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Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries

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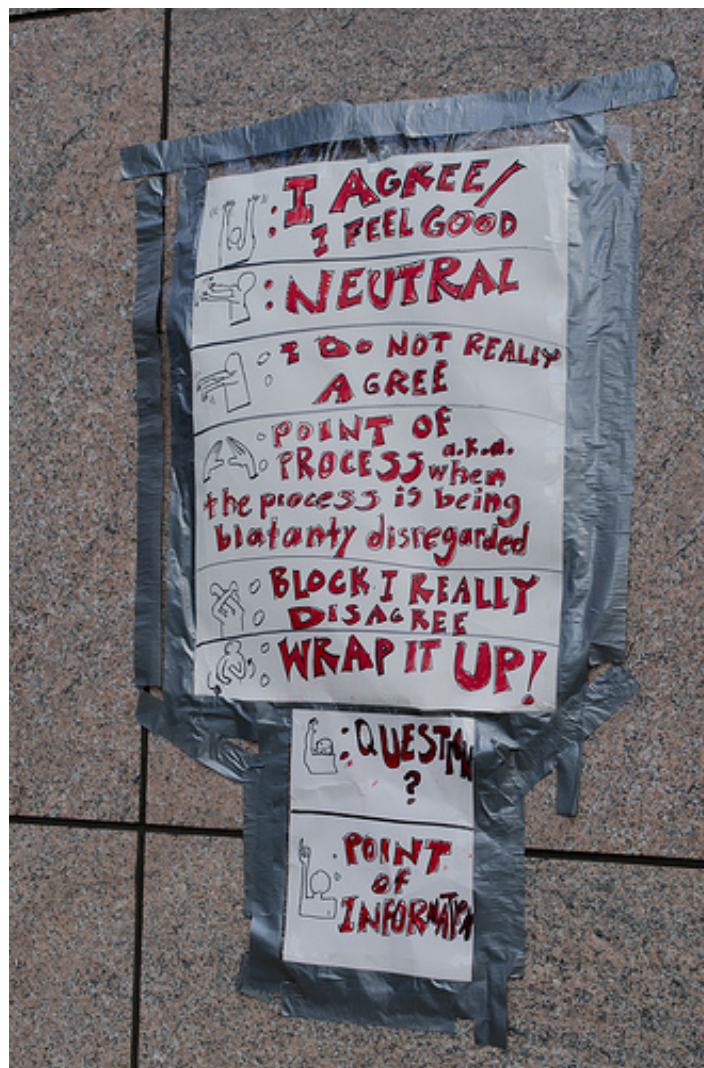
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Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries

Posted By [Emily Ford](#) On January 25, 2012 @ 6:00 am In [Uncategorized](#) | [15 Comments](#)

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Introduction

Since Occupy Wall Street finally started getting mainstream media coverage, the idea of consensus decision-making seems to have permeated our American psyche. For me, it was waking up to a [story on NPR's Morning Edition](#) that I couldn't shake. The story featured a discussion of the group meetings and decision-making process occurring in Zuccotti Park, where protesters deliberated their need for sleeping bags (Chace, 2011). Despite the somewhat flip tone of the piece, it stuck with me.

The Occupy Librarianship trope hit the blogs a few weeks later, and we at Lead Pipe chimed in with our group post [Occupy Librarianship: 5 Variations on a Theme](#) (Bonfield, Frierson, Ford, Leeder, & Vrabel, 2011). Consensus was also on my mind at work. We had recently begun a [search](#) for a new University Librarian, so discussions about our visions for the library

and qualities desired for incoming administrators had been abundant. (I even found myself wondering if we needed a [human microphone](#) in our Public Services Meetings.)

I began questioning what I thought I knew about consensus: In professional organizations and in the work places are we understanding and engaging in consensus decision-making in a way that is wholly democratic? Do we understand consensus decision-making theory? What does it look like in praxis? What potential does this decision-making process—which, in contemporary society, has been left to be practiced mostly by community action and social action groups—have for libraries?

In this piece I will discuss what I have learned about the praxis and theory of consensus decision-making; its benefits and pitfalls; and point to some examples. Then I will discuss what I think libraries can use and apply from consensus decision-making models.



What is Consensus Decision-Making?

