

# **Small Town Guide to People's General Assemblies:** **Tips for Holding a People's General Assembly in Your Community!**

## ***Quick and Dirty Consensus***

Democratic meeting process (whether a general assembly, a People's Movement Assembly or a Spokescouncil) uses consensus decision making. If you're not familiar with consensus, it's basically a collaborative rather than competitive decision making process that draws on the concerns and best ideas of the whole group. It is horizontal decision making.

If you are reading this, and you have to facilitate a consensus meeting, and you are not sure about what to do, remember your job is to help the group hear each other and work together to come to agreement. When you hear that the group is nearing agreement, here are the key phrases: **"Are there any concerns with this proposal?"** And, after waiting an appropriate amount of time, **"Hearing none, we have reached consensus!"**

If concerns are raised, work together to resolve them. It is usually easier than you think. Since this is happening right now, try to find some experienced consensus facilitators lurking around. If you cannot find any, we may be able to help. At the end of this document we provide some additional resources on consensus.

## ***Large Group Decision Making***

In a standard consensus training, you may not find guidance for large groups. Here are a few tips that may help the decision making process:

- **Facilitation** - Have at least one backup facilitator. They can watch the mood of the group, step aside with an upset individual, trade off or simply offer support. It would be good to hold at least one facilitation training to share the load and rotate this important role.
- **Stack Keeper** - have someone other than the facilitator keep a stack, which is a list of people in queue to speak. A progressive stack is where you call on people who have not spoken or who are marginalized.
- **Scribe** - a dedicated scribe to write out ideas on an easel can help when trying to decide on a proposal.
- **Send it to committee** - Rather exhausting everyone, if it looks like you are not nearing consensus after an hour of discussion, have a small group work on it and bring a new proposal to the next meeting.
- **Handsignals** - Handsignals common to consensus are critical for large meetings. Again do not worry about using the "wrong" hand signals. The ones used in NY are great examples and are linked to below.
- **Step Up, Step Back** - If you have a few individuals dominating the conversation, remind everyone that we want to hear from everyone. If you have already spoken a lot, please try to make space for others. If you have not spoken yet, we would like to hear from you.
- **Amplification** - Get a PA system if you can. The People's Mic (or the Human Mic) is great when the City requires a sound permit and you do not want to risk breaking the

law. Use the People's Mic to rev up a crowd or when you want, but do not use it for everything. It is not required.

- **Go easy on yourself** - A big public meeting ain't easy, no matter how experienced you are.

### ***Creating Space for Everyone: Let's Do the Math...***

Whether in the streets of Seattle in 1999, in front of Wall Street in 2011 or in the HDGs of rural OR, how we make decisions together is at the crux of what keeps us engaged as individuals and growing as a movement. There are a couple of keys to maximizing democratic decision making to keep the newly ignited Occupy movement aflame.

What is hard about large-scale decision making is that even though it allows for more participation than hearing speeches, it does not solve the problem of participation. Let's do some math. When you are thinking about large meetings it is important to remember:

$$(\text{meeting length}) / (\text{number of participants}) = (\text{minutes of talk time per participant})$$

Here's a helpful table:

Number of participants	5	10	15	25
Talk time in a 2hr meeting	24	12	8	5

If you have a two-hour mass meeting with 120 participants, the most that anyone would be equitably able to speak, respond and discuss would be one minute. That can work okay in a crisis, but once the crisis has passed, people that have little opportunity to be heard will either feel frustrated, or feel unnecessary and leave.

One way to maximize participation is to **break large groups into small groups**. Every occupation instinctively uses small groups to decide things from food to security to media rather than try to decide everything, including every menu item at the General Assembly. In fact, just last week the New York City General Assembly introduced a proposal to modify their process to use a Spokescouncil structure with each working group sending a "spoke" to the General Assembly.

To take that innovation of Spokescouncils further, at the 2010 PMA in Portland we attempted to break down the barriers that make it hard for affinity groups, large non-profits, unions, religious groups or human dignity groups from making movement decisions together democratically. Could this be used as a new model for movement building? For actual movement decision making?

### ***Advancing Democracy in Rural Oregon***

What could happen if we brought together dozens of people in our town to discuss the next steps for our local Occupy and/or human dignity group organizing? How many new leaders might we find and bring in? What if each community that has an Occupation in rural Oregon held a General Assembly and passed a resolution in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street? Imagine what it would feel like for each of our communities to do this and the message we would be sending on our ability to organize. What if we broke ground on a model that rural

people in other states could use? What if? After what we have seen this October, you can no longer say it cannot be done.

**With these efforts at democratic process, we are making space for new movement infrastructure.** A new kind of movement. A movement that sincerely engages many people. A movement that asks people not to hope and wait on the sidelines for instruction, but to join the conversation now, be a part of the decision making and help shape the direction of our movement, our local organizing and our human dignity work. If we get good at making decisions together, we can engage many people and we will win.

Since I opened with similarities between today and 1999, before I close I would like to remind all of us of another similarity between the antiglobalization movement and this movement: it was criticized for being mostly white. [Do not make the same mistakes today that were made then.](#) Do not ignore or deny the criticism; rather, face it honestly and humbly. Yes, white people I am talking to you. Do not get paralyzed with fear into inaction. But also do not overreact and split white people into a group who “don’t get it” and another who become self-righteous white allies. For example of what we did right, a few participants in the Key Lime Cluster in 1999 started the [Catalyst Project](#), which hands-down is the clearest response white veterans of the anti-globalization have to white supremacy within the movement. Guess who Catalyst holds up when they want to give examples of white people doing good racial justice organizing? You. ROP’s work in solidarity with rural Latino communities is something you should all be proud of. Real white allies know that it ain’t democracy until EVERYONE is at the table. **Together, we are the 99%.**

### ***Additional Resources***

**Simple Democratic Process** - <http://pma.creatingdemocracy.org/get-involved/decision-making-process> - (1 page) used for the 2010 Portland PMA

**A Short Guide to Consensus Decision Making** from the [occupytogether.org](http://occupytogether.org) website - <http://howtocamp.takethesquare.net/2011/10/24/a-short-guide-to-consensus-decision-making/>

**Guide to Hand Signals from NYC’s GA** - <http://nycga.cc/resources/general-assembly-guide/>

**The People’s Mic at Occupy Wall Street** (YouTube video) -

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knhnpUgdi\\_o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knhnpUgdi_o)

**Occupy Together General Assembly Resources** - <http://www.howtooccupy.org/>

**People’s Movement Assembly Organizing Kit** -

<http://peoplesmovementassembly.org/resources>