

Chapter 6

Power, Decision-making, and Governance

MOST INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES, other than those led by a single spiritual teacher or leader, intend that power be shared equally among members. But certain members may still have considerably more power than others. Much of the conflict in a core group or community occurs over issues of unequal distribution of power.

Sometimes the power imbalance is caused by one or more people dominating meetings and committees. These folks might have a dominating communication style — interrupting, talking loudly, “talking over” others, or speaking with such intensity and certainty that no one can oppose them. This means they end up having a lot of the power in the group.

Or maybe they have fine communication skills but unintentionally dominate meetings and committees because they have more information about issues than others do. These people arrive with a briefcase, clipboard, pocket calculator, and a sheaf of documents about how it’s done. Who could disagree?

Still others are fine communicators and don’t know any more than anyone else, but they’ve got such energy and force in their personality that people instinctively look to them for leadership. Without meaning to, they’ve got a lot of power

in the group. Some appreciate them; others resent them.

Sometimes the power imbalance involves someone being more influential than others because of his or her role in the community. In some communities one person, often a founder, seems to have considerably more influence over decisions than others, even if the community uses democratic decision-making. The power-person might have established the original vision for the community, put up all or most of the money, and/or lived there the longest. Other community members habitually defer to his or her opinion, even if the group officially believes everyone has equal say.

Power — The Ability to Influence

People who have power and privilege in a group usually aren’t aware of it. They usually exercise it innocently and don’t notice that it’s not reciprocal.

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad in *The Guru Papers* define “power” as the ability of a person or system to influence other persons or systems — and it’s neither good nor bad. They distinguish between plain and simple “power” and “the *authoritarian* use of power.” (*Italics mine.*) When people have authoritarian power, they enforce or perpetuate their power by punishing or ignoring

those who disagree with them. This distinction helped me see that the authoritarian use of power is something most of us want to avoid, yet “power” — our ability to influence each other — is not only *not* negative, but something which, if we encourage it equally in our group, can benefit all of us.

I see decision making as the main power-point in a community — who makes decisions and how they make them. Power imbalances can be greatly reduced by using a fair, participatory decision-making method that spreads power equally and offers checks and balances against power abuses. (Everyone’s having good communication skills certainly helps too.) *Not* having a fair, participatory decision-making method early

in your group will almost certainly generate conflict over power imbalances at some point. I consider this another kind of structural conflict, because putting this kind of decision-making method in place at the beginning is a “structure” which can help protect against it.

(Of course, simply having a fair decision making method doesn’t address power imbalances triggered by dominating, intimidating, or manipulative behaviors outside of meetings, taking unilateral actions that affect the community without first checking with others, or breaking community agreements. These issues will be addressed in Chapters 17 and 18.)

Focused Power, Widespread Power

If a community chooses a single person or a committee to make certain decisions, they’ve got focused power — which is good for decisions which must be made quickly or which require special expertise.

With majority-rule voting, power is theoretically spread widely, and everyone has it. However, in controversial issues, where the vote may be split 51-49 percent, half the group has all the power, the other half has none.

Consensus decision-making is a group decision-making process in which all present must agree before action is taken. It’s based on the belief that everyone has a piece of the truth. The intention is that each person in a meeting is given the time and space to speak their truth, and is listened to with respect. If done correctly, this method can help to spread power throughout the whole group, and is the method chosen most often by contemporary community founders.

How Consensus Works

While there are many styles of consensus, in general it works like this: Members don’t vote Yes

SOWING CIRCLE’S REASONS FOR CHOOSING CONSENSUS

Sowing Circle/OAEC founders chose consensus for five reasons. which they describe in one of their community documents:

Consensus creates and strengthens a spirit of trust, cooperation, and respect among the Partners (members):

- By incorporating the clearest thinking of all Partners, consensus increases the likelihood of new, better, and more creative decisions.
- Because all have participated in its formation, everyone has a stake in implementing decisions.
- Consensus significantly lessens the possibility that a minority will feel that an unacceptable decision has been imposed on them.
- Consensus safeguards against ego/adversary attitudes, uninformed decision-making, “rubber stamping” of decisions, coercion, self-interested positions, mistrust, and half-hearted agreements.

or No on motions. Rather, proposals are introduced, discussed, and eventually decided upon. Proposals don't necessarily remain as they were introduced, but are improved or modified to meet people's concerns as necessary. When it's time to decide, people either give consent to the proposal, stand aside from it, or block it.

