ROTARY DISTRICT 5440 PEACEBUILDER NEWSLETTER FALL 2017 NUMBER 4

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and
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In this fourth newsletter of the Rotary District Peacebuilders, we want to continue our invitation for contributors and ideas, suggestions and possibilities for our efforts to promote the foundational skills for promoting peace, i.e., nonviolent conflict resolution, improved communication and cooperation, successful negotiation and mediation as well as the critical and creative thinking that can help communities move through obstacles and difficulties.

These are the same skills and ideas we are nurturing with our Global Grant in Burundi, East Africa at the University of Ngozi. By sharing more of this project in what follows, we hope to spark new thinking about what can be done locally, on college campuses, elementary and secondary schools, in churches and other organizations—wherever people are looking for new and constructive ways through conflicts.

PEACEBUILDING IN THE WEST
Lessons learned from infusing sustainable peace studies at the University of Ngozi in Burundi
Bill Timpson

The following material is adapted from my 2002 book, *Teaching and Learning Peace* (Madison, WI: Atwood), a text that is being used for the infusion of sustainable peace studies into the curriculum at the University of Ngozi and other campuses in Burundi. These ideas are equally relevant for schools, colleges and universities in the U.S. as well as in our churches, organizations and businesses. Everyone can benefit when conflicts are resolved through improved communication.

Consensus

Consensus is the third set of skills that Gordon identifies as critical in *Teacher Effectiveness Training.* An example from the world of peacemaking may help. In *Savage Dreams*, Rebecca Solnit (1994) traces the interconnections between the history of nuclear weapons testing and the environmental movement. She and her brother were both activists and she describes her experiences with consensus this way.

[My] little brother is an anarchist, and a key organizer for the antinuclear movement, and though he was initially an anarchist in the sense that innumerable punks were in the eighties, he has read his Bakunin and Kropotkin and is now very seriously an anarchist. Anarchy, I should explain, means not the lack of order but of hierarchy, a direct and absolute democracy. Voting democracy, as anarchists point out, simply allows a majority

to impose its will on a minority and is not necessarily participatory or direct. They themselves continue the process of negotiation until all participants achieve consensus, until everyone—not merely a majority—has arrived at a viable decision. Anarchy proper usually works out to mean excruciatingly interminable meetings, rather than the mayhem the word evokes in most American imaginations....I have never found the patience and tolerance necessary to work with group consensus for extended periods (12-14).

Finding consensus within any group can have significant payoffs although there are associated costs of time and effort. Whether you yourself are working on a big collaborative project or participating on a committee, whether as a teacher your students are trying to get a study group organized or just finding common ground with a roommate, having some guidelines for navigating this kind of interpersonal terrain can help.

When everyone can agree, you can get more commitment for the decisions you make. You can also get better decisions when everyone's voice is heard and a variety of perspectives surface. You can even get more creative decisions. Admittedly, diverse viewpoints, experiences and personalities can make for a degree of tension in any process, especially if everyone is in a hurry. Consensus invariably takes more time, but there are important benefits. Here is a listing of recommended guidelines you could use in any number of situations.

1. ***Define the problem***

If students are meeting to form a study group, for instance, it can be useful if they begin by focusing on course requirements and what they'll need to do—when and where to meet and for how long, what to bring and how responsibilities might be best shared. Looking over past exams can give them some additional clues.

2. ***Brainstorm***

It's important to understand the benefits of brainstorming, particularly that by reserving judgment at this point in the process you can get a lot of different ideas out for discussion. Sometimes the better and more creative ideas only surface after students have worked through the more obvious ones. The key here is to generate ideas, as many as possible, without stopping to evaluate. No matter how strange these ideas may sound, students can help promote consensus by getting them all out and on their list before they start to eliminate any.

For example, Chuck was a student in our first year seminar. He organized a study group for his toughest class, chemistry. Together, members of the group looked over sample test questions and realized that they really did understand the material. Instead of reserving some time each week to review their notes, they decided to meet the day before the exam for a couple of hours. In that way they would be psyched, focused and efficient. And it worked, at least for the first exam. Taking the time to think through their needs and honestly assess their motivations produced a plan that worked. They were also able to avoid some needless meetings and wasted time. There are times when peacemaking can be proactive, when conflicts are avoided through effective planning and organization.

3. Identify consequences

This stage helps you go a bit further and think about the implications of your various choices. For Chuck and his group there was a bit of a gamble as to whether the night before would be enough. However, they did believe that scheduling study time earlier would only generate frustrations and undermine their motivation. When you aim for consensus, you take a little more time to think things through instead of impulsively latching on to whatever everyone else is doing or whatever the conventional wisdom is.

4. Decide

At this stage groups need to make a decision. One guideline many find useful is to keep any agreements tentative, like a trial run. In that way, students can assess their success early on without being so locked in that change becomes impossible. To get some movement toward consensus, they can think of a decision as an experiment. People can often agree to that.

