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Department of Planning

The University of British Columbia
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Date Oct. 4, 2002
This is a study in how a select group of practitioners skilled in leading consensus processes view and do their work. It is also an examination of the diversity and complexity of practice and its alignment (and divergence) with certain theoretical frameworks and principles. The thesis' chief goal is to create a resource that marries some of the theory on consensus decision-making, primarily coming out of land and resource planning bodies in this country, with personal accounts and strategies from people who do this work professionally. In so doing it seeks:

a) to offer hands-on advice for building consensus from experts in the field;
b) to relay areas of commonality among particular practitioners and between selected theory and practice;
c) to provide a glimpse of the "messiness" and complexity of real-life processes; and
d) to give witness to the diversity that exists in practice by highlighting key differences in perspectives and methods encountered in the group.

With this end in sight, the author interviewed 13 consensus-building practitioners using a semi-standardized interview format. Beyond inquiring about their background and expertise, the interviews explored three key aspects of the respondents' practice, namely: their view and application of consensus building principles; the process stages they commonly work through (from initial preparations to implementation); and key techniques they use when facilitating at-the-table discussions. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present the responses to each of these topics woven alongside selected writings on the subjects and the author's own analysis.

On a conceptual level, the theoretical frameworks framing the discussions on principles, processes and techniques were found to hold at least some relevance to practice. In fact, they were for the most part reasonable reflections of the very loose lines of consistency encountered across practitioners. Outside these rough similarities though, how individuals interpreted the concepts and frameworks and how they set about applying them (either consciously or unconsciously) were endlessly complex and diverse. The thesis examines the many differences in perspectives and approaches described by respondents and some contextual, stylistic and perspective-based factors contributing to the complexity and diversity of practice.
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CHAPTER 1

Examining the Theory and Practice of Consensus Decision-Making

So much have I reconstructed from the labyrinth of notes which Balthazar has left me. “To imagine is not necessarily to invent” he says elsewhere, “nor dares one make a claim for omniscience in interpreting people’s actions. One assumes that they have grown out of their feelings as leaves grow out of a branch.” But can one work backwards, deducing the one form from the other? Perhaps a writer could if he were sufficiently brave to cement these apparent gaps in our actions with interpretations of his own to bind them together?

Lawrence Durrell, The Alexandria Quartet (Balthazar)

1.1 Introduction

By coincidence, as I launched into this study I found myself working through book two of Lawrence Durrell’s The Alexandria Quartet. As the book progresses, Darley, the protagonist, is forced to revisit the chronicle of his years in Alexandria and to question his interpretation of events in lieu of his friend Balthazar’s own accounts and comments, which have been scribbled throughout his manuscript. As he struggles to mesh his somewhat different experience with that of Balthazar’s, Darley ponders about the subjectivity of reality, the revelations brought to surface by this combining of experiences, and yet the separateness of their stories as “entities” in themselves because “this is the way they were lived.”

My intrigue with Durrell’s tale has been unusually magnified by my experience in carrying out this study and the parallels I see between Darley’s observations and my reflections when first examining my findings. This study represents my attempts to weave together a number of “stories” on consensus decision-making while also giving testimony to the individuality and diversity across them. My purpose in doing so, and the principal goal behind this thesis, is to create a resource that marries some of the theory on consensus decision-making, primarily coming out of selected land and resource planning bodies in British Columbia and Canada, with personal accounts, advice and strategies.
from people who do this work professionally. With this end in sight, I interviewed 13 practitioners experienced in facilitating and mediating group planning and decision-making about how they view and do their work. The end product (this thesis), reflects no one person’s view in totality, but is a meshing of the various responses I received on a topic with selected theory on the subject and my own analysis.

All those interviewed for the study are skilled in leading consensus-type processes. But, as further discussed in Chapter 2, they come from a range of backgrounds and bring different experiences in terms of the types of group and decision settings they commonly work in. About half of the people interviewed specialize in resource and land use decision-making, which has been a popular area for consensus work in British Columbia in recent years. The remainder work primarily on socio-cultural issues, or cross over into both sectors. Beyond these sectoral differences, the members of the study group also vary in whether their work is predominantly conflict resolution, strategic planning or policy development related, and whether the processes they lead are primarily of long or short duration.

While I purposely sought out consensus building practitioners with an assortment of expertise to gain a wider perspective on this field of practice, the resulting diversity across the group has made giving voice to their range of contributions more challenging. The task has been rendered more formidable still by the wealth of information provided. With over two hundred pages of transcripted notes to glean from — each very rich in insight — it is clear that not everything that was said could be covered in this paper. Ultimately, my choice of what to include and how to weave it together with the literature has been coloured by the key messages I took from the interviews and the story I wish to tell. It is therefore important that my rationale and purpose behind this endeavour be made clear from the outset.

First and foremost, this study is guided by my personal desire to learn more about how consensus-building practitioners view and do their work and some of the commonality and diversity that exists across their experiences and approaches. Having taken various courses that touched upon multistakeholder decision-making, consensus processes and similar themes, I was interested to discover how these processes unfolded in real life, some of the perceived disparities between theory and practice, and key challenges practitioners face as a result. Moreover, as someone entering the planning field, I saw this as a unique opportunity to learn some practical strategies for resolving disputes and assisting groups in decision-making from people who have spent years honing their skills in this area.

Guided by these motivations, my goal for this research can be broken down into four principal objectives.

a) First, rather than seeing this as a theory-building exercise, my intention is to offer useful ideas and advice for facilitating consensus building and adapting strategies to context by combining existing writings on the topic with practical insights and suggestions from people who do this work.
b) Extending on the previous aim, my second objective is to relay some of the commonality of views and approaches that exist between the literature and the professionals I spoke to.

c) Thirdly, I intend to move beyond the discussion of commonalities to give greater witness to the diversity of practice by highlighting some key differences in perspectives and methods I encountered in my interviews.

d) Finally, my fourth objective is to provide a glimpse of the “messiness” and complexity of practice frequently not conveyed in writing.

A principal theme cutting across the above four objectives and ringing throughout my interviews is that there is no set recipe to this work. Just as each individual in this field is unique, so is every decision. Not only do practitioners need to tailor their style and techniques to their character, but to be effective, they must also learn to adapt each process to fit the nature of the group and the decision in question. As one participant in my study noted:

> Even in the course of the discussion, or in the course of the consensus-building exercise, you might use a whole variety of things depending upon what’s happening at the time and need to be able to reach into a kit-bag of experiences and approaches (personal, structured, individual and group) that you know to work under those kinds of circumstances. So it’s an art.... It’s a responsive art form (R11).^1

Like any art form, this ability to marry one’s approach to circumstance, given the endless possible scenarios encountered, is a key aspect of consensus decision-making that — beyond laying out some basic guidelines — is difficult to convey in theory, and is mostly garnered through trial-and-error, observation and common sense. The challenge for those entering this field is therefore to gain sensitivity for the intricacies of a situation and to develop a style, adaptive approach and portfolio of techniques that works for them. While practice is key to building these abilities and excelling at this work, it is my hope that the reflections and insights provided in the following chapters will offer useful ideas and building blocks to support the learning process.

The four remaining sections of this chapter describe the study’s purpose, focus and structure at greater length. I begin the next section by discussing the growing role of consensus decision-making in the public and private sector and reviewing my reasons — as someone entering the planning profession — for choosing to undertake research on

---

^1 To preserve anonymity, study respondents are referred to by number in the thesis text (or by number code from “R1” to “R13” in the references) based on their sequence in the 13 interviews. This particular statement, for example, was made by the eleventh person interviewed. Details on the interview process including an overview of the background and expertise of the people interviewed, the questions asked, and the methods used to analyze, compile and reference the resulting information are provided in Chapter 2.
this topic. Building on this discussion, in Section 1.3, I outline the foundation behind this study's practice-oriented approach, and my rationale for exploring the topic from a facilitator/mediator (or practitioner) perspective. In the fourth part of the chapter, I discuss the meaning of consensus decision-making as it is used in the study and some of the implications of this definition for my research outcomes. Finally, in the closing section, I review the breakdown of the paper's remaining five chapters.

1.2 Why the Interest in Consensus Decision-Making?

The common good cannot be assumed a priori, nor can it be determined by research. It is not a given. The public good is a notion of process; it emerges in the course of planning itself, and its concrete meaning is constantly evolving.


1.2.1 The Transition Towards More Participatory Decision-Making

My interest in consensus decision-making stems from my recognition of the growth of this style of decision-making in “western” governance systems and my appreciation of the need for consensus-building and related skills within the modern-day planning profession. Although the use of consensus decision-making has a long tradition in certain spheres, it is only in the last several decades that it has gained in popularity among governments and planners in Canada and the United States (Davidoff, 1965). Davidoff traces the roots of this shift to the birth of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s and the inner-city resistance against the highly criticized urban renewal initiatives of that period. As he explains, these movements saw public trust in the ability of governments to make fair and unbiased decisions significantly decline as people became progressively aware of the value-laden nature of all decisions, including those aimed at defining and advancing “the common good” (Davidoff, 1965). While these events were among the first most notable signs of the eroding trust in government, Schön (1983: 39) outlines how this growth in public scepticism has continued in later years. He also describes how it has extended beyond government to other forms of professional practice as people have come to recognize the limited ability of so-called “experts” to solve society’s ills with technical know-how alone. In Schön’s words:

Between 1963 and 1982,... both the general public and the professionals have become increasingly aware of the flaws and limitations of the professions.... [T]he professions have suffered a crisis of legitimacy rooted both in their perceived failure to live up to their own norms and in their perceived incapacity to help society achieve its objectives and solve
its problems. Increasingly we have become aware of the importance to actual practice of phenomena — complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict....

The shift in popular opinion described by Davidoff (1965) and Schöns (1983) already a number of years ago now, continues to exist and influence how public decisions are made to this day. The eroding confidence in authority and “expert” judgment has brought with it a demand among the populace and a heightened appreciation among decision-makers of the need to involve impacted groups in decisions affecting them (Hillier, 1998). Within Canada, not only has public involvement increased in emphasis over time, but there has been a gradual shift in how people are consulted and who makes the decisions as well (Dorcey and McDaniels, 1999). Participation lingo like “public meetings” and “stakeholder consultations” have progressively given way to terms like “multi-stakeholder planning,” “shared decision-making” and “consensus building processes” as affected groups take an increasingly active seat at the decision-making table.

Although the call for stakeholder participation has been a common theme in all areas of governance, it has gained particular momentum in resource and land use planning in this country. This is particularly so since the 1986 Brundtland Report on sustainable development, Our Common Future, brought issues of equity and sustainability to the top of the global agenda (CORE, 1994b). Although previous documents and commissions had touched on similar themes, the report put out by the Brundtland Commission succeeded in reaching a much wider audience and focussing world-wide attention on sustainability issues in a way not previously achieved. It reinforced our growing appreciation of the complexity and inter-relatedness of social, economic and ecological systems and the need to consider wider systemic and cumulative impacts in decisions. It raised concern over the dwindling state of the world’s resources and brought increased attention to our inter-dependence at the local, regional and global levels. It highlighted the need to build a collective commitment to managing limited resources. And it stressed the need to give concerned communities a “meaningful voice” in decisions as an important requisite for maintaining local-level commitment and achieving sustainable development over the long term.

Within Canada these challenges have been met in a number of ways including a move towards more participatory decision-making in resource management. The period following the Brundtland Report has seen the formation of a stream of multi-party planning and decision-making forums, ranging from formal round tables to, increasingly, more informal and ad hoc processes, that have made use of consensus-styled decision-making as a means of giving affected groups greater voice in land and resource decisions (Cormick et al., 1996; IRPC, 1993; CORE, 1994a). Building local commitment is only one reason governments and decision-makers in this and other countries have been making the transition towards consensual approaches to managing resources. Another impetus has been the widening prospect of conflict as resources become increasingly stretched and the growing pressure on governments to avert and deal with such disputes in a peaceful manner (Dorcey, 1991a). Others point to the development of what they term intellectual, social and political capital as yet other merits of such processes. They
note the potential of consensus-type initiatives to form networks and relationships between even opposing groups and their ability to transform what people know, how they see the world and their openness to other perspectives (Innes and Booher, 1999).