Consensus decision-making is not a new concept or practice. In fact, it has been used for hundreds of years by Native American/First Nation groups and Quakers (Hare, 1973; InfoShop, n.d.; Rifkin, M., 2005). More recently, it has been used by anarchists; housing and food cooperatives; and other social action groups. Several publications have documented these group consensus processes, such as [Martha's Rules](#); [Building United Judgment: A handbook for consensus decision making](#); [On Conflict and Consensus: A handbook on formal consensus decisionmaking](#), and [Consensus Decision Making](#). While each of these resources points to slightly different versions of the group decision-making process, they all follow a common thread of democratic decision-making practices. Peter Kakol (1995) designates "Equal access to political decision making for all" (para. 6) as the first of his [Ten Anarchist Principles](#). He continues, "All those who are affected by a particular decision should be able to participate in the making of that decision" (para. 6). This sounds like what we commonly practice and understand as democracy, but it isn't exactly what we practice.

Sager and Gastil (2006) point out that “democratic” majority rules decision-making is “...the most commonly used group decision rule in the United States” (p.2). Yet, majority-rules democracy enforces hierarchical relationships, pits sides against each other, and imposes a “pressure to conform” (Moscovici, & Doise. 1992; trans. Halls, 1994, p. 66). It creates winners and losers in each decision. Moreover, discussions preceding voting and majority-rules decisions can be greatly influenced by individuals’ social capital and authority in a group, and are tied to individuals present to participate in the decision-making process. In other words, what we have been understanding as democratic, is subject to disenfranchising individuals and re-enforcing power structures. Consensus decision-making attempts to rectify these problems.

I contend that the most common misconception regarding consensus decision-making assumes that decisions are reached unanimously. In fact, Sager and Gastil (2006) point to a difference between “consensus outcome” which implies unanimous agreement, and the “consensus decision rule,” which refers to a consensus decision-making process.

| | Process | Outcome |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Majority Rules | Discussion occurs and a vote is taken. Votes fall on both or all sides of an issue. | The majority wins. |
| Consensus Outcome | Discussion occurs and a vote is taken, with all votes falling on one side of an issue. | Consensus is reached via voting; i.e. there is nothing to contend. |
| Consensus Decision Rule | “...is a complex, time-consuming social process” (Sager & Gastil, 2006, p. 3). It involves discussion of individual concerns. No vote is taken until all are comfortable moving forward. | All individuals can support the decision, based on discussions and concerns raised during the decision-making process. |

Decisions reached via consensus decision-making are rarely unanimous. Instead, consensus means that a group works toward a common goal that supports a group’s collective vision and mission. “Of course, full consent does not mean that everyone must be completely satisfied with the final outcome—in fact, total satisfaction is rare. The decision must be acceptable enough, however, that all will agree to support the group in choosing it” (Avery, Auvine, Streibel, & Weiss, 1981, p. 1). Similarly, in his book [Empowerment and Democracy in the Workplace](#), John Dew (1997) posits “...at any time, every group member is at least 70% comfortable with each decision the group has made” (p. 118). The difference between unanimity and consensus is that unanimity supposes all individuals agree fully on the action taken, whereas consensus stresses an individual’s support of a collective mission or vision. Even though an individual may not fully agree with the tactics taken to get there, she can support the decision.

One of the dangers of group decision-making—as addressed in numerous scholarly publications from social psychology and communications—is the concept of [groupthink](#). Groupthink occurs when groups sacrifice dialog. Individuals potentially suppress concerns and differences in order to avoid conflict and achieve harmonious consensus. This results in group decisions that are potentially contentious and not those that best support the group’s end goal or desired outcome (Dew, 1997; Mohammed, 2001; Mok & Morris, 2010; Moscovici & Doise, 1992/1994; Solomon, 2006). Consensus decision-making processes attempt to avoid negative consequences from groupthink, social capital, authority, and social hierarchies. To accomplish this, groups must work to build respect and trust. In a trusting and respectful environment, discussion and conflict can occur and groupthink can be avoided.

In fact, consensus cannot exist nor can it be achieved without conflict. In *Conflict & Consensus*, Moscovici and Doise (1992/1994) point to numerous studies showing that the stronger the conflict and disagreement in a consensus decision-making process, the more sticking-power resulting decisions have. Additionally, scholars have shown that the greater the conflict involved in problem-solving and decision-making, the more creative the solutions and decisions (Mohammed, 2001; Moscovici et al., 1992/1994; Murrell, Stewart, & Engel, 1993; Troyer & Younggreen, 2009). Those decisions made via consensus achieve more buy-in, and in the end result in greater success due to the collective support for decisions.

