

Consultation -1

The administrative bodies of the Bahá'í Faith at all levels use a distinctive method of non-adversarial decision-making, known as consultation.

The principles of consultation were laid down in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, and, as a procedure for building consensus and investigating truth, they have the potential for wide application. Indeed, Bahá'ís have found them to be useful in virtually any arena where group decision-making and cooperation is required. These principles are used not only by the Faith's own institutions, but in Bahá'í-owned businesses, in Bahá'í-operated schools, and in day-to-day decision-making of Bahá'í families.

In essence, consultation seeks to build consensus in a manner that unites various constituencies instead of dividing them. It encourages diversity of opinion and acts to control the struggle for power that is otherwise so common in traditional decision-making systems.

Bahá'í consultation is based on the following principles:

- Information should be gathered from the widest possible range of sources, seeking a diversity of points of view. This may mean making special efforts to seek the views of specialists--such as lawyers, doctors, or scientists. It may also mean looking for information outside traditional specialties or making a special effort to consider the views of community members from diverse backgrounds.
- During discussion, participants must make every effort to be as frank and candid as possible, while maintaining a courteous interest in the views of others. Personal attacks, blanket ultimatums and prejudicial statements are to be avoided.
- When an idea is put forth it becomes at once the property of the group. Although this notion sounds simple, it is perhaps the most profound principle of consultation. For in this rule, all ideas cease to be the property of any individual, sub-group, or constituency. When followed, this principle encourages those ideas that spring forth from a sincere desire to serve, as opposed to ideas that emanate from a desire for personal aggrandizement or constituency-building.
- The group strives for unanimity, but a majority vote can be taken to bring about a conclusion and make the decision. An important aspect to this principle is the understanding that once a decision is made, it is incumbent on the entire group to act on it with unity--regardless of how many supported the measure.

In this sense, there can be no "minority" report or "position of the opposition" in consultation. Rather, Bahá'ís believe that if a decision is a wrong one, it will become evident in its implementation--but only if the decision-making group and, indeed, the community at large, support it wholeheartedly.

This commitment to unity ensures that if a decision or a project fails, the problem lies in the idea itself, and not in lack of support from the community or the obstinate actions of opponents.

The principle, again, harks back to an understanding of the power of unity. Bahá'u'lláh's Son, `Abdu'l-Bahá, said that Bahá'ís should strive always to seek agreement on an issue:

If they agree on a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.

Consultation -2

THE WAY TO PERFECT DECISION-MAKING

Mankind is gradually developing a more democratic way of life. Not only is democracy as a system of government becoming increasingly widespread throughout the world, but it can be seen more and more at work, at school and at home. Democracy can only work well, however, if people can consult properly together - and consultation is not as easy as one might think. The Baha'i Faith has its own system and guidelines for consultation. This leaflet is an attempt to explain them so that some of the ideas may be taken up by others for their own use.

The Goal

The goal of consultation the Baha'i way is to discover the best course of action to take for the well-being of all. If the individual consultants have any other goal than this - for instance, to gain power, win an argument, or increase their wealth or fame - their ambitions will only get in the way and the consultation will not be completely successful in achieving its goal.

The Participants

From the above it is clear that, in order to consult successfully, the participants need to have certain qualities. The Baha'i writings say that they must have pure motives, love God and want to serve humanity. In addition, they should be patient, humble, just and open-minded. Baha'is electing their administrative bodies should vote for

"those who can best combine the necessary qualities of

unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-

trained mind, of recognised ability and mature

experience."

Above all, those who consult must be united. This means, among other things, that they must set aside personal dislike for the sake of reaching the best decision.

As we look at consultation in more detail, it will be seen how necessary all these qualities are.

The Method

This is the procedure for Baha'i consultation:

- 1) establish the full facts;
- 2) decide on the principles to be applied;

3) discuss the matter;

4) make a decision.

Each of these steps is preceded by prayer, both to invoke the help of God and to remind those consulting of what their attitude should be. If problems arise during the consultation, prayers are said to resolve the difficulties. Other groups of a spiritual nature might like to adopt this approach.

"True consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love."

Establishing the Facts

Often parliaments, committees and so on fail at the beginning of consultation by not being able to agree on the facts. This is not because there are no solid facts to be found, but because the members, if they are only interested in having their own way, may reject the facts which do not suit their case. However, the advances made in data-gathering in this century should ensure that correct information is available. This information must then be viewed objectively. This should be possible for every consultative body.

Principles

A pitfall in the consultation within many organisations is not being able to agree on the underlying principles. Baha'is are fortunate not to have this problem, since there are Baha'i laws and principles which may be applied to every situation. In groups which do not have this common understanding, time must be spent reaching basic agreement on the principles to be applied before consultation can properly begin.

Discussion

Baha'i consultation calls for unity of purpose - not unity of opinion. The Baha'i writings say that:

"The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the
clash of differing opinions."

