



Giving Consensus the Finger High Five or Something Else?

By Rhonda Sparks-Tranks

How do you get a group to reach consensus ?

Firstly the group needs to agree on what's meant by consensus. Then agreement needs to be reached on how consensus will be reached. Then you can actually start the process ... sort of. Add a tight time-frame to the mix and some intransigent group members and things start to get interesting.

My facilitation toolkit includes a number of techniques (ranging from coloured cards or sticky dots to quite intense dialogue) to help groups reach consensus when making decisions. The facilitation "Method of the Month" in the most recent edition of Global Flipchart (IAF Newsletter) brought back memories of a comical moment in an event I facilitated a couple of years ago.

Five Finger Consensus

The method is called "5 Finger Consensus" and is listed in the IAF Methods Data Base

Five-finger consensus is designed to encourage a significant level of agreement without jeopardising the quality of the solution. In a nutshell, people indicate their level of agreement by holding up between 1 to 5 fingers. 1 finger indicates strongly disagree and 5 fingers indicates strongly agree.



The method allows for a couple of rounds when people who disagree can present alternatives. In the final round, majority rules.

It's a handy technique to give structure to the discussion and get a quick idea of how close the group is to reaching consensus because you can see different positions at a glance.

In this instance I was working with a group of around 20 senior academics with competing interests from diverse departments – and some important decisions needed to be made. I'd worked with them before and knew how easily lengthy explanations and justifications could divert us from the job at hand.

I suggested that, given the amount of information circulated before the event and the earlier table discussions plus the time constraints, we use the 5 Finger Consensus Technique. Most in the group welcomed the opportunity to move reasonably quickly to a decision using an approach that was participatory and transparent. One person (who'd already had plenty of air time) was unhappy about this approach. He was of the school of consensus that says "if you don't agree with me then I obviously need to explain this to you again".

Digitus Impudicus ("impudent finger")

Anyway off we went! The situation quickly became semi chaotic but order soon emerged as we worked surprisingly quickly through a number of key decisions. There was a lot of laughter amid the rapid fire argument and always one person (guess who) wanting to make alternative proposals. My focus was on the total number of fingers in the air and not on the direction the hands were facing, until it dawned on me that some people were taking the opportunity to express their disagreement with alternative propositions in less savoury ways! It was all done in jest - or at least I think it was ☺ - and the air was punctuated with plenty of High 5's at the end of the session.

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