

## CHAPTER 8

# Peace and Power Decision-Building

Peace and Power Value-Based Decision-Building:

- Ensures the best decisions possible at the time the decision is made.
- Ensures that what you do is consistent with what you value.
- Includes flexible options to address different kinds of decisions.
- Uses disagreement to build understanding.
- Reduces misunderstandings.
- Nurtures collective memory of the group's actions.
- Brings together different perspectives on a situation, rather than polarizing points of view in opposition to each other.
- Nurtures understanding, insights and wisdom for everyone who participates.

Peace and Power decision-building combines individual preferences (as in voting), hearing all points of view (as in consensus), and brainstorming all possibilities (as in creative problem solving). In addition, Peace and Power decision-building incorporates processes of values clarification, conflict mediation, and critical thinking.

Peace and Power decision-building is always grounded in your group's purpose, and is built consciously to be consistent with the group's values—your principles of solidarity. At the same time, decision-building processes contribute to clarifying and revising your group's purposes and your principles of solidarity.

A common concern when you first consider Peace and Power decision-building is that the process will be time consuming and inefficient. It sometimes does take more time to reach a decision using Peace and Power decision-building. However, groups that shift to this approach almost never have to retrace their decision, nor do they have to spend time later making sure that everyone is on the same page. It is not possible to determine the time and effort saved when everyone understands and supports the decision while you are making the decision. But to take shortcuts in building a decision is a sure setup for wasted time and frustration later. The overall benefits of cohesiveness, acting in accord rather than at cross-purposes, and mutual understanding more than compensate for the time invested in reaching a decision using Peace and Power.

## **How Is Peace and Power Decision-Building Different from Other Ways to Make Decisions?**

The most familiar way of making decisions in groups is voting, with the process more or less conforming to the system of Robert's Rules of Order. Sometimes groups bypass voting and just ask everyone to reach some form of consensus. Here are some ways that Peace and Power is different, and in some ways actually similar to both voting and consensus.

### **VOTING**

Voting is a valuable democratic tool in large communities or governments. A government that is formed by democratic processes ensures a level of order that is necessary for survival while at the same time providing access for some level of participation to all citizens. But when a group comes together because they share a personal purpose and need to work closely together, voting as a way of making decisions can reinforce a divisive power-over dynamic.

When you use Peace and Power, your group values and carefully considers all opinions, even if only one person brings a particular opinion to the group. Minority opinions are not just overruled as in voting. As each minority perspective is considered, it is integrated as an explicit part of the decision, or as a factor that informs the direction the group takes. The group may often want or need to know how many of its members hold a particular perspective, and so the group may take a straw vote. However, this is for information only, and typically is not the only factor taken into account in building a decision.

### **CONSENSUS**

Consensus decision-making is in some ways like Peace and Power decision- building. However, common understandings of consensus do not consciously ground a decision in the values of the group, which is a key element of the kind of decision-building that is central to Peace and Power processes.

Consensus does attempt to take all perspectives into account, but if this is the only consideration, the group can flounder without a clear understanding of which direction to take among many choices. Peace and Power decision-building overcomes this problem because it focuses your discussion on the values around which your decision is built. When you all agree, for example, that your group values caring for children, then when you make a decision you will eliminate possibilities that make child care difficult.

Consensus also tends to require some compromise, in that each person gives something up in order to reach a group decision. Compromise decision-making is often called consensus decision-making simply because the group is not voting, but instead merely trying to agree. Compromise often leads to a weak and unsatisfactory outcome for the group.

In contrast, when you use Peace and Power decision-building you do not ignore the concerns of those who have reservations about the decision. Instead, you build into the decision a provision that addresses those concerns. The group carefully considers individuals' wishes, preferences, or desires, and integrates these in light of the group's shared purposes. Each individual shifts attention to that which the group as a whole sincerely values as a community. When individuals concede their personal preference, it is done with full understanding of and support for the group's shared purpose and vision. In addition, a Peace and Power decision always acknowledges things that individuals had to "give up," and builds in a provision to honor those things as the group moves forward. For example, when a group needs to decide on a location for an event, clearly not everyone's personal preference can be honored for this event. The group settles on the best option for this event, and makes a plan to incorporate other possible locations in the future.

