

BY CONSENSUS: CONFESSIONS OF A CLUBHOUSE ADMINISTRATOR

By Brenda Singer

The international clubhouse movement is driven by a rich tradition of philosophical principles and beliefs, which are discussed every day in individual clubhouses and which determine the daily operation of our clubs. At Progress Place, our challenge has been translating this philosophy into how we actually make our decisions.

The turning point for our clubhouse came at the Sixth International Seminar in the clubhouse model where we heard people from Genesis Club in Massachusetts talking about their clubhouse Policy Meetings with members and staff, where decisions were made by consensus. As we listened to the information, a flood of questions emerged, such as: how would decisions ever be arrived at if everyone were involved?; how much time would it take to make actual decisions?; how often would meetings happen?; how would these meetings effect the work ordered day?; and on, and on. We were all thrilled at the possibility of making these potentially very exciting changes. However, I must confess that in addition to being excited, the idea of all of this also threw me into something of a panic. At this point I could have easily developed “eleven excuses not to” do decision making by consensus. Sound familiar?

I was able to overcome my anxiety because we have always had a strong commitment to the clubhouse philosophy, and it had become clear that we absolutely had to develop and establish new methods of applying the clubhouse philosophy to the actual operation of the clubhouse. Furthermore, the way we chose to make decisions in the clubhouse would play a significant role in our ability to apply the philosophy in all other aspects of clubhouse functioning.

Decision making in organizations, corporations, and political elections is usually accomplished through the process of voting. Voting is considered to be democratic, fair, and in keeping with progressive political thought on governance. It is also efficient and timely.

Clubhouse communities however, have struggled with this concept. When people vote there are winners and losers, which can potentially endanger the self-esteem of the people who are not winners. In contrast to the system of voting, decision by consensus allows people the opportunity to express their views and to hear opposing views, and most importantly, to consider the rationale behind those views. Clubhouse members and staff can look at an issue in the context of a full range of ideas and come to a determination after having had the chance to fully clarify the issue. The process itself can be invigorating and stimulating, and at the same time create an atmosphere of full and equal partnership. People who have a dissenting view do not feel ignored or dismissed, because they have the opportunity to explain their views in an accepting environment.

There is a divergence of opinion regarding the actual process of consensus. Some people consider it to be a process not unlike that of a jury, where everyone must come to agreement on an issue. The danger of this interpretation is that it is not in keeping with clubhouse philosophy because it could potentially create situations where one person held the “power” and the clubhouse was held up indefinitely before a decision was made. The opportunity to hear all views, have an open discussion, and have the group come to a determination regarding the “general sense” of the group appeared to be the preferred model of consensus for the clubhouse community.

We realize, though, that the process of consensus would only work in an environment where the conditions were safe, positive, and in keeping with clubhouse values and philosophy. The

first step in our adopting a forum for clubhouse decision-making, then, was to establish ground rules to ensure that the kind of environment would prevail in the meetings.

A group of members and staff began to meet every Wednesday afternoon at 3:30 p.m., and discuss the basic framework for consensus. A staff worker and a member who audited the decision making session at the Sixth International Seminar became the co-facilitators for several of the initial meetings. The group's first task was to work through and accept a definition of consensus, and then to develop ground rules to create a conducive environment within which the decision-making process could occur.

Over a period of months, ground rules emerged which were eventually accepted by the group. These were: house meetings will be conducted in a manner consistent with clubhouse philosophy; decisions will be made on the basis of consensus; members and staff will respect each others' opinions and give each other the opportunity to express their views; meeting participants will stay on topic, allowing for meaningful and productive discussion; only language which connotes respect will be used in the meeting; and participants should remain throughout the entire meeting, giving everyone the opportunity to be heard without interruption.

In addition, the group decided to operate the meetings with co-facilitators. A member and a staff person present at the meeting would volunteer to be co-facilitators at the next meeting, giving as many people as possible the opportunity to take on the leadership role. We also asked for a pair of volunteers to record the discussions at each meeting. The recorders would indicate the date, topic(s) summary, and topic(s) to be held over for the next meeting. These summaries of the clubhouse consensus meetings would then be published in the Progress Place newsletter, The Pipeline, and then cut out of the Pipeline and put into a book located in the meeting room. We wanted an on-going record of the meetings in order to provide information for people not present at the meetings, as well as to serve as a reference for previous clubhouse decisions.

There were many operational issues which needed to be decided such as the location, time and duration of the meeting; the agenda and where to post it; the priority of agenda items to be discussed; the frequency with which we would discuss the same topic if a decision was not reached at a meeting; and the necessity for a quorum.