Giving consent doesn't necessarily mean loving every aspect of the final version of the proposal, but being able to live with it and being willing to support it.

Standing aside is an act of what's sometimes called "principled non-participation," in which someone can't personally support the proposal, but doesn't want to stop the rest of the group from adopting it. People who stand aside are noted in the minutes, and, depending on the group's agreements, may not have to help implement it (but they are still subject to it).

Blocking the proposal stops it from being adopted, at least for the time being. It is not used for personal reasons, or because someone doesn't like how the decision may affect them personally. "Blocking is a serious matter," writes consensus teacher Bea Briggs, "to be done only when one truly believes that the pending proposal, if adopted, would violate the morals, ethics, or safety of the whole group." Caroline Estes, another well-known consensus teacher, often says that people who understand consensus well will only block a proposal three or four times in their lifetime — and in 50 years of consensus practice, she's never blocked once. (Caroline further notes that people who often want to block a group's proposals are probably operating on a different set of values than other members and may be in the wrong group.)

A proposal is passed when everyone in the meeting gives consent, even if one or more people stand aside. It is not passed if at least one per-

son blocks it. (Some groups don't proceed if more than one person stands aside, believing that the group doesn't have enough unity to go forward with the proposal.)

When a group uses consensus to make a decision, they can only change that decision by reaching another consensus. It may take longer to make decisions using consensus than it does when using majority-rule voting, especially at first. However, implementing a proposal once it's agreed upon usually takes far less time. Majority-rule voting, in which up to half the people can be unhappy with a decision, often generates foot-dragging and other forms of unconscious sabotage when it comes to implementing the proposal. With consensus, a decision often takes longer to decide, but far less time to implement since everyone's behind it.

A consensus meeting is not "run" by a chairperson, but served by agenda planners and a facilitator. For each meeting, the agenda planners create an agenda which will help the group address relevant topics in a certain order and within certain time frames for a well-paced, effective meeting. The facilitator's job is to consider the needs of the group as a whole, create an atmosphere of trust and safety, help those who want to do so to participate in the discussion (and not let anyone dominate), help the group stick to its agenda contract, keep the group focused and on task, and assess how well the group is agreeing, before testing for consensus.

Consensus is essentially a conservative approach to decision making — if everyone in your group cannot support the proposal, you don't adopt the proposal, or you change the proposal. While in the consensus process theoretically one person can stop a group from moving forward on a proposal, this is a rare event in a well-trained group. People objecting to a proposal

voice their concerns openly from the beginning, and the group attempts to modify and refine the proposal to meet these concerns. If, after much discussion, there isn't much support for the modified proposal, the facilitator doesn't call for a decision, but lays aside the proposal for a future meeting, or calls for a committee to suggest new solutions at a later meeting.

Consensus generates an entirely different dynamic among meeting participants than majority-rule voting. With the latter, competing factions usually try to win converts to their position by criticizing the other position and creating an "us versus them" atmosphere. But consensus creates an incentive for supporters of a proposal to seek out those who disagree with them and really try to understand their objections — and to reform the proposal to incorporate the other members' concerns. Conflicts and differences can arise using consensus as often as they do when using other forms of decision making, but in consensus conflicts are seen as a catalyst to creating more innovative solutions and crafting an agreement out of all the different concerns that people raise. So consensus is not compromise, which weakens everyone's interests, but a creative meta-solution, which, ideally, strengthens everyone's interests.