There are two interrelated aspects of consensus decision-making that must exist and function well in order for the process to be successful. First, individual participation in the decision-making process must occur. Second, conflict must arise and be resolved. Without participation and its proportional resulting conflict, consensus decision-making would not be a successful form of decision-making; the process is key to its success.

In consensus decision-making, like other decision-making processes, conflict is managed in the form of open discourse. Participants are expected to engage in active listening and respect each individual's contribution to discussion. Moreover, consensus decision-making should center on solving problems faced by the collective, not the individual.

"Consensus decision making works best when the participants believe they belong to the group, and the group belongs to them. This group solidarity develops out of mutual trust and respect. As trust and respect grow within the group, members will feel free to express opinions and feelings, and to disagree without fear of consequences." (Avery et al., 1981, p. 85)

If members of a consensus group are not working toward the same goal, or they do not feel ownership and accountability for the success and well-being of the group, consensus decision-making will not work.

So what does a consensus decision-making process look like in praxis?

As mentioned earlier, there are many different forms consensus decision-making can take. In my research I found the process outlined in [Building United Judgment](#), (Avery et al., 1981) to be the most thorough and appealing. The second chapter, "A Step-by-Step Process for Consensus" thoroughly outlines the process from preparation to final decision.

Like many group decision-making processes, it begins with agenda setting and identifying a facilitator for the process. Agenda items should be clearly defined and should state decisions that need to be made. After agenda items are introduced, discussion occurs. Discussion consists of individuals presenting ideas as a response to the issue at hand, concerns and opinions about the issue/proposal, and responses to what has already been said.

It is the facilitator's responsibility to keep discussion on topic, provide clarification and rephrasing of discussion, summarize points, and ensure that all voices are heard and understood by the group. After discussion, the facilitator will test for consensus, making sure to summarize what has been most positively discussed as a solution or action. At this point more concerns can be raised and discussed, and consensus may be met, even though it may not fully appease everyone at the table. However, "...it must be one that all group members are willing to live with" (Avery et al., 1981, p. 13).

In addition to the discussion process, any group member may choose to block an action or decision. "Blocking is a statement of the great seriousness of someone's objections to a decision. In practical terms, it is a strong indication that the group requires more time to reach consensus" (Avery et al., 1981, p. 29). (For more on blocking, read Laird Schaub's (2003) short piece: *Blocking Made Easy (or at Least Easier): Taking a look at the dynamics of dissent* and Mary Ann Renz's (2006) *The Meaning of Consensus and Blocking for Cohousing Groups*.)

My explanation of the process is certainly an oversimplification. There are many other aspects built into consensus groups, including group building, problem solving, and even evaluation or assessment of a group's decision-making process.

[Martha's Rules](#), which can be used as an alternative to [Robert's Rules of Order](#), is another consensus-based process. It outlines a five-step process for decision-making featuring separate steps for a "sense vote" and a "vote vote." "The point of the sense vote is to discover how the group feels about a proposal" (Minahan, 1986, p. 54). The sense vote asks: who likes the proposal, who can live with the proposal, and who is uncomfortable with the proposal. In contrast, a "vote vote" is to:

"...find out what those who are "uncomfortable" are uncomfortable about and then find out whether the group as a whole wishes to decide by majority rule. The facilitator asks those who (are) uncomfortable to state the reasons for their discomfort....After hearing the objections of those who are uncomfortable, a vote is taken. The question is, 'Should we implement this decision over the stated objections of the minority, when a majority of us feel it is workable?'" (p. 55)

There are numerous other variations for consensus decision-making, from the Quaker and Native American traditions to processes developed and used by small social action groups for governing meetings and decisions. Generally, consensus decision-making takes into account the reasons individuals may disagree, and embraces conflict resolution in discussions. It is

more democratic and group-oriented than a majority rules process. Groups using consensus decision-making have stronger collective ties and accountability for the success of their organizations.

It can't all be coming up roses, can it?



