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## Comparison of Robert's Rules of Order, Consensus Process and Dynamic Facilitation

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There are many ways to run a productive meeting, but three styles have a certain archetypal feel to them. Comparing these three styles -- **Robert's Rules of Order**, **Consensus Process**, and **Dynamic Facilitation** (also called "choice-creating") -- can give us insights into the possibilities and trade-offs we encounter as facilitators and participants in meetings. Hopefully the rough-hewn analysis here will be expanded, deepened, and transformed over time into guidelines truly useful to everyone. Its current articulation will probably be of most interest to facilitators.

Here is a brief description of each of the three archetypal approaches.

**ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER** was created after the Civil War by a US Army officer, Henry Martyn Robert. It is the predominant mainstream approach to meetings in the U.S. It lays out procedures for getting proposals raised, discussed, amended, and voted on in meetings directed by a chairperson. It is based on the belief that a majority can be counted on to make decisions that will work for the whole group, and that rules for orderly deliberation are the best guide to getting there. ("It is much more material that there should be a rule to go by than what that rule is..." Robert's Rules of Order Revised, 1996)

There are many forms of **CONSENSUS PROCESS**. The form discussed here is a secularized derivative of Quaker practices that is widely used in intentional communities and activist groups. It explores a problem and diverse solutions more fully than Robert's Rules, seeking an option that earns the agreement of all participants. It assumes that everyone has a piece of the truth and uses facilitation to help the group make productive use of that insight.

**DYNAMIC FACILITATION** was created by consultant Jim Rough to enhance creative problem-solving in institutional settings. It has been picked up by activist and community groups because of its capacity to handle "impossible problems" and "difficult people" and to creatively use conflict. A dynamic facilitator follows the group's interest and energy wherever it goes, so a group often ends up in a very different place than they started, frequently with a collective breakthrough of some kind.

In this article, we'll attempt to lay out these meeting facilitation styles on a spectrum ranging from the orderly sensibilities of Robert's Rules (RR), through the exploration-towards-agreement of Consensus Process (CP), to the discover-and-create energetics of Dynamic Facilitation (DF). We'll consider many aspects of meeting process, noting how each approach deals with each aspect.

## CAVEATS

*We treat RR, CP, and DF as if they are distinct approaches. However, keep in mind that this is a spectrum, so there is a lot of overlap and potentially controversial more-or-less-ness to the characteristics we describe. We think of each description below as an archetypal description of a particular approach's "center of gravity" rather than as a comprehensive description covering all instances of its use.*

*There are many other approaches to facilitation that could be explored along this spectrum. We view these three approaches as markers to think with, not as exclusive or all-inclusive categories.*

*Ideally, the material below would be a table, but is presented here as a list to make it emailable. The materials on each approach -- currently mixed with data on the other approaches and distributed over more than a dozen cross-categories -- can be readily re-arranged to constitute a good description of that approach.*

*Finally, this is a draft. We welcome corrections, additions, modifications and suggestions.*

Now let's look at the characteristics of these approaches and how they each deal with a number of factors we find in any meeting.

## NOTABLE STRENGTHS

At their best, each of these processes evidences the following characteristics:

RR: Robert's Rules is efficient at getting through an agenda. It offers order and predictability. People can understand how to operate the system by studying the rules, and a group can revise its procedures by discussing them. Its many checks and balances can provide an enormous degree of protection against demagoguery, impulsivity and laziness. Robert's Rules gives people shared language, and shared points of reference with which to communicate thoughtfully and systematically about their process. Historically, it demystified democratic decision-making for the general public, permitting -- for the first time -- democratic control of the process itself, expanding the possibilities for self-governance.

CP: Consensus process is good at making decisions that everyone agrees to, that can last. It is characterized by thoughtfulness and care, and making sure everyone is heard. It helps people feel collective accomplishment as progress towards consensus is reflected back to the group. It is resilient, since the group holds part of facilitation role.

DF: Dynamic facilitation stimulates, focuses and combines people's creative energy to deal with big issues, "impossible" problems, difficult people and chaos -- at a whole-system level. It evokes out-of-the-box creative problem-solving, a spirit of community, coherence, energy and fun. It creates an atmosphere conducive to the transformation of people and problems.

## FOCUS / SUCCESS CRITERIA / GOAL

RR: Robert's Rules focuses on efficiently choosing proposals that are supported by a majority of those empowered to make decisions. Success = workable decisions made in a timely, orderly manner. The goal for the group as a whole is to manage itself independently of internal and external domination.