5. Reevaluate and modify if necessary

When Chuck and his study group got their results from the second exam—and they didn't do as well compared to the first exam—they rethought their plans and decided that they would need to meet earlier and more frequently for the third exam, that perhaps they had gotten a bit lucky on the first exam or had been over-confident and then slacked off too much in their note-taking and engagement in class. At any rate, they channeled their disappointment with their second exam results into a revised plan for their study time together.

Additional thoughts on group consensus

It can also be helpful if everyone in a group understands and agrees to these guidelines. In this way, they can get real ownership in the process and their group's decision. Having group members take on various roles can also help. Someone could be the recorder, for example, another the task master, another the time keeper, another the synthesizer or summarizer. The moderator's role is the peacemaker for a group, attentive to feelings and alert to resolving any conflicts that arise. On the other hand, groups can also have everyone conscious of each of these roles and let the responsibilities for their functioning be more fluid.

There can be no doubt that deep listening, empathetic expressing, and consensus-making provide a useful model for establishing good communications in the classroom. They also establish the kind of communication skills that underlie effective efforts in peacemaking. To keep those skills in good working order, we also have to be able to understand and manage our emotions.

WHAT CONSENSUS IS NOT

Prepared by Robert N. Meroney

When decisions are to be made, especially in an atmosphere of strife and disagreement, one often hears the suggestion that if the various parties could only reach "consensus" that a good, equitable and satisfactory solution would be determined. But what exactly do people mean when they aspire to "consensus"? First, let's consider a possible definition:

> Consensus is a cooperative process in which all group members develop and agree to support a decision in the best interest of the whole.

Or alternatively consider various synonyms: *agreement, harmony, concurrence, accord, unity, unanimity, solidarity, or concord.* Derived from the Latin word for agreement, Merriam-Webster suggests that the first known use of the word in English occurred in 1843, but it has become more popular only since 1950. It can be used to describe both the decision and the process of decision making. It is, however, the process of reaching an agreement or judgement that is most difficult to define. Some would argue that reaching a "consensus" is the ultimate goal of any group decision, while others see many pitfalls in both the process and the end result! Let's consider this paradox further.

Benefits of consensus decision making:

First, successful consensus building harks back to the subject of a previous Newsletter about effective listening. Group participants must not only express their own concerns clearly, but they must also listen with intensity and willingness to understand other viewpoints. A truly open discussion can lead to,

- Inclusive participation that engages everyone in the process,
- A commitment to work together,
- An understanding of alternative viewpoints,
- A better representation of all ideas in a final decision, and
- A commitment from the entire group to support a final decision.

Perils and pitfalls of consensus decision making:

Unfortunately, there are some situations where a perfect and unanimous "consensus" does not seem to be possible. Recognizing these hazards in advance can reduce unreal expectations, alert group members to the need for an alternative or creative approach, or even the need to postpone decisions while further information, thought, and resources are gathered. Specifically, one should be aware during the search for consensus that,

- Some group members may have low trust or lack commitment,
- Some group members may have no common goal or purpose,
- The process gives disruptors, cranks and curmudgeons equal voice,

- The process may take considerable time, but decisions may need to be made quickly,
- Aggressive group members may essentially bludgeon others into agreement, resulting in an apparent decision which is not enthusiastically supported,
- The final group decision may leave many issues unresolved,
- The process may lead to a "tepid" decision that embraces the status quo, and, finally,
- A consensus decision may give the false impression that the debate is over.

Thus, it may be worthwhile to clearly state what consensus is not.

A Reverse Definition of Consensus…What it is Not:

Before one enters a group effort among people with initially significantly different ideas about an issue which needs resolving, it should be recognized that usually the consensus process is:

- Not a majority vote. Every opinion counts, all dissent should be addressed, 51% agreement is not consensus, and beware the "tyranny of the majority!" [**]
- Not unanimity. All viewpoints should be recognized and considered, but not everything can be given equal weight. Minority opinions cannot have the opportunity to filibuster or derail the process.
- Not all or nothing. If common areas of agreement are identified, they should be accepted into a final accord, but, alternatively, if some subjects cannot be resolved, these topics should be tabled for further discussion later.
- Not permanent. Past decisions are open to challenge and change. Perceptions, customs, and beliefs can change, and new information may revise or even negate past truths.
- Not an opportunity for war. Goodwill and good intentions are necessary from the beginning of the process…otherwise don't begin, participate, or extend the discussions.

Despite these cautionary and possibly pessimistic observations, search for consensus during conflict resolution can be a gratifying, rewarding, and wonderful experience. When aggressions are resolved, pain is reduced, fears are eliminated, and peace reigns…can there be a better final result?

[**] *The Tyranny of the Majority* refers to an inherent weakness in direct democracy in which rule by majority vote can impose its interests at the expense of the minority. Founding fathers Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Adams all warned that a simple majority vote could elect a demagogue, and could be used to overthrow true democracy, and could result in targeting oppressively unfavored ethnic, religious, political, social, or racial groups.