Yet another advantage of consensus-type processes, particularly in situations where facts and values are under wide debate, is their ability to weave together varying interests and viewpoints and from them devise more innovative and responsive solutions (Cormick et al., 1996; IRPC; 1993; CORE, 1994b; Darling, 1998; Dorcey, 1991b; Innes and Booher, 1999). Writing on agreement in water resource management, Dorcey (1991b) describes how research, in increasing our understanding of social, economic, and biophysical systems, has simultaneously opened our eyes to the many things we do not know about the actual state, complexity, resilience and inter-relationships of these systems. Given these uncertainties, he argues that most resource and land use decisions rely more on scientific judgment and ethical and moral values than on sure science. In many cases, the facts and values that should guide such decisions, and even the true nature of the problem are themselves disputed by different parties and experts, thereby rendering decisions more complicated and political in nature. Dorcey views consensual approaches to decision-making as particularly beneficial in these types of circumstances because of their ability to mesh points of agreement and disagreement and pool technical and experiential knowledge to form more comprehensive understandings of the systems involved.

1.2.2 Consensus Decision-Making and Planning

As noted in the previous section, as the demand for public participation in decisions has grown and governments have shifted towards more consensual approaches to decision-making, planning, as a profession on the interface between government and civil society, has also undergone a major shift. Gone are the days of the master plans when as Friedmann (1989) states “planners thought that making choices for others [was] simply the privilege of those having technical knowledge.” In fact, as Witty (1998) explains, globalization, population growth, rapid urbanization, and resource depletion have placed planners in the centre of a tug-of-war of obligations. Professionals in this field are increasingly finding themselves stretched between responding and “adapting to global economic trends” in order to keep economies afloat, dealing with the day-to-day needs of the communities they serve, and responding to the public’s desire to exert control over the changes affecting them. All the while, they must also work to balance the needs of an increasingly diverse and divergent group of interests. These changes are no longer restricted to resource and land use issues either, but have extended into many other realms of public and civil society, most notably: health care (R7; R12), human rights (R7), education (R9) and business (R4).

Bureaucratically, planners are also facing changes in how they do their work as sectoral conflicts and the need for more regionally responsive planning demand a greater federation and decentralization of responsibilities, more inter-sectoral decision-making, and the integration of science and politics (Dorcey, 1991b). As part of this shift, planners
are having to collaborate more across government departments to address what Gertler (1995: 15) describes as “the mismatch between a bureaucracy organized by function, and the need for coordinated problem-solving and action across functions.” To contend with these changes, planners are making use of an expanding set of interpersonal and communication skills. In fact, in a survey of 133 members of the Canadian Institute of Planners, Witty (1998: 107-109) found that the planners surveyed tended to use more “soft tools” associated with “sorting out decisions in the public realm” over traditional design and technical skills. Based on his findings, for example, the six most common tools and processes used by respondents — from the most to least frequent — were: public involvement (64%), word processing (53%), conflict resolution (47%), site planning (44%), facilitation (40%) and shared decision-making (39%). These were followed by skills such as urban design (33%), financial analysis (31%), graphics (27%), public advocacy (26%), sustainable development techniques (25%), environmental and social impact assessment (17%), Geographic Information Systems (17%), Computer Aided Design (14%) and architectural design (11%). Witty’s findings highlight in a very tangible way the immense role of group process and interactive skills within the contemporary planning field. The high ratings accorded to conflict resolution, facilitation and shared decision-making techniques also reflect the shift towards more consensual approaches to problem-solving and decision-making in this era and the importance of such skills, not only for those specializing in facilitation and mediation, but for all planners.

The value of consensual approaches to dispute resolution and decision-making goes beyond a planner’s interaction with the outside world as well. One need only read through books on organizational management, team building and even marital relations to realize that these skills can be applied in every facet of life (Kolb and Associates, 1994; Rees, 1991; Doyle; 1996; Harvey and Drolet, 1994). In the area of management, for example, there is growing recognition that authoritative and coercive management styles discourage the development of productive and loyal employees (Rees, 1991). This has led to the development of new styles of management that encourage greater employee participation, consensus building, and the formation of decision-making work teams under the premise that people support what they help create. The following statement by Rees (1991: 1) describes the implications of this shift in management thinking for managers and leaders alike:

> The increased focus on teams and employee participation requires a new leadership style and some new leadership skills. Employee participation requires leaders to be more facilitative and less controlling, to direct less and empower more. Participative leaders must know how to involve others, build consensus, and get commitment from those they lead. They must act as facilitators, helping others solve problems and make decisions.

In short, whether one is leading a strategic planning exercise, dealing with conflicts between various resource users, overseeing a project, managing an office, working as part of a team, or resolving a disagreement with a colleague, consensus building is a skill any
planner can benefit from. Such a skill can be of immense value in enhancing communication and bringing about decisions in productive and peaceful manner. It can also lead to more positive relations, enhanced creativity, and a more comprehensive understanding of issues for all involved.

1.3 Why Look at Practice?

I have become convinced that universities are not devoted to the production and distribution of fundamental knowledge in general. They are institutions committed, for the most part, to a particular epistemology, a view of knowledge that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry.

Schön, 1983: vii

Beyond being about consensus decision-making — both as a facet of planning and as a field of expertise in itself — this research is also a study in how people view and do their work in real-life. My interest in looking at practice and the approach I take in this study are largely inspired by the work of communicative action theorists. Over the last two decades, an increasing number of authors have raised issue with the apparent dissonance between theory and practice within a variety of professional fields and the need for works more attuned to the learning needs of would-be practitioners. (Schön, 1983; De Neufville, 1983; Forester, 1989; Healey, 1992; Innes; 1995; Witty; 1995; Primack, 1999). Among these professions, traditional planning theory has been particularly targeted for its lack of application to practice.

One writer to look at the limitations of contemporary planning theory is Judith Innes (formerly De Neufville). In her 1995 article, for example, Innes describes how traditional planning literature of the late 1960s and early 1970s has focused much of its discussion on “how planning could or should be” rather than how planning is actually carried out. In her view, this emphasis on rule making over the study of “what planners do and how” has encouraged theorists to limit their attention to narrow hypotheses and thereby neglect to understand the complex functioning of whole systems. It has also led them to look down on more intuitive and holistic ways-of-knowing that planners depend on in their work and to overlook the impact of context on what planners do. De Neufville (1983) further asserts that while it is important for planning to have a firm philosophical base, it is also essential that this base be appropriate to the task of planning and that it provide the grounding necessary to link knowledge to action. More and more theory is falling short of making this link as planning shifts from being a profession based in technical expertise to one based in social interaction and complex communicative processes. This has led to growing frustration among people entering this field, who not only discover themselves ill prepared for their new roles, but who also find their expectations of working in “plan making” and policy analysis unreflective of what most of them eventually do — which, according to Baum (1980) and De Neufville (1983), is to operate as negotiators and bureaucrats.
As a way of addressing the shortcomings of traditional planning theory, in more recent years a number of planning researchers have shifted their attention to a new form of theory grounded in practice (Forester; 1989; Innes, 1995; Hillier, 1998; Healey, 1992). These “communicative action theorists,” as they are termed, seek to develop theories that, among other things, help students become “reflective, creative” and adaptive practitioners (Innes, 1995). They also seek to offer learners “lenses” through which to understand how planning works and to present them with frameworks to guide their future practice. In order to do this, communicative action theorists focus on what planners do rather than what planning should be. They make efforts to look at the messy aspects of practice that are not easily compartmentalized, and in so doing are less intent on rule setting. They also centre their attention on specific practitioners rather than abstract ones. Beyond this, and as Innes (1995:184) further explains: “[t]hey rely more on qualitative, interpretive inquiry than on logical deductive analysis, and they seek to understand the unique and the contextual, rather than make general propositions.”

Although the work of communicative action theorists is based largely in qualitative research, it is not linked to any specific research model. Rather, a broad variety of qualitative research techniques, ranging anywhere from interviews to field studies, are being used according to the research purpose and need. While initial communicative action research has centred on planning practice, this style of inquiry is now also being used in the study of other professions. Kolb and Associates (1994: xiii), for example, use a mix of participant observation and interview techniques to study the work of a broad range of mediators with the aim of “animating the mediation process” so “others can appreciate and learn from it.” In a similar way, I see tremendous value in a more directed look at the practice of consensus decision-making. In the past decade there has been a wide variety of useful literature and guidebooks on consensus building and related topics coming out of various forums in this country. What I aim to do in this paper is colour this theory with practitioner accounts of how they perceive and carry out their work and how they see this theory transpiring in real life.

In conducting my research, I have chosen to restrict my choice of respondents to individuals with a reputation as mediators and facilitators for three reasons. For one, because I wished to focus on the third party perspective in the decision-making process, it made sense to select individuals who had developed some expertise in this area. Secondly, because those I interviewed are known at least in closer circles for their work in this field, it was easier to identify participants with considerable experience to speak from. Thirdly, given this is a central part of what they do, most respondents have given considerable thought to the subject, have gained firsthand insights into what works and what does not, and in the process have endeavoured to hone their skills, approaches and techniques in this area. The views, experiences and ideas that they recount as experts in this field offer useful food-for-thought for anyone interested in conflict resolution, consensus building and group decision-making. While the product is not representative of any sample group or single respondent, and does not set out rules or recipes, it is something that is rich in insights and serves as a forum for reflection and ideas. Much as Reardon et al. (1993: 70) state in describing their own communicative action study:
We learn from these accounts in the ways we learn from novels and ethnographic work, not as we learn from controlled studies. We learn from these accounts practically, because they inform our practical judgment — in many of the ways we learn from friends, if not from technical experts.

1.4 Defining Consensus Decision-Making

1.4.1 Definition Used in this Study

Throughout this paper, I define both “consensus decision-making” and “consensus process” as a process where two or more parties work together to develop a common and mutually acceptable outcome to a shared objective or problem. I also frequently use “consensus building” as a close substitute for these terms and take it to mean the act of working through or leading such a process. A search through materials on planning, decision-making, dispute resolution and facilitation might unearth a variety of other terms that share similar meanings. Examples of the more common ones include: principled negotiation (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991), shared decision-making (CORE,1994a/b; Darling, 1998), collaborative processes, or simply “collaboration” (Healey, 1997; Gray, 1989; Kofinas and Griggs, 1996; London, 1995). These selected terms are further defined in the textbox below.

Box 1. Definition of Commonly Decision-Making Terms

Consensus decision-making / consensus process: A process where two or more parties work together to develop a common and mutually acceptable outcome to a shared objective or problem.

Shared decision-making: A consensus-based approach to public consultation, decision-making and dispute resolution in which those with authority to make a decision and those who will be affected by that decision are jointly empowered to seek an outcome that accommodates the interests of all concerned (adapted from CORE 1994b; Darling, 1998).

Principled negotiation: An approach to group decision-making and dispute resolution first made popular by Fisher and Ury in their 1981 book Getting to Yes. It is characterized by face-to-face dialogue and the search for win-win solutions. As part of this approach, participants are led through a series of steps aimed at identifying interests (not positions), developing common objectives and criteria for selecting among solutions, elaborating alternatives for mutual gain, and jointly choosing among them (Fisher and Ury, 1981).

Collaboration / collaborative process: A process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible (Gray, 1989: 5).
In the case of some of the decision-making terms in Box 1, the meanings overlap quite closely and they might even be used interchangeably (as with consensus decision-making and consensus building). In other cases, one term might only touch on certain aspects of another or be cradled within it. Indeed, deciphering the discrete nuances among these and similar terminology and mapping out the relationships across them can prove to be a challenge. As one participant duly noted, “it’s a very murky area for precise definition” (R11). Appendix 1 discusses the relationship among the above terms at greater length, providing a rough illustration of the overlap and distinction across them.

1.4.2 Implications of Definition for Study Results

Mapping how the terms discussed above fit together is even less straightforward because the definitions often vary across publications and disciplines. The two definitions of shared decision-making noted in Box 2 are just one example of the different meanings that can be given to a particular term. While both definitions are accurate and share key similarities, they vary in a couple of ways largely due to the different mandates of the defining agencies and the purposes behind their respective publications.

