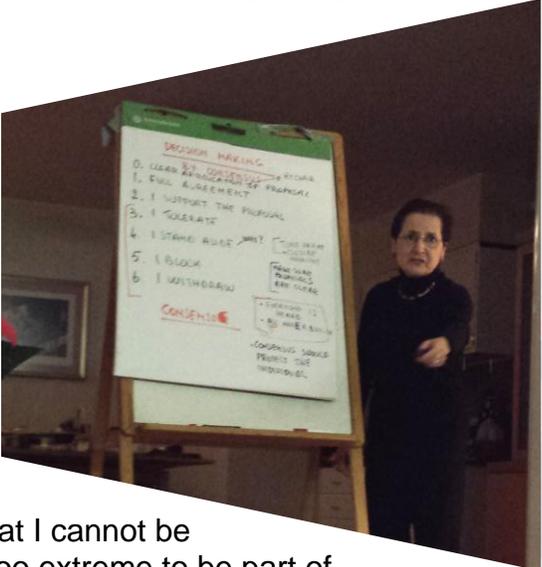


As things begin to wind down from the holidays, we look toward 2014 and all that the coming year may hold for the community. One of the central foundations of NOVA is that we make important decisions based on consensus. Because we have used consensus over the years in choosing chairs and deciding on specific annual social action projects, Brian and I thought it would be valuable to have an outside consultant come to work with us on understanding consensus away from any imminent community decisions. We were able to have Dr. Michela Perrone, a well-known expert on building community in the non-profit world and on coming to consensus, meet with community members on December 7th to have us share our consensus history, discuss some of our struggles in reaching community consensus and help us understand some important aspects of consensus that may be new thinking for some of us.

Michela shared some basic tenets of consensus methodology - when making a decision using consensus, community members should place themselves in one of the following categories of support:

- Full agreement
- Support the proposed idea (I have some reservations but support the idea)
- Tolerate the proposed idea (I have some objections but I can live with my objections and support the proposed idea)
- Stand aside (I have major objections and I do not want to weigh in on the decision- I will let the rest of the community reach consensus)
- Block (The idea is totally unacceptable and I cannot support this decision-I do not want the community to make this decision)
- Withdraw from the community (I disagree so strongly that I cannot be part of this community- at the meeting we felt this was too extreme to be part of our consensus process although it's is always an option for anyone at any time)



As we discussed these possible positions individuals might take in a NOVA consensus process, Michela reminded us that having a decision-making problem is not solved by a decision-making process but by taking the time to listen and reflect. She also shared that there are a number of variations on how an individual will respond to a proposal but we should remember that one person does not have the power to stop the process.

Perhaps the most important reminder for us all was that consensus does not mean unanimity. Consensus should protect each person's individual thinking and we should listen respectfully without trying to change someone's mind. Michela also reminded us that we could value dissent but still come to consensus as a community (again without unanimity!). Dissent that is voiced may also alter a proposal or final decision in positive ways.

Michela urged us to start with having a clear understanding about what decisions need to be made, what the pros and cons of the proposals are and take one proposal at a time. She urged us to

consider what we will do as a general practice if someone makes a blocking statement for any community consensus decision and stay with that practice.

Michela had three overarching messages for us to remember in consensus-  
Everyone is heard and listened to!  
All have the opportunity for buy-in!  
Focus on what is best for the community!

Based on Michela's suggestions, we agreed we wanted to relook at our process for choosing our annual social action project. The Peace and Social Justice Committee will follow-up with making recommendations back to the community.

All in all, those present felt the issue of consensus for the community is so important to our decisions that it was time well spent to share our thoughts and struggles and look forward to our future community consensus decisions with new insights.

*~Meg Tuccillo*