CP: Consensus Process focuses on weaving many evolving pieces of the truth into decisions everyone present can agree with, constantly oriented to what is best for the whole group. Success = decisions that have staying power because the deliberations were so thorough, wise and inclusive that everyone involved is willing to engage fully in their implementation. Consensus seeks at least agreement -- and, at best, shared understanding so deep that it aligns everyone naturally to a shared approach to the situation. The ultimate goal of consensus is communion in collective action.

DF: Dynamic Facilitation focuses on inviting the energy of the whole person and the whole group to surface, in order to allow shifts that lead to transformations and breakthroughs in understanding, feeling, relationship, possibility, etc. As a shared field of perception ("co-sensing") is created that is spacious enough to include all of the diversity of perspectives, ideas, and concerns present in the group, participants' creativity blossoms and previously-unthought-of solutions emerge with ease. In many cases, this involves re-definitions of the original problem statement, often leading to addressing and solving underlying issues that originally seemed beyond the group's capacity to resolve. Nonetheless, success is not defined solely by the solutions, but also by the ongoing creative conversations that are generated among participants and among others in the larger group, organization or community. It is the collective creativity and transformative power of conversation that constitutes the ultimate goal of dynamic facilitation.

## THE FACILITATOR

RR: The chairperson (who has a clearly defined role and constraints) maintains order, keeps discussion progressing towards a decision and decides (with the parliamentarian) procedural matters by the book. This requires someone who knows procedure; it doesn't require that they have lots of training. Because of its dependence on procedure, there are ways in which Robert's Rules are less dependent on the "person in front of the room" than consensus and dynamic facilitation are.

CP: The facilitator (who has broad, loosely defined powers to frame the emerging meaning for the group and to order the traffic of discussion) monitors participants' behavior to help them play their cooperative roles in surfacing truths on behalf of the group. If the group is experienced with consensus, a slightly-trained facilitator can do a good job. In many groups, the consensus facilitation role is rotated or shared by everyone.

DF: The facilitator (who has broad, intuitive powers as a mirror, evoker and guardian of group safety) ensures each contribution is accessible to the whole and well-acknowledged; helps the group's natural energy further the unfolding of collective discovery and transformation; and creates a space safe enough for authentic participation. Dynamic facilitation is a "quantum art," in which the qualities of presence, trust, and openness held by the facilitator play a key role in the process. While these "being skills" can be learned and developed, they require dedication and depth on the part of the facilitator. At the same time, since this approach is focused on the quality of the on-going process as well as on outcomes, it can be considered more forgiving of "mistakes".

## THE IDEAL PARTICIPANT

RR: In a meeting governed by Robert's Rules, the ideal participant is rational, articulate and knowledgeable about procedure.

CP: The ideal consensus participant is cooperative and speaks their piece of the truth on behalf of the whole group. They discern what is key for the group and what is merely their personal view, and they let go of the latter. They assume their share of responsibility for creating a safe, productive meeting.

DF: The ideal participant in a dynamically facilitated meeting acts and speaks from their authentic self, even if it seems divergent or unrelated to the issues at hand. Their role in preparing for unpredictable breakthroughs is to just be who they are, and not to edit or censor their contributions.

## WHAT THE FACILITATOR REFLECTS TO PARTICIPANTS, AND WHY

(Note: "Reflection" here refers to the action of "mirroring back what was said.")

RR: The chairperson reflects proposals, amendments, seconds, etc., to the whole group, as these things occur, in order to formally track the status of a proposal on the floor.

CP: The consensus facilitator reflects evolving issues, solutions and agreements to the whole group, to help them free their attention from personal agendas and conflicted details so they can sustain attention

on the progress of the whole group's discussion.

DF: The dynamic facilitator often reflects what individual speakers have said back to the individual, in order to help participants feel truly heard. This helps free participants' attention, allowing them to engage in the ongoing flow of the conversation as well as to be open to the unexpected. The words that are reflected also serve as a symbol to spark the next stage of the group's self-organizing energy. At various stages of the process, the facilitator also reflects his or her perception of the group's evolving journey back to the group -- again as a symbol -- to help the group track their own progress or to facilitate closure.

## PROPOSALS

RR: Proposals are solid and dominate the discussion. They are only impacted by amendment and vote. Proposals are considered and decided one at a time. The first proposal on a topic to pass is considered the solution and automatically nullifies all other options on that topic for that meeting.

CP: Proposals surface naturally during dialogue about the problem and are discussed as they arise. Discussion often starts regarding one initial, sponsored proposal, but multiple proposals often emerge and then co-exist while their merits are explored.