Box 2. Two Alternative Definitions of Shared Decision-making

Shared decision-making is a consensus-based approach to dispute resolution in which those with authority to make a decision and those who will be affected by that decision are jointly empowered to seek an outcome that accommodates the interests of all concerned.

Dispute Resolution Office, BC Ministry of Attorney General (Darling, 1998: 29)

Shared decision-making: An approach to public participation in decision-making (especially land use planning) in which, on a certain set of issues for a defined period of time, those with authority to make a decision and those affected by that decision are empowered jointly to seek an outcome that accommodates, rather than compromises, the interests of all concerned.

Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE, 1994b; Brown, 1996)

In its definition, the British Columbia Dispute Resolution Office (DRO) sees the use of a consensus-based approach as an integral part of shared decision-making. Given the DRO’s stated objective is to “raise awareness and support alternative dispute resolution training” (Darling, 1998: 1), they have also chosen to approach the topic from a dispute resolution perspective, and even highlight their restricted take on the term in their publication. This contrasts with the Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE) definition where shared decision-making is extended to include wider decision-making and strategic planning purposes beyond dispute resolution, and where consensus-based approaches (or consensus), while perhaps implicitly sought, are not explicitly required. Within historical CORE processes, shared decision-making was seen as a mechanism for assisting government officials in elaborating more participatory and fairer decisions and, in turn, more sustainable and publicly acceptable land use policies. But it was not intended to replace the Government’s traditional decision-making role, particularly given the complexity of the land use issues under consideration, the time constraints involved, and the recognition that consensus might not be achieved on all issues.
In much the same way, differences in purpose and meaning exist between the definition of consensus decision-making or consensus process adopted in this paper and that used in other publications. Possibly the most popular definition of consensus process comes from the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) in its highly regarded publication, Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Guiding Principles. As NRTEE defines it:

A consensus process is one in which all those who have a stake in the outcome aim to reach agreement on actions and outcomes that resolve or advance issues related to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. In a consensus process, participants work together to design a process that maximizes their ability to resolve their differences. Although they may not agree with all aspects of the agreement, consensus is reached if all participants are willing to live with the total package.... A consensus process provides an opportunity for participants to work together as equals to realize acceptable actions or outcomes without imposing the views or authority of one group over another (NRTEE, 1993: 6).

While there are a number of parallels between the NRTEE definition and that used in this paper, the NRTEE version is clearly more elaborate and specific in meaning. Among other things, the Round Table definition stresses the involvement of “all those with a stake in an outcome.” It puts more emphasis on sustainability as an element of resolutions. It also extends its meaning to include details about the process used, the meaning of consensus (notably that all participants are willing to live with the total package), and the need for participants “to work together as equals.” As in the NRTEE version, the term “consensus” used in this study is generally taken to mean that all parties agree they can live with the outcome. But, as further discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, how this definition is interpreted and how it translates in practice must ultimately be decided and clarified by the parties involved.

While many of the other elements described by NRTEE are implicitly sought in the definition I use, they are not explicitly required. This again is a reflection of the different intents behind their publication and this thesis. Rather than create a set of guiding principles, the purpose of this study is to offer someone who might be involved in consensus-based processes a view of the breadth of situations they might encounter, whether formal or informal, short-term or long-term, private or public sector. By using a less precise, more elastic definition I open the analysis to this wider range of circumstances. Even in these looser contexts however, there exist several elements of consensus decision-making that remain consistent throughout, namely: (i) the emphasis on building common understanding and solutions; and the need: (ii) for everyone’s voice to be heard, (iii) for the process to be deemed fair, and (iv) for everyone in the group to be in agreement with the final decision, even if it is to deal with the matter some other way.
My decision to broaden my definition from that used by NRTEE and include a wider breadth of consensus-seeking processes has some implications for my research results. For one, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, the respondents in my study specialize in everything from land use and natural resource related issues, to more social and community-type processes. These in turn include activities as far ranging as mediating bi-party and multi-party conflicts, facilitating strategic planning or policy development processes, or assisting community and corporate groups to work through internal problems. The diversity in experience among the respondents has particular implications for discussions on principles (Chapter 3), and to a lesser degree, on the process stages (Chapter 4). It is important to keep in mind that the list of principles that I used as a reference in the interviews was compiled from materials, such as the NRTEE publication, which define consensus decision-making in a much more formal way. While several of the respondents are regularly involved in such initiatives, as one person explained, and several others indicated, these types of processes tend to be "the exception rather than the rule" in the work that many practitioners do (R10). The range in participant comments regarding the principles they were shown in the interviews, as well as the process and steps they work through, are a reflection of this wide spectrum of practitioner experiences and the opening up of the study to include less defined, less formalized and more ad hoc processes.

1.5 Breakdown of Remaining Chapters

The remainder of this study is divided into five chapters that — aside from Chapter 2 on methods — each address a different aspect of consensus decision-making. Given this subject specific breakdown, rather than have separate literature review and analysis chapters, the information obtained from primary and secondary sources is integrated together based on the specific chapter topics. Given a key intent of this study is to convey the experience and views of practitioners as accurately as possible, in many instances, I also illustrate key points with quotes from those interviewed.

Chapter 2 reviews the methods used in researching and compiling the contents of each chapter to set my analysis in context. It includes a brief discussion of qualitative research guiding my methodology and the semi-standardized interview format used in this study. This is followed by a description of my interview process including the types of questions asked, the strategy behind my questions, the background and expertise of the respondents, and my observations in conducting the interviews. The closing section of Chapter 2 outlines the process used in analyzing and presenting the results and the principal streams of literature that inform the discussion.

Despite the growing use of consensus-based processes in both the public and private domain, there are situations where other methods of decision-making are more effective.

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3 This is particularly true for the three thematic chapters (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) where the bulk of my findings are presented and discussed.
and appropriate. Given each method has its place in the range of decision settings, it is useful to understand the conditions and principles most conducive to successful consensus agreements before drilling further. Chapter 3 uses a list of guiding principles developed by the NRTEE (1993) as a backdrop for discussing the elements for successful consensus building. Beyond the NRTEE list, most respondents also highlighted a number of personal tenets more specific to their roles as process facilitators and mediators, as well as skills and traits they consider important in their work. I elaborate on these in the latter part of the chapter.

Chapter 4 moves beyond the discussion of principles to examine the various stages consensus decision-making practitioners work through when building agreement — beginning with the initial preparatory stage and progressing through to the implementation of outcomes. In the latter part of the chapter, I outline contextual factors that might affect a practitioner’s approach using selected examples from the interviews. Although the factors and examples are limited to those raised by respondents, they depict some of the adaptive nature of this work and some of the elements considered when tailoring methods to circumstance.

The fifth chapter of this thesis builds on earlier discussions by taking a closer look at the strategies, techniques and tools used by respondents when facilitating at-the-table sessions. Finally, the concluding chapter highlights key themes coming out of my research and offers recommendations for future inquiry. I close by reviewing the principal lessons I take from this study and some implications for planners and would-be practitioners.
CHAPTER 2

Research Methods

This chapter reviews the methods used in researching and compiling the contents of this thesis to set my analysis in context. As discussed in Chapter 1, the study is guided by the work of communicative action theorists, which in turn is largely founded on qualitative research methods. Prior to discussing my study methods in greater detail, in the first part of this chapter I review some of the qualitative research principles guiding my research, general features of semi-standardized interviews — the qualitative research method used in this thesis — and my general interview strategy and questions. Section 2.2 describes my interview process, including some of my personal observations from the process and a general description of the study participants. In the closing section, I outline the strategy used in analyzing and presenting the interview data and the principal streams of literature informing my analysis.

2.1 Research Methods Used in This Study

2.1.1 How the Thesis is Informed by Qualitative Research

This thesis uses qualitative research and analysis techniques to mesh together selected theory on consensus decision-making with personal insights from 13 real-life practitioners. Among its guiding traits qualitative research — and the epistemology of phenomenology from which it stems — seeks to understand social phenomena as it is experienced, perceived and explained by the individual or group under study\(^4\). It is most suited to this type of communicative action inquiry precisely because, rather than trying to keep results free of subjective biases (as is the case with quantitative research), qualitative research actually seeks to bring out and understand these biases. Guided by the same motivations, this study seeks to uncover the different ways a select group of practitioners view and do their work. It is interested in the range of perspectives they bring, rather than possible hard facts they might generate. This study is not interested in theory-building. Rather, it aims to blend theory with personal accounts to paint a more complete picture of practice.

The methods used in qualitative research are diverse and adaptive and researchers have considerable freedom to choose and adjust them as they need (Flick, 1998). Bogdan and Taylor (1998) explain that this choice in methods is as much based on intuition and judgment as on prescribed approaches. In the case of this study, I opted to conduct individual interviews using a semi-standardized interview format to collect my primary data because it seemed the most direct way of hearing what practitioners had to say about existing theories and their own practice. Among its principal traits, the semi-standardized interview involves the use of a guiding set of questions or topics to direct the flow of discussion, mixed with unscheduled questions prompted by the respondent's answers. While the guiding questions remain more or less consistent throughout all interviews, the unscheduled questions tend to vary. The guiding questions used in this study are further discussed in the next section.

To avoid inadvertently steering respondents or directing the analysis to get desired results, qualitative researchers are advised to use checks and balances to verify their findings. The most popular means of doing this is "triangulation." It involves combining several "lines of sight" on a research issue. Taking this advice in consideration, in carrying out this study, I made use of three forms of triangulation. First, in my preparatory readings, I examined aspects of consensus decision-making as they are discussed in different streams of literature. These include: consensus-related literature from the fields of management, facilitation, mediation, conflict resolution, planning and political science, and consensus decision-making and strategic land use planning documents coming out of various provincial and federal round tables and forums (such as CORE, NRTEE and the British Columbia land use planning initiatives). Secondly, and as further discussed in section 2.2.2, in selecting participants for the study, I identified a mix of individuals coming from a range of professional backgrounds and possessing different expertise as far as the types of decision contexts they commonly work in.

As a third measure, I also integrated Berg's four recommended question types among my interview questions to obtain more balanced findings (Berg, 1995). The bulk of my interview consisted of essential questions, or questions that were central to the study. In addition, I also made regular use of extra questions — questions that are roughly the same as the "essential" ones (but phrased differently) — to check for influences of wording changes and to confirm the reliability and consistency of responses. Beyond these two dominant question-types, I also included some throw-away questions, particularly in the opening and closing sections of the interview, to develop a rapport with the respondents and to draw out a more complete story. Lastly, I used probing questions to obtain more information on some of the points made.

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5 Common methods include: focus groups, personal interviews, participant observation, photographic techniques (including videos), historical analysis, textual analysis, ethnographic research and sociometry. Most qualitative methods also contain a spectrum of controlled and uncontrolled techniques (Berg, 1995).

6 There exist several forms, including: (i) data triangulation where various data sources are used (either over time, through space or across various types of participants); (ii) investigator triangulation where multiple researchers are involved; (iii) theory triangulation where various theoretical perspectives inform the process; and (iv) methodological triangulation where two or more methods are used (such as interviews and participant observation), or where various angles might be taken within one specific method (such as the triangulation of interview questions).
2.1.2 Interview Questions

The scheduled list of questions guiding my interviews covered five broad topics. These included:

(a) the respondent’s background and area of focus;
(b) their view of decision-making principles presented in the literature and guiding their work;
(c) their broad strategies and approaches when working with groups;
(d) the degree to which their approach and techniques vary with context; and
(e) the key differences they see between writings on this work and practice.

The core (or "essential") questions associated with each of these five topics are noted below. A more complete interview schedule is provided in Appendix 2.

(a) Questions relating to respondent’s background and area of expertise:
In order to build a rapport with respondents and get a view of the differences among them, the first series of questions delved into the individual’s background, training, and style. Respondents were also asked to outline what led them into consensus-type work and the types of processes they were commonly involved in. Essential questions in this section included:

• What is your background and training?
• How did you become involved in this work?
• What do you see as the distinction between facilitation and mediation? And how would you characterize your style?
• What types of consensus processes have you been involved in?

