Community Consensus Building:
Process Management Techniques (and Strategies)

by Michael Ashcraft

During the past several years, local governments have assumed a more aggressive leadership role in the area of community engagement. Author Robert D. Putman (*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 2000) refers to this as building social capital. The idea is simple. Invite stakeholders into the decision-making process and help them understand, develop, and eventually own the outcomes.

The reality for some communities can be different. This article discusses a number of techniques that process owners—elected officials and management staff—can use to avoid the pitfalls of community engagement efforts and the unfortunate dynamics that can sometimes emerge. It offers a number of practical suggestions on how to lay the foundation for building community consensus.

WHAT COMMUNITY CONSENSUS MEANS

Community consensus is often driven by misdefined expectations. A common trap that communities tend to set for themselves has to do with how consensus is defined or is misdefined. Somewhere along the way, citizens can come to believe that consensus means that everyone agrees with everything. If that definition emerges, the process and the process owners are doomed.

True consensus actually develops a much more mature sense of discourse and engagement. It recognizes that people, given the right assurances and mutual respect, will act for the greater good. To help set that stage, process owners must accept that consensus is reached when mutual understanding is established and decisions are reached openly and fairly. This model does not ensure consensus, but without it, success is elusive.

Today, most process guides have been well schooled in brainstorming techniques used to obtain as many ideas as possible to help with the decision-making process. Often, people state their ideas, which are then written on a flip chart, or they write their thoughts on a note that is then secured on a wall map.

These idea-generation techniques are all well and good, but they are only part of the story and can overwhelm a meeting chair and frustrate participants. The diagram below demonstrates the quandary. At any given point, a new idea is introduced and discussion ensues (shown with red arrows). Even in the most amicable of surroundings, either the chair or the participants, or both, begin to sense that too much information may be forthcoming, so a decision is made that can result in either action or ter-

During Olathe's 2004 Diversity Forum, participants were asked to develop and then prioritize diversity issues facing the city in the next five years and how best to approach these issues.

mination of dialogue (black arrows). This is the business-as-usual model, which is repeated endlessly in today's meeting-rich environments.

When attempting to engage stakeholders and build consensus, discussion leaders find it is not always easy to limit discussion or end a meeting without a decision. As ideas, thoughts, and concerns mount, they often diverge at an accelerating rate (green arrows). The fear and the reality is that, at some point, the process can collapse from the weight of its own momentum. This barrier is called the groan zone, and if you've ever been at a public meeting that has gotten out of hand you realize it is aptly titled.

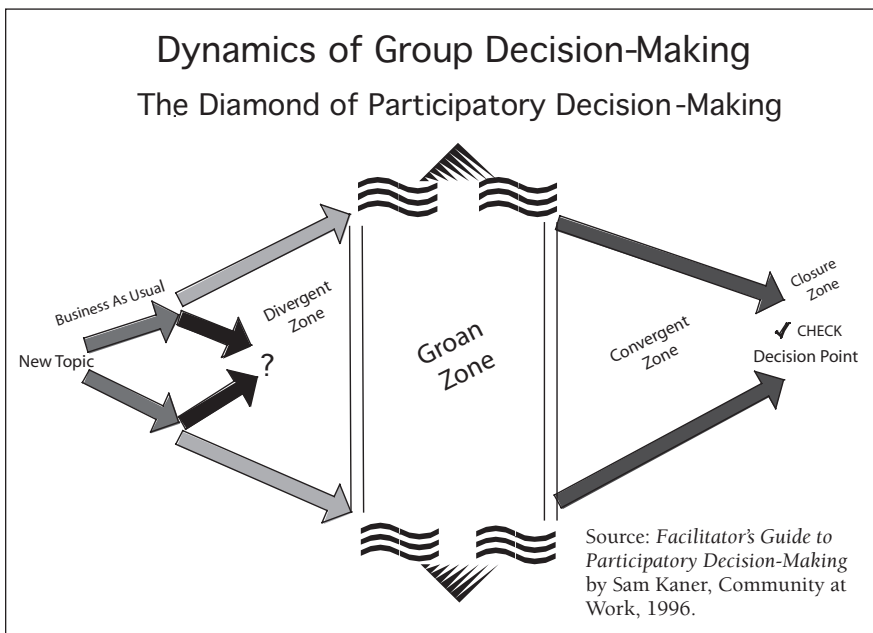The tactics that process owners must learn and deploy are applicable to the convergent zone (blue arrows).

