
Is consensus the best decision rule for group action ?

An examination of the breakdown of consensus decision making process among various small groups, reasons for breakdown and suggestions for improvements.

Introduction

This writer has thirty years of experience of groups using the consensus decision making (CDM) process, from activist groups without legal framework to incorporated bodies (charitable trusts, Co-operatives.) Critical analysis reveals that although nominally consensual groups, counter consensual processes were at work. This paper aims to test this experience against the history of consensual process groups (Quakers, Feminists), scholastic and laboratory studies and the experience of younger people active in consensual groups today. Finally I attempt to uncover methods of modifying CDM in the light of these experiences.

Quakers

The Religious Society of Friends, begun in seventeenth century Britain, as a group and as individuals were severely tested by external forces of persecution. During this formative period under fire lessons were learned on the utility of their chosen decision rule, it's flaws and weaknesses. After three hundred years there is a basis of practice for consensual meetings which Stuart Chase has characterised by the following principles;

1. *Unanimous decisions – no voting*
2. *Silent periods – at start and when conflict arises;*
3. *Moratorium – when agreement cannot be reached;*
4. *Participation by all with ideas on the subject;*
5. *Learning to listen – not going to meeting with mind made up;*
6. *Absence of leaders – the clerk steers but does not dominate;*
7. *Nobody outranks another;*
8. *Factual focus- emotions kept to a minimum;*
9. *Small meetings -typically limited numbers.*

(Chase 1973)

It is as well to be clear that every Quaker meeting is a meeting for worship; (that some business is conducted in it does not make it less so), that members share a spiritual focus and communitarian world view. Consequently group consensus failure due to ideological or cognitive conflict is less likely than in groups without a strongly shared conceptual framework. (1) History has taught Quakers the importance of inducting newcomers into the shared world view and they have off-the-shelf solutions to draw upon when group process fails, for example dominating behaviour, or a manipulative clerk. (Sheeran 1996).

The clerk, occupying roles of secretary and facilitator, has power to effect information flow and conduct of meetings. Great skills and personal qualities are demanded of this person in addition to understanding of the meeting process itself and peoples' behaviours within it. (Sheeran,Ch .V). Whilst no-one has any greater rank than another within the meeting, sometimes a meeting may require expertise on a subject under discussion. This may lead to manipulation of the decision, especially where a technical matter needs to be resolved urgently, a situation which relies on the member's good intentions and the skill of the clerk.

Sheeran's interviews (Sheeran 1996; conclusion) revealed that some (notably younger) members with experience of conventional business meeting styles, engaged in meeting strategies. These include manipulating the course of discussion and pre-meeting lobbying

for a desired outcome. Such practice is counter to the spiritual model and communitarian world view; its use in this group may be symptomatic of wider social and political trends. Alternatively it may be simply a symptom of failure to educate the member in proper practice of meetings.

Feminists

During the 1960's a widespread popular movement of women emerged based on small local consciousness raising groups. When these groups attempted to make changes in the wider world such as health care provision, crisis support, lobbying, peace actions, they had to address issues of power, control and decision making. From a starting point of the absence of structure this allowed a radical reconstruction of the tools of effective power from an entirely new conceptual framework.

An outstanding paper of this time by Jo Freeman challenged women's groups to move beyond the *rejection* of structure to create new kinds of structure in groups which avoided "the sins of the fathers" inherent in male defined hierarchical methods. In "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (1970) Freeman makes clear that all groups have structure; lack of formal structure gives influence to the informal structure which underlies any group. She identified some ground rules for new forms of process;

1. *Delegation; of specific authority for tasks by democratic procedures.*
2. *Responsibility of the selected back to the group (oversight).*
3. *Distribution of authority; gives opportunity to learn skills.*
4. *Rotation; prevents person taking power over a role.*
5. *Allocation of tasks on rational criteria.*
6. *Diffusion of information; access to information enhances power.*
7. *Equal access to resources.*

"When these principles are applied, they ensure that whatever structures are developedwill be controlled by and be responsible to the group. The group of people in positions of authority will be diffuse, flexible, open and temporary. They will not be in such an easy position to institutionalise their power because ultimate decisions will be made by the group at large. The group will have the power to determine who shall exercise authority within it." (Freeman 1970)

From these proposals Women's groups developed much effective work whilst maintaining a critical eye on methods, process and conceptual frameworks. There is now a considerable body of knowledge based on this work of which "Decisions without Hierarchy" by Kathleen P. Iannello (Iannello 1992) provides a useful examination, and offers a useful new model.