Peace and Power decision-building is not totalitarian group-think. What protects against group-think is the commitment to hear and value all points of view, and to refrain from bringing closure until all possibilities have been addressed fully. The group's principles of solidarity provide the common focus for examining diverse views, but are a guide, not dogma. A new viewpoint on an issue can challenge the group to re-examine their principles of solidarity, resulting in healthy growth and change.

## **HOW THE PROCESS WORKS**

Peace and Power decision-building includes the following processes that typically unfold in a sequence, but that also can be used in fluid and circular patterns. Here are the components of the process:

- Define the question.
- Identify the Principles of Solidarity that are most central to the question.
- List the benefits you are seeking in reaching this decision.
- Brainstorm as many options as possible.
- Gather the information you need related to the options and compare the options.
- Select the best option, or decide not to decide, or look for other options.

### **Define The Question**

Pose the central question or questions toward which the decision is oriented. For example, "Should we look for another location for our Center?" "What kind of programs should we offer in the coming year?" "Where should we meet?"

Although this seems to be a simple step, it is often overlooked, and groups set about trying to make decisions with many different perspectives concerning what the decision really is about.

## **Identify Your Key Principles Of Solidarity**

Explore which of your principles of solidarity are central to this question. If a group has a principle of solidarity that sets forth a commitment to work within a specific budget, then when they approach the issue of finding a new location, their process of decision-building needs to be guided by this principle. Or, the group may come to realize that they need to stretch the limits of what might be possible beyond the constraints of the budget as they now see it in order to achieve certain goals that they also value highly. If your group has not yet formed principles of solidarity, take time to identify together the values that you all agree are the most important in guiding this decision.

## **List The Benefits You Seek**

Describe the benefits that your group envisions for any decision that arises from this process. These benefits reflect underlying values that your group uses as yardsticks against which to measure the soundness of various options. For example, a group that is contemplating a new location might identify the following benefits they want of any new location: it must be accessible to people who are underserved; it must remain within their budget; and it must provide the kind of space that is required to implement a new program that the group wishes to begin.

In typical decision-making, people who favor a certain decision use benefits that can come from the decision they prefer as a way to convince the group to go along with what they want. When you use Peace and Power, you identify the benefits you want from any decision in advance of considering possible options. Then when you know what the options are, you compare how each one measures in bringing the benefits your group seeks.

## **Brainstorm The Options**

Brainstorm as many different options as possible. At this point, be clear that every possibility is open for discussion. No decision is contemplated or implied in this process. Remain open to all possibilities, even if they seem ludicrous at the time.

## **Gather Information You Need And Compare The Options**

Gather the information you need related to as many of the options as you can. Obtain factual data, consult others in the community, or bring in guests to provide specialized information. Find out what has happened to other groups in similar circumstances.

If at any time the group wants to know how many people prefer one option over others, pause to take a straw vote that gives everyone information about where people stand on the issue at this point in time. Votes are not taken to decide an issue, but rather to inform the deliberation. After the group votes, take the time to have people speak to why they favor one option over

others.

As you reach a point where you have considered many possibilities and you have before you all the information you can gather, begin to weigh the most viable options seriously against the benefits you set forth early in the process. Narrow the possibilities to those options that are most congruent with these benefits.

### **Make Your Decision**

If everyone in the group is comfortable with one of the options over all the others, then you have reached a decision! If the decision is a big one, it is probably not that easy. If this is the case, take a deep breath and decide how urgent this decision is. If it is truly not urgent, or if you can make an interim decision, the group leaves the matter open and places it on the agenda for the next gathering.

If the decision is urgent, then your group must focus on the necessity of reaching a decision that everyone can live with for now, and plan for more discussion of the issues involved. Even in this circumstance, the more that the group is able to identify the values upon which the decision is built and select the option that best expresses your values, the more satisfactory the decision will be in the long run.

## **CHALLENGES OF PEACE AND POWER DECISION-BUILDING**

The most common initial challenge that groups encounter with this process is the feeling that it takes a long time. Voting on a matter seems to be much more efficient, and it certainly does not take as long to make a decision. As you grow more accustomed to the process you will find that the time involved is worth the investment, and the sense that it is time-consuming begins to fade. Over time you will also build a foundation upon which all of your group's decisions are based, so that the initial processes of sorting out benefits and values moves along smoothly with very little discussion.

