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Executive Director's Message

LANCE C. BUHL

It is just a week after the conclusion of a day and a half semi-annual Core Committee meeting as I write this message. I'm drawn to reflect again on the values that make POD something special for me. Core Committee meetings provide the grist. In particular, my thoughts swarm around the kind of decisionmaking process we've agreed to observe. Instead of opting for majority rule, or expert dominance, or some such crystalline process, we opted for the consensus model. I said my thoughts swarm. And so they do, as what follows below reveals clearly. Forgive the whimsy. Think, please, about the affirmation. I trust the members of the Core Committee will forgive me for using their process as a point of departure to think about more general principles.

This should—will—be called, "Confessions of a Hoary Consensus Moger." Yes. It's true. I hunger after consensus, that blessed state where a group of people, honest people, tough people, courageous people, foolhardy people, caring people, tired people, have reached a decision with the pretty firm knowledge that not only has each had the opportunity to contribute to the decision at each stage of the process but that none feels deprived of his or her dignity, space, voice, franchise, or will. No confession there. I like that part of it. A bit akin, I suppose, to the good feeling you get after you stop beating your head against the wall.

The confession consists of the private doubts that surface from time to time during the process. There is a part of me that strongly wants efficiency, tightly bounded decisionmaking, linear progression of thinking and communicating, decisions on my terms and in my time. That part begins speaking up at some point along the way of each meeting. It engages another strong part of me, the part that accepts the present inefficiency in favor of the greater efficiency of

commitment over the longrun, that enjoys the give and take of less bounded decisionmaking, lateral as well as linear thinking and communication, and decisions based on the group's terms and in its collective time. The argument may be familiar to you, too.

In me it goes something like this. Gees, but it's tough work sometimes. I mean, let's face it. You take 23 strong-willed people—bright, alert, invested, TOUGH—and put 'em together in the same room to decide on issues that are vital to their trust and, person, you got problems. People really care. They think they have answers. They want air space. Sometimes they don't even listen to each other.

And, yet . . . Those 23 folks really do accept the decisionmaking norm that we need to slow down the process, mess it up just enough to get consensus, to make sure that what emerges is the best the whole group can devise and affirm.

Now, that beats all, folks. It surely does. I mean, it's so damn impractical. First off, it's (blush) DEMOCRATIC, maybe even CIVIL LIBERTARIAN. And, who has time for that fluff and nonsense these days? Second off, it does take time, right here, right now. Third off, it's exhausting! Now, how the hell can you run an organization (even one loopy-goopy enough to insist that it's a "Network," for gosh sakes) on the basis of toleration for all, unbound by precise schedule, but fully energy robbing. I've got business to conduct, people to see, places to be!

It's 10:45 A.M. on just the first morning of the POD Core Committee meeting (Saturday, March 8). Our wheels were ripping . . . absolute NOWHERE. Hadn't we begun the morning with a really powerful round robin icebreaker, where each person said something about why he or why she had joined POD? And then, hadn't we moved straight into the big stuff, the question of ensuring POD's fiscal viability? I mean, RIGHT into it. We had a process for working it out and everything. Good ideas. Good people. We may just have arrived at the most blessed of non-chemically induced highs where consensus and efficiency see one another for the very first time. And fall in love. A bloomin' marriage is foretold. But, then, someone goes and objects. Damn! "Cancel that dinner reservation. Someone here wants to get in the way of progress." Someone is willing to put their fingers in the very machinery and expose the fact that it's made of paper. They demand to be heard. And we've got to tolerate 'em. TOLERATION, THAT WORD THAT SITS RIGHT

AT THE HEART OF CIVIL LIBERTIES. They're going to be different, no doubt about it. Now, why'd they go and do that? AND WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE? A QUICK NIP OF ROBERT'S RULES? No, but a lot of anger, dropping out, covering. In this group? In this group! So the morning drags on, the dream of consensus without friction or conflict blown to bloody smithereens.

IT WAS A SILLY DREAM, OF COURSE. PEOPLE DO DIFFER. PEOPLE MUST DIFFER. PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT STYLES, PERCEPTIONS, KNOWLEDGE, WAYS OF KNOWING. PEOPLE MUST EVEN BE DIFFICULT. THE POINT OF CONSENSUS IS TO PINPOINT THE DIFFERENCES AND ATTENDANT CONFLICTS AND TO EXPLOIT THEM. AND THE POINT IS TO ACCORD UNCONDITIONAL PERSONAL REGARD THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS.

Oh, boy, but it's difficult. We want to be polite, after all. And we, of all the people in an increasingly small island of the world that insists that like toleration and due process, and individuality, and regard, and community, and creativity, individual and collective, are fundamentally important—we begin to wish earnestly for more efficient alternatives procedures. We pull back from confronting. The nerves fray. The price climbs and we (I) hit tables! By 11:15 we sneak through the back door of agreeing to a process. And sighing a collective sigh, move toward lunch.

And you know what? However messy that process was, I learned something. Good ideas came of it. Resolutions of problems begin to emerge. I got my priorities straight. We begin the afternoon session with a discussion of what happened during the morning. (You mean you actually took more precious time to examine a miserable experience? You bet!) And the words that fashioned the examination were less important in their dictionary precision than they were as bridges for re-extending mutual respect or as salve to offer a wound or two.

Somehow, our decisionmaking process from then to the end of the meeting at 1 P.M. the next day began to resemble the consensus of our vision. There were still differences and conflicts. Thank goodness. We exploited them. Sometimes that meant re-examining a prior decision, because we hadn't heard one another perfectly before.

It is not a perfect process, this crazy consensus building. It is not entirely certain that exhaustion doesn't produce artificial consensus on some points. Nor that we always succeed in being functionally honest with one another at every critical time. We may not be a fully mature group even yet. (In fact, there were five new members.) But the consensus building process is affirming. It does affirm a healthy democratic, civil libertarian tradition. We are the richer for that. It affirms the values we say we joined POD to indulge in. Too, we affirm the toughness of the struggle to be heard, to hear, to be valued, to value. Through honest consensus, we affirm the possibility of real community. It's a bit like what Winston Churchill is reputed to have said about democracy: "It's the worst form of government ever devised, except for all the others."

PRELIMINARY ANNOUNCEMENT

POD'S SIXTH ANNUAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE

October 16-18, The Claremont Resort Hotel
Oakland / Berkeley, California

Time for renewal: Meet old friends — make new friends
Conference theme: Managing Transitions in the Eighties:
Institutional and Professional
Featured speakers: Herman Blake, Kenneth Eble, Roger
Gould, John Vasconcellos
Deadline for session proposals: June 15, 1980
Contact: D. Joseph Clark, Coordinator, Biology Learning
Resources Center, Room 8, Johnson Annex A, AK-15,
University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195,
(206) 543-6588.