(b) Questions associated with the principles of consensus decision-making:
The second series of questions looked more closely at respondent views on the principles of consensus decision-making. To facilitate this discussion, the respondents were shown a list of consensus building principles compiled from various sources (shown in Appendix 3). They were then asked to indicate which principles they found most important, which they deemed most difficult to achieve, and the reasons behind their choices. The respondents were also encouraged to expand on the list if they felt any principles were missing. Key questions included:

• What principles of consensus decision-making (from those listed or other principles) have you found most difficult to achieve in practice and why?
• If you were to draft your own list, what principles do you think are most essential to achieve successful agreements?
• Are there any principles that you would add to this list?

(c) Questions related to the decision-making process
The third series of questions focused more specifically on how respondents worked with groups. This included a look at the standard steps respondents lead groups through when working towards an agreement; some of the facilitation techniques they
used, common problems they encountered; and how they dealt with these challenges.

Essential questions in this section included:

• If you were to describe the consensus decision-making process going from preliminary stages to the actual implementation, how would you describe it?
• Once “at the decision-making table,” what steps do you lead a group through?
• Can you give examples of facilitation techniques that you would use in each step?
• Can you give examples of the most common problems you encounter when facilitating consensus processes and how you have dealt with them?

(d) Questions associated with the adaptation of strategies to context
A fourth series of questions examined the degree to which the approach used by respondents varied across contexts, and things they considered when deciding how to proceed. Questions associated with this topic included:

• Do you generally use the same approach and techniques in all processes you work in?
• If not, can you give several examples of how your approach might vary and why?
• What key factors do you consider when deciding what approach and techniques to use?

(e) Closing questions
Finally, the closing set of questions looked at perceived differences between theory and practice and invited closing comments. Essential questions included:

• If you could highlight a couple of things, what do you feel are the biggest disparities between the theory of consensus decision-making and what occurs in practice?
• Do you have any questions or closing comments?

While I made efforts to cover all essential questions consistently in every interview, the remainder of the questions in Appendix 2 were loosely followed and served as prompts when points were not addressed, or I wished to crosscheck information. As previously mentioned, this study followed a semi-standardized format, so I also expanded my questions beyond what is listed, based on the respondent’s specific expertise, angle on a topic, and statements.

2.2 Interview Process and Participants

2.2.1 Participant Selection Process

As previously noted, the participants in this study were selected from people who have acted as facilitators or mediators of consensus-based processes. Most are involved in this type of work as private consultants, although several work as government employees, or do a mix of public and independent work. They were identified using purposive sampling
techniques and, more specifically intensity sampling, based on their known expertise leading consensus decision-making processes. Eight of the 13 respondents were identified by chain sampling in consultation with Professor Tony Dorsey at the University of British Columbia, who has been involved in a number of multistakeholder processes in this Province and has many links to the facilitation and mediation community. Four of the remaining five participants were suggested by other respondents. The final respondent was recommended by a practising planner with whom I discussed my research.

As touched on in Chapter 1 and further discussed in Section 2.3.3, the majority of those interviewed are primarily involved in resource and land use related decision-making — which has been a popular area for consensus work in British Columbia in recent years. To gain a wider perspective on this field of expertise, however, I also identified several participants who work predominantly on social and cultural issues, including adult educators and people with a community development background. Given all interviews were conducted in person, another selection criterion was proximity to Vancouver. Of the final group of 13 respondents, nine are based in the Greater Vancouver area. The remaining four are from Vancouver Island or the nearby Gulf Islands. As well, I sought to have a mix of men and women in the group, which eventually consisted of eight men and five women. Although I had hoped for wider cultural representation, only two respondents were of non-European heritage. They included a First Nations leader and one participant originally from the Philippines.

### 2.2.2 Interview Process and Personal Impressions

All interviews were carried out in a seven-week period from June 11 to August 3rd, 1999. Study participants were first contacted in writing. I then followed up with a telephone call several days later. Of the people contacted, all were available for an interview except one, who was away during most of my interview period and also lived a considerable distance from Vancouver, thereby making a meeting difficult.

One of my first introductions to the realities of facilitation and mediation work came in scheduling interviews. A process I first expected to complete in a matter of two or three weeks soon stretched to over twice that period to accommodate the heavy travel schedules of most participants. Of the 13 interviews, ten were scheduled around the participants’ return from a business trip. A number of respondents also had trips lined up shortly following the interview. Despite their obviously busy schedules, my request for a rather lengthy interview was received with surprising enthusiasm with many going out of

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7 With purposive sampling, subjects are selected because of their ability to provide information on a specific topic.

8 In the case of intensity sampling, subjects are identified because they strongly manifest the phenomenon under study (in this case, they have extensive experience in leading consensus decision-making processes).

9 With chain sampling subjects are identified through individuals who know what cases are information-rich or good interview subjects on the topic.
their way to make time to meet and even chauffeur me to and from less accessible locations.

The interviews themselves varied in length from one hour to 95 minutes, with most lasting about 85 minutes. Nine interviews were conducted at people’s offices. One was done at a participant’s home. The final three were carried out in restaurants, and in one unique case, on a ferry.

If I were to list my three chief impressions of the interviews, they would be: the approachability and frankness of those I spoke to; the difficulty some had slotting their practice into “boxes”; and the emphasis respondents put on personal philosophies, motivations and attitudes over methods and skills. Going into the study, I had concerns that participants would avoid talking about less positive and successful aspects of their work. Unfortunately, due to time limitations, I was not able to crosscheck information with in-field observations of practitioners in action\(^\text{10}\). This notwithstanding, I found the respondents I interviewed to be very approachable, introspective and unexpectedly up front about their challenges, shortcomings and less successful moments. In only two cases did I leave the interview feeling that some of the challenges and limitations of consensus decision-making were perhaps glossed over. But even in these two instances, my doubt was restricted to only small segments of the interviews.

A second thing that struck me was the difficulty many participants had in systematically dissecting and simplifying what they do given the situation-specific and intuitive character of their work. The phrase, “it depends on the context” recurred repeatedly in every interview, particularly when discussing the stages of decision-making and the facilitation strategies and techniques used therein. The dynamic and ever-changing nature of this work is one of the more difficult things to convey in words. By interspersing my discussion in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 with participant statements on these and other aspects of practice, I hope to illustrate in their words some of the complexity involved.

Finally, a last thing that impressed me in the interviews was the great weight attributed to personal character, philosophies, motivations and worldviews over tools and techniques. While I went into the study with a strong methodological slant and focused on learning about practical tools, techniques and steps practitioners use in real life, most respondents downplayed this side of practice. They stressed that methods are only as good as the character, attitude, perceptiveness and judgment of the person applying them and that adeptness with techniques is not necessarily a requisite, nor a guarantee for success. They further noted that there is no distinguishing style or personality among those who excel in this profession (R1; R6; R4; R12). In fact, as will be shown in later chapters, there exists considerable difference in how practitioners perceive and do their work.

\(^{10}\) In a similar study of mediators that involved a combination of one-on-one interviews and participant observation, Kolb and Associates (1994) found that individuals, when observed in practice, did not always conduct themselves as they described in their interviews. While this type of in-field observation is beyond the scope of this research, it would be an area worthy of future study.

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Chapter 2 – Research Methods

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2.2.3 More Detailed Description of Participants

The mediation and facilitation community in British Columbia is relatively small. In the area of resource and land use planning, in particular, it is very much a situation where “everyone knows everyone.” To encourage greater openness among those I interviewed, I assured their full anonymity. I do not mention participants by name. Instead, when referencing individuals, I identify them with a number from “1” to “13” (or a number code from “R1” to “R13” in the references) based on their sequence in the 13 interviews.

The table in Appendix 4 provides an overview of the training, background and expertise of each of the 13 study participants. More specifically, the four columns in the table outline: (a) their academic background, (b) general mediation and facilitation type training they received, (c) previous work and informal training that contributed to their consensus decision-making skills, and (d) the types of consensus-based processes they are commonly involved in. Key points from the table are summarized below to give an overview of the group’s composition.

(a) Academic training

Among those interviewed four have academic training in resource management or the biophysical sciences, three come from a law background, two have planning degrees, and three have degrees in a adult education or community development related fields. One of the participants has no post-secondary education but has a wealth of real-life training acquired from informal teachings from elders, from her environment, and from her experience as a community and First Nations leader. The length of experience in the group, based on time after the completion of their studies, ranges from over 25 years (for four respondents), to approximately ten years (for another four respondents). The remaining five respondents have between ten and 25 years of experience in the field.

(b) Formal Mediation, Facilitation or Related Training

Six of the people interviewed have received extensive training in facilitation, mediation, conflict resolution or related areas and offer training in this field outside of their hands-on work. Four other participants have taken the odd course in facilitation, mediation, negotiation, conflict resolution, leadership or similar areas, in most cases as part of their academic degrees. Two respondents noted that they had no formal consensus-type training. This question was not raised in one of the interviews, so I am missing this information for this individual.

(c) Previous Work and Informal Training

As can be expected, the participants brought a wide range of experience to their facilitation and mediation work. As well, many continue to be involved in training, education, and other professional initiatives in the area of service provision, planning.

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11To preserve the respondents’ anonymity, their information is presented in random order in the table. The sequence does not correspond with that of the interviews or the number used to reference each respondent’s comments in the following chapters.
and resource management. What prompted them to become involved in consensus decision-making processes and to take on a greater facilitation and mediation role varies widely across the group and is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss at length. A general summary is provided in Appendix 4 (see column 3).

(d) Type of Consensus Processes Commonly Involved In
In reviewing respondent descriptions of the processes they lead, I noted three principal lines their experiences can be divided along. First, their experiences can be broken down based on their sectoral focus. In this case, of the 13 participants, six are primarily or strictly involved in resource-based issues, two are strictly involved in social issues, and the remaining five work in a range of work transecting both sectors. As would be expected, those with a science and environmental background are mostly involved in resource and land use issues, while those with an education background have a more social orientation. Outside of these two trends, the participants from other academic streams showed no fixed tendency.

A second line of distinction relates to the duration of processes they lead. While all respondents are involved in processes of mixed length to some extent, two of the group work almost exclusively in longer-running processes (extending one or more years), while another six are primarily involved in shorter-term initiatives generally lasting a series of months or less. The remaining five spread their work over both short and long-term processes.

Thirdly, the individuals in the study group vary in whether they have a preference for agreement building or conflict resolution type work. While all respondents work in both decision settings to some degree, and most do some mix of the two in most of the initiatives they lead, a couple of individuals said they preferred conflict resolution-type situations, where emotions often run high. Another individual stressed that her strength lies in facilitating team and agreement building and that she is less interested in work where she is strictly there to mediate a conflict.

2.3 Data Analysis and Presentation

2.3.1 Methods Used to Compile and Analyze Interview Results
All interviews carried out in this study were recorded on audiocassette to provide a more accurate record of what was said and to reduce the need for note taking. These recordings were then transcribed in full and, unless requested otherwise, participants were sent a copy of their transcript for review. In two instances, the participants followed up with brief messages containing additional information or minor clarifications about points made in the interviews.
Once complete, the content of each interview transcript was examined using context and discourse analysis techniques and thematically coded based on the 11 themes listed below.

1) Participant’s background, skills and training — including key resources and mentors
2) Types of processes they have been involved in
3) Participant’s personal style
4) The difference and similarities between mediation, facilitation and related fields
5) The principles of decision-making and facilitation
6) The processes and stages of decision-making
7) Facilitation techniques used
8) Challenges, problems and disasters encountered in their work
9) Adapting approach and techniques to context
10) The pros and cons of doing this work
11) The biggest disparities between theory and practice

The coded material from each interview was then sorted and put into separate documents (or thematic files), which eventually contained comments from all participants on one of the 11 topics listed. To keep track of who said what, reference tags corresponding to the respondent’s sequence in my 13 interviews were added to all statements before assembling them into the files. Once grouped, the contents of many of these thematic files were themselves sub-coded into sub-categories or themes. For example, in the case of the file on Principles (theme 5), the statements were further broken down into 15 categories. The first 13 categories corresponded with the 13 principles provided in the sample list given to respondents and shown in Appendix 3. The two remaining subgroups represented (a) additional principles not included in the sample list and (b) blanket comments about the role of principles in general and the list they were shown.

