

Nurturing Dissent in a Consensus Process

In an age of unrelenting industrialization, there are reminders all around us of the importance of dissent. How much ecological devastation has been wreaked because no one stopped it from happening? Erich Fromm has written, “Human history began with an act of disobedience, and it is not unlikely that it will be terminated by an act of obedience.” Or as Hugo Adam Bedau put it, “An unyielding ‘No!’ may yet prove to be our sole password to the future.”

On a smaller scale, gathering the wisdom of the group relies on the open and honest sharing of concerns. Without people freely speaking up, the group has no access to information with which to create the best decision. Yet disagreement can feel intimidating. Participants know that speaking a different opinion from others can create distance, and that feels socially uncomfortable.

The Abilene Paradox

There is an old story from management expert Jerry Harvey, telling how a group can do something even when no one actually wants to. This version comes from Wikipedia:

On a hot afternoon in Coleman, Texas, a family is comfortably playing dominoes on a porch, until the father-in-law suggests that they take a trip to Abilene (53 miles away to the north) for dinner. The wife says, “Sounds like a great idea.” The husband, despite having reservations because the drive is long and hot, thinks that his preferences must be out-of-step with the group and says, “Sounds good to me. I just hope your mother wants to go.” The mother-in-law then says, “Of course I want to go. I haven’t been to Abilene in a long time.”

The drive is hot, dusty, and long. When they arrive at the cafeteria, the food is bad. They arrive back home four hours later, exhausted.

One of them dishonestly says, “It was a great trip, wasn’t it.” The mother-in-law says that, actually, she would rather have stayed home, but went along since the other three were so enthusiastic. The husband says, “I wasn’t delighted to be doing what we were doing. I only went to satisfy the rest of you.” The wife says, “I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in the heat like that.” The father-in-law then says that he only suggested it because he thought the others might be bored.

The group sits back, perplexed that they together decided to take a trip which none of them wanted. They each would have preferred to sit comfortably, but did not admit to it when they still had time to enjoy the afternoon.

Connection Across Difference

Staying connected through times of difference is a central challenge of community life. And nowhere is this more apparent than in group meetings. Since the free interplay of ideas (and the resulting improvement in the proposal) is crucial to the consensus process, what can we do to create safe space and honor each other’s contributions?

Nourish solid friendships in the group. The more connected we are, the more we tend to have a sympathetic and respectful attitude when someone has a different opinion than we do.

Support personal empowerment. The more empowered someone feels in their life, the more willing they will be to speak up from a minority viewpoint. Whether it’s doing a personal growth workshop, therapy, finding a job where they are respected and paid decently, or getting out of an abusive

relationship and into a healthy one, any changes that result in higher self-esteem and differentiation will help. When you see someone start to take the first steps, give them positive feedback (assuming you can do so from a place of genuine celebration and not patronizing), and give them time and space for the changes to settle in and grow.

Create a respectful climate for discussion. Take responsibility for co-creating safe space in the meeting. Use all the communication tools you know, such as “I statements” and not interrupting each other. If someone speaks to another member with disrespect or sarcasm, don’t let it slide: interrupt this behavior immediately—the impact reaches far beyond just those two people.

Ask questions. Draw each other out. Really search to understand why someone feels the way they do on an issue. Assume you have something to learn from them.

Reflective listening. Stay with what the minority is saying until you can repeat it back to their satisfaction, so that they feel like you are really getting it. Honor the feelings and values that are giving rise to their position.

Shift formats. If you’ve been in open discussion in the meeting, try a fishbowl or small groups or a visualization instead. Sometimes a time of silence can work miracles. Some groups have sharing circles or “distilleries” that are held outside the normal meeting time, in a more informal atmosphere.

Find the dissenter(s) an ally—do not isolate them. Perhaps no one agrees with all of what the lone dissenter is saying, but do they agree with any piece of it? Focus on that, search out the common territory. And don’t let the relationships get damaged by the disagreement; make a point of continuing social connections.

Be mindful of how you talk about the situation outside meetings. Venting behind someone’s back when you are frustrated is understandable and a normal human response. It can sometimes be helpful if it lowers your charge such that when you next encounter the subject, you can listen better. But if you are attempting to gang up support for your side in an attempt to pressure the other into going along, ask yourself whether that is really following the consensus process and the values that you and your group believe in.

Honor diversity. No matter how much you may disagree with a particular viewpoint, it’s highly likely that if you’d had that person’s life experiences, you’d feel the same way. And even if you wouldn’t, they are still entitled to their point of view. Ideally people can love and respect each other even if they vehemently disagree.

Put yourself in the other person’s shoes. We have all been there at some time in our lives. We’ve had the uncomfortable experience of being in a minority position. Remember what that was like, and think about how you would have wanted to be treated.

Cultivate patience. Hard as it may be to practice, there’s a reason this is an honored virtue, eh? Except for physical and financial decisions by communities in the building and development phase, there are few resolutions that require a tight timeline.

Sometimes the Minority is Right After All

Don't assume that someone in a minority position is wrong! Sometimes it is appropriate for the whole group to shift. And the group will, once it sees the wisdom in the concern. When John Woolman first started preaching against slavery among Quakers, many Friends still held slaves, and it wasn't until almost 20 years after his death that the Society of Friends petitioned the U.S. Congress for abolition.

On a more amusing note, at the end of a day at the national cohousing conference in summer 2006, i was headed out to the pub with a bunch of folks from the conference. Walking alongside one of my new acquaintances, the song "Cat's in the Cradle" came up in conversation. "Oh, the one by Cat Stevens," he said. "No, no, it's by Harry Chapin," i replied. At that point our group of eight or ten people all squeezed into an elevator together, and the question was put to the group. "Cat Stevens!" they all chorused. "No way," said i—and promptly bet two people \$10 each on it. Later i looked it up, and can report with satisfaction that i won the bets: apparently many people mistakenly believe the song to be by Cat Stevens, even though he has never performed it (not even privately or in the studio).

Consensus decision-making is not about speed nor peer pressure. The point is to fully examine the possibilities and concerns and search out what is best for the whole. This seasoning process calls for reflection and discernment. It requires discipline and commitment, but the results are worth it. As visionary consultant Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) wrote, "Social process may be conceived either as the opposing and battle of desires with the victory of one over the other, or as the confronting and integrating of desires. . . . The latter means a freeing for both sides and increased total power or . . . capacity in the world."