Participation

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CANBRIDGE

a process collective

(Consensus And Network Building Resolving Impasse and Developing Group Effectiveness)

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1. The Key Questions

As a process consultant I get asked to work this issue more than any other.

Here's my sense of the key questions a group will have to address on the topic of Work/Participation, or non-monetary contributions to the group's well being and maintenance. **Note 1**: while some of these questions are specific to residential communities, many are not, and the issue of Work/Participation can plague *any* group. **Note 2**: the order in which these questions are listed is not meant to suggest that they should be tackled in that order. Address them in any order you wish. Some questions may not be potent for your situation.

A. Should everyone in the group be expected to contribute to the well-being and development of the group (are expectations per adult member or per household)?

B. If yes, do you want to quantify that expectation (for example, hours/month)?

C. Do you want to record contributions? If so, how, and how will you manage those records (will they be available to everyone in the group)?

D. What is the point of this expectation? To get the work done, to build relationships among members, or both?

E. To what extent, if any, is it OK that dollars are substituted for hours? (**Hint**: the answer here will be impacted by how you answer Questions A-C.)

F. Is it OK that one member donate hours to cover another who is working less? If so, are there any limits on this?

G. Can members "bank" hours (by working more than expected for one stretch, and then less than expected in another stretch)?

H. What flexibility will there be to take into account a person's limitations in their life, either permanent or temporary? (The diminished capacities of seniors, people who are infirm, perhaps a sick relative, economic pressure following loss of employment, etc.)

I. Do you want to establish a standing Participation Committee whose job it would be to coordinate labor in the group? (**Hint**: for most groups, the right

answer is "yes." I'm talking about a committee who's job it would be to regularly check with folks, trying to figure out how best to match up needs with interests, skills, and availability; they would *not* be the Labor Police.)

J. If you have children in your group, are they expected to contribute? If so, in what ways?

K. In what ways, if at all, do expectations of contribution vary by membership category (renters, owners, non-resident owners, long-term guests, etc.)?

L. What work counts? Physical maintenance, governance, social organizing and enhancement, beautification, gardening, child care? Should some kinds of work count more than others?

M. How will you handle tensions arising in connection with Work/Participation (that is, the perception that there are martyrs or slackers in the group—and don't tell me that never happens)?

2. Working a Hair Ball

The above list of 13 questions represents strands of "hair." (There may be others, or some may not be interesting threads in your group, but you get the idea.) With a complex topic like this it generally works best to break it down into digestible chunks and deal with them one at a time. Thus, you'd pick whichever of these questions seemed most potent and jump in, being disciplined enough to *not* talk about the other dozen until you'd finished work with the first one.
So what does this look like? Glad you asked. Suppose the group selected Question A. Here are the factors that one group I worked with identified as elements that would need to be addressed by the community's response to this question:

o Desire for flexibility about what's expected, taking into account people's physical limitations, skills, and life situations (note the connection with Question H).
o Desire to be as encouraging as possible, and minimally punishing. Contributions should be made known and celebrated.
o Want contributing to the community to be fun.
o Need to get a certain amount of bottom-line work done (though it's yet to be determined what that is—note the connection with Question L).
o Some current residents don't seem to be in alignment with the community's common values; can the community create solid agreements about work expectations if there is not a firm foundation of common values?

o Desire that it be acceptable for members to do more than their share, to cover the shortage of others (note the connection with Question F).
o Need equitable management (coordination) of projects and work areas.

After vetting this list (getting buy-in that everything was tied to a group common value), next came the heavy lifting—figuring out what responses would best balance these factors. While we didn't reach the finish line in one session, we did get significant traction with the following statement, which wove together some of the factors into a unified statement:

"Our community intends to do everything it can to encourage members to contribute to the community's work and have a positive experience of developing and maintaining a vibrant community. At the same time, it needs a clear agreement about how to accomplish the work in the event that volunteerism is insufficient to get everything done that the community deems necessary."

The group liked this. It balanced two needs that otherwise might have been caught in a tug-of-war: being positive and being responsible. While it was only a start, it was one solid step in the right direction, toward detente and away from acrimony. When repeated—over and over—that's the kind of thing that gets the job done, braiding a strong and resilient solution, one strand at a time.

Additional Guidance about Working a Hair Ball

Complex topics can be overwhelming. Not only is it hard to know where to start, it can be mysterious determining how to divide things into digestible bites, and it can be paralyzing knowing how to make progress on interlocking parts.

Let me illuminate this. Suppose you have a complex topic and have divided it into three parts: A, B, and C. (Obviously it can get much more complex than that, but that's enough to illustrate the point.) In considering A, you realize that your best response may need to take into account what you'll decide for B & C—things you haven't discussed yet. However, you may also realize that if you set A aside and deal first with B that you'll face the same dilemma: you'll want to know how you're going to handle A & C first! How do you begin?