Note that it is the opinions which clash and not the people. Everyone should express his or her opinion with the conviction that it will contribute in some way to the discussion. Each should speak frankly, but with courtesy and moderation. No-one should be too shy to offer an idea. On the other hand, after a person has stated a point of view, it should not be repeated over and over again.

"They must in every matter search out the truth and not
insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and
persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord

and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden."

All opinions must be listened to with an open mind and judged fairly. Shouting, sarcasm and name-calling cause feelings of hostility which obscure the truth and make proper consultation impossible. A chairperson must be elected who will ensure that everyone participates; that each opinion is listened to carefully and considered on its merits; that no-one dominates or diverts the discussion.

Each idea must be offered to the group as a gift: it should not be identified in anyone's mind with the person who first suggested it. This means that the idea can be changed and developed, or even rejected, without anyone feeling hurt. If the participants are adopting the right approach, they will be able to see the best course of action to be taken, whatever their own original opinions might have been. It happens quite frequently in Baha'i consultation that a person will change his or her mind completely during the course of the consultation and even argue against an idea they originally suggested.

Making a Decision

If the consultation has gone successfully through the preceding steps, making a decision will probably prove the easiest part. It is likely also that it will be a unanimous decision. But if unanimity cannot be achieved, a majority opinion must prevail. Each member should respect the consulting body enough to carry out its decision obediently and confidently - even if he or she did not vote in favour of it.

Unity

"No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation."

Unity in itself brings benefits. When a decision is not obeyed, it is never certain whether it was wrong in itself or whether sabotage made it fail. When a decision is carried out wholeheartedly, however, it soon becomes apparent if the decision was wrong and it can quickly be reversed. But if the decision was right the benefits will be felt immediately.

"Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding."

Some Effects of Baha'i Consultation

No more industrial disputes. Impartial, trustworthy consultative bodies would seek out the terms which would best serve employees, employers and the community at large.

Law would cease to be a battle of wits if justice were truly the object of all legal procedures. Rather than "defence" and "prosecution" there should be a system of consultation aimed at establishing the truth.

Science and medicine would progress. Baha'i consultation would eliminate professional jealousies and free both science and medicine to forge ahead faster with whatever is beneficial to mankind as a whole.

Party politics would become unnecessary because the representatives of the people would unite to search for the best solutions to the nation's problems.

International Co-operation Leaders of nations would no longer make decisions solely on the basis of national interests. As the peoples of the world see just decisions being made, national hatreds and mistrust will die out, and peace will become possible...

Consultation -3

Let's say you are among a group of people who are facing a problem. Maybe the group is your family. Maybe you and your coworkers have been given a task to complete. Or again, maybe you are the owner of a business, and you are meeting with some of your managers to decide upon a course of action. You might even be a government official engaged in a debate over a proposed regulation or pending legislation. The exact situation doesn't matter, because in any case you are a member of a group who must deal with some problem, whatever it may be. How do you go about formulating a plan of action and making decisions?

I think most of us would say that ideally we discuss the situation, look at it from all sides, generate ideas, debate their pros and cons, and eventually make a decision based upon the facts. The decision itself may be made by majority vote or by the decree of a ranking official, depending upon the situation. But in the best of all worlds, the decision will ultimately be based upon the facts and will be the most effective solution possible.

But this isn't an ideal world. We all know what can and frequently does go wrong. The participants bring their own agendas to the table. Some may have selfish motivations: power, money, comfort, or even just a desire to minimize the effort they have to put into the solution. They also bring their own knowledge, or lack of knowledge, to the table, and often don't want to hear anything that contradicts what they already "know." Moreover, members don't want to appear "weak" in front of each other, so they resist changing their positions, even in the face of new knowledge. Pride and its attendants are powerful motivators. And, of course, sometimes the group just doesn't have access to all the facts that it needs, not through any fault of its own but simply because they don't realize that they need additional information.

Quite often, such defects and deficiencies result in division, argument, and ill-will. The argument itself may be couched in civil terms, but it becomes a contest to see who will prevail and who will lose. In the worst case, the proceedings are politicized to the point that group members band together in subgroups, each aligned with a particular unyielding agenda, and fight with other subgroups for control of the body.

Such symptoms of disunity are frequently seen in governments, of course, but they also appear in businesses, religious organizations, clubs, and sometimes even within families. They are so pervasive that we tend to see them as merely part of human nature and (in democratic societies, at least) believe that certain kinds of safeguards must be built into organizations to prevent abuse of power. Many of these safeguards actively encourage rivalry between factions. In such an environment, we don't generally get the best solution. We generally get the best compromise that the competitors can forge.

The Bahá'í Faith offers a different model of decision-making. Rather than encouraging rivalry between factions, this model guards against abuse in an entirely opposite manner: it eliminates all possibility of acquiring personal power and

prohibits the development of factions. When properly executed, there is no rivalry here, no opportunity for personal agendas, for pride, or for other human failings to pollute the process. We call this process "consultation." It is built upon four fundamental principles.

