Turning lemons into lemonade

Unit 15
Understanding Consensus
Instructor's Guide

Public Conflict Resolution

Through a lecture and role-play, participants will become familiar with the principles, levels, and ways to go about building consensus.

Purpose Consensus is the decision rule that allows collaborative problem solving to work. The rule prevents the tyranny of the majority, allows building of trust and the sharing of information, especially under conditions of conflict.

Objectives As a result, participants will:
- Learn about the principles and advantages of consensus.
- Learn about consensus through a role play about a wolf reintroduction.

Time One and a half to two hours

Materials Needed Flip Chart and Easel
Markers
Overhead Projector

Overheads 52 Advantages of Consensus
53 a-b Principles of Consensus

Handouts 1. Levels of Consensus
2. Consensus Building Techniques
3. Wolf Reintroduction

Directions 1. The trainer should ask the participants how they define "consensus." There are multiple meanings of consensus which the trainer should mention:
- Majority: 51 percent of the deciding group agree;
- Unanimity: everyone agrees;
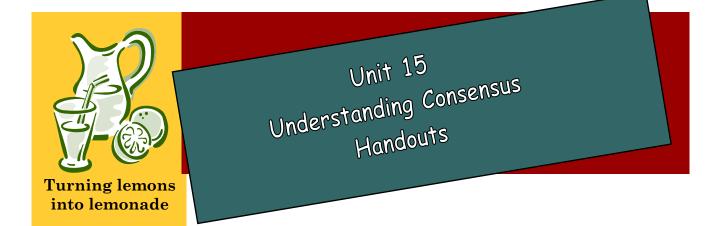- Conditional Unanimity: (the definition used by collaborative problem solvers) everyone can live with it

because it is the best alternative under the circumstances, and it attends to each party's most important interests.

Overhead 52

2. The trainer should display **Overhead 52** to give the advantages of consensus. After reading the advantages the trainer should ask the participants if they can think of any other advantages to reaching consensus.

Overhead 53 a-b

3. There are a number of essential principles that underlie the practice of consensus and contribute to its success. The trainer should use **Overheads 53 a-b** to list these principles.

4. There are different levels of consensus that the trainer should describe. The "Levels of Consensus" handout should be distributed and parts A, B, C and D read aloud by the trainer.

5. There are several consensus-building techniques that are presented on the handout "Consensus Building Techniques." After dispensing and reading aloud each of the eight techniques on the handout, the trainer should then distribute the "Wolf Reintroduction" role play. Split the participants into small groups and identify one person as the neutral in each group. The neutral is to get consensus by using one or more of the techniques introduced. Although the role play includes six parties, it is structured enough for the "Consensus Building Techniques" to be applied. The trainer should follow the Conflict Coaches' Guide.

6. Once most groups have reached consensus or a firm impasse, reconvene the participants and discuss the approaches used. Were any consensus building techniques more effective than others? Were any techniques inappropriate for this case? Using the flip chart to record responses, ask the participants to say what level of consensus (referring to the Levels of Consensus handout) each character reached by the end of the negotiations. The more stakeholders who display A or B levels of consensus, the more likely the proposal has of being successfully put into practice.

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Levels of Consensus

Once a proposal has been made, the group must discover how each member feels about it, and then identify specific concerns in order to move forward in problem solving. At any stage in the process, group members might express four levels of response to a proposed action or decision:

A. Full support or agreement with the proposal for action or decision.

B. Agreement with most aspects of the proposal, and, despite continued concerns with some elements, willingness to go along with the proposal.

C. Significant concerns or outright disagreement with some or all elements of the proposal, but will not oppose the action or decision (often called "standing aside").

D. Continued strong disagreement with the proposal.

If all members of the group express approval at levels A, B or C, then they have reached consensus. If some members continue to disagree strongly (level D), then consensus has not been reached. The challenge to the group is to see what interest must be addressed in the proposal to move people at D to C (or higher) and from C to B (or higher) and from B to A.

In addition, it is important to find out the nature of disagreements with a proposal. It is often helpful to characterize concerns as follows:

• Minor concerns with wording or editing.

• Agreement with the main thrust of the proposal, but concerns with specific elements which, if changed, would lead to agreement.

• Major concerns: principles disagreement with the overall direction of the proposal, which if not addressed, would lead the member to block the consensus (level D).

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Ask "Who can't live with...?" When discussion seems to be pointing toward a preferred solution, this question will help identify those who do not support the decision. Should individuals indicate they cannot support the decision, explore why, and then brainstorm how the decision can be altered to incorporate their interests.

Straw Vote Participants are asked to make a tentative, non-binding vote on their preference to get a quick sense of where each is leaning.

Negative Voting Participants vote out options that are completely unacceptable. This can be used to narrow a large list of potential options to a manageable size.

Synthesize or Combine It may be possible to select two leading options and combine them into an acceptable solution.

Building Packages If the group is selecting options from several different categories, the group is building a "package." In choosing to build a "package" the group is attempting to see how options from each category fit with each other so complementary choices can be made. Three "packaging" techniques are described below:

Building Block When using this "package-building" technique, agreement is sought on each identified sub issue, then combined into the final "package."

Agreement in Principle This "package-building" technique is conducted in reverse order of the building block method. Rather than getting an agreement on specific issues, the goal is to reach a broad agreement in principle. Based on the larger agreement, options are developed and selected for each of the smaller issues.

Single Text This "package-building" technique identifies areas of agreement as the group works to continually expand areas of agreement. The single text may be developed by an intervening neutral or by one of the parties. Since each group is not promoting its own set of solutions (multiple text) the entire group can work with a single text.

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Confidential

You will divide the group into clusters of seven, assigning each person one of the roles. Everyone receives a copy of the Proposal and Background sheet. Instruct the Leslie Bills character (the neutral) to use whatever skills will successfully move the discussion toward some type of agreement. Allow sufficient time for the neutral to have made progress in teasing out stakeholder interests.

The following questions and issues are designed to stimulate discussion among the participants. You are not expected to provide all of the answers. Use the flip chart to keep a record of the responses.

- What types of conflict exist between the parties? You may want to refer to the Circle of Conflict from Unit 12 for help (Clearly there are data as well as value conflicts).

- What ground rules did the Leslie Bills character (neutral) find helpful and/or necessary How did you set the tone for the meeting?

- What are each parties' positions? Interests?

- What options were generated that might meet the parties' interests?

If the groups were unable to find issues on which interests could be mutually met, suggest the following possibilities:

- There could be an agreement on which data should be used for predicting the ecological impact of the reintroduction, and the creation of a multi-party commission that develops the criteria by which the impacts will be uniformly gauged. This goes to the heart of the data conflicts.

- The timeline could be pushed back in order for all of the groups to discuss the issues that remain unresolved. This might assuage fears stemming from incomplete information and collective consideration.

- There could be an agreement to use the radio monitoring technologies currently at use in other reintroduction areas. This may help address the safety and data disagreements.

- The number of wolves to be originally reintroduced could be reduced. This route reduces the ecological impact and perceived threat of the wolves, thereby allowing public perception to build more gradually.