

## **ACHIEVING CONSENSUS**

Consensus may be defined as unanimity of agreement on a set of collective values or course of action for a group. It is a desirable objective for a Board to pursue. But consensus striving should not be such an overriding goal that it leads to organizational paralysis or produces watered-down, less desirable decisions. In a group process, conflict is inevitable, and if kept within bounds even desirable. While some tensions will always exist between the organizational cohesiveness of the group and the individual needs of its members, the quest for consensus decisions, although not always possible, ought to be a goal of your meetings. Then is, however, no substitute for common sense. An able leader will not push for consensus at the expense of seeing the Board fail to make good, timely decisions.

Conflict management and consensus building are of necessity a collaborative effort of the Board and if the Chairperson is able to achieve the following conditions, there will be a much greater likelihood that the Board will achieve a high degree of consensus while making sound decisions.

- The recruitment and selection of effective members is critical to the performance of the Board. Talented, compatible (not necessarily similar) board members are critical for the consensus building process.
- The orientation of new Board members, ensuring that new members understand the primary mission of the organization, the procedures by which the organization is run, the responsibilities of a board member, etc. are all building blocks needed to construct a consensual foundation for the performance of the Board.
- The Chairperson should know what the meeting is intended to achieve not in terms of specific outcomes, but in terms of what issues will be discussed and resolved.
- An agenda and sufficient information about options should be provided to the members of the Board prior to the meeting. Good decisions are made from a solid information base.
- The decision making process is appropriate and clear. Be comfortable and knowledgeable about parliamentary procedures; have a working knowledge of Roberts Rules of Order, but don't be rigid; be flexible enough to encourage consensus decisions.
- All members of the group should have a fair opportunity to influence the decision. On very salient issues, make an effort to involve all members of the group in the process. Go-round-the-table technique is particularly useful when there is a controversy over the issue under discussion. This method has the following advantages; 1.) it brings out individual concerns; 2) it allows all members of a group to have a sense of how the group on the whole feels about an issue before it comes to a vote; 3) it defuses malcontents who might have otherwise kept silent and only later complain, because they did not have a fair opportunity to express their concerns.
- Don't beat an issue to death. Watch for readiness to decide. Ask if people are ready to vote. When all viewpoints have been heard and sufficient information has been shared, the Chairperson states his or her understanding of the group decision. Two of the most common faults of a Chairperson are allowing the same arguments to be expressed repeatedly and the failure to terminate the discussion early enough.
- Conversely, if the group is strongly divided and the issue is not pressing, deferring decisions for further study and reflection is sometimes appropriate.
- The Chairperson should see himself or herself as the servant rather than the master of the group and the facilitator of the consensus building process. The greatest single barrier to the success of a meeting is the Chairperson's self-indulgence. The clearest danger signal is when the Chairperson hears herself/himself talking too much.
- The Chairperson provides an environment in which divergent views can be aired. When criticism is leveled, the Chair must be sure that it is the ideas that are criticized not the people.
- The Board does not need to come to consensus on each item. It's time consuming and generally not very honest. The Chairperson should make sure that everyone understands what the issue is, debates the differences, and resolves the issue, recognizing that consensus is not always possible. If the decision-making process is an open, one with mutual respect for conflicting views, you will have succeeded in building a strong foundation for a consensual Board.

## **ACKNOWLEDGING DISSENT**

Dissent is an important element in going beyond the symptoms to uncovering the real issues. Look upon dissent as a means of creating understanding and mutual respect. The trust necessary to build an effective Board is built by allowing dissent to be expressed.

- Assume that each person is right. Each person sees the situation from a different perspective.
- Look for opportunities to re-describe the situation in such a way that the dissenter's point of view is included.
- Welcome dissent as an opportunity to identify trivialities. Sometimes, when conflicts are expressed, they are seen as trivial and the Board can move on.
- Let dissenters know they have been heard.
- Keep identifying commonalities.

If a decision is made with which one or more members disagree, you may wish to note their disagreement in the minutes.