By the time of Iannello's work the use of CDM was almost universal. This may have come about through close association of Women's' groups with Quaker peace activists, or it may have emerged independently; this is not clear. Iannello identifies a key issue as being

*"whether organisations can develop in non-hierarchical ways without imitating the **informal** structures of patrimonial systems.*

(emphasis mine).

In her outline of organisation theory she quotes from Zey-Ferrel and Aitken

"We should not merely acknowledge the non rational and irrational aspects of organisations and then rush to analyse the rational aspects...our analysis should centre on these non rational and irrational aspects because these are the ways organisations operate in the real world."

It may be argued that formal structuring is an attempt to reduce any negative impact of

the non rational and irrational elements of group behaviour on meetings and other group process. Building on the work of Rothschild and Whitt (1986) an eight point model is proposed;

1. **Authority** rests with the collective, it may be temporarily or specifically (task) delegated but is always subject to oversight and recall.
2. **Rules** are few and based on the substantive ethics of the situation.
3. **Social control** is a group dynamic similar to peer pressure.
4. **Social relations** stem from the communitarian world view, are personal, and valued in themselves.
5. **Recruitment and advancement** are based on friendship networks, informally assessed skills, and compatibility with the group values.
6. **Incentive structures**; material incentives are secondary, normative and solidarity incentives are primary.
7. **Social stratification** is deprecated in favour of striving to egalitarianism.
8. **Differentiation**, is minimised in favour of task and skill sharing; demystifying expertise.

The same writers also offer an analysis of factors which mediate against consensual process;

1. **Time**; consensual process takes longer than hierarchical styles, most notably in the absence of training and practice.
2. **Emotional intensity**; is greater in consensual groups, and is given space and value in the meeting context, impacting also on time taken.
3. **Non-democratic habits and values**, most people are raised and educated in non consensual situations and bring this value set, consciously or otherwise to whatever they do.
4. **Environmental constraints**; any external influences on the group may be greater for consensual groups addressing social, political, economic or environmental issues.
5. **Individual differences**; culture, education, training, life experience will all impact an individual's capacity to participate in consensus process, but this may become advantageous in terms of creative group work.

(paraphrased for brevity by this writer)

Iannello describes a Modified Consensus Model, partly derived from the experiences of a Women's' group operating a health centre as a formal business. The MCM makes a distinction between *critical* and *routine* decisions. A critical decision has high impact on the members, resources, policies, external standing or service users. A routine matter is low impact whilst being necessary within the management of the group's *work*. In a reversal of hierarchical systems critical decisions are kept within full group consensus process, routine decisions are delegated to sub groups or specific individuals whilst being subject to recall. MCM allows groups to operate much larger activities than would be realisable with all members involved in all decisions.

A danger exists that a rapidly growing organisation using MCM could fall into the trap of creating hierarchy of decision as existing routine decision making members over-see greater volumes of work. To counter this the growing organisation could fork into two or more parallel similar groups, or an affinity group structure could be used (a type of consensual hierarchy !)