Because the consensus facilitator draws out the ideas and concerns of each member and doesn't let the more articulate or energetic members dominate, consensus empowers a group *as a group*. Majority-rule voting usually rewards the most aggressive members but disempowers the group as a whole.

Done well, consensus can transform meetings from overlong, frustrating, draining sessions that go nowhere and elicit people's worst behaviors, to spirited, stimulating events where everyone's ideas are valued and the group comes

up with surprisingly creative and workable solutions.

In a well-trained group with good facilitation, using consensus can elevate the consciousness of a group. It's not just a decision-making technique, but a philosophy of inclusion, drawing out the ideas, insights, and wisdom of everyone's "piece of the truth."

But it's not a panacea and it won't work in every situation. To get the full power and impact of this process, certain elements must be present.

What You Need to Make Consensus Work

Willingness to learn the process. Consensus needs to be taught thoroughly, and its basic principles periodically reviewed. I can't emphasize strongly enough the need for training: the more people in your group who understand consensus, the better it will work. Training often takes place in one or more weekends or multi-day workshops, with plenty of opportunity to practice. Fortunately there's a wealth of consensus trainers who can help, and articles and books to get you started.

(See resources for more information on consensus trainers, see www.CreatingALifeTogether.org).

Common purpose. Without a shared vision and common purpose to focus and unify your efforts, your group can bounce around endlessly between confusion, frustration, and grim battles for control. In the times when you find yourselves yelling at each other or your momentum halted by apathy or despair, you need a common touchstone to return to. You need to remember where you're going and why you're going there — one of the reasons you spend so much time and energy creating your community vision.

Willingness to share power. For many, consensus requires a kind of paradigm shift — from an impatient “I know best” attitude to a simple acceptance of and respect for other human beings. Folks who are used to being in charge — alpha males and females, articulate dynamos, and people who usually think they know better than others — can have an especially hard time with consensus at first. If your group is top-heavy with such folks you might want to think twice about using this method, and ask if they are willing to give up such roles and innate assumptions. And related to this:

Willingness to let go of personal attachments in the best interests of the group. If your main concern is what the decision will be and whether it’ll be the one you want, it’s unlikely you’re practicing deep listening, holistic thinking, and letting go of your preconceived ideas, say consensus trainers Betty Didcoct and Paul DeLapa.

Trusting in the process, and trusting each other. This means believing that by continuing to share ideas and concerns about a proposal with each other, you will come up with a much better solution than any one of you could have thought of alone. It’s believing that there is a solution, and that together you’ll reach it. It’s assuming that everyone is doing his or her best to listen to one another’s point of view. It takes willingness just to sit patiently through the ongoing discussion, even though you don’t yet know how it will turn out or how the issue will get solved.

Humility. “I have come to believe that one of the foundations of successful consensus process is personal humility,” says consensus facilitator Rob Sandelin. “When you can consider that your beliefs about a community issue may be wrong,

then you are ready to fully engage in consensus. For example, I may not like the boy my daughter is dating and think he isn’t a good companion for her, but I realize I might be wrong, that I might have misjudged him, and that the situation is safe enough that I can give my permission for her to date him knowing she will learn from the experience. Consensus is often about giving permission to go ahead, even if you are concerned about the outcome. You give permission in order to have experiences to learn from.”

Equal access to power. Consensus requires a level playing field. It doesn’t work well when one person in a group is the employer, who could theoretically fire or demote the others; or when one member is the land owner, who could theoretically sell the land or evict the others.

Physical participation, and the right people present. In consensus no one decides by proxy. (although in well-trained groups, the interests of absent members are taken into account). Participation requires that people be there because agreements are built on what comes out of the discussion. And good decisions require good information to start with. Group members who might implement a decision, or have information or perspectives relative to a topic, need to attend the meeting.

The right topics. Not all topics require that the whole group be present to decide. Some things can be decided by area managers or committees, based on the whole group’s input.