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Chances are your work groups and teams already use some form of consensus to make decisions and govern the work of your library. Consensus decision-making is a fantastic process when it works, but it certainly has its drawbacks.

First, consensus decision-making takes a long time. For each individual in a group to voice her concerns and for group members to respond can be a lengthy process in small groups, and even lengthier for large groups. For small groups, such as Lead Pipe's Editorial Board, consensus can work extremely well. The larger a group, however, the more likely the process is to break down into groupthink.

What's more, sometimes decisions need to happen quickly and simply cannot wait for a consensus process. Who will make decisions that need to occur quickly? In this situation, one hopes that a decision-maker remains true to the group's collective vision, and can respond on behalf of the group.

Another issue is that of participation and social dynamics. Group members should feel safe to talk openly about their concerns, and each individual should actively participate by speaking and listening during the decision-making process. When individuals dominate meetings or do not engage in active listening, the consensus process breaks down. Implicit in social dynamics are hierarchies, power, elitism, and privilege that can contribute to dysfunction and invisible power dynamics in consensus decision-making (Freeman, J., n.d.). Therefore, individuals need to be aware of these pitfalls, and be dedicated to creating an environment that enables consensus decision-making processes, even at times when decisions do not need to be made.

What's more, library culture is stereotypically conflict averse. Being a service-oriented profession, library workers aim to help people, not disagree with them; so it makes sense that our culture might feel uncomfortable with conflict. Individuals may be hesitant to participate in discussions, and in doing so, open up meetings and discussions to be dominated by those who are more vocal. Due to this aversion, library groups attempting to engage in consensus decision-making are at great risk of running into groupthink.

Group composition can also hinder consensus decision-making. Groups may be comprised of

a mix of administrators and workers, which, for some individuals may stymie participation and feelings of safety. What's more, consensus may break down if all individuals who will be affected by decisions are not involved in the decision-making process. Libraries are not immune to this dilemma. How frequently do teams of administrators or professionals make decisions that impact classified staff, student workers, and others who weren't part of the discussion or decision-making process?

External factors challenging consensus decision-making in libraries are those organizational structure imposed on libraries by their governing bodies. Cities, counties, corporations and universities—those bodies to which most libraries report—are typically structured hierarchically, with departments and committees reporting up the chain of command. Frequently libraries in these organizations mirror this structure. This does not mean that consensus decision-making cannot occur, however, the process must co-exist and function within a larger structure that may not fully support the consensus decision-making process.

It may be that your working group uses consensus to make decisions while the entire organization does not. It may happen that your team makes a decision, which is then reported up to administration. Administration may either support, modify, or rescind the decision. This might feel disempowering and you might see it as an abrogation of your group's value within the library. In this case, it would make sense to open dialog with administration to discuss this outcome. Perhaps administration's reasoning is strong enough, that if it were presented via a consensus process, your group's decision may not have had the same outcome.

Despite these challenges, consensus decision-making seems to be a promising possibility for libraries.

Moving Toward a Consensus Model

Libraries are institutions that have historically been dedicated to the free and open exchange of ideas. In their current form, they work collaboratively with their communities, establishing and maintaining consortial relationships, and providing a supportive space for dissent and discourse. It is only intuitive that libraries could operate with the same machinations of open discourse and decision-making processes, much like the collective in Zuccotti Park. For libraries consensus decision-making can create strong organizations that will encounter great future successes.

In 2005 Barbara Fister and Kathie Martin presented their paper *Embracing the Challenge of Change through Collegial Decision-Making* (Fister & Martin, 2005) at ACRL, which offers a different model for libraries. In it, they describe their library's reorganization into a flat organizational structure. "Rather than have a director we would elect a chair every three years as other departments did. The chair, as 'first among equals,' would add the tasks for coordinating the library's efforts and liaison with the administration to his or her portfolio" (p. 4). Fister & Martin present a model in which their library is governed by consensus not only in faculty groups, but by classified staff as well. Of their organizational chart they say, "This new chart, two overlapping circles of responsibilities...erased the old vestiges of hierarchy lodged in nominal supervisory roles given to librarians over paraprofessionals and showed the collegial conversation extended to the entire library staff" (p. 4). Gustavus Adolphus College's library is certainly a creative example of how librarians and library workers have engaged in a consensus model.