The 11 thematic files, once compiled and sub-coded, have been used in two separate ways in the development of this paper. A number of the files make up the core of specific chapters. For example, information on participant backgrounds, training and process types (themes 1 and 2) are summarized in this chapter and in the table found in Appendix 4. Study findings associated with the principles of consensus building (theme 5) are primarily discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 of this paper examines what was said about processes and stages of decision-making (theme 6) and considerations for adapting approaches to context (theme 9). Likewise, Chapter 5 looks at what was said about facilitation techniques (themes 7). The remaining thematic files are not tied to any one chapter, but are used to inform my discussions and analysis at various points throughout the paper.

2.3.2 Streams of Literature Informing My Analysis

As mentioned in the introduction, rather than have a separate literature review chapter, I have chosen to integrate information from primary and secondary sources into each chapter based on the topic in question. Therefore, the references and streams of literature used vary depending on the chapter. For example, in the next chapter on Principles, I
base much of my discussion on the principles of consensus building identified by the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE, 1993). These principles were developed through an extensive multi-year process involving over 100 people with experience as participants, practitioners and convenors of multi-party processes (NRTEE, 1993; Cormick et al., 1996). The ten principles presented in their materials represent the product of this group’s deliberations, and was itself derived by consensus.

In Chapter 4, I rely on literature from a range of decision-making and resource planning forums (including NRTEE, CORE and the British Columbia Land Resource Management Planning initiatives) to inform my analysis on the process and stages of consensus decision-making. I also refer to various publications on negotiation and mediation. Finally, in Chapter 5, I draw on more practice-based or “how to” materials — particularly in the area of facilitation — to expand on selected methods and techniques identified by participants.

2.4 Conclusion

This is a study in how a select group of mediators and facilitators skilled in leading consensus processes view and do their work. It is also an examination of the diversity and complexity of practice and its alignment (and divergence) with theory. As part of the preparation for this thesis, I interviewed 13 consensus-building practitioners using a semi-standardized interview format. My questions inquired into four key areas of their experience, namely: (a) their background, training and particular expertise in this field, (b) their view of the principles for successful consensus building, (c) their method of working with groups (including the process and discussion techniques they use), and (d) ways they adjust their methods to suit changing circumstances. Individuals were also asked to highlight what they considered to be the disparities between theory and practice and to periodically support their responses with examples from their work.

While all respondents work in consensus building, their educational and professional backgrounds, their ideologies, their sectoral focus, the dominant process-types they lead, their personal style, and their predominant role along the facilitation-mediation spectrum differ quite widely. Not surprisingly then, these differences colour their experience and are reflected in their responses. Given the interview format allowed respondents some flexibility to roam outside the essential questions, individuals also tended to expand on some areas more than others — in some cases due to their own particular interests. In reading on, readers are advised to keep these differences in mind.

The next three chapters lay out the responses I received to my questions along the three broad headings previously described in Chapter 1. By interlocking individual responses with current writings on the topic in a patchwork fashion, the chapters do not set down

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12 A good example is Respondent 2, who spoke at particular length on her experience working across cultures and tailoring processes to groups.

*Chapter 2 – Research Methods*
any firm rules, but paint a picture of how processes transpire in practice, where some of
the broad similarities and differences lie, and some of the challenges and trade-offs that
would-be practitioners might encounter that are less apparent in existing resources.
Readers should not expect hard fast conclusions anywhere throughout, except perhaps
that commonality lies mostly in the concepts and diversity occurs in the application and
details. Every practitioner, every group and every situation is unique and these things
combined contribute to a unique set of responses each time, though the inspirations and
aspirations guiding practitioners are often quite similar.
Despite the numerous benefits of consensus decision-making, consensual approaches to making decisions or resolving disputes are not always necessary, effective or appropriate (Cormick et al., 1996). Even in situations where consensual approaches are deemed most appropriate, and where stakeholders are keen to be involved, success also relies on the process used to bring parties together, its perceived fairness by those taking part, and its ability to build the right mix of trust, dynamics and structures to support collaborative discussions (Hillier, 1998; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987). Understanding what makes consensus decision-making work (and not work), is therefore just as crucial to building lasting decisions as any practical approaches or techniques used to help the process along.

This chapter kicks off the discussion of consensus decision-making theory and practice by reviewing some of the most basic principles for successful consensus building as presented in literature and expanded upon by the study participants. Beyond describing the significance of each principle to successful outcomes, I also highlight some of the challenges, contextual barriers and tradeoffs that one may have to grapple with when working to apply them. The chapter’s first section is dedicated to those factors that fall within the list of consensus building principles drafted and elaborated upon by the National Roundtable for the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) in its two publications Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Guiding Principles (NRTEE, 1993) and Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles Into Practice (Cormick et al., 1996). The latter part of the chapter extends the NRTEE list to look at wider principles identified by respondents, including ideals more specific to their role as facilitators and mediators, and the personal values, aptitudes, skills and behaviours they consider important in their work.

3.1 NRTEE Consensus Building Principles

As explained in Chapter 2, in order to facilitate the interviews on principles, as part of my interview process, I presented the study participants with a sample list of principles (shown in Appendix 3) and asked them to highlight those they deemed most important in their work and those they found most difficult to achieve. Respondents were also encouraged to provide reasons for their choices and to expand on the list by adding principles they considered missing. The list, which was compiled from various sources, made large use of the NRTEE principles for successful consensus building shown in
Box 3. In this section, I use the Round Table list as a backdrop for framing the discussion on principles — layering concepts and recommendations related to each principle in their publications with broader commentary and observations from the study respondents and my own analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.</td>
<td><strong>Purpose-Driven</strong>: People need a reason to participate in the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 2.</td>
<td><strong>Inclusive, Not Exclusive</strong>: All parties with a significant interest in the issues should be involved in a consensus process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 3.</td>
<td><strong>Voluntary Participation</strong>: The parties who are affected or interested participate voluntarily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.</td>
<td><strong>Self-Design</strong>: The parties design the consensus process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 5.</td>
<td><strong>Flexibility</strong>: Flexibility should be designed into the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.</td>
<td><strong>Equal Opportunity</strong>: All parties have equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate effectively throughout the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 7.</td>
<td><strong>Respect for Diverse Interests</strong>: Acceptance of the diverse values, interests, and knowledge of the parties involved in the consensus process is essential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 8.</td>
<td><strong>Accountability</strong>: The participants are accountable both to their constituencies and to the process that they have agreed to establish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 9.</td>
<td><strong>Time Limits</strong>: Realistic deadlines are necessary throughout the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 10.</td>
<td><strong>Implementation</strong>: Commitments to implementation and effective monitoring are essential parts of any agreement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cormick et al., 1996: 7

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13 The principles presented in the interview handout reflected a selection of principles that I was particularly interested in getting people's viewpoints on due to their relation to past papers I had done. The sample list varied from the above NRTEE list in a couple of ways. All Round Table principles were addressed to a large extent in the handout except Principles 7 (respect for diverse interests) and Principle 9 (time limits). In addition, I chose to divide Principle 8 into two points dealing with “accountability to constituency” and “accountability to process” in order to get more distinct comments on these separate aspects of accountability. For similar reasons as well, I added certain points to the sample list — such as the use of a neutral third party, the provision of negotiation training, and the recommendation that negotiation be the best alternative for all involved — which while not identified as principles per se in the NRTEE list, were suggested or touched upon as key sub-elements in the expanded 1996 publication. Despite the slight difference in the two lists, the bulk of the respondent comments from this segment of the interview can be tied back to one of the ten Round Table principles as they are elaborated upon in NRTEE’s publication. Even “respect” and “time limits,” despite their absence from the handout were repeatedly raised as missing and then elaborated upon by respondents.

14 NRTEE’s 1996 publication *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles Into Practice* reviews and expands on the original 1993 guiding principles by providing advice for applying the principles in practice. For this reason, I refer more heavily to this publication in the discussions that follow.

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Chapter 3 - Consensus Building Principles 27
Setting the Context - Role and Application of Principles

To set things in context, before discussing the ten Round Table principles individually, it is important to note that the study participants viewed and addressed the sample list they were shown in somewhat different ways — in part because of their differing backgrounds and also because of their range of familiarity with the Round Table principles themselves. Some, for example, make regular use of the Round Table principles in their work, while a couple had never encountered them before. Because of the parallels between the Round Table principles and those listed in the handout, and my mention of the NRTEE publication as a key source, participants who were familiar with the document spoke occasionally, or sometimes entirely to the NRTEE list, particularly when making blanket statements. Others, however, spoke specifically to the points as presented in the handout.

Possibly because of their varying backgrounds, and differences in the types and formality of processes they commonly work in, there was also some disagreement across the group as to whether all principles shown applied in all circumstances. Though no one considered the sample principles inappropriate or irrelevant to their work, a couple of respondents found the list reflective of a specific style of decision-making, with one saying it assumed a “formal process” (R10) and the other noting the set of principles were “very classic consensus-based negotiation stuff” (R1). Also, while some saw the principles as fundamental elements for success, others tended to view them as ideals that they should work towards. There were also slight differences in how respondents viewed the relative difficulty of individual principles. Comments ranged from: “I think there are issues with all of them. These principles are more challenging in different situations” (R1), and “I use the Round Table principles in my work and training, and I’ve got to say that each of these is really important and each of them is extremely difficult.” (R6), to: “None of these principles are any more difficult than any other” (R8).

The last respondent, who spoke more specifically to the Round Table principles, elaborated on this statement by explaining that, in his experience, the amount of work it takes to be effective might vary from one principle to another, but none is particularly more challenging than any other, and all are equally critical to the success of “consensus-seeking processes where the goal is to reach an agreement” (R8). They are not necessarily essential, however, in consultation-type processes where the parties are engaged by an ultimate decision-maker in a way that is not “agreement seeking.”

Respondent 8 also provided a useful synopsis of what he sees as the three key purposes of the Round Table principles. These are: (a) to help individuals discern between consensus processes and other types of public involvement; (b) to serve as a “checklist” that one can refer to when doing this work and deciding what approach to use; and (c) to give some sense of why a process has not worked, or why things have transpired the way they have. In his own words:

The first thing those principles do is they allow us to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges. A lot of people are using words like consultation, advisory process, consensus processes, collaborative processes. You know there’s a whole arm-length of different labels that we give. And often times there are very distinct activities that are going
on under what are ostensibly similar processes, and that’s highly problematic because we can’t really develop bodies of knowledge around what the implications are of different kinds of structures that people are working with. So these principles allow us to start differentiating between different types of interactions.... The second is to create kind of a user-friendly checklist of things that people should have in their mind in going forward, so that they’re able to have some comfort level around how it is that they would do this if that’s what they wanted to do; and if they’re not doing that, other things that they could do, making informed choices. And a third thing is to provide some basis to evaluate what it is that’s happened in any given process. So we can go there and say: “Well, I think in measuring what went on here, these and these and these were not followed in the way that they were intended and as a consequence certain outcomes happened and that may explain why different things have resulted in different settings” (R8).

3.1.1 Principle 1 - Purpose-Driven

In the range of public involvement processes, consensual approaches to decision-making fall among the most intensive and demanding in terms of time and resources, and in terms of the demands they make of the parties involved. People have to be ready to put their heads together with others they may not agree with, to grapple with complex problems, to question their own views and values, and to deal with sensitive issues in situations where emotions may be running high. For these processes to weather the storms without people throwing in the towel, the participants must want them to work. For this reason, NRTEE’s first consensus principle requires that parties involved in a consensus process share a sense of common purpose and believe that working together towards a joint solution is the best way to meet their interests (NRTEE, 1993). To come to such a decision in an informed manner, they have to be clear about the issue or question they are coming together to discuss — although this may be redefined as talks proceed — their own reasons for getting involved, the wider policy context in which their decision rests, the degree of decision-making authority they are being given, and what will be done with the results if and when an agreement is reached (Cormick et al, 1996). If intentions are misconstrued, or any important party lacks commitment to seeing a resolution through, chances are an agreement will not be reached, or if it is, it will fall apart later on. NRTEE outlines several conditions which prevent parties from negotiating in good faith and under which consensus decision-making may be ill-advised or premature. These include instances where:

- one or more parties believe they can fully satisfy their interests “even without negotiations”;
- an important stakeholder group is not suitably prepared, needs time to organize and consult with its constituency, or is itself strongly divided over the question of participation;
• one or more parties are entering the process as a means of delaying a decision;
• a party’s sole reason for being involved is to promote an image of openness; or
• a party is strongly committed to a principle and would prefer defeat over any
  appearance of compromise (Cormick et al, 1996).