Well-crafted agendas. When a few designated people plan an agenda ahead of time, and when the whole group reviews, revises, and approves it at the beginning of a meeting, the group has just

made a contract with itself for how they'll spend time in that meeting. Making such a contract and sticking to it goes a long way towards having effective, satisfying, upbeat meetings. Having no agenda, or an agenda controlled only by certain people, or a poorly crafted agenda, can diminish the group's trust and subject them to confused, dragging, time-wasting meetings.

Skilled facilitation. The facilitator is not the group's leader or chairperson, but its servant, charged with the job of helping the group make the best decisions possible. The facilitator is empowered to help the group keep its process and agenda contract with itself, move forward in its discussion and decision-making tasks, and intervene when necessary. The facilitator doesn't participate in the discussion. (In many communities several members learn facilitation so they can rotate the role. Some communities trade facilitation with other nearby communities, so everyone can take part in the discussion.) The facilitator is neutral about the topics being discussed, and treats everyone equally, showing no favorites. He or she helps spread the power throughout the group by asking, "Have we heard from everyone?" "Does anyone have anything to add?" The facilitator seeks solutions, asking, "Are there any other ideas?" The facilitator helps the group focus on where it is in the discussion by summarizing what's been said so far, by drawing out and clarifying decisions, and by asking, "Are we ready to move on?" With a skilled facilitator, community meetings which used to be irritating or unproductive can move more swiftly, which means its members tend to remain alert and energized, enjoy themselves, and get more done.

I used to think consensus wouldn't work in a group with an aggressive member who'd steamroller over others; or an angry, suspicious person

who might block a decision out of sheer contrariness. But I've learned that a good facilitator, like a kind of aikido master, can redirect the overly verbal, draw out shy folks, diffuse aggressive behavior, stop cross-talk, and repeatedly bring a group back to its task of making good decisions. "A good facilitator can save you up to 50 percent of the group's time," notes Bea Briggs. "A poor one can easily cost the group as much."

Enough time. Making good decisions takes time, especially when people are first learning new procedures. Arrange enough time in your meetings so that you won't feel rushed; as your group builds trust and experience together, you'll get more efficient at making decisions with this method.

"Pseudoconsensus" and Structural Conflict

"Many groups aren't trained in how to use consensus," says Caroline Estes. "When I get called in to help, it's usually because the group doesn't understand the process."

When a group thinks it knows how to use consensus, but doesn't, it's a set-up for structural conflict. They proceed in ignorance, sowing seeds of frustration and resentment that can fester for years to come. Many political activists in the 1960s and '70s assumed they were using consensus, but were often just guessing at it. This is what I call "pseudoconsensus," and it's widespread in communities. Here are some of its forms:

- *Big League Complex.* The main problem in many forming community groups, says Caroline Estes, is when people are used to having their own way, or they believe they know better than others. I call this the "Big League Complex." It seems particularly

prevalent when the group has a high percentage of business executives or people in the helping professions, as is the case with many cohousing communities. “Participants in a consensus group must be willing to give up hierarchical roles and privileges and to function as equals,” writes Bea Briggs. “The contributions of experts, professionals, and elders are, of course, welcome, but they must not be allowed to silence the voices of the other members.”

- *Decision by endurance.* Another pseudo-consensus notion is the belief that people need to stay in the room until they make a decision, no matter how long it takes (even if that means until four in the morning, as many '60s-era political activists well recall.) If people believe they must keep talking about something for hours and hours until they all agree, their meeting is not well-facilitated and/or their agenda wasn't well planned. A good facilitator keeps to the agenda's planned schedule and suggests unconcluded items be tabled for future meetings and/or sends items to committee.
- *Everyone decides everything.* Some groups flounder in frustration and burnout because they believe everyone in the group must be involved in every decision, no matter how small. Not true. The whole group is usually needed for deciding major policy issues; smaller issues can often be decided by committees, operating with general guidelines from or oversight by the whole group.
- *“I block, I block!”* Pseudoconsensus seems especially prevalent in cohousing com-

