

Consensus at Camp Augusta

A unified sense of the whole on a given decision

Consensus means that everyone who is party to a discussion agrees to a course of action. For a decision to be adopted, everyone must give his or her consent. This doesn't mean that everyone agrees that a particular decision is the best decision. It simply means that everyone will go along with what the group decides.

Principles

- Everyone has equal input into the decision; no one holds any more power or influence over the decision than another.
- All participants seek to be: cooperative, communicate cleanly, emotionally intelligent, creative, and practice NVC.
- Solution orientation. The group seeks commonality and compromise over division and differences. The goal is unity over unanimity. Hard lines and raised hairs are rigid, while consensus involves warmth, openness, and appreciation.
- The values of the group/entity are considered. The values of individuals are not part of the consideration, unless the group, via consensus, makes them part of the group's core values and beliefs. The decision is about Camp Augusta, not John or Jane. Personal requests within the bounds of the community values are not in need of consensus. Everything on the website, staff manuals, and other guiding philosophy documents are considered standing and agreed upon by all community members.
- In large-group consensus, the issue at hand is of significant consequence, and there is enough information to make a decision. The weight and implications of the decision almost demand large-group consensus – it is that important. A core value is often in question, and a small-group process/effort educating the larger group was unsuccessful.

Decisions without large-group consensus

The individual/small group may make a decision, and then bring it up for consensus later, if they feel it necessary/prudent.

- Quick decisions safely considered within the bounds of the group's values. Time is of the essence. Often executed by people with a relevant Role, but not necessarily if immediacy is critical.
- Minor decisions safely considered within the bounds of the group's values. There are thousands of decisions that given individuals make, believing the large group to be either uninterested in or already considered within existing philosophical/value understandings. Judgment calls without major weight.
- Necessary decisions (emergent) safely considered within the bounds of the group's values
- Role/function decisions are made by people given the power to make decisions by the group. Trusted judgment. That person/small group may feel that the decision in their hand at the moment doesn't fit that granted power, or they may want a second opinion.
- Ad-hoc testing is when an individual or small group tosses out a decision to a few people, often at random, and tests their reaction to a decision. Assuming that goes well enough, the decision may be carried out. As the small group or individual sees fit, sometimes the option(s) may be tossed out to the whole group to test the waters, or find out about strong feelings.

Cautions

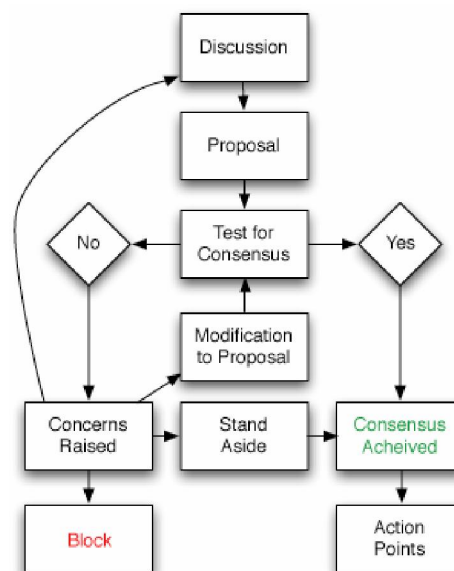
- Important dissenting opinions need to be heard & properly considered. (“Groupthink”)
- The more unclear the values and beliefs, the longer consensus is going to take.
- Consensus may require that the group meet an hour or more before the normal Sunday meeting to consider a whole-group-consensus decision. Individuals not in objection may abstain from the meeting, if so desired. Alternatively, members with an objection may be comfortable conveying their points to a surrogate. Dictatorships and strict hierarchies are very often more efficient. Consensus often trades that efficiency for stronger community.