DF: Proposals are encouraged and recorded on a chart pad as possible solutions, but they do not determine the subsequent flow of conversation, nor do they become the focus of a deliberate decision-making process. Although anyone can comment on any proposal at any time, the facilitator persistently seeks new possible solutions. As the conversation follows its natural energy and shared perceptions grow, consensus solutions emerge that contain the shared energy of the group.

## RELEVANCE

RR: Relevance is determined by the topic under consideration and the stage of the conversation about it, as specified by the rules. When a chairperson deems a comment irrelevant, he or she declares the speaker "out of order," which silences them.

CP: Relevance is determined by the group-approved agenda, as judged by the facilitator. A major distraction is called a "cross-town bus" and is "parked elsewhere" for handling at another time, if desired. If there seems to be strong group energy to pursue on an emerging topic, the facilitator can check if the group wants to alter their agenda.

DF: Relevance is made visible by the flow of group energy. A group's continually shifting sense of what's relevant arises naturally from the evolving, interacting concerns of all participants. The energy and comments of any group member at any given time are considered contributions to this process. Their creative energy is sought and followed, trusting that relevance, if not obvious, will become clear. Something that seems totally irrelevant one moment may prove to be the doorway to a breakthrough in the next moment. The facilitator intervenes not to weed out irrelevance, but to sustain this flow of group energy. For example, the facilitator may skillfully recast someone's "objection" as a "concern" to help the group not bog down in unproductive "back-and-forth" arguments. Or the facilitator may intervene if the group gets sidetracked into a heady discussion of well-worn ideas that have no creativity or passion. Traditional approaches to relevance are never pursued at the expense of the group's creative energy.

## INTERPERSONAL ISSUES, EMOTION & CONFLICT

RR: Interpersonal issues are not dealt with by Robert's Rules, especially if they're emotional. The focus is on reasoned articulations germane to the topic, so passionate outbursts may be declared out of order. Conflict is channeled into the approved procedures of amendment, discussion, voting and procedural challenges (and sometimes procedural manipulation by the parliamentary powers-that-be).

CP: Interpersonal understanding is often pursued in a consensus meeting as a goal in itself, so that participants feel fully seen and comfortable as part of the group. (Communion is a high value in most consensus groups.) Strong emotions regarding the topic are often withheld to reduce the chance of open

conflict, and because people are trying to stay focused on what's good for the whole group.

DF: Abundant interpersonal understanding is generated by giving participants the opportunity to hear each other in much greater depth than is usually the norm. Participants' contributions, especially at first, are directed to the facilitator, who elicits and records the contributions, invites extended elaboration, and reflects their contents back to the originator. This creates a space in which other participants have the opportunity to "witness" without falling into usual patterns of response and argument. Emotions are fully welcomed, initially by the facilitator, and eventually by the participants themselves as the spaciousness of the shared container is established. Conflict is re-channeled by the facilitator into an expression of the various partisan concerns, directed towards the facilitator instead of at other participants. The facilitator records the concerns on chart pads as well as reflecting them back verbally to the speakers so that all parties feel heard. Upsetting interpersonal misunderstandings are turned into shared challenges. They become impossible-seeming issues requiring creative breakthroughs to resolve -- i.e., more grist for the mill of dynamic facilitation.

#### FIXED IDEAS, JUDGEMENTS, IDEOLOGIES

RR: People push their fixed ideas to see whose will prevail.

CP: People try to suppress their own fixed ideas for the sake of the group.

DF: Fixed ideas and passionately-held beliefs are welcomed, listened to, reflected, and fully acknowledged. In the process, people often find themselves choosing to let go of fixed ideas quite easily, as there is nothing to defend.

#### DISAGREEMENTS

RR: Disagreements can be openly expressed if they conform to the agenda, the procedure and the stage of the meeting. If they are not resolved by discussion and amendment, they are dealt with either by voting (ending up as minority/majority positions where the majority wins), by tabling them for later, or by simply ignoring them.

CP: Whatever disagreements actually exist are valued as information resources for building a solution everyone can agree with. Participants whittle away all the disagreements until there's nothing left but agreement -- or participants make room for diversity in the agreement -- or one or more people let go of their attachment to their perspective. Often disagreements dominate the discussion until they disappear through exploration. At the decision-point, any remaining concerns are formally listed in the minutes.