munities, whose members often seem to misunderstand blocking. I've heard of cohousing core groups in which people sometimes blocked proposals because, for example, someone wanted *this* kind of front door and no other, saying, “I'm sorry but that just doesn't work for me.” This is not consensus; it's self-indulgence. Then there was the forming cohousing group where a member living in another state, reading about a particular proposal on the agenda of the next meeting, sent word that he disagreed with the proposal and was blocking in advance, so there'd be no need to discuss it. This poor fellow didn't have a clue that you don't do this with consensus — but the group hadn't a clue either, since they let him do it! A trained group knows blocking is used only when someone's “piece of the truth” shows them something important the rest of the group hasn't seen. One uses this privilege after a time of earnest, objective, soul-searching. Not understanding the blocking privilege is what can make pseudo-consensus dangerous. A whole group can be held hostage to such tyranny. (C.T. Butler's Formal Consensus process has a further safeguard, which some consensus facilitators call the “principled objection” — a block can only stand if it is consistent with the group's stated purpose. If the group believes it's not consistent with their purpose, the block is not valid.)

Consensus is like a chain saw. It can chop a lot of wood, but it can also chop your leg! The point — you have to be trained to use consensus, or its improper use can hurt you. *Not* getting trained in consensus is another form of structural conflict.

Rob Sandelin says, “If even one person in your group doesn’t fully understand consensus — don’t use it.”

Agreement-Seeking — When You Don’t Want to use Full Consensus

Agreement-seeking methods fall in between majority-rule voting and consensus and can include elements of both.

Super-majority voting. As in consensus, people try to build agreement for a proposal and modify the proposal as needed, but they vote for or against it. The proposal must receive many more “Yes” votes than a simple majority to pass. Depending on what the group has decided in advance, the required majority can be anywhere from 55 to, say, 95 percent.

Voting fallback. The group attempts to come to consensus once, or twice, and if they don’t reach consensus, they fall back to a percentage of voting the group has previously decided on, anywhere from majority-rule (51 percent) to, say, a 95 percent vote.

Consensus-minus-one or consensus-minus-two. In consensus-minus-one, a proposal still passes even if someone blocks it (it takes two to block the proposal for it not to pass). In consensus-minus-two, a proposal still passes even if two people block (it takes three people to block the proposal for it not to pass). Consensus trainer Lysbeth Borie believes these terms are misnomers, since neither is actually “consensus,” and suggests these methods might be more accurately termed agreement-minus-one or unity-minus-one.

The sunset clause. In consensus, once a decision is made, it requires a consensus of the whole to

change it. With a sunset clause, the group agrees on a proposal for a certain period of time; say a month, six months, a year, etc., at which time the decision is automatically discontinued and the situation reverts to what it was before. The decision can be continued (or continued and modified) only by a consensus of the whole.

A sunset clause is a way for people who aren’t fully supportive of a proposal to allow the whole group to try it for a while without requiring the agreement of the whole group to rescind or modify it later if it doesn’t work out.

Consensus teacher Tree Bressen points out that in order for sunset clauses to work well, the group must have a well-functioning agenda list and tracking mechanism for decisions so that the item will be brought up again later. Otherwise those group members who went along with the decision reluctantly may not be so willing the next time someone proposes a sunset clause.

Multi-winner Voting

Another decision-making method that spreads power equally in a group involves finding a way for the greatest number of members to get the most of what they want. Multi-winner voting is a system adopted from European parliamentary elections in which each person gets a certain number of votes to spread across a range of choices.

Sharingwood Cohousing in Washington State uses multi-winner voting as a proportional spending method for its annual discretionary funding allocation. Once a year Sharingwood members hold a “budget party” to decide what projects they’ll fund the following year. They dress up in fancy clothes for wine and cheese in their Common House. Each member receives an envelope of play money as they enter, which represents his or her real power in the decision

making. This is the amount of money in the discretionary budget fund for the following year, divided by the number of community members — “voters” — who attend the budget party.

