

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

The Discussion Leader's Guide to Public Issue Dispute Resolution and Participatory Decision-Making

Volume 9

Resolving Community Conflict: Your Role as a Facilitator

Facilitating the discussion of a community issue is a third party activity that seeks to help participants develop a wise solution to a complex issue that mutually satisfies all stakeholders. In order to do this, the facilitator pursues full participation, mutual understanding, inclusive decision-making and shared responsibility among all stakeholders through a collaborative process where unanimity is the desired decision rule.

The Facilitator's Core Values

1. Full Participation

- All participants speak their minds
- Participants are willing to raise difficult issues
- Everyone becomes more adept at discovering and acknowledging diverse perspectives and opinions



2. Mutual Understanding

- Participants accept one another's needs and goals as legitimate
- A common perspective or framework of understanding emerges
- Individuals are able to develop innovative ideas that incorporate everyone's point of view

3. Inclusive Solutions

- It is accepted as a norm that everyone has a piece of the truth
- Wisdom emerges from the integration of everyone's perspective and needs
- Wise decisions result

4. Shared Responsibility

- Participants share a strong sense of responsibility for creating and developing sustainable agreements
- They make every effort to give and receive input before a final decision is made
- Participants are willing to help implement the proposals they endorse

The Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator has a powerful role because s/he:

- controls the flow and pacing of the meeting process
- sets the tone for discussions
- helps the group focus on important items, make decisions and get the work done



The group gives that power to the facilitator

The group has authorized you to serve as the facilitator. The group can withdraw its consent at any time. To gain authority to facilitate for the group, introduce yourself, explain how you came to be in the role, and then:

- Define your role **AND GET CONSENT**
- Review the agenda **AND GET CONSENT**
- Review priorities **AND GET CONSENT**
- Define ground rules **AND GET CONSENT**

The facilitator draws on this **CONSENT** during the meeting to keep the group on track and under control.

Facilitator Responsibilities

1. Clearly Define and Agree Upon Roles

- Make roles explicit in advance of meetings
- Include role definitions as part of the ground rules
- Get permission to keep people in their roles
- Establish a process for rotating some roles
- Offer reminders when people step out of role
- Ask the group to deal with questions if they arise

2. Address One Subject At A Time

- Get group agreement in advance on desired outcomes and agenda
- Keep agenda in view during the meeting
- Get permission in advance to keep the discussion focused
- Use flip chart to record discussions
- Keep record of meeting discussion in full view of group
- Summarize and confirm agreements and next steps
- Remind group of the subject they agreed to discuss
- Record new issue on flip chart to assure it has been understood and can be remembered
- Renegotiate the meeting agenda

3. Follow One Process At A Time

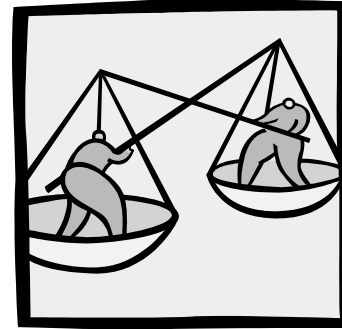
- Get group agreement in advance on an agenda
- Keep agenda in view during meeting
- Get permission in advance to keep group using one process
- Get agreement on a way to proceed before proceeding
- Remind group of the process they agreed to use
- Try one approach; if it doesn't work try something else
- Educate the group about the process



- Offer a suggestion on how to proceed
- Renegotiate the agenda

4. Promote Open and Balanced Discussion

- Set up the room
- Get agreement on explicit ground rules
- Keep the ground rules in view during the meeting
- Get permission in advance to help maintain open dialogue
- Listen
- Be positive to encourage participation
- Thank people for contributing ideas
- Establish a queue when several people want to speak
- Go around the room asking each person to speak
- Ask the quieter people what they think
- Ask people who speak a lot to give others a chance
- Float a trial balloon: "I haven't heard anyone mention...yet, is that relevant here?"