The most valuable part of working through the operational procedures was the creation of a community which was experimenting with a new way of reaching decisions. Working through the logistics of the process of consensus provided reassurance that it could happen despite the hard work and, at times, frustration with the steps. Results of many months of collective effort built a community spirit and camaraderie amongst everyone who participated. People felt a real sense of accomplishment, a feeling that their ideas could indeed shape the operation of the clubhouse community and its future direction. Each participant's issues were as important and as valued as any other person in the community. The process itself provides a safety net where a divergence of opinion could be heard in a supportive and non-judgemental environment.

Once the logistics and ground rules were in place, the first issue we confronted as a group was that of smoking in the clubhouse. The issue took several months of discussion before consensus was finally reached on this very difficult topic. As it had been part of a heated debate for a lengthy period prior to being discussed at the meetings, people were very concerned as to whether it could ever be resolved. The ultimately successful resolution of this controversial topic, however, validated the effectiveness of the process and encouraged people to participate. Examples of subsequent topics which we have dealt with in our meeting are stealing in the

clubhouse; housing for couples; operating hours for the evening/weekend program; and outstanding loans.

Participating in the process of consensus has given us all an opportunity to understand each other outside the work ordered day. As we have struggled together to work through issues, we have developed new and positive relationships with people from our entire clubhouse community. We experienced ourselves as people trying hard to resolve an issue together, and to make a decision important to our clubhouse. The decisions were not made in the best interests of each us selfishly, but in the best interest of our whole community. As relationships are paramount to our clubhouse world and value system, we continue to hone the process of reaching consensus so that our relationships are strengthened in the process.

Each week new people attend the meeting. There is a natural flow of people to and from the units. People return to the units and relay decisions and this usually motivates new people to come and get involved in an issue of importance to them. Our clubhouse is large and it is not easy for people to feel connected with the entire clubhouse. The consensus meetings give us the opportunity to be part of a forum which brings us together.

After experimenting with decision making through consensus for a period of six months, the clubhouse community reviewed some of the basic guidelines. Members and staff found that there was a lack of clarity around “the general sense of the group”. Initially there was a strong feeling that consensus could not be reached if one or two members did not agree. There was considerable discussion around ensuring that the opinions of all participants were heard and respected. The community finally decided that if two thirds of the group seemed to agree and the issue had been thoroughly and sensitively dealt with by everyone, then consensus could indeed be reached.

We found that the role of facilitator, whose job it is to determine when and if consensus has been reached, is not an easy one. The facilitator has to remain “content free”, but often finds it difficult not to deviate from the role and express his or her own opinions. Undoubtedly, as more staff and members have experience with this role, a sense of comfort and a level of expertise will begin to emerge.

The process of decision making by consensus is, in fact, a powerful and regenerative process in the clubhouse. Initially, however, staff and members may be overwhelmed by the logistics or fearful and threatened by some aspect of the process. As our clubhouse director, my worst fears were around the timeliness of decisions, and the fear that if the process moved too slowly it could potentially paralyze the organization and bring it to a grinding halt.

The reality, though, is that only those decisions which are of current concern to the community are brought forward for discussion, and the community has been fully aware of the time factors involved in making decisions. In addition, the community is very well aware of other constraints in making decisions, such as decisions which involve the need for more resources (human resources, fiscal resources or capital items). At times there is consensus that research needs to be carried out, or that more information is needed before a decision can be made.

I have found that the consensus process teaches people a dramatically different way of thinking and approaching issues, and I myself have been significantly changed through this process. In the past, I would come to a meeting with my mind made up. If I knew what was on the agenda, then I invariably had an opinion. In fact, I had an opinion on everything! The process of consensus building in the club, though, has changed all of that. After listening to the discussions and the many views expressed, and witnessing the respect and sensitivity the

participants show toward one another, I have found myself willing to change my mind. In fact, participation in this process has actually changed my approach to issues entirely. I have started to become a truly “open” human being.

Consequently, the process has also revolutionized the way I work. I don't have the weight of the world on my shoulders any more. It is a pleasure, a joy, and a relief to have the opportunity to share the burden of decision-making with my whole community. For me, this experience has given new meaning to the word partnership.

The process of decision making by consensus has been in effect for over a year now at our clubhouse. From an administrative viewpoint, it is an efficient process. When feedback is needed on an issue, there is a ready group of willing people who have expertise in making decisions and using the process to examine all aspects of an issue. It is a process which challenges all of us who participate in it, including myself. It is a process which has brought a new depth to our relationships, and a process which has helped to unite our clubhouse. Indeed, it is a process which is as organic and dynamic as the clubhouse communities from which it emerges.

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