If a process is convened by a body with authority to make the decision, these
requirements extend to them as well. As one participant explained: “I’ve spent a lot of
time of course with sponsoring agencies who have turned and asked: ‘Well why should
we be doing this? By engaging in this level of shared decision-making, (as I call it) are
we not abdicating our responsibility to our statutory authority, or our political
accountability and the like.’ So they too, the sponsoring agency, need a purpose as well”
(R7). In addition, they must be clear and transparent about their purpose for undertaking
the process (R4). They should be ready to “give a little,” to consider options that are
raised, and to implement the group’s decision. Moreover, should they decide not to go
with a proposal, they should be willing to make their reasons known and to enter a
discussion on the matter (R7; R11; Brown, 1999). If a convenor is using a process to
simply collect information, to give a semblance of participation, or as a smokescreen for a
decision they already have firm opinions about, they are best to use less intensive forms
of public involvement15, or risk future backlash (CORE, 1994b).

Below are some observations and pointers individual study respondents offered on these
and other recommendations tied to Principle 1 based on their experience in the field.

Parties Often Sceptical Up Front

Although having a sense of shared purpose is considered a key element of this first
principle, two respondents indicated that parties rarely enter a decision-making process
convinced that “negotiation” or consensus decision-making is their best alternative (R1;
R7). Rather, this is something that groups often work through as they become involved.
According to these particular respondents, parties often first enter discussions with
varying levels of scepticism. Rather than coming in feeling instant commitment to the
process, they might first agree to sit in on discussions to feel out the situation, to ensure
they are not left out of important decisions, to test the waters, or simply to gather
information. As one respondent stated:

Often you’re dragging people to the table. They don’t believe that this is
necessarily going to work. You just try to convince them to be there and
you hope that you win them through the day. They don’t make a simple
choice that “absolutely I’m going to come and I think it’s the best idea.”
They sometimes come and check it out. So you have people with
different levels of commitment or engagement to it. They haven’t made
a clear commitment when they walk in the door, so you’re kind of trying
to win them all the time (R1).

15 Chapter 4 examines the criteria for choosing among public involvement methods in greater depth.

Chapter 3 - Consensus Building Principles
For this and other reasons, as an early step, all processes of this type should involve an assessment phase (Cormick et al., 1996). One of the key aspects of a facilitator’s or mediator’s work in the early stages is in fact to help groups through this process of assessment so they can weigh for themselves the appropriateness of a consensus process, the pros and cons of becoming involved, and what this involvement might look like. While the parties work through this appraisal, Respondent 7 considered it unrealistic to expect them to renounce all other forms of action. As he explained:

I’ve never presumed to suggest to people that [they should] participate in this process and abandon anything else. First off, they won’t do it. Secondly, I don’t think it’s fair. They need to discover by sitting down and talking with people that this alternative is better than the other ones available to them. Better in a sense that they may well conclude that they can gain more by working together with people than they could otherwise. But they have to discover that. It’s a voyage of discovery. So I guess I would probably phrase it differently. People need to be in a group somewhere where they can assess the appropriateness of a negotiated approach. That’s part of the framework that I get involved with. It’s called the assessment phase (7).

Negotiation Only One Possible Method

Beyond the comments noted above, another participant shed light on one of my own misconceptions about consensus decision-making by stressing the difference between a consensus process as an approach to decision-making, and “negotiation” as only one of many methods that can be used in this process. Given consensus-based decisions are commonly carried out using a negotiated-approach, it is not uncommon for people and reference materials to make mention of both as necessarily occurring together, and in some cases as synonymous terms. I also made the same assumption by indicating that “negotiation must be the best alternative for all involved” among the sample principles in the interview handout. As was pointed out to me though, this is not always the case. In fact, this particular respondent considered this tendency to equate consensus-seeking processes with negotiation as a major problem in the decision-making field and warned against the common habit of “fixing on a certain method” and forcing all decisions to fit into that mold (R11).

This same respondent went on to explain that the line between consensus decision-making and other decision-making or public involvement methods is not always clear cut. There are many layers to a decision-making process and each of these layers can involve a multitude of different methods, approaches and processes among which some may be consensus-seeking and some may be negotiation-based, while others might not. Rather than using a cookie cutter approach to decision-making, part of the art of this practice is to assist parties in determining the appropriate mix of methods for the circumstance in question. So while the criterion that “negotiation be the best alternative” might apply to the method of negotiation if that is what is being used in a specific situation, it does not necessarily apply to the wider consensus process. In some instances, dialogue around
process design may lead parties to conclude that negotiation is not their best alternative for resolving some or all issues. In this respondent’s words:

[W]hat I find in these kinds of discussions is that people tend to try to balkanize methods off as some kind of absolute and in my experience, situations present themselves which require the selection of an appropriate method at the time and place and circumstance. So you might be conducting a mediation or a facilitation, or attempting to achieve consensus in some context for which different methods are called for at different times during the proceedings. And that consensus-seeking is like a huge bundle of activities.... So when you say “negotiation must be the best alternative for all involved,” as a general rule that might be the case; but you could also have a situation where negotiation is simply a device that you use at a given time to elucidate the fact that you have an impasse that has to be solved by some other method. Maybe it has to go to legal counsel. Maybe it has to go to a formal judicial hearing. In order for something of that magnitude to be solved, you wouldn’t have found that out had you not conducted a negotiation at the beginning which allowed you to learn where the parties actually stood. So the best alternative may not be negotiation (R11).

Level of Internal Organization, Preparedness and Accord Varies

As previously mentioned, it is seen to be unwise to launch too quickly into a consensus process if one of the major players is poorly organized or needs time to establish some internal agreement. In an ideal world, all parties would come to the table clear on their task and interests and evenly prepared and represented. But, real life presents many obstacles to this ideal. While it is helpful for practitioners to meet groups separately beforehand to ensure that they are adequately ready and understand the process, this can be difficult to do in practice, particularly in large multi-party settings (R1). In fact, a common challenge all practitioners face no matter what the situation is ensuring a fair process and balanced participation among parties with very different levels of preparedness and organization. As one person explained:

The levels of preparation always vary — from people who are paid professionals, who are extremely skilled at putting a point of view forward and making it look like accident, to people who are absolutely sincere, naive, powerful, committed, but haven’t done a stick of preparation.... It’s useful to have all the parties sufficiently organized. But they’ll never be equally organized. Not in my experience anyway (R11).

Several respondents also considered it unrealistic for groups not to have internal divisions (R1; R3; R10; R11). At times it may be possible to work separately with one party or several like-minded groups to build a common position before moving to the table (Cormick et al, 1996). Even in such instances though, it is unlikely that full unanimity will be reached, even in highly organized groups. One respondent outlined some of the
barriers to full internal agreement by recounting his efforts to build unity among representatives of a single government department:

I've never had parties that are not internally divided. They always are internally divided. There's always tension, and they are often poorly organized because this is one of the million things they're doing. Rarely are they just completely singing from the same song sheet. Last week with this [resource related] workshop, I went over a week beforehand to work with [a government department] so that the seven [department] representatives might be saying the same kind of thing. And they still didn't say the same kind of thing because there are real philosophical and professional differences in how they see what should be done (R1).

So although it is important for the process to be purpose-driven and for conditions to be conducive to a consensus process, the reality is that, particularly in the early stages, conditions will likely not be conducive. Groups will not be jumping on the band wagon fully convinced that this is the right thing. Many, if not most groups will be undefined, poorly organized and divided in opinion. The issue under question and the dividing line between significant and non-significant interests may also be unclear. The early stages of any process therefore involve working through these issues with the relevant groups; assessing where their interests lie and the feasibility of a consensual approach; and identifying what might need to be done to allow them to properly participate in the process if the commitment is there to proceed. The assessment and other stages of consensus building are discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

3.1.2 Principle 2 - Inclusive, Not Exclusive

The second NRTEE principle underlines the importance of identifying all groups with significant interests in a decision and taking steps to ensure that they are aptly involved in the process (NRTEE, 1993). Involving all parties with a significant stake in a decision helps to foster greater credibility and support for the outcomes. It can build better solutions by reducing the risk that key interests are overlooked. It can also cultivate collaboration and commitment among implementing parties therefore reinforcing the likelihood of the decision reaching fruition (Cormick et al., 1996).

To ensure the integrity of the process, NRTEE (1993) recommends that parties identify their own representatives, particularly if they have an important stake in the outcome. In some cases, it may make sense to connect groups with similar interests (if they agree), to improve communication, to keep the table to a manageable size, and to render the process more effective and efficient.

Below are more specific observations on the principle of inclusiveness from among the individuals interviewed.
May Need to Be Exclusive Before Being Inclusive

On a broad level, inclusiveness was seen as a good thing and an important end to strive for by those respondents who addressed this point. But these same individuals also qualified their statements by highlighting limitations, trade-offs and wider considerations that must be balanced against this principle (R1; R2; R3; R4; R7; R10; R11). One respondent, for example, advised against pushing for wide involvement too quickly, noting that in certain instances some parties might need to be exclusive before being inclusive (R9). This particular respondent, who is primarily involved in grassroots, intercultural and community-initiated processes, felt particularly strong on the matter. Speaking from her experience working with disempowered or less organized groups, she explained that it is sometimes important to help such groups gain a level of confidence in their own internal organization and agreement first, so they feel secure opening the discussion to a wider set of stakeholders — including to those with greater influence and authority over the outcome. In her words:

[I]n terms of process, sometimes before people can think of being inclusive, they need to caucus on their own first and be exclusive. And once they’re clear about their issues and confident about them and empowered, then you can say: “Okay, now we’ll talk to whoever the people are who have more apparent power.” So I’m not so concerned about inclusivity, because if we include people just for representational reasons, the process may not be ready for that, or the people themselves may not be ready for that. So I think it needs to be part of what comes out of their own decision (R9).

Line Between Significant and Non-Significant Interests Is Matter of Judgment

Although it is important not to rush unprepared groups into a process too quickly (if circumstances allow\(^\text{16}\)), once a table is convened, inclusiveness is generally taken to be a good thing. For one, as previously discussed, the decisions generally garner wider support if people feel their interests are given adequate consideration. This in turn heightens the chance that an agreement will be honoured (Hillier, 1998; Cormick et al, 1996). It often leads to more balanced and lasting resolutions as well.

Like others, Respondent 11 acknowledged the importance of inclusiveness at the table. But he cautioned that one can be over-inclusive as well, and can negatively impact the process as a result (R11). As he explained and the principle itself denotes, those stakeholders with a “significant interest” in the issue should be involved. But an important question this raises is whose interests are “significant” and whose are not? Cormick et al. (1996) offer broad guidelines for making these distinctions by advising that, at minimum, one should seek to involve those who could be significantly affected by the outcome, those who will play a major role in its implementation, those with the authority to make the decision, and those with the potential to undermine it. The

\(^{16}\) As mentioned under principle 1, not all situations will allow practitioners to spend time preparing individual groups before the table convenes.
challenge for practitioners, convenors and participants is deciding where to draw the line around these parameters when each situation brings a new set of issues and interests, a new set of dynamics among the parties, its own unique circumstances, and no clear guidelines for making a decision. As Respondent 11 noted, like so much of this work, these are not matters that can be answered by applying some prescribed formula. Rather they are questions of judgment:

If what you mean by “inclusive” is that you’re involving all the people who have some material interest in what’s going on, now that’s probably valid. But there are some circumstances where people’s self-declared interest is bogus and other cases where people’s weak interest should be included. Now those are matters of judgment, not matters of formula.... So when you say “the process is inclusive,” yes and no. There are times when you want the parties for whom a consensus is being sought to be the ones that are actually materially involved in the outcome and are intimately affected by the outcome. So you know if you’re conducting a family mediation, it might be quite destructive to include the nosy neighbour, even though they’d love to be there, and think they have a right to be there because they listen to the squabbles over the fence. You can see that the rationale for people to be involved in the discussions might thin out after a while. So to say “inclusive” is too formulaic. You’ve got to be looking at the real structure of what’s going on, the real people involved, and what’s really at issue to know where the boundary lies between inclusion and exclusion. There’s no formula for that but judgment.

