



What's for Lunch: Voting, Consensus, or Sense of the Meeting

Overview

Participants will role-play ordering lunch with two options. They will experience different ways to make a decision, then name each and discuss which is the best choice to build community and good feelings.



15 min.



All ages



Newcomer Friendly

Aims & Objectives

When you have completed this topic, you will have experience in making decisions using different approaches and discussing in a group which method is the most helpful.

Materials & Setup:

Newsprint for recording details and decisions.

Text of “Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting” to read with the group.

Credit: Betsy Meyers, Exercise Author

Morley, Barry. *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*. Wallingford: Pendle Hill, 1993. 13-15. Print.

Instructions

Budget an amount of money that is enough to pay for lunch for the group if everybody orders the same thing (for example, pizza for all) but is not enough for each person to order a separate take-out or restaurant meal. Present two choices for lunch, and ask the class to vote on what to eat; make sure that none of the lunch choices satisfies every child's food needs. For example, you might offer a choice between ordering cheese pizza and General Tso's Chicken. The pizza will work for the vegetarian but not for the child who is lactose-intolerant. If your class is small and all the members enjoy the same food, bring in some high-school-age or adult Friends to create food issues for the group.

Tally up the votes and announce the result. How does the class feel about the result? Will we enjoy our lunch if someone in the group cannot eat? Is there any advantage to voting? (It gives a quick result.)

Now let the class discuss whether there is another way to go about deciding what to have for lunch. You might invite the group to name a clerk who is willing to make sure everybody has a chance to speak. Let the group come up with an alternative that will feed everybody. They may decide to call a local restaurant to find out if it serves any dish that meets everybody's food needs. Alternatively, they might decide to search the internet for a recipe that is vegetarian and lactose- and gluten-free, then use the budget to buy the ingredients and prepare the meal themselves.

After the group has made its decision, read aloud the passage below. Invite listeners to pay attention to the way that Friends at Sandy Spring made their decision about building a balcony.

If the process by which we discover the sense of the meeting is to work, we must be willing to lay aside personal needs and grievances; we must be willing to reach beyond what you or I want. When I am able to set my ideas aside, and you are able to set your ideas aside, doors are opened which allow solutions to enter on a shaft of Light.

The sense of the meeting is not discovered through competition of ideas. Outcomes should be determined neither by rhetorical skill, nor logical brilliance. The test of reason is not the test. Though

compromise and moving toward consensus are tools which can assist early in the process, they must be laid aside as we reach for the Inward Presence.

Ideas should be offered and explained, rather than argued. They should be heard thoughtfully and respectfully, just as messages in meeting for worship are heard thoughtfully and respectfully. Sense of the meeting requires listening rather than contending, weighing rather than reacting. It requires the kind of patience that understands that all things will work themselves out in due course. Unless we are willing to settle for consensus, pressures imposed by urgency must not be allowed to erode the process. Quaker business procedure, subjected to a clock, is always corrupted.

Sense of the meeting was seriously tested by the epic Sandy Spring balcony dispute. After the founding of Sandy Spring Friends School, the local meeting house could not contain the large crowds which arrived for choral concerts and graduations. Performances and celebrations were marred by disgruntled, disappointed people milling around outside.

Probably through a sense of the meeting, the building's designers foresaw that a balcony might someday be needed. They built the ceiling two stories high in order to accommodate its future construction. Now, a hundred and fifty years later, their vision seemed warranted.

No one challenged the need for a balcony. The dispute arose over remnants of the ancient partition which had once separated men's and women's business meetings. The partition's lower section had long since been removed. But the upper half cut across the open second story and bisected the wall against which the balcony would be constructed. It served no structural or functional purpose except to remind Friends of their history.

History, it turned out, carried weight. Some Friend, often elderly, would say, "But I love that old partition. It reminds me of where we've come from." Another Friend would say, "That partition has been there all my life. I'm not sure I could worship here any more if it were gone." Someone would add, "It wouldn't look like the meeting house without it." Another Friend would look up wistfully and say, "I love those beautiful old panels."

Sandy Spring's business meeting reached impasse. "Those beautiful old panels" became the symbol of the impasse. In doing

so, they provided the narrow opening through which we could reach for the transcendent solution. During a meeting for worship, three years after the balcony issue had been raised, Brook Moore was moved to rise from the facing bench to say, "I see a balcony in this room and it is faced with the panels from the partition." Sense of the meeting lay I the silence that followed. With little hesitation, the next business meeting adopted Brook's vision.

The balcony filled for Sandy Spring Friends School's graduation on the morning after its completion. That afternoon it filled again for the memorial service of a cherished member of the meeting. No one thought it coincidental that the new balcony would fill twice on its first day of availability. We might have gotten a balcony sooner if we had been willing to force the issue. Arguments and logic were unassailable. But we would have left a residue of hard feeling; and we would have been deprived of the glow of unity that came from the solution given to us out of silence.

Consensus involves a process in which we promulgate, argue, and select or compromise ideas until we can arrive at an acceptable decision. When we seek the sense of the meeting, the decision is a by-product. It happens along the way. The purpose of seeking the sense of the meeting is to gather ourselves in unity in the presence of Light.

(Morley, Barry. **Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting.** Wallingford: Pendle Hill, 1993. 13-15. Print.)

Invite the class to discuss whether they reached consensus or a sense of the meeting. Invite them to articulate the difference in the context of this decision.

The difference is in how the participants feel about the decision and the others in their community. If each one just wants to have something to eat, and the meal they picked works, it is a compromise or consensus. But if, in the process, the group learns that each participant really cares that everyone gets something appropriate to eat, and that each person would rather eat something that everybody can eat, even if it is not a favorite food, then this was a community-building experience and a sense of the meeting was reached.