Various members or committees sponsor projects they’d like to see funded the following year, and set up displays in the room, which the guests visit during the evening. A “New Retaining Wall” display, for example, might have a short sample rock wall and a member-advocate of the project who explains the benefits of the project.

Party guests spend various amounts of their play money on one or more of the proposed projects they like best. As soon as a project gets wholly funded its sponsors ring a bell and announce it — “The retaining wall is funded!” — to everyone’s cheers. Since more projects are proposed for the next year than Sharingwood has money for, not all projects get enough play-money funding. At the end of the budget party sponsors of the least-funded projects donate their contributions to the almost-funded projects. This way the greatest number of people fund the greatest number of their favorite projects.

Community Governance — Spreading Power Widely

In communities, as well as in core groups, everyone needn’t decide everything — it’s too unwieldy. So how does a group manage decisions so that power is balanced and everyone has input into decisions, yet meetings don’t take too long, and people aren’t driven crazy with details? The “ten percent” communities profiled in this book all govern themselves with whole-group-meetings and a series of smaller committees.

Let’s consider the method used by Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina. Full group meetings, called Council, are held over two days, one weekend a month. In Council, significant and

wide-ranging community and policy issues are decided upon. Day-to-day work is accomplished by smaller committees overseeing finance, physical infrastructure, membership issues, and so on. Committees are set up by the Council, and report to it. The committees decide on issues and distribute a record of their minutes and all decisions to members by email and by posting them in the kitchen and Council Hall. After posting, the community has three weeks in which to offer concerns regarding a decision. In that event, the proposal goes back to the discussion stage for further refinement and revision, which is also posted for three weeks for everyone’s OK. If a committee decision is not challenged in the three-week period, it stands. This way, every community member who reads the committee minutes can keep track of each committee’s activity, and oversee all community decisions. Additionally, committees may bring proposals about more significant issues to Council for discussion and decision by the group.

More than One Form of Decision Making?

As we’ve seen, although consensus often takes longer than other methods, its decisions are usually implemented faster. However, because forming-community groups must sometimes decide things quickly, particularly when a land-purchase may be involved, some community veterans recommend having an alternate, faster process in place.

And some groups might have more than one decision-making method, using different methods for different kinds of decisions. If some community members own the property and others are tenants, for example, the group might use consensus for most decisions, and a supermajority method solely for decisions affecting

property value; or have a decision-making body (that uses consensus) comprised only of property owners who make decisions affecting property value. (However, doing so will probably bring up power issues, unless all members understand who makes which decisions, and agree to this

when they enter the community.) It's important to be flexible, and know when it's appropriate to be inclusive and when to be more directive in decision-making. You must agree in advance on which method you're using before starting a meeting.

STYLES OF CONSENSUS

Quaker style. Consensus was developed by Quakers in seventeenth century England as an extension of their beliefs in equality, nonviolence, and everyday accessibility to divine guidance. In Quaker meetings people sit silently, seek a place of inner tranquility and guidance, and don't offer their opinions unless they believe they're divinely inspired to do so.

Native American style. Certain Native American tribes have traditionally made decisions in the context of being moved by Spirit before speaking, respectfully listening to one another, and giving particular weight to the voice of community elders.

"Community" style. Derived from these traditions and by the contemporary communities movement, what I call "community" style considers emotions that come up in meetings as potentially relevant input for decisions. If someone is angry or tearful in a meeting, for example, a community-style facilitator would use the person's upset as an opportunity to find out what "pieces of truth" about a proposal or a group dynamic those feelings may contain.

Consensus by individual guidance. Developed by various community activists in the early '80s (including Betty Didcoct, and members of Sirius community), this method involves meditating and seeking spiritual guidance before beginning the meeting, so that any decisions may be informed by intuition and spiritual guidance. It's very similar to the practices of Quakers

and Native Americans, but without a specifically religious or cultural context.