- Verbal or non-verbal frustration or other emotions that silence or discourage members from being heard or being active are destructive toward consensus.
- Believing that an individual will be consulted in most or all decisions is impractical beyond 8-12 people in the total group. As the number of people rise, so do the number of decisions, almost exponentially.
- Stickiness in consensus often arises when there are apparently competing values within the same group/organization. Reconciliation may be possible, but often a given value must be assigned weight over another. For example, it would be wonderful to be “off the grid,” but doing so would involve many unsavory consequences, such as lowering the number of staff, number of scholarships, quality of food, number of activities, and/or raising the price of camp. Many decisions involve considerable complexity.
- A given individual may look at many decisions within the community and choose to feel irked by them. If that path is chosen, the person may feel distanced from the community: “So many decisions are not going the way I’d like them to; I wonder if I’m a good fit here?” Or, “I can’t believe they decided that!” Remember that there is diversity of perspectives in community, and agreement from “everyone” does not happen as often as you might imagine. Keep your eyes on the values and workings of the community, striving for the betterment of all, and knowing that the ideas of one or some both do and do not reflect the whole at times.

Sample Process

- Smaller group discusses item up for decision, writes the brief proposal, noting both the plusses and minuses raised in discussion.
 - The small group may at this point decide to make a small-group-consensus decision and test for modifications, all of which can be done via writing and review.
 - It can also work in the reverse, where the larger group sets a decision to a small group and agrees to abide by the consensus decision of the small group.
- Proposal review by large group. Everyone has read the brief, and a call for consensus is tested. Hands in the air works well. Listening. Possible refinements. Possibly back to small group, with dissenters leading positive change.
 - If it is not reached, new plusses and minuses are raised.
 - After all +/- have been raised, there is a call for discussion. Alterations to the proposal are often made here.
 - At any point, a call can be made for the group (large or small) to be willing to accept a majority vote. If there is consensus of the will of the majority setting the direction, a vote is called. This is a common occurrence. In voting, the group, and individuals, must be careful not to ignore the sentiments expressed on the decision. Voting is expedient, yet not at the expense of people who want to be heard being heard and considered. If a vote doesn’t pass, a second vote is unwise on the same issue – go for full consensus.
- Individuals are assigned to carry out the proposal.

Sample Process



Minorities in consensus – three levels

- Declare reservation – the softest form of disagreement, but allowance. The dissenter(s) wishes to be heard and considered, but if the group is not swayed, s/he agrees to allow the proposal, having been heard. The act is made in peaceful disagreement, but allowance. The decision does not live on emotionally in the dissenter – there is non-attachment, release.
- Stand aside – an individual(s) has a serious disagreement with the proposal, but is willing to let the motion pass. Modifications are often made in such cases. In standing aside, the individual is also agreeing to let the emotions and consequences pass, so there isn't a "grudge" or "disgruntlement." The act is made in peaceful disagreement, but allowance.
- Block – the decision may not go forward. A guiding principle with blocks are that a given individual may use four of them in his or her physical lifetime (from the Quaker model). It is a stand of last resort, reflecting a perceived blindsightedness on the part of the larger group in regard to a shared, community value. Personal values are not relevant. Significant harm to the organization or individuals must be perceived. The blocker holds enormous responsibility to create understanding and solutions; they are not sticks, but wands.

Getting unstuck

- Leave the decision for later or take a break. Have an energizing activity or a cup of tea.
- Ask everyone to argue convincingly the point of view they like the least
- Break down the decision into smaller areas. See which ones you can agree on and see what points of disagreement are left.
- Identify the assumptions, needs, and beliefs underlying the issue. Get to the heart of the matter.
- Imagine what will happen in six months, a year, five year's time if you don't agree. How important is the decision now?
- Bring in a facilitator. If the group is unable to work through conflicts or if similar issues keep coming up, think about bringing in a professional facilitator or mediator who is trained in conflict-resolution techniques.
- Consensus is not an effective way to make either-or-choices between evils, for members will never be able to agree which is worse. If the group has to choose between being shot and hung, flip a coin.
- Accept a temporary solution. As long as no one is blocking, move ahead and revisit as soon as possible within the principles and framework of consensus. The group may decide that a strong objection is enough to hold up a course of action as well.

