

# Handling Inappropriate Blocks in a Consensus Process

When a block arises the situation is typically frustrating and scary for everyone involved. While the received wisdom says that blocking should only happen extremely rarely (doyenne Caroline Estes says that in 45 years of facilitating hundreds of groups she's only seen a correct block less than a dozen times), less skilled groups often struggle with more frequent blocks than this. Blocking based on personal preference or values rather than group well-being and values is the most common mistake in attempts at consensus process and causes so much frustration that it gives the whole process a bad rap. If you are participating in a group and someone blocks inappropriately, what are you to do? Here are suggestions for how to address this situation, presented in chronological order.

**(1) Nurture solid friendships in your group.** The more y'all like each other, the stronger your web of relationships will be for dealing with challenges that come up.

**(2) Train all the group members in consensus** so that everyone understands when it is and is not appropriate to block. Blocks are not to get your way. Blocks are not because you would have to move out of the community (or not be able to afford to move in) if this happened. Blocks are not because a proposal doesn't fit your values or how you want to live. Blocks are not to prevent the group from taking a risk. The reason that blocking power exists in the consensus process is to prevent the group from crossing its own stated values or from making a mistake that is truly disastrous. All these other things are appropriate and important to raise as concerns, and to modify a proposal in response to—you just can't block a decision over them, or else the whole process breaks down.

People also need to be informed about the option to Stand Aside, and when to invoke it. Groups must treat Stand Asides seriously so that people will have an outlet to express major concern at the decision point without resorting to blocking.

**(3) Clarify the group's common values to provide criteria for blocking that transcend personal preferences.** If the common values are not yet explicit, the next best option is to rely on a general sense of what is in the group's best interest.

**(4) Establish a clear procedure for handling blocks.** I recommend creating an expectation that dissenters are responsible for helping seek solutions to the issue under consideration. For example, at N Street Cohousing in Davis, California, anyone who blocks is required to sit down every two weeks for up to three months with representatives of the consensus position in an effort to work out an acceptable alternative. Resident Kevin Wolf says, "If after the six meetings, consensus hasn't been reached, the community will vote with a 75% supermajority winning. In 18 years of having this process, we have yet to get past two blocked consensus meetings before consensus is reached. We have never voted."

The Quakers are often thought of as the most seasoned practitioners of consensus. Pacific Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice book (2001) says that the facilitator can overrule a block if it comes from someone(s) who objects too frequently. Here is the quote:

"Meetings may occasionally act even over the objections of one or more Friends. Due weight should be given to the insights of any Friend, long experienced in Friends meetings, whose judgment and service have been proven over considerable time. A 'stop' in such a member's mind should be heeded. If, on the other hand, the one who is withholding support is known for persistently objecting, then the Clerk [facilitator] may call for a period of silent worship and, if so led, announce that the weight of the Meeting seems decidedly to favor the action, and the proposal is approved. The same principle applies even on occasions when there is more than one objector."

In a communitarian context, operating in this way would likely offend egalitarian sensibilities and put too much burden on the facilitator—if the facilitator overrules someone’s block, that person (or their friends) are likely to get upset at whoever happened to be facilitating that day. At the national cohousing conference in summer 2006, Annie Russell of Wonderland Hill suggested referring unresolved blocks to a community’s steering council instead, who could then render a ruling on the validity of the block.

There are various other expectations in use to decide what constitutes an appropriate block. Laird Schaub of Sandhill Farm in Missouri applies the standard of, “Can you convince at least one other person in the group [presumably not one’s spouse] that the block is legitimate?” CT Butler (author of the Formal Consensus method) says that the group must validate a block as principled, or else it doesn’t count. And so on. Your group needs to get some clarity on what your standards and procedures will be *before* a particular block comes up; otherwise you run the risk of actual or perceived biased action based on the personalities or content involved. Cohousing groups have voting fallbacks written into their bylaws to satisfy lenders; you need to know under what circumstances and how you will invoke such a fallback.

**(5) *Work with the substance of the concern.***

- Assume goodwill.
- Often a dissenter will be inarticulate, and need support. Don’t isolate that person—instead, find them one or more allies.
- Do major reflective listening. Make an effort to fully understand the blocker’s concerns and then check to be sure that their point of view has been grasped by the rest of the group.
- Ask questions to draw them out.
- Listen for the “piece of the truth” the dissenter is holding.
- Engage the people with concerns in solving the problem—ask them what would work for them that would also address the other needs that are present.
- Look for common ground, search out how their concern can be integrated.

**(6) *If it seems that someone is blocking based on personal preference, others in the group need to speak up.***

Consider starting gently, by having one person approach the blocker outside of meeting. If that doesn’t work, multiple people will need to speak up to get through the resistance and avoid having one person take all the heat. Talk with the person respectfully, honestly, and as kindly as you can. If the group has made a substantial effort to understand the blocker’s point of view, yet the person still insists that she or he is not being heard, someone might say, “I’d like to know how you would tell the difference between not being heard vs. being heard and disagreed with.” Or, “I think we do hear you and are just disagreeing with you. But I could be wrong. Can you tell me what I can do to help you have a sense of being heard?” Again, usually what is needed is some really excellent reflective listening. Occasionally someone needs to be reminded of the Stand Aside option and what it’s there for.

**(7) *Invoke whatever procedures were agreed to in Step 4, and/or a voting fallback.*** While traditionally consensus groups have not had voting fallbacks, Rob Sandelin of Sharingwood Cohousing (Snohomish, Washington) points out that they prevent a tyranny of the minority. If someone knows they can potentially be outvoted, they are more likely to act cooperatively with the group.

The Quakers say that one should only block after a sleepless night and the shedding of tears, and at most a few times in lifetime. However, sometimes it really is appropriate. While this article has addressed how to reduce blocks, a whole other article could be written on the importance of nurturing dissent and the open, honest expression of concerns. Living in community, and in consensus, is about finding the balance.