

Three Decision Options

1. Consent, Approval

- Ⓢ Basic alignment with group direction, share in “the sense of the meeting.”
- Ⓢ Doesn’t necessarily mean you love the decision; rather, you can live with it.
- Ⓢ Not the same as a unanimous vote in majority-rule voting; it means everyone can live with the decision and no one wants to stop the group from having it.

2. Standing in the Way (Blocking)

➡ Appropriate blocks:

- ⊞ Block if you believe that passing the proposal would be disastrous for your community or because it crosses the group’s known core principles or violates its mission and purpose. If so, you are responsible for stopping it. Your name and the reasons for your block will be recorded in the minutes.
- ⊞ Don’t block at the last minute. Share your concerns early in the discussion.
- ⊞ Legitimate blocks most often arise from different interpretations of a community value, principle, or its Mission & Purpose, or from two community values or principles coming into conflict with each other.
- ⊞ If the group has criteria for a principled block (recommended by C.T. Butler and other consensus trainers), the block may be tested against this criteria. If it meets the test, the block will be declared valid and the proposal will be stopped. Or the block could be declared invalid, in which case it won’t stop the proposal.
- ❖ In many communities —and this is highly recommended — the person(s) blocking are responsible for helping work out a new proposal that addresses the same issue.

➡ Inappropriate blocks:

- ⊞ Inappropriate blocking is the most common cause of pseudo-consensus. The following are not valid reasons to block:
 - ⊞ Not to get your way, or because you prefer a different solution.
 - ⊞ Not because of your personal ethics, values, beliefs, practices, or how you want to live. (As compared to the community’s ethics, values, etc.)
 - ⊞ Not because of tradition: things have always been done a different way.
 - ⊞ Not because you can’t afford the proposed action personally.
 - ⊞ Not because the proposed action would be inconvenient for you personally.
 - ⊞ Not because if the proposal were passed you’d have to leave the group.
 - ⊞ Not to prevent the group from taking a risk.

3. Standing Aside

➡ Stand aside when:

- You don’t support the proposal but don’t want to stop it if everyone else wants it.

- You have an intuition that it wouldn't be good to pass the proposal, but you can't say why. (It's fine to say this when bringing up concerns about the proposal.)
- The proposal violates your personal values or principles.
- The proposal will negatively affect you personally: you can't afford it, or you'd have to leave the community if the proposal were passed.

- ✦ Your name and reason will be recorded in the minutes.
- ✦ You won't take the lead in implementing the proposal, but you're still bound by the decision.
- ✦ How many stand-asides is too many? It depends on the size of your group, but with a smaller group, some trainers say maybe no more than 1 or 2 at most.

Etiquette of Blocking

- Treat the person who is blocking with courtesy and respect.
- Depending on the community's agreements, the facilitator may test the block for whether or it meets the group's criteria for a principled block
- Back up your facilitator in doing this.
- In some groups the facilitator makes the call as to whether the block is principled. Or the facilitator makes the call after hearing from everyone, in a go-round. In other communities, the whole group decides.

Does a Block Kill the Proposal?

- If someone blocks a proposal it doesn't mean the proposal is dead; it only means there is no consensus for the proposal at that time.
- The facilitator might say, "We don't have consensus at this time," after a test for consensus, and the group can continue to discuss it if there's more time left for that agenda item.
- C.T. Butler's Formal Consensus methods advocates calling for consensus at least three times: after Level 1, "Broad Open Discussion"; after Level 3, "Resolve Grouped Concerns"; and again in Level 3, "Resolving One Concern at a Time."
- If the group is using Formal Consensus, the facilitator can perhaps test for consensus again later in same meeting after hearing more concerns and proposed solutions to the concerns.
- Or, if the agenda time for that item is up, the facilitator can lay the proposal aside and ask the agenda planners to include the item in the next meeting's agenda.
- The facilitator could ask the blocker to meet with those who support the proposal in the meantime to craft a mutually agreed-on resolution, if possible.

