

Highlights

Sense-of-the-Meeting Decision Making

Sense-of-the-Meeting decision-making is different than other decision-making processes. It can take a little getting used to for those of us used to majority rule voting.

Sense-of-the-Meeting decision-making encourages communities to seek truth collectively for the community – rather than pooling the needs of individuals.

Sense of the Meeting and consensus are often confused because they have in common a non-voting process. One way to contrast them is to ask, “What is the question that calls for a decision?”

- Majority Rule Model: “How do we vote?”
- Consensus Model: “What can we agree to?”
- Sense-of-the-meeting Model: “How are we led?”

Sense-of-the-Meeting decision-making is:

- a non-voting process that
- uses the sense of the movement and direction of the energy in the group as the basis for coming decisions.
- Decisions are identified by the unity of the group.
- Not every decision requires a lengthy sense-of-meeting process.

Definitions

- Sense-of-the-Meeting (with hyphens) – the hyphens make it an adjective to describe a process.
- Sense of the Meeting (no hyphens) – describes the outcome or decision.

Assumptions

- Those using the process have a sense of community which they wish to preserve, and a shared sense of what the community is about.
- Using this process, the group will be able to make good decisions which not only are inclusive but also will strengthen the community in the process.
- The wisdom of the group is greater than the wisdom of any one or several individuals.

Characteristics

- It is a listening process which regards the ability to listen not only to what individuals are saying, but also to what the group is saying (the group’s energy). In listening, the group begins to discover what might be right outcomes for it as a whole.
- It is a cooperative, non-adversarial process in which truth emerges in the group’s cooperation to find it, not by taking sides and not by an unyielding advocacy of one’s own views.

- It is a discovery process in which the group comes to know what is right for it, at this time and in these circumstances, by thinking of its decision-making as a process of discovering the truth inherent in the collective wisdom of the group.

Requirement

- That each person be willing to separate his or her own preferences from what may be a quite different, emerging, right outcome for the group.

What does a Sense-of-Meeting decision-making process reward?

- the melding of ideas
- understanding that the best or most fitting idea may not be first idea or the idea articulated most skillfully
- listening, patience, and mindfulness
- taking risks to speak and being reluctant to repeat what's already been said
- community building

Unity and Unanimity

In Sense-of-Meeting/Friends decision-making, we seek unity in response to a proposed sense of the meeting. A person is in unity with a sense of the meeting if the person is able to accept the sense of the meeting even though it may not reflect the person's personal preferences.

Unity is sometimes confused with unanimity. In a Friends context, they are not the same. Friends will say with respect to a particular decision, "The meeting was in unity." Friends will not say that the decision was "unanimous." In Friends practice, unity refers to a sense of having been led to and arriving at a shared outcome, and not to identical views. "Unanimous" often means "of one mind," or "in complete accord." It implies "sameness." In Friends practice, it is not necessary to be in "in complete accord" for the meeting to be in unity.

[There is a spiritual aspect inherent in this process which Friends organizations and individuals will articulate and claim in different ways. For some organizations and individuals, Friends decision-making necessarily invites spiritual awareness and guidance. For others, the concept of spiritual awareness and guidance is less comfortable, expressed in different language and not always embraced.]

Questions to Explore

- Will a sense-of-meeting process improve our meetings, discussions, and decision making?
- How can we listen more, talk less, allow more time for understanding?
- Are we clear about the process and the role we play in the process?

Edited Excerpts from Understanding Quaker Decision Making, Friends School of Minnesota 8/2012
<http://blog.fsmn.org/2012/08/understanding-quaker-decision-making/> & *Quaker Values Based Decision Making, Friends Services for the Aging Workshop, Medford Leas, June 18, 2015*

Roles and Guidelines – Sense-of-the-Meeting Decision Making

The process is inclusive. Everyone should be heard and respected. The group moves toward a “sense of the meeting.” The process is as much about fostering community as about reaching a decision.

The process emphasizes listening. Members listen to other members and listen inside themselves.

The Role of Those Present

- Come prepared, having given attention to materials sent in advance of the meeting.
- Be attentive and open.
- Support the expectations of the group for good order which many include but not be limited to:
 - Starting and ending meetings on time,
 - Being mindful about not speaking excessively,
 - Waiting to be recognized,
 - Giving full attention to the work of the meeting, leaving other work and distractions behind.
- Speak your own personal truth. Release your truth without defensiveness.
- Listen to others, and to yourself, with the heart and mind. Listen empathetically for what “is really being said.”
- Challenge yourself to trust, to be open to others and to learn.
- Refrain from repeating what has already been said.
- Be willing to say when you are not in agreement and to share your reasons.
- Help the meeting to move forward.
- Support the decisions of the meeting.
- Exercise patience.

The role of those not present is to show up next time.

The Chair’s Responsibility

- Set the agenda.
- Create a climate of safety for all to speak candidly.
- Be the chief listener; therefore, rarely speak.
- Give everyone a chance to speak.
- Ask people who haven’t spoken if they have new ideas to add to the discussion.
- Allow someone who has already spoken to speak again only after everyone has had a chance to speak.
- Watch members’ body language for agreement or dissent.

- Curtail long-winded speeches by saying, “We have heard your message.” Or “Thank you, we understand what you are saying.”
- Summarize the sense of the meeting, or state that the sense of the meeting is not clear.
- Set an agenda for future discussion or action.

Reminder for Individuals Participating in Decision Making

- Listen respectfully.
- Pause after each speaker to consider his or her ideas.
- Avoid arguments or rebuttals.
- Share one’s own views if someone else has not voiced them, or say, “I agree with what has been spoken,” or “Others have already expressed my views.”
- Provide some new perspective and briefly explain why you prefer it.
- Stop speaking when asked by the chair.
- Separate personal preferences from what may be different but right outcomes for the group.
- Unite when possible, stand aside when appropriate.

When all participants have expressed their views, the chair summarizes the sense of the meeting. *Chair asks if what is summarized is shared by those present and if members are in unity with the decision.* If everyone is in accord, the chair states the agreement, *asks for approval*, and the meeting moves on to decide how to implement the decision. If there is no agreement, the issue is carried over to the next meeting to give members time to reflect on the differing views. If the chair believes a sense of the meeting will not be achieved even with more time, the chair may ask the dissenting member whether he or she will set his/her objection aside, or would like the dissent to be recorded.

The focus is not on quick decisions or quashing unpopular views. The focus is on fostering community and the well-being and respect of people in it.

Edited excerpts from “Quakers Principles Explained” - Collingwood News, Nov. 2016

We don't vote; so, what is it that we do?
Three ways to make decisions

Majority Rule (Vote)	Consensus	Sense-of-Meeting Values Based/Quaker
DECIDING	DECIDING	DECIDING
Vote – Majority Decide	Non-Voting – Unanimity All agree on course of action.	Non-Voting – Unity All agree and see that this is best direction for the group to move even though it may not be “my” particular preference.
PROCESS	PROCESS	PROCESS
Debate – Pros and Cons Behind the scenes lobbying for position. Line up people who agree or disagree and make a strong case for the proposal.	Sift and sort to find things you agree on. Bargain and make compromises.	Weigh and listen deeply to others and self. Communal discernment. Keep in mind what is best for entire community. Staying aware of how the group is being led or is going until a sense of the meeting is clear and unified.
QUESTION	QUESTION	QUESTION
How do we vote? What are the results of our voting?	What do we agree to?	How are we led? What is the sense of the Meeting?

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