Recent, large-group consensus examples at Camp Augusta

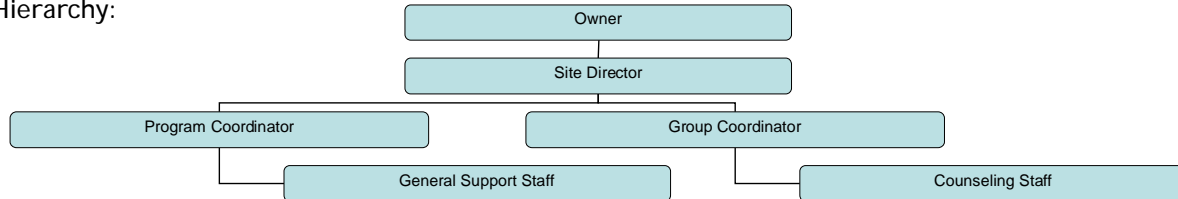
- Competition
There was a fuzzy understanding of the philosophy of competition at camp. A few people discussed it, one created the initial philosophy document, a small group reviewed and edited it, and then that group proposed it to the whole group for consensus.
- Music
Similar process to the above. The philosophy document was created by one person, and several, changing small groups contributed to it over weeks during the summer. It was proposed to the entire group via a posted writing for comment, and invitation to continue development.
- Food
A rough draft was created, loosely proposed to the whole group for comment, and then fine tuned in a small group. Posted for review and commentary to the whole group.
- Floor of staff house / T-shirt / Water bottle
A small group discussed the staff house floor. A couple community members outside of that group requested that the entire group be tested for their thoughts. That occurred, and then it went back to the small group for decision. No one in the whole group requested to join the small-group process, although they could have. The t-shirt and water bottle designs started via a request to form a small group, that group working on it, one person designing, and then back out to small group, and then finally to the whole group for commentary as folks felt inspired to do so.

Flat Hierarchy

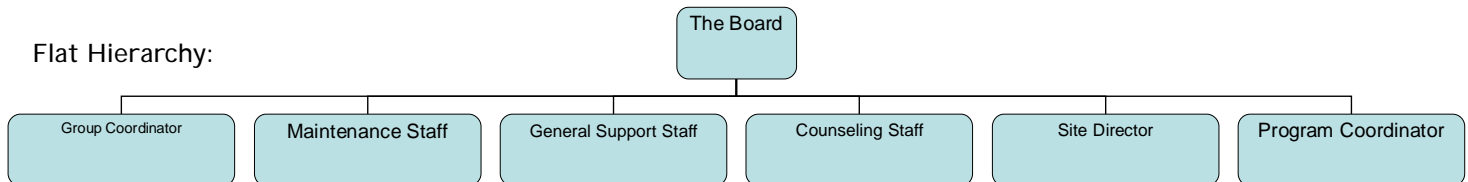
What is a flat hierarchy?

Flat hierarchy itself is a term you might have heard if you have taken any classes in business or management. It refers to the system of management a business or organization has in place regarding decision making. It is compared to a tall hierarchy. As a picture, it looks like this.

Tall Hierarchy:



Flat Hierarchy:



How does a flat hierarchy work?

- The power used in a flat hierarchy is expert, versus legitimate (see Bases of Power for a more complete description). In a flat hierarchy, people have power over a given area because the community has either given it to them or accepted that area as something for which they are responsible.
- Ideas brought forth by members of the community are all given equal weight. If an idea is brought forth for an area a small number of people have responsibility for, the decision to implement the idea is made by them with the understanding they have expert knowledge in their area and that they are working within the organization's philosophy. If it is an area that involves large groups of people, or will affect the community as a whole, the idea is brought to the entire community and often involves a consensus decision – see consensus for a more thorough description about the rubric here.
- Tall hierarchies have a boss looking over their subordinates work to ensure quality and completion. In a flat hierarchy individuals support and evaluate one another as equals. If a person has responsibility over a certain area, they may check in to ensure something is done, but the intent is that checking in is happening in both directions.