5. Protect People and Their Ideas from Attack

- Calm yourself
- Model courtesy
- Get agreement on explicit ground rules
- Get permission to protect people and ideas from attack
- Keep the ground rules in view during the meeting
- Record ideas on flip charts without attribution
- Listen to and watch the group
- Acknowledge people's feelings when they are expressed
- Diffuse intense emotions by looking at the speaker, accepting their feelings as legitimate, and paraphrasing to ensure you understand; do not try to minimize, joke or resolve the feelings
- Call for breaks or caucuses

6. Organize Information for Efficient and Effective Use

- Record ideas on flip charts without attribution
- Track various lines of thought in a discussion; point out the multiple elements
- Suggest techniques for achieving a common framework of understanding
- Suggest ways to categorize elements of a complex discussion quickly and effectively
- Listen for common ground; summarize differences and similarities

Reaching Consensus

Consensus is the decision rule that allows collaborative problem solving to work. The rule prevents the tyranny of the majority, allows building of trust and the sharing of information - especially under conditions of conflict. Consensus does not mean that everyone will be equally happy with the decision, but that all accept that the decision is the best that could be made at the time. The term “consensus” has multiple meanings.

Multiple Meanings of Consensus

- **Majority:** Most agree
- **Unanimity:** Everyone agrees
- **Conditional Unanimity:** Everyone can live with a consensus decision because:
 - ✓ It is the best alternative under the circumstances
 - ✓ It attends to each party's most important interests



Advantages of Consensus

- It requires sharing of information, which leads to mutual education, which, in turn provides the basis for crafting workable and acceptable alternatives
- It promotes joint thinking of a diverse group which leads to creative solutions
- Because parties participate in the deliberation, they understand the reasoning behind the chosen solution and are willing to support its implementation

Principles of Consensus

A number of essential principles contribute to the success of consensus:

- To achieve consensus, everyone in the group must actively participate
- To participate fully and freely, all group members must have a common base of information and keep up to date on the progress of the group
- The group must create and maintain an atmosphere in which everyone feels free to state his or her views and to disagree
- Disagreements should be respected; they can illuminate unrecognized problems and serve as a catalyst for improving the decision
- When someone objects or disagrees, the goal of the group is to discover the unmet need that has produced the objection, and to find a way to meet that need in a revised agreement, rather than to suppress the objection

Levels of Consensus

Once a proposal has been made, the group must discover how each member feels about it, and then identify specific concerns in order to move forward in problem solving.

When checking for unanimity, Kaner, et al (*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, by Sam Kaner, New Society Press, Philadelphia, 1996.) suggest using an eight-point scale that assesses the possible gradients of agreement among participants. The scale allows participants to communicate their intentions more clearly and permits a clearer assessment of the degree of agreement that exists. The greater precision permits greater confidence in knowing whether or not to move ahead. The eight-point scale is presented below:

1. Endorsement (I like it)
2. Endorsement with a minor point of contention (Basically, I like it)
3. Agreement with reservations (I can live with it)
4. Abstain (I have no opinion)
5. Stand aside (I don't like this, but I don't want to hold up the group)
6. Formal disagreement, but willing to go with majority (I want my disagreement noted in writing, but I'll support the decision.)
7. Formal disagreement with Request to be absolved of responsibility for implementation (I don't want to stop anyone else, but I don't want to be involved in implementing it).
8. Block (I won't support the proposal).

The scale allows more precise interpretation of support for a decision - from enthusiastic support through luke-warm to ambiguous support. Everyone can judge whether the degree of support warrants continued action.

A less detailed consensus framework is more workable for most people. At any stage in the process, group members might express four levels of response to a proposed action or decision:

1. Endorsement (I like it)
2. Endorsement with a minor point of contention (Basically, I like it)
3. Agreement with reservations (I can live with it)
4. Stand aside (I don't like this, but I don't want to hold up the group)
5. Block (I won't support the proposal)



At each point where a consensus decision is necessary, the facilitator can poll the group to see where they stand on a given proposal. Group members can hold up the number of fingers representing where they fall on the 1-5 scale. If all members of the group express approval at levels 1, 2, 3 or 4, then they have reached consensus. If some members continue to disagree strongly (level 5), then consensus has not been reached. The challenge to the group is to see what interests must be addressed in the proposal to move people at 5 to 4 (or higher) and from 4 to 2 (or higher).

It is important to find out the nature of a disagreement with a proposal. It is often helpful to characterize concerns as follows:

- Minor concerns with wording or editing
- Agreement with the main thrust of the proposal, but concerns with specific elements which, if changed, would lead to agreement
- Major concerns: principled disagreement with the overall direction of the proposal, which if not addressed, would lead the member to block the consensus (level 5).

Prepared by
L. Steven Smutko
Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
Simon Garber
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695



North Carolina Cooperative Extension partners with communities to deliver education and technology that enrich the lives, land and economy of North Carolinians.

Distributed in furtherance of the acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University commit themselves to positive action to secure equal opportunity regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.