

Best Practices

Democratic Practice in Everyday Meetings

OVERVIEW

We were running a large meeting recently when a participant said, “You know, the structure of this meeting gives us worlds of freedom to do our work. It is hard to get used to. Usually, I’m aware that we live in one of the freest countries in the world and yet it seems like all our instincts in meetings run to authoritarianism.”

In order to be self governing, in order to accomplish work and address the problems our communities face, we need a practice of democracy that encompasses our ordinary lives. The signers of the Declaration of Independence, the birth certificate for an independent United States of America, affirmed people’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They did not intend, nor do the Constitution and Bill of Rights suggest, that we practice democracy only in relation to matters of government.

Many of us wait for special occasions to think about how to

make our democracy stronger. But we can strengthen democracy through developing simple, ordinary daily habits. Meetings are one place to build those habits.

In meetings we can exercise freedoms, take responsibility, insist on equality, and build the connections that the French people distilled in their call for “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” The well-known (even if not well-practiced) efficient meeting tactics are important. But by recognizing meetings as occasions for the practice of fundamental democracy, planners and participants can make meetings even more powerful and meaningful. Meetings can become places where we are alive, productive, and satisfied.

In this issue of *Best Practices*, we suggest a number of ways to accomplish the complementary purposes of improving ordinary meetings and strengthening people’s democratic capabilities.

meeting . . .
n. The act or process or an instance of coming together; an encounter



Roberts & Kay, Inc. presents Best Practices, a publication highlighting progressive strategies that will serve both private and public sector organizations in the next decades.

GUIDELINES

Democratic Practices for Satisfying, Powerful Meetings

It may seem strange to talk about democracy and authoritarianism in ordinary meetings. But think about it: when people meet, they bring with them many forms of power. Democratic practices balance the power in a meeting, creating the opportunity and the expectation that each participant will make a strong contribution.

Authoritarian elements in meetings create or deepen imbalances in power. We've seen one or two key figures wield control, draining power from others. The meeting ends with the authority figures holding an inappropriate amount of power, while other participants, having given up or never tapped their

own power, feel diminished and depleted.

Ways to implement democratic practices in everyday meetings cannot be reduced to simple tips. However, practices described below seek to balance power while they increase productivity and satisfaction.

1. Clarify authority and purpose.

Meetings are purposeful when a group's mission and authority are clear. A written charge is one important tool for clarifying authority and purpose. Most good charges are written in simple language and take no more than one page to present.

Personally Speaking

Stories of democracy thrilled me as a child. As a young adult, direct from the highly participatory climate in the early '70's, I lived for two years in the Philippines under martial law, and traveled in countries where monarchs and totalitarian rulers governed.

When I returned to the United States I was stunned by how little advantage we take of democracy, how we don't begin to use the freedoms we have. I began to wonder how we can build a vigorous democracy, how citizens can build personal power and personal responsibility to address our communities' needs.

After years of thinking the answer lay in changing how government oper-

A group that establishes itself can create its own written charge as a first piece of business. A task force, committee, team or other group created by someone outside the group needs a written charge before beginning its work.

2. Meet only about real issues.

Purposeful talk based on different points of view and different experiences is the secret ingredient of successful meetings. Good meetings that address real issues succeed because people do what is difficult or impossible to do in other ways: they integrate different perspectives; they explore and choose among options they have generated jointly; or they generate new understandings that can only happen through talk.

3. Create a climate that encourages choice.

Choice depends on developing sound alternatives or options. Have you

ates, my great interest now lies in moving democracy beyond election day and the whole apparatus of government. I am convinced that we have to develop habits of democracy and use them all the time. One secret of strong democracy lies in the small actions and details of people's daily lives. Much of those lives we spend at work, and much of the time we are at work we are meeting. By learning to make those meetings more democratic, we can get some of the experience and develop some of the habits we need to take full advantage of the opportunity of democracy -- and the meetings themselves will be more satisfying.

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been to meetings that fail because the group generates and considers too few options, wasting its energy instead in arguments about the relative merits of a limited number of strategies? The Kettering Foundation, in its work on public talk, refers to this syndrome as "solution wars."

Even in meetings intended to address conflicts, the principle of creating choices makes a difference. In Fisher and Ury's path-breaking book on interest-based negotiation, *Getting to Yes*, the third of four key principles is: "Invent options for mutual gain."

4. Value freedom of expression and creative thinking.

Encourage shy people and those less accustomed to the spotlight to speak their minds. Cultivate a group habit of members encouraging each other to speak.

Call on more than linguistic intelligence. At an important public meeting recently we found the space changed by beautiful music someone was playing on a portable boom-box. We sometimes take collage-making ingredients into problem solving sessions so that people can use their visual and tactile intelligences when addressing problems.

5. Learn and practice deliberative discussion.

Deliberation requires working together to discover all the possibilities for a decision, and then testing these ideas, in imagination, as a group, in order to see which will work best. Deep listening is a necessary foundation for deliberation.

Deliberation suffers when groups rush. For the best results, build in time and resources for groups to take the time they need.

6. Strive to understand and practice consensus decision making.

Consensus results when a group develops the skills, over time, to elicit and consider together all the ideas people have about a particular decision. Consensus means a decision members build together and can live with, even though some might have preferred a different result.

Colored cards (a red, blue, yellow and green one for each member) can help in working toward consensus. The group can use them to take straw polls as discussion proceeds. (This is a variation of a system Shaffer and Anundsen suggest in *Creating Community Anywhere*.)

The cards clarify how near a group is to consensus -- often much nearer than people think -- and make clear who has objections or questions. The group can then focus on learning from those showing cards other than green how a decision would need to be shaped to win their support.

7. Build connections.

When opinions have a human face, they seem more reasonable, and more worth considering. Use setting, food, breaks, and personal warmth to create a hospitable climate where people connect with each other, become committed to each others' interests, and demonstrate respect for each other during talk and decision making.

"Consensus ... rests on the belief that every member of the group -- however naive, experienced, confused, or articulate -- holds a portion of the truth and that no one person holds all of the truth."

Shaffer & Anundsen

IN PRACTICE

Meeting Conference

If you want to explore the topic of democratic practice in ordinary meetings in some depth with a group of interesting people, join us on December 6 and 7, 1994, at Shakertown at Pleasant Hill. We will use a variety of meeting structures to explore how liberty, equality, and community serve as valued underpinnings for satisfying, productive meetings.

The conference fee is \$165, which includes all meals from Shakertown's famous kitchen. We will begin with lunch at 12:00 noon EST on December 6, and conclude at 5:00 p.m. on December 7. The deadline for conference registration is December 2. You must make your own lodging arrangements. Lodging is available at Shakertown (606/734-5411).

We expect a fun, lively event. Come join us. Call us at (606/231-8308) to register or to request a conference brochure.

Resources:

Democracy in Small Groups. John Gastil. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers. 1993

Creating Community Anywhere. Carolyn Shaffer & Kristin Anundsen. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee. 1993.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In. Roger Fisher and William Ury. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1981.

Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Howard Gardner. Basic Books. 1983.

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“All real living is meeting.”

Martin Buber

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