

Quick Decision Making Using Consensus

Why use this exercise?

- Direct actions can be (at times) fast moving and ever changing. They rarely go entirely to plan. It's therefore essential that any group needs a method of making quick decisions during actions.
- Because we work often with an [affinity group](#) model, and because affinity groups are non-hierarchical and value autonomy, it seems appropriate to use a [consensus](#) based decision making process.
- Even with groups who aren't (yet) committed to a democratic grassroots model Quick Consensus Decision Making (QCDM) has practical advantages: it creates decisions that people are more committed to and therefore more likely to implement or abide by; it's empowering to use.

Issues to explore

- *Effective decision making* – is a decision effective if it gets implemented but leaves people feeling undervalued and disillusioned? Is a decision effective if everyone really enjoyed making it but nothing got done? Where does the balance lie?
- *Personal power versus co-operating with a group* – Does QCDM threaten personal autonomy or enhance it? How do we suspend our personal agendas to work towards a group agenda?
- *Making the best possible decision in the time available* – QCDM won't make the same decision as a 4 hour long meeting, but in an action you rarely have 4 hours.
- *The role of the facilitator in QCDM* – which facilitation tools are appropriate?

How to run the exercise:

The details of the exercise will depend on the length of time you've got. This assumes you've only got around 45 minutes.

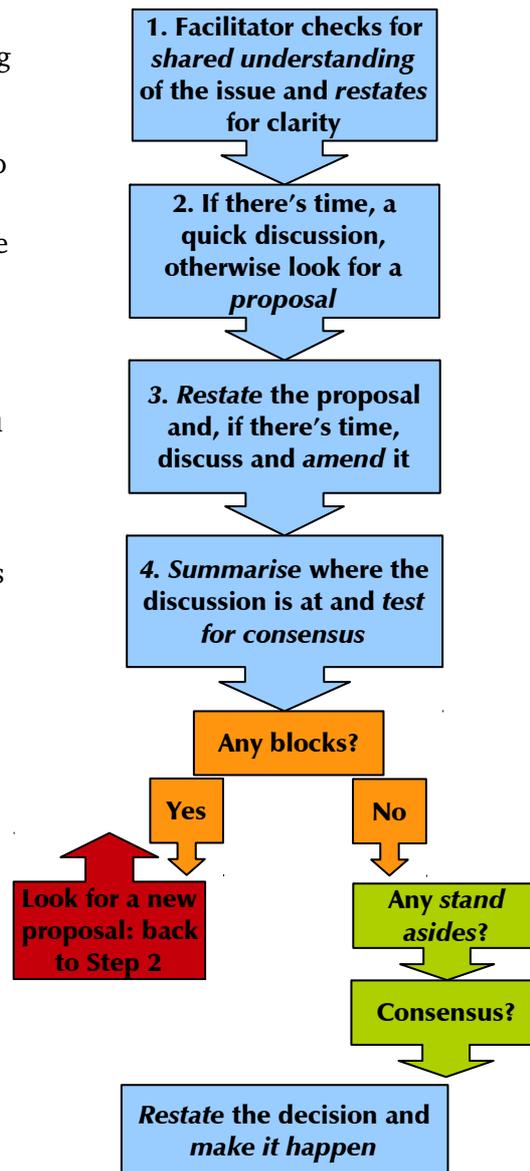
1. Introduce the need for quick decisions on actions. Explain that for this exercise

