WORKING WITH BLOCKS & CONCERNS

Assume good-faith intentions.

Listen closely.

Listen for the truth in each person's expression.

Reflect back the feelings and main points.

Look for what needs are underneath the concern.

Act as an ally of the person with the concern, while still holding the needs of the rest of the group.

Remember that differing opinions are a resource. What can you learn from these different opinions?

Seek common ground. What part of the proposal can everyone agree to?

Ask questions:

- How do you see this idea?
- What are you worried might happen?
- How will that follow from this decision?
- Could we monitor that problem?
- What parts of the proposal *do* you support?

Analyze what the origin of the difficulty is. Problems might arise from:

- Genuine content disagreement
- Process issues
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Structural challenges

Engage the people with concerns in solving the problem. Ask them what would work for them that would also meet others' needs.

Reflective Listening Guidelines

This is a key skill to use during conflict resolution. In your reflections, seek to:

1. Keep your attention focused on the other person (don't go into your own story)
2. Be non-judgmental
3. Listen with compassion
4. Seek the essence of what the other person is trying to convey

Remember the 5 basic principles of facilitation:

1. You are the servant of the group, the steward of the process
2. Plan ahead and work outside the meeting
3. Help each person feel heard
4. Work with all of what's in the room
5. Listen for common ground and reflect it back to the group, as often as necessary

Options, if a concern is unresolved and time is finished:

1. Lay it over to a future meeting
2. Send it to committee, with the person blocking included
3. Talk during a break or outside the meeting— "coffee"
4. Mediation (if interpersonal conflict)
5. If correct block, lay down the item

Robust Responses to Inappropriate Blocks

The consensus process gives substantial power to individuals to make their own discernment as to whether a proposal is in the best interest of the group. That power needs to be balanced with limits and responsibilities. In other words, there needs to be some way to deal with a member who is blocking inappropriately. The most effective groups have both cultural and procedural means of doing this.

Common cultural methods include:

- Genuinely honoring dissenting viewpoints, including staying in relationship with those who disagree and not isolating them.
- Avoiding use of the word “block” prematurely by using the term "concerns” until after a thorough discussion has taken place and you are actually at the call for consensus.
- Taking someone aside one-on-one whose has blocked (or threatened to do so) for a private conversation and check-in.
- Spreading the norm that if you’ve blocked an emerging consensus half a dozen times in your life (for all the groups you are part of), you’ve used up your lifetime quota.

Procedural methods include:

- Requiring anyone who is blocking to convene extra meetings in an effort to work out an alternative, within a time limit, or else their block is automatically lifted. (This is sometimes known as "the N-Street System," after the community in Davis, California that uses this approach.)
- Requiring group validation of a block in some form; for example, saying that a block does not count unless at least one other member agrees it is valid, or 75% of the group, or the executive team or steering council of the organization. (The Formal Consensus method, for example, uses this approach.)
- Using a fallback voting process.