DF: Disagreements are treated in a similar way as conflict: Each point is reframed so that it is a valuable addition to the group exploration -- a concern, an alternative problem statement, a possible solution, or an additional piece of data. Each is acknowledged and recorded on the group's charts. No effort is made by the facilitator to reconcile disagreements, nor to invite the group to do so, as entering agreement/disagreement mode is understood to entail a loss of creative energy. Instead, the facilitator focuses on enlarging the space to include all perspectives, validating each one in turn, and keeping the flow going. At the same time, as the conversation continues, the group itself will tend to spontaneously generate new perspectives that include a synthesis of previously conflicting views.

#### COMPROMISE

RR: Robert's Rules strategists value compromise as a way of building the majority they need to prevail.

CP: Users of consensus process respect compromise as one tool to build agreement, but think of it as weaker than solutions that satisfy everyone's deepest needs or interests.

DF: The whole purpose of dynamic facilitation is to enter the realm of co-creativity, where compromise is

naturally regarded by all participants as unnecessary, uninspiring, and not nearly as much fun.

## THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL VOICES IN DECISION-MAKING, AND THE STATUS OF DECISIONS

RR: Individual voices and well-being are not intrinsically important. People are valued for the quality of their preparation (which RR strongly supports, allowing them to engage at an advanced decision-making level), their proposals, their information, their votes, their knowledge of procedure, and their conversational civility. The majority rules. Dissenting minority opinions and leftover feelings and dissatisfaction are ignored. Decisions are considered final until overturned by a new majority.

CP: There is some real care for the well-being of individual participants. The facilitator makes sure each person is heard and is in agreement with the final decision. During the process, individual ideas are considered group property from the moment they're spoken, and thus individual voices can be subsumed into "the whole" (given no special attention) until closure is near, at which point individual dissent and concerns are expressly solicited by the facilitator. An individual who doesn't consent can stand aside and let the group proceed anyway, or they can block the decision. (Note: A block is not a veto, nor is it properly undertaken to aggrandize an individual's views or power. In most cases it is only allowed when someone feels that the proposed decision would be disastrous for the group. Groups that allow casual blocking find they cannot function with consensus. Thus the importance of shared community values and sensibilities.) Decisions are usually considered final.

DF: Each individual voice is fully heard early in the process so that everyone's contribution is available to the group and everyone has the free attention to see it. After that, the facilitator follows group energy, helping individuals to be creative and unique. The facilitator assures that individual voices are always appreciated and never meet with judgment. Eventually differences become an asset, making the process more fun, breakthroughs more likely and resulting solutions better. It is important to understand that instead of consciously pursuing a "decision-making process", dynamic facilitation invites the spontaneous emergence of collective breakthroughs. These collective breakthroughs are NOT decisions, and do NOT involve a process of stopping to check for individual "agreement". In fact, collective breakthroughs are often only pointed out by the facilitator to the group AFTER the fact, some time after the group has naturally shifted their energy to resolving a whole new set of problems that have emerged as a result of having addressed and resolved the initial problem set. (Of course, once a group has become more used to this process, they become better able to recognize their own breakthroughs themselves.) Dynamic facilitation elicits co-creativity by encouraging participants to involve their whole selves in the process, and welcoming fully individuals' emotions, beliefs, perspectives, etc. During the initial stages of this work, quieter individuals or those who prefer greater structure may feel somewhat overwhelmed, especially since the process does not proceed (like decision-making processes) in a linear, step-by-step fashion. As a result, initial breakthroughs may sometimes be revisited as participants develop greater capacity to voice any withheld concerns and contribute more fully to the group (or as circumstances change), thus increasing (or sustaining) the quality of results over time.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR COMMUNITY AND TRAINING

RR: Robert's Rules can function in the absence of community spirit, thanks to its highly structured procedures. It needs a chairperson knowledgeable about procedure. Participants need to know at least basic procedures to participate.

CP: Consensus requires a high level of community spirit and commitment -- AND it builds community by building attunement to Spirit and/or to each other. Participants need to understand consensus process, to monitor their participation to fit the needs of the group, and to follow the facilitator's guidance regarding the process. Consensus can work with only a moderately trained or moderately experienced facilitator, thanks to its cooperative nature and group support.

DF: Although dynamic facilitation generates a great deal of community spirit, it does not require that spirit as a pre-existing condition in order to succeed. It works best in the presence of real differences of opinion which, when they produce breakthroughs, generate powerful group feelings. The group requires no initial training, but does require a skilled facilitator to ensure good results.. (It remains to be seen if dynamic facilitation would develop a peculiar "community culture" if used regularly in an intentional community -- in

which the group shares responsibility for the process, the way consensus-trained groups do -- and what the results of that would be.)

