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http://wheel.dcn.davis.ca.us/go/nstreet/library/Spreitzer/th_decisions.html

Excerpts from Master's Thesis on aspects of Co-housing management

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Meetings

If there is anything cohousing requires, it's meetings. Meetings are the formal channels of communication; these are the places decisions get made. Meetings can also provide a forum for a sense of community to develop and grow. Long before Muir Commons residents became neighbors, their primary form of socializing together was through meetings and work parties. After 1-2 years of meetings, 91% felt a sense of community had already developed. (See section on community

This point is thoughtfully elaborated by Gordon Davidson, founder of the Sirius Community in Massachusetts and former member of Findhorn in Scotland. In an interview about his experience with intentional communities, Davidson offered some insight on this topic:

The greatest learning for us has been recognizing that the future development of a balanced system of governance requires the integration of the principle of *democracy and egalitarianism*, together with the principle of *hierarchy and apportioned responsibility of authority*. These two principles are inextricably woven together. When you watch how people really function in groups and in political arrangements, you realize that if you don't integrate these principles, you get into very serious difficulties.

We have worked for a long time in what gets called "the alternative movement," where there is an extreme emphasis on democracy and egalitarianism. Oftentimes that doesn't allow real leadership and authority to be exercised. What we've learned is that even though we are all "divinely equal," we are at different stages of manifesting and expressing our divinity."

... Different people are at different levels of energy, consistency, and ability to take responsibility. It seems to me that out of the effort to allow everyone full empowerment, we sometimes disempower the people who have more capacity. (Davidson 1991: 23).

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Differing individual capacities must also be acknowledged. One Muir Commons resident hates meetings. He's a hands-on, Mr. Fix-it type. His strengths are seen on work days and

doing other physical tasks. Unfortunately, during the lengthy planning process in which attendance at meetings was required, his strengths went unappreciated and he became alienated from the group. Of course, it would have been impractical for the group to single him out and exempt him from the meeting requirements. But as we build community, we should be thinking about empowering ourselves and others, and experimenting with ways to achieve this goal with flexibility towards meeting the needs of individuals.

Voting / Consensus

Both N Street and Muir Commons make decisions through a consensus process. In the former, all adult residents are considered voting members; in the latter, voting is done on a per household basis. Voting, per se, is not the operative word in consensus. As Americans, we are conditioned to cast votes and accept the majority position. In voting, there are always winners and losers. Consensus, on the other hand, is decision-making whereby everyone can live with the decision - no one feels like a loser.

In her book, Collaborative Communities, Dorit Fromm outlines the 6 main steps in a consensus process:

- 1. **Issue:** A problem is stated.
- 2. **Discussion:** What needs to be decided is discussed, as well as concerns.
- 3. **Amendments:** As members bring up ideas and solutions, others add to them or alter suggestions. As one member explained, "It's not consensus if you don't have the benefit of the other person's wisdom."
- 4. **Test for consensus:** The facilitator draws the discussion to an end by stating a proposal that summarizes the group's direction or preference. The group agrees or disagrees, and more discussion follows.
- 5. **Proposal:** If agreed, a formal proposal is stated, and there is a call for any concerns about it.
- 6. **Formal consensus:** The concerns are discussed until consensus is reached.
(Fromm 1991: 169)

Components of a good meeting include a good agenda, a good facilitator, and timeliness. Agendas can be prepared in advance of the meeting by a committee or can be done at the start of the meeting. Regardless of whether 5 minutes or two hours goes into planning the agenda, it is essential that there be one. Usually it is written up on newsprint and hung for all to see. Attendees agree at the beginning how much time to devote to each item of business. Someone may be requested to be the timekeeper to keep the group on schedule. The facilitator's role is to keep people focused and to see that all points are addressed and all voices heard. Anyone can act as facilitator, but newcomers should observe several meetings before attempting to facilitate, since groups take on their own culture, and meetings reflect this.

When someone does not agree with the proposal, they can block the consensus. Fromm explains: "Blocking is a refusal by a member to go along with a proposal and can give the individual the power to block the group. There are several levels of blocking; for example, a member can agree to step aside from the decision making or to have his or her objections recorded." (Ibid)

Both communities have provisions to resort to a vote if they get stuck and consensus cannot be reached. As written in the N Street Cohousing General Information packet, if someone blocks on N Street, "a 3 month minimum effort of at least biweekly meetings occurs. The person(s) who blocks consensus must attend the biweekly meetings. Meetings should be scheduled around blockers. The biweekly meetings must focus on the issue needing consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, a 2/3 majority vote of those present at the monthly vision quest meeting will decide the issue at hand." (More on consensus can be found on page 11 of the N Street Cohousing General Information packet included in the Appendix).