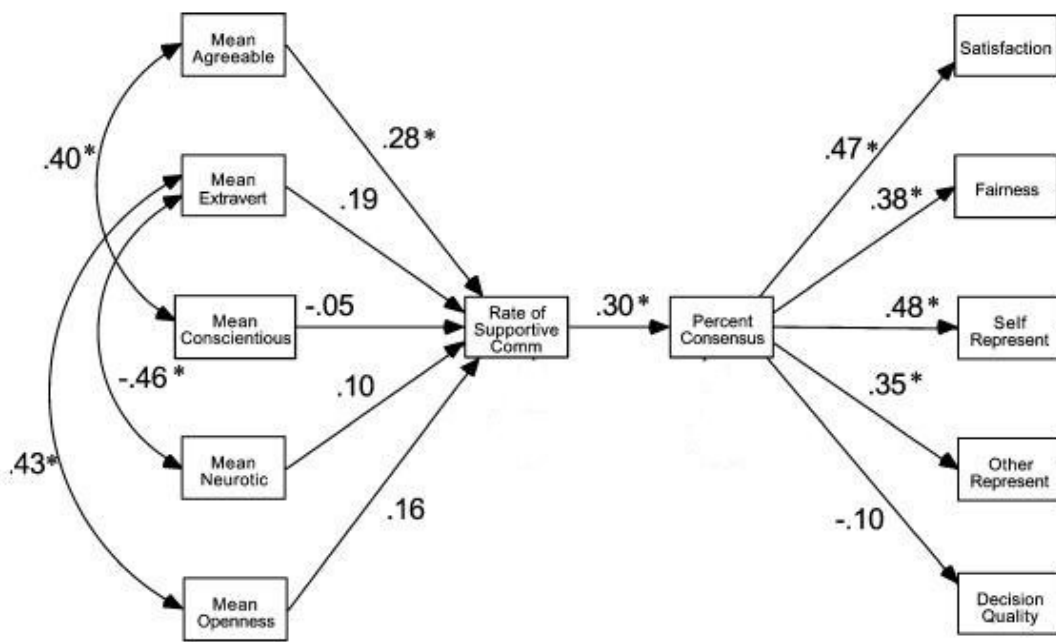
The Management /Academic view

A considerable body of work exists within the academic study of management on the matter of CDM, some focussed on non-hierarchical or co-operative organisations but most looking at using consensual methods within traditional business models. In the paper "Identifying Obstacles to Small Group Democracy" (Gastil 1993) a field study of a struggling co-operative business was used to create hypothetical models of points of failure in small groups, followed by a survey study to determine their universality. The study found the following obstacles to democracy;

1. *Long meetings.*
2. *Unequal involvement and commitment.*
3. *Cliques and miniconsensus.*
4. *Different communication skills and styles.*
5. *Interpersonal conflicts.*

The follow up study used 66 students and examined their own experiences of small group process. Gastil's hypothesis that the identified obstacles are universal was confirmed. (2) Part of the original field study proposed strategies for overcoming the obstacles . These are reproduced in full in appendix 1. but can be summarised as a set of group and individual learning tasks aiming to change personal behaviours (both in and outside of meetings) towards greater personal responsibility for maintaining the group. In other words these learned behaviours would make the individuals better overall co-operators, not just better at meetings.

Studies of CDM within management of mainstream businesses have focussed more on quality of decisions, but some studies have also considered the issue of acceptability, or ownership of outcome. Schweiger, Sandberg and Ragan (1986) have shown that adversarial methods (Dialectical Inquiry and Devils advocate) yield "better " decisions over CDM, but that only in CDM groups was there universal acceptance of outcomes. Numeroff, Passmore and Ford (1976) have shown that the use of CDM implies a process gain wherein the group yields a result greater than non consensual groups. The same study also examined the quality of outcomes of groups against the individual members, but the results have not been consistently replicated by other studies. Sager and Gastil (2006) looked at groups in terms of their personality factors and how this impacted the process and outcomes. This diagram illustrates the model and shows correlation co-
coefficients for the various dependant variables tested. Note that use of CDM was arrived at *independently* by groups and was not part of the experimental set.



