Conflict Management and Building Group Agreements - October Engagement Chat Recap

Check out these innovative and successful strategies from the October 2024 chat where we discussed ways for neighbors to plan individual projects, collaboratively and overcome conflict in the process.

Self-Governance via Sociocracy. This dynamic self-governance model empowers groups to make decisions collectively, ensuring that everyone's voice is heard and valued. It gives everyone a functional role and helps groups agree on a plan and develop effective strategies for moving forward smoothly. This method fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability, which leads to more engaged and motivated members.

Our Special Guests:

- **Daniela Panetta**, Director of Community Building and Engagement from La Casa Inc. (NM)
- **Carol Bronson,** Resident and Community Engagement in Great Falls (MT)
- **Julie Filapek,** Program Manager at NeighborWorks Green Bay (WI)

Sociocracy Structure. If using the Sociocracy model, a central figure initiates the project and may provide guidance, but execution of the project takes a decentralized approach. The project may involve multiple circles, each responsible for specific tasks and with its own decision-making authority. Unlike traditional hierarchical structures, there are no boards, committees, or external recommendations. Instead, those directly involved in the work make decisions.

To stay coordinated, building connections and communication between circles are essential, typically facilitated by delegates and note-takers. All participatory roles are reviewed and adjusted every six months or as needed, with individuals nominated based on their perceived suitability. Open discussions and evaluations of individual strengths help determine assignments.

Sociocracy operates on a consent-based approach rather than voting or consensus. Instead of requiring unanimous agreement, it focuses on making sure everyone agrees to a decision. This means the group members deem it acceptable for the present time and safe to implement. This approach emphasizes that decisions don't have to be perfect but should be good enough for the current situation and not cause harm. To ensure flexibility and adaptability, each decision is assigned a timeline for review, which allows for adjustments as circumstances change and creates a dynamic and evolving structure.

Productive Discussions:
- Establish clear process and guidelines
- Have one speaker at a time
- Ask people to refrain from interrupting
- Focus on solving the problem and proposing next steps
- Make sure everyone has an opportunity to contribute
- Establish ground rules including good listening , speaker time limits, and being respectful
- Identify the steps to move forward and have groups write up responses

Sociocratic meetings follow a structured format known as rounds. The agenda begins with a check-in, then information relevant to the meeting is shared by all participants. The group consents to the agenda, then discusses individual items. Topics are suggested and decisions are reached during the go-around. In each round, each participant has the opportunity to express their opinion or pass, ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.

Additional Thoughts on Conflict Management and Group Agreements. In addition to the Sociocracy model, guests discussed other strategies for building group agreements and managing conflicts, and identified some tips for success.

Effective community engagement often involves working closely with neighborhood leaders to address issues, including conflict resolution, and it's a good idea to establish an informal process for resolving disputes right from the start. When conflicts arise, such as disagreements on tree trimming along a particular street, having a structured approach will save time and energy and help create a cohesive plan. The first step is to clearly identify the problem, recognizing there may be different perspectives. Engage residents in the conversation through activities like sticky note exercises or [world café](#) to uncover underlying issues and potential solutions.

Having an effective facilitator is key in this situation and could be a neutral third party. Based on community conversations, develop a group agreement to make the process smoother. When reaching out to residents to ask if they will participate, don't forget to mention that neighborhood projects and solutions are often cheaper when people work together.

Tips for Success:
- Start by building relationships with residents
- Reach out to communities within the community such as churches, resident groups, collages, businesses, etc.
- Host neighborhood listening sessions ("Neighbor Nights) to understand neighborhood need
- Use community surveys to mobilize support
- Include local government
- Identify key influencers who can help facilitate engagement and communication

Still, strong leadership is the key to success. Also, strive to also build a relationship with council members and local government representatives and invite them to planning meetings to help ease the conversation if items like street closures, permits, etc. are needed.

Below are some useful tools from the Collaborative Discussion Project:

- ☐ https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/items
- ☐ https://www.sociocracyforall.org/content/
- ☐ https://www.sociocracyforall.org/books/