Despite the challenges of implementing consensus decision-making in libraries, it should be well worth it. There are a number of things you could do to try to work toward improving consensus decision-making in your library:

- Talk to your library director, your supervisor, your mentor, your colleagues about the idea of consensus decision-making and see what they think.
- Evaluate your current decision-making model. Does it work for your group? Would group members be open a more consensus-based model?
- Get training in good meeting facilitation practices for group members. You and your colleagues could learn active listening and other communication skills that contribute to successful consensus decision-making.
- Try to work on embracing conflict and productive discussions in meetings. Work toward creating a safe and respectful environment where each individual feels safe discussing her concerns in a group.
- Try using Martha's Rules next time you hold a meeting.

Libraries can be very siloed organizations. How often are public services staff involved in cataloging, acquisitions, and electronic resources management decisions, and vice versa? What will happen when catalogers are alongside instruction librarians thinking of new approaches to resource discovery? Consensus can open opportunities by deconstructing silos and starting to create new models for library decision-making.

Libraries that successfully engage in consensus decision-making will see improvement in making decisions that best serve their patrons; more cohesion in staff and accountability; and are likely to experience more creativity in problem solving. Individuals in these libraries will most likely become more dedicated to serving the organization and working towards its shared vision and mission. The reason these changes may occur, is that the decision-making and visioning is shared—individuals all contribute to the definition of and accomplishment of goals. Individuals would begin creating an environment of respect and trust, enabling them to participate in a democratic decision-making process.

What has been your experience with consensus?

Many thanks to Barbara Fister, Robert Schroeder, Gretta Siegel, and Sarah Ford for providing perspective and thoughtful comments on this piece. Additional thanks to Erin Dorney, Hilary Davis and Brett Bonfield from In the Library with the Lead Pipe for copyedits and even more thoughts. And finally, a shout out to [Faulkner Short](#) for letting me use his image in this post. He takes stunningly beautiful photographs.

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15 Comments To "Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries"

#1 Pingback By [Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries — Library Journal Reviews](#) On January 25, 2012 @ 11:15 am

[...] 25, 2012 By Cheryl LaGuardia Leave a Comment I'd like to give a big shout out about this post, "Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries," by Emily Ford on the wonderful In the Library with the Leadpipe blog. We used consensus [...]

#2 Comment By [Michael](#) On January 26, 2012 @ 3:25 am

Thanks for the interesting post and the interesting links! It's always nice to see a different point of view put forward.

I've been in different groups (left or green) that have practised consensus deliberately and a couple (non-political) that practice it, though the folks involved wouldn't think of it as such. (By which I mean, though nominally decisions are taken by vote, if someone disagreed the group tried to fix the problems.)

I've also been in too many meetings at work where I'm sure it could have been useful; though anything that makes meetings go for even longer...
And I think that's the biggest potential problem with consensus style. People already don't like meetings, and anything that makes them longer is sure to be disliked.

(Also, I'd never heard of Jesse Shera before today. I'm a non-USA library student.)

#3 Comment By [Rebecca](#) On January 26, 2012 @ 5:59 pm

This is a really fantastic post – thank you for sharing it!

I am one of many librarians with the Audre Lorde to Howard Zinn Library of Occupy Boston, and it so happens that we recently created a reading/resource guide for the OB community on consensus-building and nonviolent communication. (Available here: <http://wiki.occupyboston.org/images/c/cd/ConsensusNonviolentCommunicationResourceGuide.pdf>). We had been asked by some members of the OB community to create it in anticipation of a “Co-creating a safer community” forum.

I just shared this post with the A-Z Library listserv, and I hope that it'll help inform intentional communication within our own community as well as each of our interactions in the larger LIS field.

Again, many thanks.

#4 Comment By Kim Leeder On January 27, 2012 @ 11:45 am

Emily, you're so amazing at presenting ideals in a way that makes me think, "I could do that!" As a new library director I'd really like to figure out how to build consensus decisionmaking into my new organization. I've been recently working on a future-thinking org chart, since my college is growing like crazy and we anticipate doing a lot of hiring in the next few years (er, forever).

The trick, to me, is how do I build this idea of consensus into an org chart? Who reports to whom? The flattest possible scenario means everyone in the whole place would report to me, and I'm not sure that's workable once we get larger. Or can we have multiple reporting layers but still make decisions in the same way? I'm just not sure about how this looks where the rubber meets road when we figure in the fact that everyone needs a supervisor to meet the requirements of our larger organizational structure.