The Sundown Clause

A "sundown clause" allows a group to try out a decision for a certain period of time, say, six months, a year, etc. At the end of that time the decision is automatically revoked. If the group wants to re-institute the decision at the end of that time, a new proposal must be introduced and passed.

- **Pros:** Using a sundown clause allows people with reservations about a proposal to allow the group try it out without outright blocking it. If, during the sundown period, the reason for their concerns becomes apparent to everyone, it will save the community from being stuck with a bad decision they'll later have to change. If the reasons for their concerns don't manifest, great: the group has a good decision.
- **Cons:** This requires careful record-keeping. The Agenda planners need to let the group know one or two meetings ahead of time when the decision will cease.

Empowering Modifications of Consensus:

1. Voting Fallbacks

These are consensus methods which present, discuss, and decide on a proposal in the normal way. If a proposal is blocked, however, at the next meeting the group then uses a super-majority voting method (90%, 85%, 80%, 75%, etc.) to decide the same proposal. The format is exactly the same (facilitator, discussion, modifying the proposal, etc.)

Most cohousing groups have a voting fallback process written into their Bylaws, whether or not they use it. This is often because banks and lending institutions often want to see a voting fallback in the group's Bylaws.

2. Requiring Blocker(s) to Organize Meetings to Work Out an Alternative Solution

In this consensus method the person(s) blocking must take responsibility to co-create a new proposal with the proponents of the first proposal before they go to a voting fallback.

N Street Cohousing in Davis, California does this, with the blocker(s) organizing a series of up to six small-group meetings in an up-to-three-month period. They've only had to do this twice in 22 years, and with only two meetings each time. (See handout, "Solution-Oriented Meetings.")

3. Criteria for a Principled Block

C.T. Butler introduced this method in his Formal Consensus process, in which all blocks are tested against the criteria for what constitutes a principled block in their group (also known as a valid or legitimate block). The group not only has agreed-upon, written-down criteria for this, but also has an agreed-upon, written-down way that the facilitator or the facilitator and meeting participants test for this when someone blocks. (See handout, "Criteria for Principled Blocks.")

Here are what some well-known consensus trainers say about legitimate blocks:

- Ⓔ Tree Bressen: The block prevents the group from either: (1) crossing its own stated values, or (2) doing something truly disastrous or catastrophic; not just risky or undesirable, but truly disastrous.
- Ⓔ Caroline Estes: The block must be tied to genuine core principles of the organization, not the person's own personal moral or ethical principles. Blocking is used for substantial issues only. Never used on small, incidental items.
- Ⓔ Bea Briggs: The proposal violates the ethics, principles, or safety of the group.
- Ⓔ C.T. Butler: The block must be tied to the group's specific mission & purpose: if the proposal can be shown to violate the group's mission and purpose, it's a legitimate block. Yet, see Rob Sandelin's view, below.

4. Is Violating a Community's Mission & Purpose Adequate as Criteria for a Principled Block?

- Ⓔ Rob Sandelin is a well-known consensus trainer and process consultant who lives at Sharingwood Cohousing in Washington state. Rob notes that the Formal Consensus method was created for political action groups with the Mission & Purpose "to stop X from happening." It's easier to tie a block to a mission & purpose when the mission & purpose is this specific, Rob says. But most intentional communities don't usually have such a pointed Mission & Purpose, but rather a broad and general one: to serve a variety of needs of community members, including shelter, cooperative lifestyle, etc.. It's not easy to tie a block to this broader kind of mission & purpose. Rob suggests that having a principled block tied to the Mission & Purpose of a political action group is fine. But to do so with an intentional community's is a fallacy, a set-up for needless conflict.

Threatening to Block, & the Dreaded "P.P.D."

This occurs when someone says "I'll block that!" or "I'll never support that!" in response to an idea someone has. Maybe people are just talking somewhere in the community or hanging out in the kitchen. They're not in a meeting and no proposal has been written.