The answer is making *conditional* decisions. Do the best you can with A, and then revisit your decision after you've also tackled B & C in turn. If you modify what you did earlier on A in light of the decisions made on B & C, then you may need to revisit B & C as well, in light of your adjustment to A. Keep it up until there are no more adjustments. [This is Step 8 below.] Trust me: it's not as hard as it sounds, and you *will* reach an end! The trick is keeping track of where you are in the consideration and being disciplined about sticking to one topic at a time.

Step 1: Identify all the questions that need to be addressed (the interwoven strands of the hair ball).

Step 2: Tackle them one at a time. **+Hint**: while it's likely that some strands will make more sense to tackle before others, don't get hung up on the sequence. Expect many of the strands to be interconnected and for there to be complaints that the answer to the current strand depends on the answer to other strands. Do not be dismayed! [Reference the opening paragraphs above on this.] Yet be diligent about keeping the focus on one strand at a time. If you allow multiple strands to be discussed concurrently, you'll be at risk of getting swamped by the variables, which expand exponentially. (See Step 7 for how to navigate the issue of interconnectedness.)

Step 3: In working a particular strand, your first order of business is identifying all the factors that good response to this issue needs to take into account. This is essentially a brainstorm, where you want to set aside evaluative comments—at least at the outset. Warning: Once you've determined that this is a plenary-worthy topic, make sure that this step happens in plenary.

Step 4: After you've identified factors, go through a vetting step, where you establish that each factor generated in the brainstorm belongs on the list by virtue of its being connected with at least one explicitly held common value. The point of this is to separate legitimate group factors from personal preferences.

Step 5: Next time to ask if some factors trump others. For example, is it deemed essential that some factors be satisfied while others are merely desirable? You are only looking for a quick sort here (if one is possible); not a protracted debate.

Step 6: Now (finally) you're ready for problem solving, where you attempt to find the proposed action that best balances the factors that survived the winnowing of the previous step. **Hint**: the trick to having this stage go efficiently is making it clear that you are looking for suggestions that connect and bridge factors; you are not looking for advocacy here.

Step 7: After crafting your best response for dealing with this strand, set it aside and pick up another. Repeat as needed, until all strands identified in Step 1 have been addressed.

Step 8: Last, take a look at the whole package, to ascertain how well the individualized responses hang together as a cohesive package, making adjustments as needed.

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☞ **Caution:** Note that in this model, problem solving (Step 6) does not begin until you have completed identifying (Step 3), vetting (Step 4), and prioritizing (Step 5) all the factors that a good response needs to take into account. It is very common for groups to struggle with complex topics because well-intentioned subgroups attempt to draft proposals prior to the factors having been agreed upon in plenary. Don't fall into this trap! For good results, it is important to keep one's problem-solving cart squarely behind the criteria horse.

3. Draft Mandate for Participation Committee
(don't get hung up on the name; call it whatever you like)

I suggest the following mandate:

o Meets with all new residents (this may include long-term renters and guests as well as owners) to thoroughly explain community service expectations.

o Meets periodically with all residents to find out their skills, availability, and desire for non-monetary contributions to the community.

o Periodically canvasses all committees and managers/coordinators to get a current sense of labor/skills needs.

o Match-makes to the extent possible.

o Keeps the community regularly informed of what people have committed to do.

o Regularly celebrates and makes known accomplishments by residents.

o Is available to meet with residents who are struggling to meet their non-monetary obligations to the community, helping to figure out ways to get that person's work done that are in line with the community's policy about how they'd like this accomplished.

o Tries to fill all holes, with priority attention given to tasks deemed necessary (Note: this presumes that the plenary will determine what work is necessary.)

o Is the shepherd for all questions and concerns about non-monetary contributions to the maintenance and development of the community. They will need to coordinate with the plenary agenda setter about when and how to bring issues forward for plenary consideration.

o Is available to help people surface and constructively work through tensions and concerns relating to any resident's non-monetary contributions. Note that the committee is not obligated to be the ones facilitating the conversations at which attempts are made to name and resolve tensions; rather, they are responsible for seeing that it happens, perhaps in conjunction with Conflict Resolution.

o Periodically sets up a forum for the community to have a "Martyrs & Slackers" conversation to clear the air.

o Has no authority to impose solutions or sanctions. It is advisory and coordinating only (excepting the authority to grant exemptions from obligations as delineated below).

o Is the body authorized to grant relief from community service expectations, including whether the exemption is whole or partial; permanent or temporary. Note: this function will be accomplished applying guidelines established by the community.

o Reports to the community regularly about how well labor needs for community service are being met and how well the system is working. This will explicitly include a summary of who has been granted relief (and to what extent) from work expectations, so that everyone can be aware of the situation. As the committee becomes aware of any significant shortfalls in the labor available to meet necessary tasks, it will report those promptly to the community, along with any recommendations about how to proceed, so that the community can determine how best to respond.

o Submits an annual assessment of how well the community is doing in meeting its non-monetary needs for maintenance and development. Among other things, this report will look at the balance of contributions among residents, the amount of tensions among residents relating to participation, and how well residents are cooperating with the committee.

o Determines the distribution of funds collected from members who opt for paying the community in lieu of doing their non-monetary tasks (if this option is allowed), to committees or managers needing financial help completing work in their areas.