**Must Balance Inclusiveness With Effectiveness**

Even once the significant interests are identified, it might not be possible to get everyone at the table, so there is also a need to balance inclusiveness with effectiveness. There are various reasons why it may be difficult to achieve full representation, at least at the core table. Some parties, including those with significant interests, may not want to be involved either because they feel they can gain more in other ways, because they do not want to be seen as giving credibility to the process, or simply because they feel no change will come of it. Others may simply lack the interest in taking part, particularly when balancing other demands on their time. While the principle of inclusiveness puts to question the aptness of consensus decision-making in such situations, the reality is that many processes are initiated under these less than ideal circumstances. Respondent 1 offered his view on this dilemma by stating:

I think there’s always a real tension between the full representation of all interests and effectiveness. You can’t get everybody in the room half the time.... They don’t turn up. Also, there are some people who don’t want to play. The workshop last week, we wanted industry to come to a negotiation.... Most of the industries decided not to come because they don’t want to be participating and be seen as a credibility to this process. So you sort of want them there, but you realize that you just have to go
ahead and do it anyway and hope that you can sort it all out afterwards. So it’s much more iterative to try to bring people in... So I think it’s correct that it is a principle to strive for and that you should always work towards it. But at some point it can be incredibly debilitating to the process to slow it down and it’s not always realistic to get everybody at the table. You sometimes have to do some mending of fences afterwards. And sometimes you have to kind of push ahead and hope that you can win the day.

Balancing inclusiveness and effectiveness is also an essential factor in this work because for practical and logistical reasons it is often not possible to fit everyone with an interest into one room. This is particularly the case in large multi-party settings. It also becomes difficult to hold productive discussions and make decisions if the numbers at the table are too great. What is important in these circumstances is that the participants are representative of the different interests that exist and that proper representation and communication structures are set up to ensure they are accountable to those not in the room. NRTEE stresses this point as well, noting that “inclusive representation does not mean every party must be at the table, but that all significant interests should be represented there” (Cormick et al, 1996: 31). In order to render the process more inclusive and to accommodate the particular participation needs and interests of various groups, they also suggest having different circles of participation, both at and away from the table. For example, outside parties with restricted interests can sit on adjoining task groups dealing with issues of particular concern to them. Public forums and open houses can be held intermittently to share information with wider groups less interested in hands on involvement. In other cases, the table may simply need to inform non-participating parties of key developments and seek their input at pivotal points.

According to Respondent 7, the best way to create an appropriate representation structure is to design it in consultation with the groups concerned — including those at the table and wider interests (where appropriate). In the course of doing so, one should seek to balance four key things, namely: inclusiveness, effectiveness, representativeness and accountability. As he explains:

The challenge with the work that I do is there are two principles that go side by side. There’s the principle of inclusivity. The other is the principle of effectiveness. So there’s two dimensions to inclusivity. In the work that I do, to be inclusive we’d have to have a pretty big room.... So the principle has to evolve in a way, the structure has to evolve in a way that’s responsible to inclusivity — which is certainly the goal — yet at the same time it has to be effective. So how do you balance or reconcile the competing interests of inclusivity and effectiveness? And I think tied into all of that are two other dimensions: one of them is representativeness and the other is accountability. So in the context of inclusivity we need to assure that we’re representative and also that we’re accountable, as some of these other principles suggest. So yes, inclusive by all means, but effective in a way that people can look around and say: “Yeah, we’ve got the right people in the room, and we can effectively
communicate to those who are not in the room and together we constitute an effective process for dealing with these problems” (R7).

### 3.1.3 Principle 3 - Voluntary Participation

NRTEE’s third principle for successful consensus building requires that all parties with a stake in a process have the freedom to participate voluntarily (NRTEE, 1993). They should not feel coerced into it. They should also be free to withdraw if they are dissatisfied with how their concerns are handled (Cormick et al., 1996). According to NRTEE, if a group feels they can not step back once they enter a dialogue, they will probably not risk involvement. It is the knowledge that they can walk away at any time that makes parties willing to investigate collaborative talks. Furthermore, it is the knowledge that any other group can do the same that encourages the table to give all interests adequate voice and due attention. As discussed under Principle 4, involving participants in the design of ground rules is an important way of giving them the security they need to participate. As part of their procedural agreement, NRTEE suggests that parties define how they will work together, what they mean by consensus, what will be done if there is an impasse, and protocols for withdrawing from the table (Cormick et al., 1996). In the latter case, a group may require advanced notice before someone pulls out. This type of provision helps to discourage impulsive exits. It also gives the remaining members a chance to try to remedy the situation before the concerned party withdraws.

**Not Always Voluntary for Everyone**

The individuals interviewed in this study broadly agreed with the concept of voluntary participation. But a couple also noted that, despite all good intentions, participation is not always voluntary for all participants at a table, or for the constituencies they represent (R4; R6). For one, there are now processes where parties are obliged to enter civil mediations without any choice in the matter (R4). More and more, people are also compelled to sit on committees and multi-party tables as part of their jobs and have little option but to take part. The same can be said for representatives from less powerful groups and the First Nations who cannot risk being left out of decisions having long ranging repercussions on their livelihoods. The fact that others constituents are counting on them to give voice to their concerns puts added pressure on representatives to get involved and makes it more difficult for them to withdraw at their own will. As one participant indicated:

[W]orking with groups within an organization, you’re always going to find people who don’t want to be there, and they’re told to come to a consensus process. In reality you want that [voluntary participation], but the reality is that there’s going to be greater and lesser degrees of commitment and lesser and greater voluntariness (R6).
3.1.4 Principle 4 - Self-Design

The fourth NRTEE principle recommends that the table representatives be involved in the design of their process and that everyone be given equal opportunity to contribute to the terms and procedures guiding their interaction (Cormick et al., 1996). The more say participants have in how they will work together, the more likely they are to respect the process and rules once talks begin. Among other advantages, involving individuals in procedural discussions allows them to become acquainted before substantive talks are underway and helps set the tone for later discussions. It also broadens the chances that they will be comfortable with the process and methods used.

As part of the design activities, parties generally begin by defining their roles and responsibilities and laying down ground rules and protocols to guide their interactions. As a general recommendation, ground rules should clarify details related to the “who, why, what, how, when and where” of the process, including:

- who the parties at the table are;
- why they are there (the objective);
- what issues are and are not up for discussion;
- how they will interact (rules, protocols and procedures); and
- when and where they will meet (schedule and logistics) (Cormick et al., 1996).

There are no fixed procedures or ready answers to any of these questions. Instead, each process must be adapted to the specific circumstances and issues under consideration. They must also take into account individual needs, schedules, concerns and responsibilities. Although a third party might be used to facilitate these discussions, control over the mandate, rules, procedures and broad process structure should rest with the representatives involved.

Below are added observations and comments that respondents offered on the principle of self-design.

Introduce the Idea of Process Design Early

Several respondents considered the exercise of process design a vital precursor for successful dialogue. Among other things, the value-based conversations these procedural talks stimulate introduces participants to other ways of thinking and to one another’s worldviews before they enter substantive talks. It enables parties to create a process that makes realistic demands on people’s time and resources and that allows for everyone’s participation. It also allows individuals to build in discussion styles that they feel comfortable with. But, selling parties on the need for procedural talks is not always easy (R8). To get around this problem, one respondent has learnt to introduce the idea early, so people know what to expect. As his statement below illustrates, the art of taking people through this conversation comes with experience:

I guess there is a difficulty that people have in understanding why it’s important to focus on the way that we’re going to work together before
we start working together. People are inclined to say: “Well, let’s just get to it.” But I’ve developed pretty deep experience in how to take people into that conversation, so I don’t have nearly the problem that I once had with it, because I talk to them a lot privately before I get into that room to start building the anticipation for how that conversation is going to go. And by the time they come to the room, I’ve started to float out enough ideas and enough small pieces of paper that when we start having the discussion about how we’re going to work together, they’re not surprised by it (R8).

Be Simple and Specific When Defining Ground Rules and Terms

As with all stages of decision-making, it is important that the development of ground rules and principles be done in a fair and participatory manner, and that all parties share a common understanding of what they are agreeing to. To prevent misinterpretations, Respondent 12 recommends being specific, avoiding jargon, and keeping things simple. He expressed his point as follows:

When it comes to principles, they’re usually written in a way which sometimes has a lot of jargon in it. So first of all, what does “inclusive” mean? What does “accountability” mean? What does “equal opportunity” mean? So what we’ve done is many times we’ll use jargon terms, and I’m not necessarily convinced everybody in the room understands (a) what they are and (b) what they mean in practice. So when you go through [defining ground rules], I think they need to be very simple; they need to be understood by everyone; and they need to be continuously talked about.... And so I’m not as concerned about what specifically the group has agreed to as long as the group has honestly discussed it and there has been equal opportunity for everyone to participate in that discussion (R12).

As the previous statement indicates, it is important to incorporate practical details when defining terms of reference. Beyond laying out general ground rules, parties need to spell out how these rules will be carried out, how they will be reinforced, and how the group will respond to situations of non-compliance (R12; Cormick et al., 1996). They should also specify how decisions will be made and how they will deal with impasses. In the case of the latter, a common practice in consensual processes is to make proposals provisional until the whole package is approved (CORE, 1994b). The assurance that individuals will not be held to concessions unless they accept the final package makes participants amenable to experimentation, promotes more give-and-take, and encourages freer dialogue.

A key term to define in any consensus process is the word “consensus” itself. To avoid those with dominant interests pushing decisions through, NRTEE advises against expanding the definition of consensus to encompass less than unanimous agreement. They note that: “[w]hile there is room for different wording, it is essential that unanimity be explicitly and exclusively the rule” (Cormick et al., 1996: 36). Respondent 12 fully
agreed with the need to be specific when defining “consensus.” But he added that even in consensus-type processes, not all decisions must necessarily be made by consensus. In fact, in his experience, most groups tend to shift between consensus and voting depending on the question or task. He illustrated with an example from his practice:

I work with a group, an environmental group..., and they spent a year discussing what was going to be their model of making decisions. They spent a year talking about it and they agreed that.... for administrative purposes we would always vote. Major issues or controversy, they'd use consensus and then they defined it. But they used a combination of voting and consensus as their model, and they clearly described that all the way through. I think many people use the combination, but don't formalize it. And the tricky part is, “when we disagree and we can’t reach consensus, what do we do?” (R12)

In defining consensus, groups should keep in mind that the word “yes” has many meanings (Kaner et al., 1996). What may mean “I agree wholeheartedly” to one participant or in one circumstance, may mean, “it is good enough” or “it will have to do” to someone else or in other cases. To add clarity to discussions (particularly in multi-party settings) and better gauge people’s comfort-levels with decisions, Kaner et al. (1996) suggests using a “gradient of agreement” such as that shown in Table 1. Parties can refer to the gradient when developing their ground rules. They should also use the terms in the gradient whenever a decision is made or their position on a proposal is sought.

### Table 1. Example of Possible Terms in an Agreement Gradient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DECISION TERM</th>
<th>POSSIBLE MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Endorse</td>
<td>I like the decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree with reservations</td>
<td>I can live with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstain</td>
<td>I have no opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand aside</td>
<td>I don’t like it, but won’t block</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally disagree</td>
<td>I don’t like it and want this recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>I veto the proposal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Kaner et al., 1996: 211-216

### Time and Attention Accorded to Ground Rules and Procedures Varies

While it is important that participants develop their own procedures and ground rules rather than adopt pre-existing ones, early consensus processes have provided numerous frameworks, models and examples that groups can refer to and tailor to their needs. This has vastly sped the development of procedural agreements from the early days when groups could spend so much time debating how they would work together that they had little time left for substantive talks (R3). The amount of time and emphasis put on this activity varies. In long-term processes, a table may spend months hammering out its
ground rules and procedures, particularly if parties mistrust one another. In short-term or less controversial processes, a group might simply review existing frameworks and establish the terms that apply in their case.

