

Reaching Consensus in Challenging Situations

Have you ever been in a situation where there is so much disagreement among the participants that you can't imagine consensus, or trust, ever emerging? Probably it is fair to say that most facilitators, at one time or another, have faced that situation. After all, rarely is a facilitator hired if the situation being faced is smooth sailing and without potential controversy. The next time you are in a situation where you are encountering extensive disagreement, and apparent lack of trust among the participants, consider the following process:

- 1. Get all the participants in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else**
- 2. Introduce the topic of disagreement by naming the topic or defining the topic in some way. Ask the participants to refine the definition as they see fit.**
- 3. Outline the following rules for discussion:**
 - Everything said in the discussion must remain confidential. Nothing can leave the room or be shared with anyone else.**
 - Participants will be allowed to speak to the topic at hand, in order and while someone is speaking, no interruptions are allowed.**
 - Participants must make their points quickly and efficiently. No one can speak at any one time for more than a minute or so.**
 - You can pass when it is your turn to speak. You do not have to say anything.**
 - You can say whatever you wish as far as the topic at hand is concerned and you do not have to defend your comments.**
- 4. Start the discussion at any point in the circle and simply move around the circle until everyone has had a chance to speak at least once.**
- 5. Then go around again.**
- 6. Ask if there is anyone who wishes to speak again. Allow those, if necessary, to speak to the topic again and give everyone this opportunity.**
- 7. Now, as the facilitator, ask the group to identify anything they heard that suggests agreement or consensus on the topic.**
- 8. Note these items and build from them.**

You should find consensus and agreement beginning to emerge. You should find the participants more willing to listen, and trust, each other. You may be able to form some work groups to deal with specific areas of the problem with reporting back to the total group with recommendations and suggestions.