The idea here is to create a team that is working pro-actively behind the scenes to help people find a good fit in making non-monetary contributions to the community's development and maintenance. It will work best if this committee does not have the power to impose sanctions and can only advise. If there are difficulties with some residents contributing adequately and these cannot be resolved informally, then whatever channels for helping people work through such issues should be invoked (perhaps through Confliction Resolution). The plenary will be seen as the body of last resort.

For their part, all community residents are expected to:

o Cooperate with this committee in answering questions about their skills, availability and desire for doing community tasks.

o Make themselves available for a good-faith attempt to resolve any tensions they have (or others have with them) about non-monetary contributions to the community. Note that all parties will be given reasonable options around when such conversations will happen, who will be in the room, and how the meetings will be set up. The priority here is making choices that seem most friendly and constructive for all concerned.

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Warning #1: Setting this committee up will not eliminate problems with Participation, yet it *will* create a solid basis for a conversation when tensions arise, and it can help enormously to have a group of members empowered to go around asking well-intended questions about what people are doing now and would like to do in the future. It can be grease for squeaky wheels.

Warning #2: Be careful about how members are selected to serve on this committee—it's typically trickier than just asking for volunteers and taking the first three people who put their hands in the air. It can be important to the committee's viability that the community feels that there's a representative balance of pro-structure folks with those who favor a more informal, let-people-come-forward-as-they-are-moved approach to getting the work done.

Also, I recommend taking a moment to reflect on whether the proposed committee composition is such that you believe every group member will feel there's at least one person on the committee whom they can approach and trust to hear them accurately. To the extent that you have disgruntled and estranged folks in your group, this can be a challenge. If you don't handle this well, the disenfranchised will tend to view the Participation Committee as Big Brother and it won't be pretty.

4. Filling slots where you need high trust

In the majority of cases, the groups I work with rely overwhelmingly on a show of hands to decide who will honcho a project or staff a committee. While quick, that's about the only positive thing you can say about it.

If results matter (and they should), then I urge groups to be much more deliberate about the selection of committee members—especially when high trust is called for.

—Establishing Desirable Qualities
The first step I'd take is having a conversation about the qualities wanted in people serving on the committee. This can include familiarity with the technical aspects of the work being overseen (such as a handyman serving on the Maintenance Committee), interpersonal skills, reliability, easy-going nature… all manner of things.

Hint: When developing a list of selection criteria, there is an important nuance about qualities that you want *all* committee members to have (such as a basic understanding of accounting principles for sitting on the Finance Committee), and those that you only need *some* committee members to possess (perhaps facility with html if you serve on the team that manages the group's website).

Note: It can often be good for the plenary to select the committee's convener, so that you'll get someone with the right qualities (these may be somewhat different than the qualities wanted from regular committee members—for example, a greater emphasis may be placed on the convener being a good administrator, a

prompt communicator, or discreet with sensitive information).

I recommend that the group develop a written standard for what it wants from people serving in the capacity of convener, adjusting it as needed for specific committees.

—Selection Process
In deciding who will serve, I recommend against simply asking for raised hands (volunteer roulette). Instead, I suggest the following, which is much more deliberate:

o Post the committee job description and desired qualities for the members who serve on it.

o Ask all group members if they are willing to serve and create a written ballot listing all those who consider themselves qualified, willing, and available.

o In plenary, select an ad hoc Ballot Team (two people?) from among those members who have opted off the ballot. These people will be the only ones seeing the filled-in ballots and must agree to divulge to no one how people voted beyond what is specified here.

o Distribute printed ballots to all members, asking them to mark all those who they find acceptable to serve (people can pick none, all, or anything in between).

o After a set period of time (72 hours?) ballots are due and the Ballot Team tallies them in private.

o After ranking people by the number of votes received, they privately approach people (starting with the top vote-getter and working their way down the list), asking them one at a time if they are willing to serve. As slots are filled, additional people are added only if they are agreeable to those who have already accepted—that way you protect the chemistry of the committee. This process continues until all slots are filled.

o The Ballot Team announces the composition of the team (which does not require plenary ratification), the ballots are destroyed, and the Ballot Team is disbanded.