There are challenges that can prove to be real stumbling blocks to the process. If you consider these issues early, you can be prepared to address them as they arise.

### **Being Present**

Being physically present face-to-face, or being virtually present online, is ideal when a major decision is involved. However, in a Peace and Power process, it is even more important to develop a sense of everyone's significance. If all members of the group know that they are significant and that their opinions matter to the group, then the fact of being physically present at every moment becomes less of an issue.

However, it is still ideal if everyone can be present when major decisions are made. One way to enhance "presence" is to combine online interaction with face-to-face discussion. If this is possible, you can ensure that everyone in the group is equally informed and capable of

contributing to the decision.

If you are not able to have everyone involved in reaching a decision, those who are present can reach tentative closure because the group's principles of solidarity guide the process. Once a tentative decision is made, those who reached that point take steps to inform everyone of the tentative decision and of the values and benefits that underlie that decision. The matter remains tentative until everyone checks in to affirm the decision or offer alternatives. However you approach doing this, you want to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate as much as possible in the discussion and in the decision-building process.

### **Positive Dissent**

The right of an individual or small minority to dissent when most other people seem to be in agreement can be a strength that guards against the dangers of totalitarian groupthink. Negative dissent, however, can create a real stumbling block to a process that is intended to strengthen your group. In order to ensure that dissent proceeds as a positive strength in the decision-building process, consider the following specific questions:<sup>6</sup>

- ***Have those who are dissenting fully disclosed their objections, and the underlying concerns, values, and reasons for their objections?*** Everyone may need to help in placing words around an individual's concerns. Sometimes getting clear about exactly what is motivating dissent is not an easy thing to do, especially when you are in the difficult situation of being alone in your opinion. If you are in the majority, you may not agree with those who are dissenting. Take care not to assume that the dissenters have fully disclosed their concerns. Turn your attention to helping to find a way to express and understand their underlying concerns.
- ***Have all members of the group fully heard, and do we all appreciate the concerns of those dissenting?*** One way to affirm the group's solidarity in appreciation of the minority view is to ask each person to state the dissent in her or his own way, and reflect to the group what she or he might do if this were her or his own perspective. In other words, have everyone place themselves in the shoes of those who hold the dissenting view. When you strongly disagree with the dissenting point of view, remember that in expressing something you disagree with you are seeking to understand it, not necessarily to agree with it. By remaining sincerely committed to understanding another point of view, you contribute to building a decision that brings people together, rather than puts them at odds with one another.
- ***What underlying principle of solidarity or value does this situation bring to light?*** The value or principle may not be one that the group has addressed before, and getting clear

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<sup>6</sup> The Center for Conflict Resolution book entitled *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making* (1981) provides an excellent in-depth discussion of the processes, possibilities, and challenges of consensus decision-making. These questions are informed by many of their suggestions and insights.

about a new underlying value can have a major influence on what next step the group takes. If you identify an underlying value that is already part of your group's principles, and this situation is challenging that value, this is a signal that the group may be at a turning point in its growth.

- ***What are all the possible decisions that we could make on this issue, taking into account this dissenting perspective?*** Which of these possible decisions could best reflect our group's purpose and our principles of solidarity? Once you have all the alternatives clearly identified and once you explicitly match the alternatives with what your group is really all about, you may be able to reach closure.

If your group considers these questions and they lead to productive discussion, you are experiencing positive and growth-encouraging dissent. If instead you become more confused and alienated from one another, then you are likely to be embroiled in a divisive power struggle. Despite the positive potential of dissent, dissenting individuals hold enormous potential to act in a divisive power-over manner. If you find yourself in a situation that cannot be resolved, you and the group have special responsibilities to carefully consider exactly what is happening.

Reaching a point in the decision-building process where positions are polarized is a signal that the group as a whole needs to step away from the "what" of the discussion and examine underlying values and commitments. To do this, move to processes for conflict transformation (Chapter 10). When most people in the group want to settle the matter and get on with things, it can feel very tedious to shift into a process of conflict transformation. However, when you consider the typical alternatives—hurt feelings, misunderstandings beyond repair, broken relationships, the resentment and anger that grow from unresolved disagreement—taking the time to attend to what is happening in the group is an attractive alternative indeed!