Formal Consensus. Facilitator C.T. Butler developed this as a step-by-step (hence "formal") process to address the typical problems of consensus as used by members of political activist groups. The first step, once a proposal is made, is to ask only clarifying questions. In the next step, people state only objections and concerns, which are written on a large easel pad and grouped according to topic. In the third step these groups of concerns are addressed, one at a time, with discussion and suggestions for refining or modifying the proposal. The last step is calling for consensus. The steps can occur sequentially in one meeting, but for more complex or controversial topics are usually spread across several different meetings. Proposals can be blocked only when the group agrees that the person's reasons for the block are based in the group's vision and values, called the "principled objection." If not, the block is considered invalid and the proposal passes anyway. This step prevents a group from being covertly disrupted by someone not aligned with the group's vision and values, as is often found in non-profit organizations and cohousing communities. He finds that this way of treating blocking allows non-profits and cohousers to include these people without being held hostage to their ability to block the group from moving towards its intended purpose.

Other community activists caution against using a so-called “fallback” decision-making method in addition to consensus, for two reasons. First, if someone blocks a proposal, the people who want the proposal to pass can just sit back and say, “No matter, we’ll just switch to 75 percent voting now and pass it anyway.” The group won’t try to keep re-crafting and honing the proposal to meet that one person’s concerns. In consensus, the idea is that when concerns about a proposal are met, *it makes a better decision*. A “fallback” method is likely to result in lower-quality decisions. (And as consensus trainer Patricia Allison points out, willingness to stop the consensus process and simply vote because someone has blocking concerns means they group’s not really using consensus.) Second, many facilitators point out that consensus is not just a method but a philosophy of inclusion. When individuals are less able to influence the group’s decisions because it has switched to a faster method, they see it as breaking down the trust and cohesion of the group. If there’s pressure on the group to decide something quickly, people won’t feel the time or space to get in touch with and express their concerns. They could feel pressured into deciding something they don’t really want, and end up leaving the group as a result.

I believe this issue hinges on whether you want to start a new community primarily to build its physical infrastructure and see who’ll join you over time, or to create a place where you can enjoy connection and friendship with your existing group. If your reason is mostly to create a community and live with whomever resonates with its vision, you may want to use a faster decision-making method than consensus (such as super-majority voting), in these circumstances, regardless of the current members you may lose.

If your reason is to create a community with your current group of friends, you may want a more inclusive method like consensus that builds support and connection, regardless of the great land deals you might have to pass up.

What Decision-making Method Should You Use?

If you want to spread power widely, help bond the group more deeply, and evoke the shared wisdom of the group for decisions, consider using consensus or an agreement-seeking method (or both). For spreading resources across a range of choices, try multi-winner voting.

And for accomplishing many tasks without taking the whole group’s time, consider setting up systems like Earthaven’s Council and committee structure.

If you’ve chosen consensus, here are some ways to get trained in it:

- Read Bea Briggs’ *Introduction to Consensus* for an excellent overview of the process itself, and especially how to facilitate a consensus meeting. I suggest studying it, section by section, as a group.
- Study the Formal Consensus process in C.T. Butler’s book, *On Consensus and Conflict*. I recommend Formal Consensus for inexperienced groups, as I think its step-by-step process is easier to learn and easier for beginners to facilitate.
- Visit other community groups or political activist groups, and as a guest, observe their consensus process.
- Hire a consensus trainer to come out and train your group.
- Offer support to any group members who want to learn facilitation (including financial help for additional training), so

you'll end up with a team of people who can rotate the job of facilitating your meetings.

Some core groups and communities go all out to understand and practice consensus well, and their meetings show it. Sharingwood cohousing gives whatever approval and financial support necessary for the ongoing training of its process team. Members of Earthaven's core group arranged trainings by both Caroline Estes and C.T. Butler.



In Part Two we'll look at some of the technical tips and tools for growing a community — from making agreements and setting up legal entities to finding, financing, and developing your community property — and how you'll raise enough money internally to pay property loans and operating expenses.