- Threatening to block can also occur when a proposal is first introduced in a meeting.
- **It's NOT part of the consensus process to threaten to block a proposal.**
- One of the tenets of consensus is to come to a meeting open-minded, not with your mind already made up. Meeting participants must first go through the entire consensus process, including listening to other people in the discussion, before choosing to block. Alternative approaches to expressing dislike of an upcoming proposal, other than threatening to block, might be: "If I had to decide right now, I'd be against it." Or, "I would have to be convinced." Or, "I don't support the idea at this time."
- C.T. Butler says: "It is not appropriate for a person to come to a meeting planning to block a proposal or, during discussion, to express their concerns as major concerns or blocking concerns. Often, during discussion, the person learns additional information which resolves the concern. Sometimes, after expressing the concern, someone is able to creatively resolve it by thinking of something new. It often happens that a concern which seems to be extremely problematic when it is first mentioned turns out to be easily resolved." —On Conflict and Consensus, pg. 29.
- Caroline Estes says: "It is important to come to meetings with a clear and unmade-up mind. This is not to say that prior thinking should not have been done, but simply that the thinking must remain open throughout the discussion — or else there is no way to reach the full truth. Ideas and solutions must be listened to with respect and trust, and must be sought from all assembled." —"Consensus Ingredients," Communities Directory, 1990, pg. 79.

When the Meeting Facilitator Caves in to a Threat to Block

Sometimes a facilitator doesn't call for consensus on a proposal because someone in the meeting has threatened to block it. This has at least two negative consequences.

- (1) It doesn't allow the person to take responsibility for their block. They might actually stand aside from or even consent to the proposal if it were tested for consensus. Without testing for consensus, someone in community can "block" many proposals without really having blocked a proposal. A person with a reputation for "blocking" can thus legitimately say, "I've never blocked anything in this community!" This gives the person power-over the community's process without also requiring them to participate in helping find a solution.
- (2) The group can forget it has the right to continue discussing a proposal after was tested for consensus and didn't pass. Or it can forget that the facilitator can lay over the proposal until next time. The proposal is not dead just because someone blocked it, or threatened to.

"Don't be afraid of blocking," Bea Briggs wrote in an email to Earthaven in 2007. "If someone threatens to block an idea or a proposal, don't stop the process. Go through the steps: create the proposal, discuss it in meetings, call for consensus. There's a tendency to avoid blocks by stalling, arm twisting, etc., in an effort to 'reach consensus' instead of biting the bullet, calling the question, and living with the consequences of a valid block, or, if necessary, declaring the block invalid."

The Dreaded "P.P.D." (Premature Proposal Death)

Related to Threatening to Block. Proponents of a proposal or idea can easily allow themselves to be discouraged and stopped by another member who says, "I'll block it." The first members never develop their idea or proposal further or present it to the appropriate committee or agenda planners. The idea or proposal is killed before it's even born.

When someone threatens to block and advocates of the idea or proposal feel so discouraged they just drop it, everyone loses.

- The proposal is removed from the community's "creativity bank."
- The group never gets to consider the proposal with group co-intelligence, modify it, try it out — or even get just a good sense of why it wouldn't want it.

Don't let yourself be manipulated and bamboozled by a threat to block. If someone threatens to block — even if it's just an idea people are talking about informally — please remember it's not a part of the consensus process to threaten to block.

A helpful way to respond — and to remind them not to threaten to block — could be: "Are you saying that if this was proposed, your mind is already made up?"

Or, "Are you saying that if this was proposed, you'd be unwilling to listen and participate in a discussion about it?"

And don't let yourself collude with this violation of the consensus process by just dropping your idea or proposal if someone says they'll block it. Go ahead and develop your idea into a proposal and submit it to the appropriate committee or agenda planners, depending on how your community handles proposals. The committee or the agenda planners may think the proposal needs more work or is otherwise inappropriate for the community at that time, but at least you'd be using your community's governance process correctly.