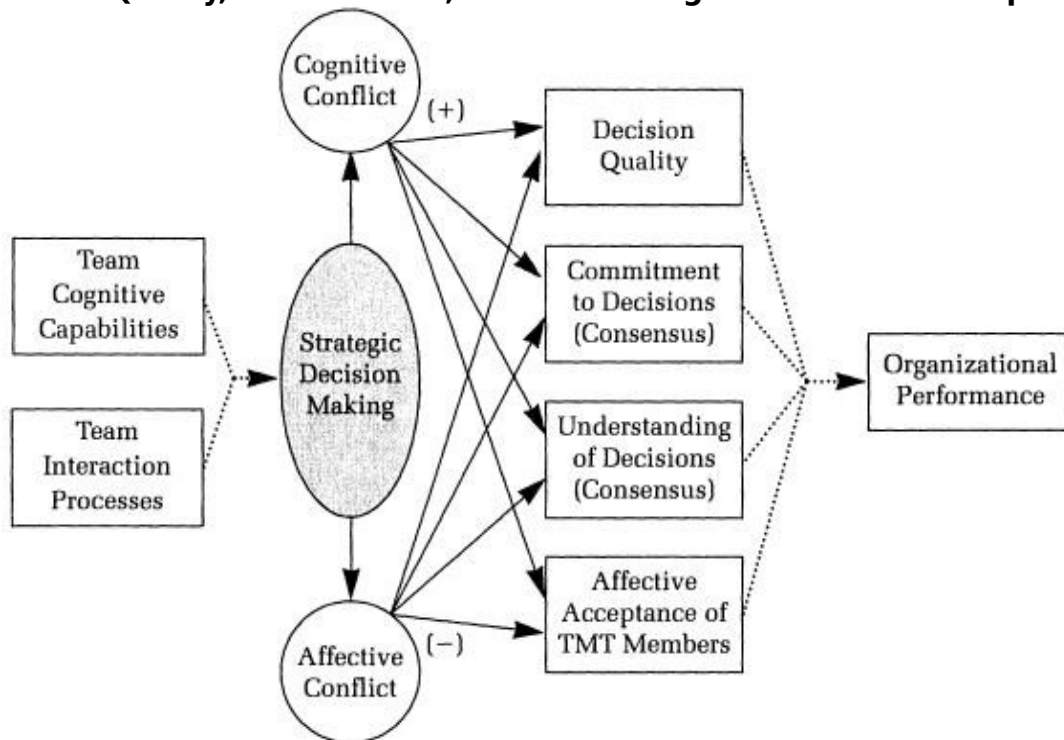
*p < .05. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 216$, $df = 52$, $p < .001$.

Path Analytical Summary of the Relationships Among Personality Factors, Supportive Communication, Percent Consensus and Outcome Ratings (3)

To some extent it is stating the obvious that we are going to communicate best with others who are open, sane, conscientious, outgoing and agreeable, and that such qualities will enhance group outcomes regardless of process, (though this latter suggestion may yield to further testing.) This study yields a description of a personality profile of the idealised member of a CDM group, but tells us nothing about *how* we ordinary mortals achieve this state of being!

Interpersonal conflict is a common obstacle to CDM . Amason (1996) examines conflict in group work with a view to drawing out the effect of different types of conflict. Essentially the model tested is;

Consistent and contradictory effects of Cognitive and Affective Conflicts on Decision Quality, Commitment, Understanding and Affective Acceptance



^a The relationships measured and tested in this study are represented by solid lines. The dotted lines represent implied relationships and are not being explicitly tested.

The essential finding of this study is that *cognitive* conflict enhances outcome quality, whilst *affective* conflict diminishes it. This gives a model to address one of the common reasons for group failure, namely interpersonal conflicts. No measure may be sufficient to overcome emotional conflict between individuals, but a recognition of the role of cognitive conflict, with a willingness to bring it into the open and use it to improve the group decision *without taking it personally* may prevent build up of personal resentments. (4)

