

Appendix: resources for future use

Meeting Guidelines

1. Speak for oneself
2. Share air time
3. Inquire to better understand how someone may be thinking about an issue differently (with genuine questions and without imbedded judgments)
4. Explain the line of thinking/reasoning behind one's statements, questions and actions.
5. Be specific – use data, examples.
6. Disagree openly with any member of the group.
7. Jointly design ways to test disagreements and identify solutions.
8. Use the group forum to speak and refrain from sidebar conversations.
9. Agree on what important words mean.
10. Explicitly decide what the decision-making process is for any decisions made (e.g. consensus, recommend to someone, give input and leave the final decision to someone).
11. Bring up undiscussable issues (“elephants in the room”) when doing so will help the group process, the task at hand and/or long term relationships in the group

(Thanks to Umbrella for sharing their most recent meeting guidelines. Many of these were adopted or adapted from that list. In turn, many of Umbrella's guidelines were adapted from Roger Schwarz's book, The Skilled Facilitator.)

A consensus building process

Consensus means that all members support or can at least “live with” a particular decision. Consensus does not mean that all members agree whole-heartedly or without reservation. All participants must take a stand; there is no such thing as passing or abstaining. Silence also has a particular meaning. Persons remaining silent are agreeing with the outcome or “can live with” the outcome; in other words, silence IS taking a stand.

Consensus building is a process. A consensus building process begins with discovery or inquiry; all persons seek to understand what the issues are, what are similarities and differences in perceptions, experiences and values. At some point, either/or (closed) questions may be asked, with straw polls taken. These straw polls provide the group with information in the discovery process. Still later, a proposal or assertion may be framed by or brought to the group. At this point, it is useful to begin to “test consensus.” One way to do this is by posting a

scale that represents a range of opinion. This one is adapted from Kaner, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-making*.

- 1 I cannot support this proposal as presently stated. (N.B., some groups decide that there will be “no blocking without alternative proposals.”)
- 2 I have serious reservations and/or questions. I lean toward not being able to support this proposal as presently stated. “I don't like this, and I also don't want to hold up the group,” (for example), or “I don't like this, and I still have serious reservations that are making me hang back.”
- 3 I have reservations, and will go along. “I can live with it.”
- 4 I agree to support this proposal even as I have some minor reservations. “Basically, I like it.”
- 5 I support this proposal. “I like it.”

One member (in VACCRRRA's case, one person per agency would make sense) stands along a continuum, representing positions 1-5. Alternatively, people call out a number, which is recorded on a flipchart. Everybody can see where the group stands.

At this point, unless everyone is at 3, 4 and 5, it is important to switch from advocacy (asserting a viewpoint) back to inquiry, with discovery questions like, “Where is there common ground?”

“What are the crux reservations?”

“What would help those at 1 and 2 to move up on the scale?”

“What opportunities do you see for modifying the proposal/assertion to assist the group in moving toward consensus?”

The group may decide to modify the original assertion/proposal as many times as it wishes to and may keep testing consensus on these modifications.

There are gradations of support. For example, strong support might look like 6 members at 5, 4 members at 4, 2 members at 3. Modest support might look like 1 member at 5, 1 member at 4, 4 members at 3. Some guidelines for when to seek enthusiastic support include:

- When the stakes are high
- When decisions are long term or not easily reversible
- When the issues are complex
- When there is great need for stakeholder buy-in.