Let's look at a common misconception and some examples.

Common misconception: Everyone is now their own dictator, with no one to tell them what to do or guide their actions. Everyone can do what they want because there is no one in authority over them.

Let's look at some examples of scenarios where hierarchy comes into play:

I want to borrow a camp van for the weekend.

- a. Tall hierarchy model: I ask my immediate supervisor if I can use the van. He says "you can't have the van for the weekend because I'm the boss and I said so." That would be using legitimate power, conferred because that person has been placed in a position of authority.
- b. Using the above misconception about flat hierarchies, I have just as much right as the next person to have a van so I simply take it.
- c. Flat hierarchy: I ask the program director as their area of responsibility includes overseeing transportation needs. They say "you can't take the van this weekend because it's needed to go with the bus." If another solution is possible, the requester may propose it for consideration. A no without reason or openness is unacceptable.

I have great new ideas to change the grooming and saddling class! I'd like to try them for the next lesson, starting in two minutes.

- A) Tall hierarchy: I ask the EQ director and they say "Nope, I'm the boss, it's my way or the highway!"
- B) Common misconception of a flat hierarchy: We are all on the same level so my idea is as valid as the EQ directors. I'm going to go ahead and teach it this new way. Because we're all on the same level, I don't even need to run it by them first.
- C) Flat Hierarchy: The EQ Director has the responsibility for running the EQ program as well as advanced knowledge in working with horses. They have a lot of experience in that area. It would be appropriate to speak with them first before changing the standard way of doing something because it is an area they are responsible for. I also might have a great idea! Two minutes before the lesson may not be an appropriate time to present that information so the request of the EQ director might be "please run it the way you have in the past for this clinic and lets meet tonight and talk about your ideas." The idea would be given fair consideration; do it my way because I said so would not fly. A discussion regarding the ideas would ensue.

Four of the high ropes instructor's come to the Challenge Course Manager (CCM) having decided it is silly for the campers to need to wear helmets on the zip line as there is nothing for them to hit.

- A) Tall Hierarchy: No, they have to wear helmets. That's what the policy from the organization says. It's a safety standard.
- B) Misconception: They say it's four against one so they're going to do it their way. As everyone is equal, the vote of the CCM doesn't count any more than theirs.
- C) Flat Hierarchy: As the Challenge Course Manager (CCM), your vote actually does count more than theirs, assuming they aren't certified or highly experienced as well. The CCM is responsible for the safety of the courses and has done classes to become certified. They are both the person responsible for that area and carry certifications that give them expert power. Discussion of the policy would take place but the CCM would be able to override the vote.

Working with the expert (or someone with domain responsibility):

An expert has some level of experience or training above and beyond in a certain area. This is not to say that others don't have useful experience or great ideas. It does mean that the expert, or someone with domain responsibility, may have additional insight or perspective on the bigger picture that needs to be taken into account. Evidence to the contrary of the expert's opinion can be gathered and presented to change a process/decision.

Lets say you work in the kitchen and would like to prepare a meal a different way. The kitchen manager (the expert) thinks this will take longer than the current practice. If the staff wants to try this other way, they would be welcome to, but the concerns of the kitchen manager would need to be addressed. People may need to come in earlier for example. Another avenue would be to seek an outside expert's opinion on the matter to the contrary. Any discussion needs to be entered with openness to one another's view and a curiosity from all parties, rather than "this is THE way!." Situations that could be overridden by the expert would be ones related to a safety issue that was unpreventable, a reasonable concern that couldn't be worked around, or a legal issue. A remaining disagreement in these regards would follow a juried decision with a portion of the community.

What about ideas that cross multiple areas or changes to the philosophy of the organization?

Changes to something that is multiple people's responsibilities would need to be discussed with those people. A decision may then be made among them. Changes to the philosophy of the organization would involve the people in the organization, in this case the Camp community members. This would likely be a consensus discussion. See the previous pages for more information on that process.