This is where consensus is nurtured, social capital grows, and better decisions are born. This is where the many ideas become the few, and the best ideas prevail.

HOW EFFECTIVE MEETINGS ARE ORGANIZED

A typical public meeting might have anywhere from 20 to 100 people in attendance. Regardless of the size of the group, process convergent techniques are necessary. The first challenge is mutual understanding. This takes time, and it takes a willingness to manage aberrant behaviors respectfully.[1] This can be accomplished in a number of different ways.

One strategy is to divide the larger group into breakout sessions and allow smaller, more intimate discussions to develop under the guidance of a trained, neutral (third-party) facilitator. Depending on the complexity of the topic, each breakout group can discuss the issue(s) at hand, allowing every participant to be heard and understood. This is reinforced if everyone's thoughts are written down, unfiltered, and publicly displayed.

Consensus can then be built at the breakout level and transferred to the larger group using similar process techniques. At the breakout level, the facilitator begins by asking the participants if there are any similarities (connections) among the ideas presented that might allow group members to link and build upon each others' thoughts. This process takes time, but it establishes the foundations of mutual support as well as open and fair dialogue.

Dynamics of Group Decision-Making
The Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making

Business As Usual

New Topic

Divergent Zone

?

Groan Zone

Convergent Zone

Closure Zone

✔ CHECK
Decision Point

Source: *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* by Sam Kaner, Community at Work, 1996.

Once the group identifies and expresses the linkages (or themes), the facilitator can employ a second technique to help group members prioritize their points. Sometimes this prioritization is self-evident, but a visual representation of preferences allows people to express themselves and develop a paper trail of decision making.

One effective technique is the use of "dot polling." This is not voting. It is an expression of support (or nonsupport) for a particular idea or solution. The facilitator can reinforce that premise and make those expressions more meaningful by limiting the number of dots each participant receives. Everyone should get the same number of dots. The key is to set expectations that those dots are precious and should be used wisely. Once the dots are placed, the facilitator can ask the group members to summarize what they see in the poll results. This reinforces openness and fairness. It allows people to support the outcome because they know they were heard and understood.

The breakout group priorities can now be shared with the group as a whole. Consensus can continue to be built if members of each breakout group tap a spokesperson to present the results of their discussions. The entire process repeats itself, allowing breakout group members to ask questions and discuss issues. A final round of dot polling allows the entire group to understand the whole and be part of the final priority listing.

MEETING TRANSPARENCY AND FOLLOW-UP

To help ensure understanding and to promote commitment to the consensus-building effort, process owners should plan on memorializing the results of the discussions throughout the process. This can easily be done by putting the results of the discussions and the dot polling on the Web for further review and comment.

For many local governments, this type of transparency is not unusual or even difficult. It does take time, but, as the old adage says, "you can pay

Operational Definition: Consensus Decision Making

A. I believe I understand **your** point of view.
B. I believe you understand **my** point of view.
C. Whether or not I prefer this decision, I **support** it because it was reached **openly** and **fairly**.

me now or you can pay me later." For communities that make stakeholder engagement the foundation of their social capital efforts, they find that "the best," most rational voices tend to prevail. They also find that the decisions that elected officials must make from time to time are more generally supported by the community, are understood more widely, and are more appreciated. **PM**

[1]Note that certain sociopathic and psychopathic behaviors fall outside of this discussion and would require special consideration. For example, people with drug or alcohol addictions will from time to time attend public meetings.

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Coming in

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Avoiding the Post-Crisis Crisis