Making Group Decisions

Collective Decision-Making as a Democratic Process

- *Living cooperatively is a huge shift!* If we are used to being unempowered and reduced to complaining (often with no result) as renters, it is a major change to being collectively empowered to take action, and to participate in many decisions that affect our housing. If we are used to acting individually as private homeowners, it is a major change to consult and collaborate with each other to get things done. Either way, it takes time to settle into this shift.
- *Participating does not mean you always get your way.* It means your voice is considered as part of the collective, and your reasoning and desires are given a fair shake. No one gets their way all the time.
- *Group decision-making always wrestles with tensions between individual & collective,* and between various interest groups—that is archetypal and normal! The key is to be decent to each other about it, and understand that over time everyone who participates will have experiences of being in the minority and majority viewpoint. How would you want to be treated at either time? Try to offer that.
- *The living organism of a cooperative is a complex system with many moving parts.* Regarding governance, there are typically teams; sometimes a board; house, staff or community meetings; and/or could be bigger membership meetings on special occasions (e.g. selecting board, annual budget). Some groups have roles such as an administrator or general manager who is assigned specific powers. Which entity makes which decision and how they do it is an evolutionary process. Sometimes you may not agree with how a decision unfolds, and it's fine to speak up about it—just keep in mind that the people involved are probably trying their best, and you don't want to burn out people who are willing to do stuff on behalf of the group. *Assume good intent!*

Inspirational quote from Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933): "Social process may be conceived either as the opposing and battle of desires with the victory of one over the other, or as the confronting and integrating of desires. . . . The latter means a freeing for both sides and increased total power or . . . capacity in the world."

Starting from an <u>issue</u> (how will we solve this?) vs. a specific <u>proposal</u>

Is the issue . . .	SIMPLE	COMPLEX
SMALL	Proposal may pass with relative ease.	Main work likely to happen in committee.
LARGE	Might be ok to start with proposal, and might take a few more meetings, possibly with committee work in between.	Start with issue discussion not proposal, and expect it to take a series of meetings, almost always with committee or individual work in between.

Arriving at Decisions

Official rules vs. how we actually do it around here: There are co-ops who say they use consensus, but at the meeting on a gut level the pressure feels like voting. There are corporate boards of directors who officially use majority voting, but in reality they listen carefully to each other's views before arriving at consistently unanimous "votes." What's written down may or may not match what happens in reality, and similar to how businesspeople say, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," an observer of cooperative decision-making groups might say, "Culture eats bylaws for lunch."

Temperature check vs. decisions: Make sure it's clear which is happening when. Temperature check means the group is just polling to check how much support there is for an idea, and whether folks generally want to move forward with it. Decisions last into the future.

Decision rules/thresholds & definitions:

- **Autocracy**: one person decides
- **Majority Vote**: proposals pass with 50% + 1 affirmative votes
- **Supermajority Vote**: proposals pass with a higher threshold, such as 60-75%; often used in special circumstances such as bylaws changes
- **Consensus**: proposals adopted when the "sense of the meeting" supports it; if using color cards (see below), probably means all or almost all green (no red, no more than one or maybe a few yellow)

Color Cards

- green = agreement/support
- yellow = reservations or standing aside, ambivalence or minor concerns
- red = major concern or block
- no card = abstain, prefer not to participate in that decision

Some groups have a more elaborate color card protocol that includes additional colors, and different definitions of colors depending on whether the group is in discussion vs. decision mode. So for example during discussion, yellow could mean "i have a question."

Advice Process (Consultation)

Although a team or person in their role may have authority to make a decision, it is often wise to seek wider input first before arriving at the outcome. This can take a wide range of forms depending on the situation and need, such as:

- Casual check-in with a few people you run into, "Hey, what do you think of this idea?"
- Ask the group in an online chat channel or email list
- Send out a poll or survey
- Hold a "salon" or non-decision-making meeting to invite input (for example, the city often convenes open houses as part of their public engagement process)

Decision Boards & Online Consent

Some groups have a system for making decisions in writing, without needing to convene a meeting, especially for smaller decisions. For example, a team posts their plan, and invites responses by a deadline, such as: (a) I'm OK with this; (b) further communication desired to address questions or minor concerns; (c) this item belongs at a live meeting. Requires having a clear protocol for how various outcomes are handled.