should have the proposal written out for clarity.

CALLING THE QUESTION

When the facilitator or any participant of the meeting feels that discussion is complete and no new input is forthcoming, s/he may say "call the question." The facilitator should briefly restate the proposal or decision at hand, check to see that there is general agreement on calling the question, and ask, "Is there any call for clarification?" If there is no call for clarification, the facilitator will ask, "Is there any call for concern?" Participants should clearly indicate their position either with body language or vocally so that the facilitator has no difficulty determining the sense of the meeting. If there are no questions or concerns, consensus has been reached and should be so recorded. The facilitator should then move the group on to the next item. If there are questions and concerns, discussion should continue.

CALL FOR CLARIFICATION

The facilitator will state the proposal and ask if there is any call for clarification. Questions about the proposal are answered during this part of the process, concerns are saved for later discussion. Once the group is satisfied that the proposal is clearly understood, the facilitator will ask if there is any call for concern.

CALL FOR CONCERN

The facilitator will re-state the proposal and ask if there is any call for concern regarding the proposal as stated.

A concern is a statement of how the proposal as stated might conflict with the group's stated purpose and shared values.

The facilitator will recognize those with concerns, distill the concerns into short phrases and list them on a blackboard or large easel.

Listing concerns in this manner helps the group focus on the concern, not the presenter or the person raising the concern.

Concerns should be impersonal.

After all the concerns have been listed, the facilitator will deal with each in turn to resolve the concerns through group discussion and friendly amendments.

GROUP RESOLUTION

Concerns are resolved as the proposal is explained or changed to address them.

To make consensus more easily attainable, it may be possible for a participant having difficulty accepting a proposal decision to offer a "friendly amendment" that expands somewhat on the original idea or changes it to a minor degree in a manner that satisfactorily addresses their concerns without altering the "sense of the meeting" on that issue. If accepted by the group, the friendly amendment should be worded into the proposal being discussed.

If, after further discussion, the proposal seems satisfactory, it should be carefully restated and the facilitator should call the question. The accepted proposal should then be written down by the proposer in its final form and submitted to the minute-taker for inclusion in the minutes.

STAND ASIDE / WITHDRAW

If, after reasonable discussion and exploration, the group cannot resolve the concerns through friendly amendments, then the facilitator should try to determine the depth of the concerns. The facilitator will ask if those with concern will stand aside to allow the proposal to pass. If not, the facilitator will ask the proposer if they will withdraw the proposal or the part raising concern to allow the proposal to pass. If not, the proposal shall be delegated to a committee of resolution.

COMMITTEE OF RESOLUTION

This smaller group should include skilled representatives of all sides of the issue who are acceptable to all members of the larger group. They may meet during a break or temporarily withdraw from the larger group, which should then occupy itself with some other relatively minor issue, and attempt to come to consensus. The resolution they develop is then carried back to the larger group and introduced for discussion and approval. It may be necessary to reconvene the smaller group for further attempts at achieving a workable solution before consensus can be reached.

DEFER DECISION/VOTE

If the committee of resolution or group absolutely cannot reach consensus, then it should be determined if a decision must be made at this particular meeting. The facilitator will call for the group (voting members only) to vote on whether or not to defer the issue. If the vote to defer passes (2/3 for substantive issues, 50%+1 for procedural issues), the item should be postponed for consideration at a future meeting. If the vote to defer does not pass, the facilitator then calls for a vote, in place of the consensus process, to decide the issue. If the delegates vote to accept or reject the particular proposal (2/3 substansive, 50%+1 procedural), that decision becomes binding and is entered into the minutes. This process should be a last resort.

EVALUATION

If the process is to improve, there must be an opportunity to review what went on and why and a time to suggest ways to make it work better next time.

A suggestion for a large group is for the Notekeeper to make a list on a blackboard or a large sheet of newsprint that the whole group can see. These headings should be placed at the top: a "-" on the left side, and a "+" on the right side. Then, in brainstorming fashion and without argumentation or discussion, list those things that did not work out well under "-" and those things that did go well under "+". After listing, the group should briefly discuss how to improve those items listed under "-" and, where necessary, ways of maintaining the "+" items. Suggestions and listings should be included in the minutes.