#5 Comment By Kathleen On February 1, 2012 @ 8:14 am

Will be recommending to my classes.

#6 Comment By Juan On February 1, 2012 @ 12:35 pm

I gotta admit, as wonderful as this all sounds, and as much as I'm all for democratic decision-making, I've rarely seen it work at my library. Committee work here suffers from consensus decision-making. It drags out decision-making and is an inefficient use of staff time.

The thing is, our director wants staff buy-in. As such, she pushes committee decision-making. Committee membership reflects the diversity of the library by director design (i.e. she likes to assign persons from multiple departments rather than just those with hands-on knowledge). This means that a committee devoted to, for instance, redesign of the library website might include persons who have no knowledge of web design or the principles of site architecture. Those who have a better grasp of design principles often end up locking horns with those who think it's as simple as formatting a Word document. I'm simplifying, but you get my point.

Did I mention that the decision-making process drags on when decisions are made in committee? So much wasted staff time, which means wasted taxpayer money.

I would prefer that a very small group of people (2-3 people) with hands-on knowledge of the issue come up with recommendations that can be pitched to a larger group rather than making decisions within a larger group/committee.

When I saw this post, I immediately thought of recent NYTimes article that critiques group decision-making: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/opinion/sunday/the-rise-of-the-new-groupthink.html>

Worth a read.

Honestly, I prefer work-democracy (see Wilhelm Reich's "The Mass Psychology of Fascism"). In short, those who do the work make the decisions. People not DIRECTLY involved in the work are not involved in the decision-making process. You can provide others with opportunities for input—and should—but it should never be about involving persons from disparate departments, etc simply to make people feel like they had a hand in the decision-making.

And I hate it when admins use committees to create the illusion of consensus decision-making, but then toss aside committee recommendations if they don't jive with the output they were looking for before committee membership was even delegated.

#7 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On February 1, 2012 @ 1:10 pm

You are most welcome. I'm glad to hear of the resources on nonviolent communication you're making available to the community.

In general, I think we can learn a lot about intentional communication in libraries and in every workplace.

#8 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On February 1, 2012 @ 1:14 pm

Kim, this is a really interesting and exciting conundrum that you have. What would our organizations look like if we had the support to do re-org for future thinking? I think one of the things that you might think about is what the contracts between your administration and its reporting bodies say. I discovered, via a discussion with a colleague at MPOW, that our union contract discusses faculty governance— but that in contract, our faculty body can make any recommendation it wants to administration, but administration has every right to completely ignore those recommendations. It's almost like being in a right-to-work state.

You might be able to talk to the folks over at Gustavus Adolphus and see how they are liking the re-org that they did to use collegial decision-making; they might have some tips for you as you consider your future thinking.

#9 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On February 1, 2012 @ 1:41 pm

I'm so glad that you took the time to comment, Juan, and show the other side of what can happen in consensus processes. There are many arguments out there that point to consensus hindering democratic process. For instance, I was just sent a link to a piece by Howard Ryan called [Blocking Progress: Consensus decision making in the anti-nuclear movement](#). While I haven't yet had the time to read it, I will be interested to see if this piece points to the privilege problem that Jo Freeman discusses.

I agree that there are times when we just can't get things done by consensus and things can break down. At this point, what can be borrow from consensus that will still enable us to have some collective decision-making, but that won't block progress? Also, how can we engage in these practices at work and collaborate with an administrative body that will respect this process, instead of ignore it? (see my previous comment in response to Kim discussing the contract between my union and my university's administration).

I'm going to give that Reich a read...

#10 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On February 1, 2012 @ 1:42 pm

Thanks, Kathleen!

#11 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On February 1, 2012 @ 1:44 pm

I think this is really interesting that people might be engaging in consensus, but aren't

thinking of it as such.

I have also been in situations where I disagreed with the need for more meetings—where's the compromise between consensus and efficiency?

#12 Comment By [Juan](#) On February 1, 2012 @ 3:12 pm

If I might go somewhat off-topic and rant a bit more, I'd say that the main problem facing humanity and progress on any level is the fact that to greater and lesser degrees humans are—across the board—irrational. And since people in admin are merely human, they are bound to implement all sorts of irrational practices and make all manner of irrational decisions (and they do). Luckily, those at the “to a lesser degree” end of the spectrum keep things moving in a generally positive direction most of the time; however, meaningful progress is an incredible lofty goal.