you're going to be looking at a consensus based model

2. If you feel you have time you can then introduce the theory behind consensus – in the limited time you've got that probably means a short presentation. Some ideas on what you might cover follow:
 - Consensus is a *state of mind* that values:
 - *Group working* – it assumes an awareness that the group is bigger than the sum of the individuals
 - *Participation* – it requires and encourages everyone to engage
 - *Democracy* - power is equal throughout the group in a consensus based decision
 - *Equality and diversity* – it avoids the usual “oppressive” behaviours and actively discourages domination on account of gender, race, sexuality or any of the other usual isms
 - *Co-operation* – it works towards a common group goal and attempts to find win-win solutions to a group's problems by looking for decisions that everyone is happy to implement. In doing so it avoids isolating and alienating minorities. It's a synthesis of the best elements of everyone's thinking.
 - *Trust* - in each other and in the fact that consensus works
 - Consensus is *task orientated* - it is by definition about making effective decisions
 - All participants must share an understanding of the consensus model the group is using and of the state of mind (above)
3. Explain the Quick Consensus model covering the following points:
 - Start by ensuring that there's clarity on what decision needs to be made and how much time there is to make

it

- Facilitation - restating & summarising the problem and proposed solutions to save time
 - Clear use of language to avoid confusion (say “I propose...” so that people know to pay attention, don't say “block” when you mean “stand aside” etc)
 - Making proposals (& friendly amendments if there's time!) - is there time for a period of reflection or discussion, or are you looking for the first proposal someone can think of?
 - The use of the block and how it varies from a stand aside – the block as a total veto because:
 - the decision will *destroy group cohesion* (even one person leaving the group does this)
 - the *discussion is paralysed* and time is ticking so you block to kill the proposal and make room for a new one
 - The use of a stand aside (non support or support but inability to actively participate)
 - Implementing the decision – who will do what?
4. Give the participants the chance to clarify anything they are unsure about. You may have time for more general questions – but be aware that any introduction to consensus can lead to a lot of questions, many of which are fascinating but not directly relevant! Offer to speak to people after the workshop or in a break and



answer their questions then, or refer them to other resources.

5. Split people into small groups – 5-6 people in each group works well. Once they have settled down, explain to them what's going to happen: you will read out a scenario and they will have a short time to come to a consensus decision using the model you've outlined previously.
6. Ask each group to appoint a facilitator for the first scenario, if necessary elaborating (briefly) on the role of the facilitator.
7. Start the clock!
8. Observe the roleplay, noting any particularly good / bad / interesting events.
9. Stop the roleplay after the required time and ask which group came to a decision. You may have to be quite firm to stop people talking – they may carry on if they're focused on making the decision.
10. Facilitate a short debrief. Start by explaining that you're not so interested in what they decided to do as in how they did it. *What happened? Which groups made a decision? Was it a decision that everyone was happy with? If not, why not? What can they learn for next time?* Use your observations to provoke response if need be (“*this group seemed to make a decision and then sat back without deciding who would implement it.. is that a fair observation?*”)
11. Repeat with at least another 2 scenarios, appointing a new facilitator in each group for each scenario. It will normally take at least 3 scenarios for people to get the hang of the process.

Example Scenarios:

Customise the list of scenarios to make them more relevant to your group and to have an idea of the running order. We usually start by giving the group 3 to 5 minutes to make the first decision and working down to 30 second decisions.

- *You are taking part in a sit down protest outside a government building. The police have told you that you have 5 minutes to move out of the road and behind their cordon, or they will move in and arrest you all (5 mins)*
- *Your affinity group is participating in an action which has groundrules that include no property damage. Another affinity group is preparing to spray-paint messages on one of the buildings. Unbeknownst to them a TV crew is setting up to film them spray painting (2 min)*
- *You are a support affinity group acting as legal observers for an action. The police have ordered you to move away behind a police cordon 50 yards away, threatening arrest. They have started clearing protesters using what you regard to be excessive force. The protesters are calling for legal observers. (1 min)*
- *One member of the affinity group is feeling panicky and wants to leave the protest now. The police are moving in to arrest everyone. (1 min)*
- *You are taking part in a sit down blockade of a gate at a military base. The guards are momentarily distracted by another protester trying to climb the fence, and the gate is unguarded. You had not planned to enter the base but.... (30 secs)*
- *You see a fellow protester (from another affinity group) being treated with excessive force as the police carry them to a police transit (30 secs)*
- *You're an affinity group taking part in a large mobilisation around [insert Unpopular Head of State]'s visit to the UK. You're walking away from the main protest to go find something to eat. As you walk down a side street you see a limousine with a police escort coming towards you down the street.... (30 secs)*

Time:

You can do a whistlestop tour of QCDM in 30 minutes, but you'll only have time to practice 3 scenarios and won't have time for the background concepts to consensus. You can also fill 2 hours and make it a workshop in itself, or anything in between the two.