Muir Commons developed a tidy diagram of their consensus process that is displayed at formal meetings. It clearly outlines the stages of consensus. (See diagram.) Other collaborative communities employ techniques to make meetings run more efficiently. The Winslow, Washington cohousing group uses a system of colored cards that participants hold up to express the degree of agreement with the proposal. Other groups use hand signals which help keep the meeting on track, express agreement or disagreement, or allow the facilitator to know if they have a point of information that should be addressed immediately or comments that can be taken in turn.

FORMAL CONSENSUS PROCESS

Developed by Muir Commons

Introduction

Proposal

Questions which clarify proposal

LEVEL ONE

General Discussion

Call for consensus Yes

LEVEL TWO No

List all concerns

Discussion

Call for consensus Yes CONSENSUS

LEVEL THREE No

Restate concerns (one at a time) Unresolved concerns

listed

Questions which clarify the concern

Discussion limited to one concern Plan for

Implementation

Are all concerns resolved? Yes

CLOSING OPTIONS No Yes

Declare the Send the proposal Withdraw the concern

proposal blocked to committee (standing aside)

One of the most comprehensive explanations of the consensus process was written by a group of physicians in the Valley Diagnostic, Medical, and Surgical Clinic, Inc. of Harlingen, Texas during a community-building exercise. Their definition is worthy of reprinting in total.

Consensus is a group decision - which some members may not feel is the best decision but which they can all live with, support, and commit themselves to not undermine - arrived at without voting, through a process whereby the issues are fully aired, all members feel that they have been adequately heard, in which everyone has equal power and responsibility, and different degrees of influence by virtue of individual stubbornness or charisma are avoided, so that all are satisfied with the process. The process requires the members to be emotionally present and engaged; frank in a loving, mutually respectful manner; sensitive to each other; to be selfless, dispassionate, and capable of emptying themselves; and possessing a paradoxical awareness of both people and time, including knowing when the solution is satisfactory, and that it is time to stop and not reopen the discussion until such time that the group determines a need for revision."(Peck 1991: 27)

The Muir Commons consensus diagram and the physicians' description are complementary. The former provides an organized framework for consensus; the latter very descriptively explains the fundamental principles behind consensus.

Working through differences pulls people apart and brings them together. Sometimes this happens in a linear sequence, but it is more likely to take a less logical form. At times, a

decision-making process will divide the group temporarily, bringing some people closer together and driving others further apart. This is the assumed scenario in a typical voting process. But consensus rebels against the winner/loser side effect of majority rule decision-making. Cohousing aims to strengthen the individual and the community simultaneously. One's success should not be at the other's expense. The consensus process and the cohousing model work towards unifying the whole.

Clearly, consensus is the *modus operandi* among cohousers, both in the United States and abroad. It is becoming an accepted form of decision-making. Certainly it takes more time and energy to accomplish things through consensus, but decisions tend to be better than those arrived at through traditional voting methods. With consensus, no one is working to undermine the group. Issues or concerns are confronted during the discussion process, before a decision is made. At Muir Commons, only one decision has ever had to be decided by voting: choosing the name, Muir Commons. Tomato Flats was the big contender. N Street has never had to resort to a vote, although several issues have been blocked initially but later decided after the biweekly meetings helped reach mutual understandings and agreement.

Growing Pains

Creation and implementation of policy is time-consuming, yet a vital exercise in maintaining a sustainable community. Cohousers are continually breaking new ground - in structuring the community, in long term and day to day decisions, and in personal interactions. Nobody has all the answers, yet it is frequently frustrating when things fall between the cracks and solutions or directions aren't readily apparent. Whether a decision should be made by an individual, a household, a committee, or the entire community is not always obvious. Jurisdictions are not always spelled out, nor are they necessarily cut and dry. Does constructing a new path fall under the jurisdiction of the household adjacent to the path or the Outdoor Committee? Growing pains occur when community members are confronted with ambiguity or contradictions.

Similar to an adolescent struggling to be an adult, many cohousers dream of the day when they don't have to agonize over every decision or analyze every alternative. They dream of the time when the community is self-regulating and runs smoothly, without frequent meetings. In the early stages of cohousing, meetings are essential components of the process. Regular gatherings, where decisions are made and progress is monitored, cannot be neglected. Muir Commons accomplished its goal through diligent meetings which spanned nearly a three-year period from the first get-together and slide show presentation on cohousing to the completion of the homes. Meetings will continue to be an integral part of Muir Commons cohousing as they adapt to living together and continue to nurture their community.

N Street cohousers have been meeting twice monthly since January of 1990. There has not been the same urgency to meet, as Muir Commons experienced, due to the simple fact that N Street residents did not have to design cohousing from scratch. On N Street, residents were already living and working in a cooperative community while they were

designing cohousing. Muir Commons existed only on paper for nearly two years. The Muir Commons cohousers were much more anxious to build their community, since they were not able to fully experience cohousing until they moved in and were living it.