(Note: There are other processes, such as Bohmian dialogue, Listening Circles and Open Space Conferencing, which can quickly evolve to require no facilitator at all. Much more inquiry is needed about the role of facilitation and process structures in creation and maintenance of self-organizing systems.)

## RELATIONSHIP OF RULES TO OUTCOME

RR: Those with greater awareness of the complex rules and procedures -- and with facility in using them, or control over their application (such as the chairperson) -- can "win" more often than others, or can block the efforts of others. This is frowned on by Robert's Rules. The chairperson can vote if he or she is a member of the assembly.

CP: There are far fewer rules in consensus process than in Robert's Rules. Shared awareness of rules tends to make manipulation difficult, and empowers all individuals equally. Manipulation by the facilitator is possible, but is usually monitored by the group. The facilitator cannot participate in the substantive discussion or decision-making unless they turn over their facilitator hat to someone else. There is no voting.

DF: Although there are some handy dynamic facilitation techniques for dealing with various situations, there are few, if any, "rules." In fact, rules are viewed as an extrinsic management approach that usually interfere with the intrinsic, self-organizing dynamic of change that is the trademark of dynamic facilitation. The structure of the meeting is largely contained in the chart pads on which the facilitator reflects the evolving content of the conversation -- chart pads usually headed "Problem statements," "Solutions," "Concerns," and "Data." The group's dependence on the facilitator makes participants vulnerable to facilitator manipulation. But if there is manipulation, then -- by definition -- the group is not being dynamically facilitated.

## SOURCE OF TRUST / SOURCE OF DIRECTION

RR: Trust in standardized procedures results in well-controlled meetings. "Orderly progress will get us where we want to go."

CP: Trust in the wisdom generated by respectful dialogue among all involved creates a self-governing community. (In Quaker consensus process, the source of trust is the Divine speaking through the members of the meeting.) "Together we can weave a greater truth than any of us can find alone."

DF: Trust in the creative, mysterious, unpredictable process of life -- both conscious and unconscious -- leads dynamic facilitators to evoke self-organizing conversations and ongoing evolution. "Making room to share our full uniqueness with each other, paradoxically allows the power of co-sensing, co-creativity, and synergy to emerge among us. We don't back away from conflict, evil or dragons, but face them and hang out ... and trust that they will be transformed, that somehow they possess parts of ourselves that have been missing. Together we can call forth or create the resources needed to get beyond any problem."

## CHARACTERISTIC PROBLEMS

RR: The focus on a single proposal per topic can preclude the possibility of totally different and far better solutions emerging and being considered.... The dominance of procedure can deaden the meeting if participants have not done good homework.... Majority rule is intrinsically adversarial, so there's often a dissatisfied minority ready to impede implementation or to overturn the decision later when they accumulate enough power to do so.... It's more about decision-making than listening to each other or generating breakthrough ideas.... The rules become an obstacle when certain people "act out" in the group by raising trivial concerns with regards to proposals under consideration....

CP: The focus on community can lead to groupthink and reduced energy. Some community-oriented people develop the capacity to appear open, while subtly defending their turf or manipulating others.... It

takes time for the culture of community to develop, so consensus may be applied where there isn't enough shared sensibility to allow it to do its magic... Important hot topics can be neglected as "cross-town busses" (side issues to be dealt with later).... Taking people's statements in order of hands raised (or other mechanical system) can bog the rapidly-evolving energy of the group.... Consensus is more about listening to each other than generating breakthrough ideas.... Consensus can often get bogged down by certain people "acting out" in the group by raising trivial concerns with regards to proposals under consideration, leading to frustration by other participants .... Consensus can raise issues that can't be resolved by consensus.

DF: During the initial stages of the process, quiet people often get less of a chance to talk... Since collective breakthroughs are not in the traditional form of decisions (and since they often give rise to an entirely new set of problems!), it can be difficult for participants to notice their own progress unless the facilitator points it out... If facilitation is not skilled, meetings can be experienced as too heady or zippy by more reflective or feeling-focused people... The non-linearity of dynamic facilitation makes it unsuited for getting through tightly timed agendas (although its effectiveness raises questions about the value of agenda-based restrictions on group energy)... Skilled facilitation is needed to generate clear successes.... The process is about generating breakthroughs to solve real problems. As such, it is not very effective in situations where people are strongly attached to "making a decision" between a fixed set of options as determined by a fixed definition of "the problem", and are unwilling to explore any deeper underlying issues, alternative problem statements, or creative, fresh approaches to solving the problem.

## ENERGETICS

RR: Building and pushing.

CP: Weaving -- and deeply understanding the landscape.

DF: Bubbling up -- and quantum leaps.

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