In a sense, humanity has been making the same mistakes and such since the advent of opposable thumbs. We seem stymied in terms of our evolution as a species and choose to delude and content ourselves with the notion that advancements in the tools we use to kill each other, keep each other alive a little longer, communicate with each other, etc., reflect the continued evolution of our species. The reality is that building more powerful weapons, drugs, apps and whatnot is not progress; the reality is that we're failing again and again to make meaningful philosophical leaps. As Bill Hicks put it, “Evolution did not stop with the development of thumbs....It's time to EVOLVE IDEAS”.

But humans are irrational and almost universally in denial of this fact.

Sorry to wax so cynical, but it's getting to a point where the folks who are “to a greater degree” irrational are trashing the ecosystem to such an extent that all other considerations seem moot and I'm incredibly pessimistic about the future.

To quote Bill Hicks again, “We're a virus with shoes”. And the world will likely be a better place when we're gone. Regardless, I'm glad that these conversations are happening, that there are people looking at disparate points of view, thinking critically and all that, for this kind of exchange is truly the only way we'll move forward. If only the majority of the people on this planet felt the same way. Yeah, I'm extremely cynical, but maybe, just maybe, it's not too late.

#13 Comment By [John Buschman](#) On March 15, 2012 @ 1:06 pm

Emily & commenters,

I've dragged my feet for a very long time responding & posting my response for a number of reasons. Emily most certainly does not minimize the difficulties, nor oversell the benefits. And when I was not a manager or an administrator, I found this process useful to forge a community of interest to counter seriously bad (bad, not poor) administration. However:

- 1) Like Neighborhood Watches, these kind of initiatives tend to get energy from problems or bad situations that need to be addressed (like my experience). Most support/engagement melts away after the problem is solved – or it drags on a bit. Library workers often “just want to come in and do their jobs.” Consensus decision-making is best used selectively in my experience.

- 2) (Channeling my inner Juan here): People weasel on their commitments. Simply put, you can't collectively peer into one another's souls to see if people are being up front. I've experienced this too: based on consensus, I've taken enormous political risks in the name of the group, only to realize just how alone I was in taking those risks. Library workers tend to be risk averse, and in the end, someone has to take responsibility.

- 3) Which leads me to: the role of leadership. This is tricky, because I don't want to pull the “it's lonely at the top” thing. But... institutions pay leaders more to take responsibility — but that also includes morale, institutional integrity, and so on. In the end, a good leader straddles that very thin line between opening things up and then seeing them through in a responsible, open, and communicative way — or explaining what ended up not getting done and why.

- 4) (Inner Juan again): There are snakes-in-the-grass. Ulterior motives can and often masquerade as for the benefit of the whole (a specialized project, off-loading disliked work,

or simply revenge). I actually had someone a number of months ago suggest that we not upgrade our computers and save the money (so he wouldn't have to learn anything new on it). Which brings me to a closely related point: some folks are simply unwilling or unable to think about a larger whole. It is simply beyond them intellectually or ethically. Hence, the stable historical examples of consensus decision-making tend to be moral or ethnic communities with strong ties in place, and few opportunities for exit. And hence, consensus decision-making in other contemporary arenas (like Occupy & some of the other examples noted) tend to be temporary contracts. I don't know if its human nature (ala Juan), but it definitely is part of western neoliberal culture.

So, my take: consensus decision-making is highly, highly useful and productive for something very episodic like long-range or strategic planning for a library; it is probably the way a smaller unit (w/oversight to protect integrity and distribution of work) should do its business. That it can and does work, often when properly set up, obviates the "heroic leadership" nonsense we're so often fed. But, lets not fool ourselves that libraries would be perfect if only the inmates ran ... (never mind!).

#14 Pingback By [Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries | Loomio](#) On May 7, 2012 @ 4:38 pm

[...] Consensus Decision-Making and its Possibilities in Libraries [...]

#15 Pingback By [Weekly Link RoundupLone Star Librarian | Lone Star Librarian](#) On July 28, 2012 @ 4:10 pm

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