First, information should be gathered from the widest possible range of sources, seeking a diversity of points of view. Do we need input from specialists, such as doctors, lawyers, artists, or construction workers? If so, we bring them into the group. Will the decision affect an entire community? If so, we seek the input of community members from diverse backgrounds, be they racial, ethnic, economic, or the like. We do everything in our power to get all the information and as many points of view as possible.

Second, participants must make every effort to be as frank and candid as possible, but must also show courtesy and respect for the views of others. There is no room for personal attacks, prejudice, or efforts by any individual or subgroup to gain control of the proceedings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote,

The members . . . must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 87)

Third, ideas become the property of the group as soon as they are brought up. No individual, subgroup, or constituency has any claim on any idea, nor do ideas exist in this setting to serve anyone but the group or community as a whole. You will not gain power or prestige from having your idea adopted. But neither will you descend into shame or be "cut out" of the process should your idea not be adopted. Every idea advances the consultative process, even if it is ultimately discarded. This principle not only safeguards the unity of the group, it also promotes the generation of ideas that are motivated by a sincere desire to serve rather than those born of selfish interest. The competition is no longer between competing individuals or subgroups, but between competing ideas. Compromise doesn't enter into the equation; the only goal is to find the best ideas.

Finally, in consultation we strive for unanimity. If at all possible, we want a decision that everyone feels comfortable supporting based upon its merits. But should this not prove possible, a majority vote can be taken. And here we find another difference between consultation and most other forms of decision-making. Once the vote is cast, the result represents the decision of the entire group. There is no "minority report", no "dissenting opinion." Votes by individuals are not recorded and subsequently reported so everyone knows who was "for" the decision and who was "against" it. The decision is the decision of the group as a whole, as if it had been a unanimous vote. The entire group must in unity obey and support that decision.

But what if the decision was wrong? We are, after all, talking here about a group of human beings. Even with the best intentions and with the best information they can gather, it is possible that a majority vote, or even a unanimous decision, might be in error. Can nobody speak out if they feel an error has been made?

In fact, consultation is an ongoing process. A decision, once made, is not set in stone. Rather, it will be periodically reviewed to determine how well it is working and adjusted as necessary. But there is a difference between pointing out, in the spirit of consultation, a perceived problem and actively opposing a decision. Through consultation, the group or community is united in seeking and making a decision, in carrying out that decision, and in reviewing and improving upon that decision.

Of course, we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that Bahá'í consultation is a panacea, a magic formula that somehow cures all the ills found in traditional decision-making systems. Rather, it is a skill that must be learned, practiced, and perfected. It both relies upon and facilitates the spiritual growth of its participants. However, any group that dedicates itself to learning, practicing, and perfecting consultation skills will reap enormous benefits.

And the best thing is, you don't even have to be a Bahá'í to use it!

Consultation-4

The mechanism by which decisions are made at all levels of the Bahá'í administrative order involves the process of consultation. The purpose of consultation is to bring the minds of several people to bear on a particular subject so that the decision made is the result of the group's collective wisdom.⁽¹⁰⁾

ʿAbdu'l-Bahá asserts that this result can only be achieved, however, if certain conditions are met:

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them. . . The members [of a spiritual assembly] must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.⁽¹¹⁾

Nor is the tool of consultation only to be used in matters of Bahá'í administration. It is something that can be used whenever a decision has to be made:

Consultation is acceptable in the presence of the Almighty, and hath been enjoined upon the believers, so that they may confer upon ordinary and personal matters, as well as on affairs which are general in nature and universal. For instance, when a man hath a project to accomplish, should he consult with some of his brethren, that which is agreeable will of course be investigated and unveiled to his eyes, and the truth will be disclosed. Likewise on a higher level, should the people of a village consult one another about their affairs, the right solution will certainly be revealed. In like manner, the members of each profession, such as in industry, should consult, and those in commerce should similarly consult on business affairs. In short, consultation is desirable and acceptable in all things and on all issues. (ʿAbdu'l-Bahá)⁽¹²⁾

‘ABDU'L-BAHÁ ON CONSULTATION

In this Cause consultation is of vital importance, but spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views is intended. In France I was present at a session of the senate, but the experience was not impressive. Parliamentary procedure should have for its object the attainment of the light of truth upon questions presented and not furnish a battleground for opposition and self-opinion. Antagonism and contradiction are unfortunate and always destructive to truth. In the parliamentary meeting mentioned, altercation and useless quibbling were frequent; the result, mostly confusion and turmoil; even in one instance a physical encounter took place between two members. It was not consultation but comedy.

The purpose is to emphasize the statement that consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. A spark is produced when flint and steel come together. Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not wilfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavours to arrive at unity and truth. . . . Therefore, true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation. (Promulgation of Universal Peace, pages 72- 73)