I undertook a qualitative study by questionnaire of the experiences of three people at a gathering held at a housing co-operative. All three respondents had experience of CDM in non-incorporated activist groups, two were serial co-operators in housing and community groups, all understood and had used CDM extensively. The questions are produced in full in appendix 2. In response to Q6 one reported more than one experience of breakdown due to lack of communication and respect for CDM, resulting in one group split and one cessation of the co-op. The same respondent described vested interests and use of status quo for personal gain as situations where CDM would be inadequate. Another respondent described a breakdown of CDM resulting in an amicable forking as a managed change to a group within an organisation. Clearly these two individuals have had widely differing experiences of the breakdown of consensus, but both confirm situations similar to those witnessed and experienced by this writer. Responding to Q11, one suggested that being brought up with CDM is required, but more realistically recommends active listening, and good facilitation skills whilst (Q12) deprecating pig headedness and certainty. The same respondent to Q13 emphasised good training including facilitation skills. The third respondent mostly talked about experience of CDM impacting on a large environmental action. To Q6 she described how large numbers of newcomers adversely impacted the capacity of the action participants to agree a form of action, as no clear foresight existed for integrating them into the more experienced body. This led to a failure of the larger more experienced group to decide an overall action and wasted time and effort which

could have been spent more creatively. In response to Q10 she spoke of the need for experts for some decisions and how time constraints (especially in front line action situations) could result in people reverting to traditional roles in group behaviours; either acting as individuals unco-ordinated or following "leaders". In reply to Q11 she lists self-criticism, formulation and clarity of aim, and knowledge of own motives as needed qualities. All respondents reported familiarity with types of Modified Consensus Model in use.

Conclusions

The Quaker model has survived three hundred years and offers off the shelf solutions to many of the problems in CDM, but it depends strongly on adherence to a shared spiritual world view. Starting from a structureless position the Women's' movement has built a strong model of non-hierarchical decision making and a vigorous body of criticism which could form a foundation for training in CDM and the Modified Consensus Model. Business and management studies have also produced a body of experimental and critical work which confirms that CDM and MCM process give higher decision quality and greater participant ownership than adversarial and hierarchical methods. These types of study may have reached a limit wherein the interpersonal factors reduce testing of hypotheses to experimental noise, as revealed by failure to replicate some more subtle studies and also by the tested impact of personality and interpersonal factors on group process.(5). All the frameworks agree the main reasons for breakdown of consensus are;

1. Unequal commitment and participation.
2. Counter consensual behaviours.
3. Unequal communications and information flow.
4. Conflict.
5. Time demands

Whatever direction a group comes to application of CDM or MCM all models agree that training in personal behaviour, the meeting process and facilitation are all essential for long term success. It is suggested that conflict resolution by separation of types of conflict could be included in group training. One interview subject strongly advocated role play as part of group training to prepare members to handle known counter consensual behaviours, a view I strongly endorse. A novel study of group decision process using email instead of face to face meeting was found to overcome barriers of perceived status and of meeting manipulation (Dubrovsky et al. 1991). If nothing else, knowledge of such studies and the effects they reveal could be part of consensus model training. In terms of training individuals for participation in large group actions there may be something to be learned from studies of consensual process in animal groups (Conradt and Roper 2005) especially in terms of self organising sub group behaviours. The proposals for remedial actions in the Gastil study (1993) (detailed in appendix 1) form an outline for a personal training schedule for CDM and MCM participants. Perhaps the strongest indicator for sustainable consensual groups is shared experience within a shared conceptual framework of communality as demonstrated by the survival of the Quaker movement and confirmed experimentally by Postmes, Spears and Cihangir (2001). It is my view that all participants in CDM and MCM groups would benefit from a rigorously designed and implemented training program involving;

- History (Quaker and Feminist groups and also recent *failures*),
- Scientific/academic studies of interpersonal factors (and other factors) in group process.
- Facilitator roles; theory and practice (for *all* participants).
- Knowledge and practice for all critical roles in organisation.
- Role plays of known counter consensual behaviours, and remedial steps.

In addition, the effectiveness and long term survival of the organisation is dependant on

common adoption of group norms, so a repeated (ritual ?) affirmation of the group goals and vision is strongly indicated.