Materials:

Flipcharts or handouts of the QCDM model are useful for the practice session.s

Notes:

- QCDM raises lots of issues. You will find that some of the small groups don't get any decisions made in the time you've got. This can leave people feeling unsatisfied and even disempowered. You need to counter this by reassuring them that it does take practice, and finding positive things from their experience (Did they improve? They're likely to be the groups who did the most learning – can you illustrate that for them?).
- These roleplays often get the group buzzing, which is very positive, but it can then be difficult to facilitate the debrief. Some groups will want to keep talking amongst themselves and conduct a post mortem of their last decision. Be prepared to facilitate firmly to get and hold people's attention on learning the lessons. You can of course give people a few minutes to debrief as a small group before coming together in a plenary session
- It's common for participants to want to focus on the task – they want to know what other groups decided, or share their decisions. If you've got time, this is fine, but sooner or later you'll need to focus them on the *process*. They're learning a process to make decisions – the decisions they make are less important in this context. You can make this easier by saying at the start that you won't be asking for feedback on the decision themselves, but on how they were reached.
- Common problems that you should be aware of, highlight and offer solutions for (or get solutions from the group) include:

- Facilitators feeling they need to make all the proposals or make the decision on behalf of the group
- Groups making a decision but not delegating the implementation of it
- People volunteering others to take on roles – probably best avoided (“OK, so we need someone to step into the road and stop the convoy, any volunteers?” ...“Jo will do it!”) but often happens
- People not volunteering to take on roles. In QCDDM it's important that the group achieves its goals but not that any one individual does. Sometimes you'll need to highlight this. People might need to step out of the action limelight into a support role unexpectedly, for example.
- Counter proposals. A group will find it almost impossible to coherently discuss 2 proposals simultaneously and it will usually lead to paralysis. Encourage groups to take one proposal at a time, using the block to kill off proposals if need be, or reflection to ensure that when proposals do emerge they are at least partly thought out.

Variations:

Longer Workshop: If you have the luxury of more time there's plenty more you can do. You could think about adding in sessions:

- the history of consensus
- facilitating quick decision making
- more scenario practice, possibly changing the make up of the group so that the dynamic changes each time (different people, larger group size etc)
- opening roleplay – throwing the participants into the deep end by asking them to get into groups and make an urgent decision against the clock. Debriefing what worked well? what didn't? how decisions were made? were they democratic? This will almost certainly throw up lots of issues that you can then solve in the rest of the workshop by introducing consensus.

Quick Decisions without a model: some

trainers do run quick decision making exercises without 'teaching' the consensus model, and use the debriefs to highlight the issues to do with democracy and power in the group.

Larger group practice: If you want to offer extra challenges, after a few practice scenarios, bring 2 or 3 small groups together to form larger group (say 10-12 people) and see how they do when the group size increases.

Glossary

Block: the power that every group member has to prevent a *proposal* going forward. In QCDDM a block is usually only used to (1) ensure the group sticks to its agreed core principles or (2) to move a group on when the discussion around the proposal is tying the group in knots and the clock is ticking.

Friendly Amendment: the process of making small amendments or additions to a proposal to improve it, when there is enough time.

Proposal: a suggested course of action, normally synthesised out of the best elements of all the ideas discussed. In an urgent situation it may have to be the first concrete idea a group can come up with .

Stand aside: to consent but not agree. In other words to step back from participating in making the decision happen because of some level of disagreement with it,. But standing aside consents to the rest of the group taking that course of action without damaging long-term relationships between those that stand aside and those that agree. Note, in quick consensus if too many people stand aside a proposal may not be viable