RESTORATIVE PRINCIPLES IN POLITICS
Lindsey Pointer, 2017 Rotary Global Grant Recipient

A striking feature of the political climate in the United States at this moment is the degree of polarization, its adversarial nature. It seems to be embedded in an "us versus them" construct with winners and losers and rampant dehumanization of the opposing side. In many ways, it resembles the mainstream criminal justice system in the way that it reinforces opposing sides, leans heavily on labels, and often causes further harm in its attempts to respond to issues.

During a recent conversation with some friends in New Zealand, we began talking about whether a more "restorative" approach to the political system would be possible in the same way it has been possible in the criminal justice sphere. Could there be a way to move away from entrenched sides towards understanding the individual human stories and needs that drive our behaviors? Could we find creative policy solutions that meet the needs of all involved parties rather than leaving behind winners and losers? Is there a way to bring more open honest communication, empathy and compassion into the political process? Are there structures that could help us to find consensus?

What I know is that in restorative justice processes, when everyone has a chance to tell their story and express their needs and to hear each other in a respectful and safe space, phenomenally creative and collaborative outcomes almost always emerge. I have seen understanding and consensus come out of the most polarized and emotional situations, heavy with hurt and fear. This peace arises because through storytelling, participants understand each other as fellow human beings and are able to work together to identify solutions. Could a restorative process be the answer to the disharmony in the political sphere? What would a "policy circle" look like?

Following this discussion, my friends and I of course wanted to test the idea on an issue. After a bit of discussion, we decided that one issue we may have sufficient difference in opinion on is the issue of vegetarianism. In a group of six, there was one vegetarian, one vegan, and two previous vegetarians who had gone back to eating meat. We assigned ourselves the mission of coming to consensus around a policy that we would like to implement.

We used the restorative circle format to have the conversation. I used my camping cooking pot as a talking piece and spoke about how food is an integral part of our personal histories and cultures and also represents a unifying human experience through eating together. For the first round, I asked each person to share his or her hopes for the conversation. For the second round, I asked each person to share his or her personal history in relation to meat eating or vegetarianism. It was interesting to notice myself relaxing during this round. Hearing where each person came from helped me to understand his or her position on the issue. After that, we transitioned into talking about needs moving forward and then into concrete ideas for policy that would address those needs. At this point, we suspended the structure of the circle and the use of the talking piece to have a more free-flowing conversation, but I noticed that the respect and equal voice remained as we worked toward consensus.

The first policy solution that was suggested involved placing restrictions on meat production that would ultimately increase the price of meat and improve the treatment of animals. Others in the circle however felt that this would anger consumers and would also put people in the position of being expected to eat more plant-based food without knowing how to make vegetarian food that tastes good and is nutritious. We decided what was needed was an initiative that would familiarize people with plant-based eating in a positive way. The solution we arrived at involved providing free vegetarian lunches at all schools in order to introduce children to delicious vegetarian food, promote public health, combat child hunger and as a result, improve learning and behavior at school. It is a solution that certainly reflects the liberal leaning of those present in the circle, but I do think that a circle with a wider range of voices would be able to come up with an even more creative solution that would address the needs brought to that circle. We closed with a final circle round offering an opportunity for any last comments or thoughts.

I recognize that there are certainly limitations to this political method. It is time consuming for one and it would never be possible to incorporate the voices of all people. Conversations would take place in smaller circles and then there would still need to be a way to transfer that learning about each other and the positive outcomes to the wider society. However, I think what we are desperately needing in this moment is a structure, a way to create a safe space that encourages respectful communication and listening that seeks to cultivate empathy and recognize the ***human*** across the divide. Restorative approaches such as the circle could be a helpful tool towards this end.

For more information about the Restorative Circle process, see Kay Pranis' Little Book of Circle Processes or the Circle Keeper's Handbook .

Are you considering holding a circle process to work through an issue or difference in opinion? Remember a few key things:

1. Know that it will take time. It is difficult to predict how long a circle will take and you do not want to rush the conversation, so be sure to give yourself plenty of time in a space where you won't be interrupted.
2. Focus on a listening deeply with an open mind and seeking to understand others and develop empathy for their position. The facilitator is in an especially powerful role to be able to model that.
3. Ensure equal voice and equal valuing of contributions at all time. The talking piece is a great tool to help you do that!
4. Use open-ended questions and be strategic about the order in which you ask circle questions. Restorative processes move from storytelling to impacts to ideas for the future.
5. Recognize and appreciate the benefits of different opinions in making for better and more creative solutions.

6. Allow yourself to be fully present in the process and appreciate the gift of connecting deeply and seeking to understand others.

PROPOSED GLOBAL GRANT FOR PEACEBUILDING WITH ISRAEL AND PALESTINE:

The Challenge: Organize a group of Rotarians in Fort Collins and District 5440 and beyond to develop a Global Grant proposal that would connect to willing Rotary Clubs in Israel and Palestine to implement one or more of the ideas in the report summarized below.

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