Finally, the organisation “Radical Routes”, (www.radicalroutes.org.uk) a secondary co-operative (ie one whose members are housing or workers co-ops who send delegates to meetings), would provide an excellent field for further detailed studies. Whilst all co-operatives with secondary CDM or MCM decision rules they all operate within legal frameworks derived from the mainstream and having a vote based primary decision rule, to which some co-ops have reverted in consensus breakdown situations. Radical Routes also has a support system for member co-ops to help each other with conflict resolution and provides some training for members of member co-ops. (6) The individual co-ops within RR draw members from a wide demographic spread as well as diverse social political and philosophical agendas, making this a particularly fertile pool for both qualitative and quantitative studies and multi factor testing.

APPENDIX 1

Strategies for Confronting Obstacles to Small Group Democracy

(from Gastil 1993)

Long Meetings	Self-facilitate Facilitate others Meet when everyone is wide awake Come to meetings well prepared Be attentive, take notes.
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Unequal involvement and/or commitment	Make levels of involvement and commitment more equal; reduce some members levels and/or increase those of other members. Change the group membership.
Cliques and misconensus	Establish means for communicating important ideas and information outside of meetings (eg logbook). Make individuals responsible for communicating with others outside of meetings.
Communication differences; Unequal Comm. skills	Encourage and assist the least skilled members in improving their skills. Establish procedures that make it easier for more hesitant members to speak (eg round robin) Create a self-sufficiency ethic that spurs members to take responsibility for augmenting their skills.
Different Comm. styles	Try to understand and accept differences in communication styles. If possible integrate different styles into a unique group style that favours no particular individual style.
Personal Conflict	Try to maintain mutual respect. Resist temptation to gossip about group members with others in the group. Prevent bitter conflict through building positive emotional bonds among members. Whenever possible express feelings to other group members; be open and honest. Help other members work through their conflicts. If conflict becomes extreme during a meeting consider leaving the room and addressing it at a later time.

APPENDIX 2.

Questionnaire on personal history of CDM practice.

Interviews conducted face to face on 22.6.2008 at Earthworm C-op. Answers recorded in note form by interviewer.

1.Respondent Name.

2. List of CDM driven groups including legal framework if any.
3. CDM Training- What form, from whom, what effect.?
4. Facilitator role; number of times. Training - from whom ?
5. Group use of external facilitator- How selected- issues arising.
6. Breakdown of CDM; identified reasons. How overcome?
7. Consequences to *group* in time as a result of 6.
8. Consequences to *organisation* as a result of 6/7.
9. Have you been involved in *Modified* CDM group ?
10. Any situation where CDM is inadequate ? (real or imagined)
11. List qualities of individual needed for CDM to work.
12. List qualities of individual counter to CDM.
13. What lessons can you offer to newcomers to CDM?

NOTES

1. Almost certainly a classic example of the impact of group norms on decision process and quality as in Postmes, Spears and Cihangir (2001)
2. When critically examining these laboratory studies it must be in the context of the use of zero-history contrived groups of (usually) undergraduate students. Some thought must be given to how applicable such studies are to more diverse groups in the world at large.
3. To interpret this chart simply, only the “agreeable” dimension has a significant effect on

the rate of supportive communication; the other effects are outside the selected significance. The positive correlation between supportive communication and use of CDM is significant. The measures of outcome quality are significant other than for decision quality which shows a small (non significant) negative correlation.

4. In a co-operative business model or MCM where critical decisions are shared consensually the members *are* the "top management team" equivalent to the board of a mainstream company. Whilst the scale may be smaller, the decisions are still critical to the wellbeing and survival of the business, so studies relevant to the latter are transferable in my view.

5. For a round up of work on wider group process (*ie* not limited to CDM or MCM groups) see Kerr and Tindale (2004). In my view there is much in this work which should be considered in a syllabus for CDM and MCM group training, for prophylactic reasons as well as incorporation into group practice.

6. All attempts to contact this group failed. Another source within RR confirmed they are currently (June 2008) dealing with several separate crises, therefore unable to give time to academic enquiries.

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