Respondent 3 explained that even in a process of several days she still opens discussions by clarifying the issue and identifying ground rules, though this is done much more concisely. In informal sessions lasting a day or less, she simply writes key ground rules on a board and quickly reviews them with the group. She elaborated by saying:

The ones that I end up putting on the board all the time are: one person speaking at a time; listen (You know really try to listen. Listen for interests and not positions); hard on the problem soft on the people; problem-solve to accommodate interests; we’re really striving for respectful communications. So those are the things that [I put up] even in an informal [setting].... “We’re looking forward to having everyone participate in the discussion to the extent that they’d like to. You’re all welcome to, and so let’s make sure that we create an opportunity for everybody to participate.” And those are the kinds of things that I’ll say, even in a one-day or half-day session. Maybe not so much the focusing on the interests stuff. I say: “Let’s make sure that we hear about what’s important to people on the subject that we’re talking about.”.... Setting ground rules at the beginning of any session helps people understand the way in which they’re going to work together. So I think that’s valuable (R3).

Involving Parties in Wider Process Design

According to several respondents, self-design means more than giving people a say in their proceedings (R2; R7; R9; R13). It means giving them ownership as well. One respondent reasoned that if participants have ownership of a process they are more likely to respect and use it. It is this feeling of shared responsibility that he strives to generate in the group. In his words: “The more that people have to get their hands on that wheel, the more it’s their process, which is my objective. I want people to make the process theirs. Why? If they adopt it as their own, then they’ll use it” (R7).

A sense of ownership does not come naturally and will not necessarily form unless the time and space is specifically set aside for participants to discuss procedural questions. Those in a third party role must also play a role by helping the discussion along, gauging the atmosphere in the room, building foundations for trustful relations, and allowing parties to interact and take initiative so they can progressively cede responsibility to the group. As one person explained:

I think the group becomes a facilitator themselves if you’re doing it right and you really work through “what is the best way for us to do this?” To me a facilitator only helps for that to come about. It’s the beginning where you facilitate that kind of thing, and then it becomes an entity onto
itself. You know a real moving kind of group, so that they start to say, “okay, this is how we want to do it” (R13).

While most practitioners ultimately strive for participant ownership, the amount of design-specific responsibilities they relinquish to the group and how and when they do it varies with each practitioner and each process. Some respondents put immense emphasis on participant design from the start, so people are at ease with the process (R2; R7; R8; R9; R13). This is particularly true for Respondent 2, who often works in cross-cultural settings, and who sees this as a way of addressing people’s different comforts with western-style negotiation. Others explained that depending on decision context, the stage in the process, the geographic scale, the group size, and their ability to bring parties together, the level of input sought from participants and the amount of discretion left to them might vary (R1; R11). A practitioner’s personal style and outlook also has a lot to play. To give an example, Respondent 1 described that in processes he is involved in — which often involve short workshop-type events aimed at evolving policy — he generally works with a steering committee of participants to lay out design parameters. He then designs the process based on these parameters and seeks the group’s input and consent on this design. While this design may serve as a general guide for discussions, once at the table, he also adapts his approach in response to the group’s feedback and changing circumstances. He described his approach to process design as follows:

‘Participants design and control the process’ — It’s something you strive for. You throw the responsibility back to them in the preparatory phase and you share the responsibility with them during the event. But as far as “controlling” the process, what I want them to do is to give me consent to run the process on their behalf once they’ve agreed to some broad parameters. So yes, conceptually they control it, but actually I’m facilitating it for them. In terms of “design,” no, generally I design it and they give a consent to make it work. It sounds arrogant, but I don’t think good process design is a simple skill, and I think sometimes they need to be convinced to do it a different way even if it doesn’t sound right. Sometimes we’re wrong. You know, we all get it wrong. I think they need to have input in the design and give their consent to the way it’s framed (R1).

Other factors affecting the third party’s approach to process design and the degree of control they are prepared to relinquish include the level of conflict or trust in the group, and the table’s own willingness to take on this responsibility (R11). In highly heated situations, the facilitator or mediator may need to assume more control to ensure a fair process. Part of the reason for engaging a third party is in fact to keep the process fair and to exert varying levels of control over the proceedings in doing so. In situations where the group has established a certain degree of trust, parties are more able to take on this responsibility, provided they are ready to do so. Respondent 11 spoke at particular length on the need for flexibility around process design and control. As he explained:

The whole purpose of a mediator, or a chairman, or an even-handed outside person, is to keep the participants honest, and in fact sometimes
to control the process in order to do so. So you don’t necessarily relinquish control of the process to the group unless the group is prepared to take on that responsibility and to actually work it. So there are times that you’d say: “Your choice. Completely open to your choice.” And sometimes when you say: “No, I’m in charge of this.” Like what if you have a conflict? You’ve probably been at meetings where a chairman has let things wander and where everybody is totally, completely and utterly frustrated as a result, and other cases where a strong chairperson has intervened and said: “No, here are the rules of order. Here’s how it happens. Here’s how we bring conclusion to this. You are expected to follow this set of steps.” So there are cases for either of those techniques. There are times when you’d let it wander and let the group take on responsibility for what’s happening. There’ll be other times when you provide iron control (R11).

### 3.1.5 Principle 5 - Flexibility

Reiterating what was said under the previous sections, the fifth Round Table principle highlights the importance of flexibility for successful consensus building (Cormick et al. 1996). On a personal level, participants need to be flexible, adaptable and open to new perspectives. On a group level, the table must also anticipate and plan for change. They must realize that they are working within a dynamic context and that many things happen in the course of deliberations that call for quick adaptations on their part. A constituency representative may be replaced. A new party may emerge and join the table mid-stream. New facts or information may surface that put to question some of the group’s assumptions. Outside events or actions by one constituency may lead to feelings of betrayal or stalled talks. Deadlines may be missed. Impasses and unexpected pitfalls may hinder the implementation of decisions. In short, any range of factors can disrupt relations or talks and call for responsiveness, open communication and quick action by the group.

Anticipating problems before they arise and devising contingency plans are two ways that consensus tables build flexibility into their processes. Often such contingencies are incorporated into the group’s wider ground rules. For example, the group might include terms for integrating new stakeholder groups (when unanticipated interests emerge) or replacement representatives (when someone steps down). The group can also devise contingency plans to deal with impasses, implementation problems, or missed deadlines. Beyond these measures, the table should stay attuned to outside developments that can impact the issue. They should also be aware of changing moods and events in their own constituencies that can disrupt their relations. By agreeing on procedures for dealing with contextual issues ahead of time, parties can avoid heat-of-the-moment responses and prevent the erosion of talks if and when these things happen.

Of the principles listed in the interview handout, flexibility received by far the least amount of comment from the individuals interviewed — perhaps because it is an intrinsic part of the process that requires less directed effort than some of the other principles.
noted. In many instances it happens as a natural response to changes and developments. Aside from supporting the need for flexibility, respondents had little to say. Their comments were kept to brief affirmations like: “Flexibility - Yes this is very important” (R1) and “Flexibility – yes entirely” (R11).

3.1.6 Principle 6 - Equal Opportunity

NRTEE’s sixth principle for successful consensus building states that participants should be given “equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate effectively throughout the process” (NRTEE, 1993). In most cases, participants in a consensus process will start on an uneven footing from the standpoint of finances, technical knowledge, resources, preparedness, eloquence and negotiation experience (Cormick et al., 1996). Because such imbalances threaten the legitimacy and fairness of a process, they are a problem for all groups at the table, not only the under-resourced or inexperienced ones.

There are a number of things that can be done to achieve more even representation in a consensus process. First and foremost, the convenors need to ensure that all groups have sufficient access to information, experts, and resources (including funding) to participate effectively. To achieve greater balance and make better use of resources, steps can be taken to support information sharing and the joint use of experts among the parties. NRTEE also suggests providing advanced training in negotiation and consensus decision-making to those less skilled in bargaining (Cormick et al., 1996). In other instances, a mediator can work individually with such parties to build up their skills once the process is underway. Also, less organized groups can be supported through financial and communication assistance and, in some cases, can be strengthened through links and caucusing with like-minded parties. All these strategies can improve a party’s ability to effectively represent itself and, in turn, can contribute to more successful resolutions.

In addressing this particular principle most respondents accented the range of obstacles that hinder balanced representation. They also suggested ways to better equalize the playing field. Their observations and suggestions are further outlined below.

Unequal Access to Funding

The most resounding message from respondents on this particular principle was that despite good intentions and best efforts to balance the scales, the playing field in these processes is never completely flush. One of the key obstacles to balanced representation in any multi-party setting is funding. For one thing, some representatives are paid to participate and have funding and resources to back them. Others attend as volunteers, have very little access to resources, and may be giving up wages to take part. The voluntary nature of their involvement makes it difficult for under-resources participants to attend meetings regularly, let alone spend time on preparations and communications. As one respondent indicated, these types of factors affect the strength of a representative’s voice and their ability to communicate their views in a clear and compelling manner:

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Often the amount of resources people have affects the amount of information that they can bring to it, or the strength of their voice, or the sophistication of their argument, because they've had a lot of time to develop it with help or whatever. And that's a reality. And you can do what you can to equalize the playing field at the moment and in the preparatory phase, but, yeah, I'm troubled by it because it isn't equal (R1).

**Unequal Experience, Knowledge and Persuasiveness**

Beyond having uneven access to funding and resources, participants at a consensus table also have different personality-types and different comfort levels speaking in public. These differences affect the eloquence and persuasiveness of their arguments and thus their ability to gain credibility and influence decisions. One respondent considered this a key limitation of these types of group decision-making processes. As she explained:

> I think automatically consensus is possibly coloured because some people are more charismatic. They present their case better. They have more influence just by virtue of who they are and how they are. And as such, those views carry more weight than other views that aren't as well articulated. And I think it's a potential weakness of consensus (R2).

Compounding this problem is the fact that participants enter with different amounts of experience participating in consensus-type initiatives, different levels of education, and different degrees of familiarity with the issue. While there might be more balance if these limitations were spread evenly across the group, the reverse is generally true. The best resourced parties are generally the most organized, and precisely for these reasons, they tend to have the most experienced, educated and charismatic delegates as well. One person explained that his strategy to offset such imbalances is to “try and build on the individual that has the least chance to be able to participate fully” in order to bring them to a level where they can participate more effectively (R5). Other strategies for reducing inequities include:

- assuring that all parties can access the available information and that it is presented in a way that they understand;
- using a variety of discussion methods to cater to people’s different communication styles; and
- going the extra mile in discussions to ensure that participants have a fair opportunity to speak and that what each person says is understood by the group.

Chapter 5 discusses various methods and approaches practitioners use to do just this.

**Negotiation Training**

While negotiation training is another way of levelling the playing field, opinions range on how useful it is and on what the content of such training should be. On one side, training in negotiation and “consensus-oriented decision-making” helps to dampen the tendency
among parties to fall back on positions when discussions get heated, and in so doing, can help groups work through more difficult issues (R5). But, as some respondents also indicated, current negotiation training has its shortcomings and challenges as well. For one, in cases where formal training is provided, it is often inadequate or ill-timed. As one person put it: “It took me hundreds of hours of training before I got it. Why would we expect people with fourteen hours [of training] to be able to work in this capacity simply because one person is assisting them?” (R6)

In certain processes, the tradition of initiating training at the front end, when discussions are less complex, is also ineffective. One participant pointed out that in processes she works in, it is often in the more advanced stages, “six, ten, twelve months later” that discussions get more complicated and negotiation skills are most essential (R3). By that time, participants have often forgotten most of what they learnt. To resolve this problem, she suggests that the training be sustained throughout certain processes so participants have skills at these later stages.

Practitioners are also encountering growing resistance to formal negotiation training, especially from experienced professionals. As participatory forms of decision-making become increasingly commonplace, more and more people are entering these processes feeling well acquainted with the procedures and seeing no need for extra instruction (R1, 7). Given the many demands on people’s time, they often find it difficult to attend extended training sessions too. One solution is to simply provide instruction to those who want it. But, this fails to ensure that everyone is entering a process with the same expectations. Rather than force the issue or fail to train individuals who resist it, one respondent suggests integrating procedural discussions and training into the decision-making process itself:

You might have your teaching moments during the course of a meeting. And so you spend a little time talking about some of those elements. And a key part of that discussion comes out at the process design stage where the parties negotiate their procedural agreement. If you include in that the principles of negotiation, the interest-based negotiation, you get a lot of discussion around them. There’s discussion around what consensus is also in that context. So people are focused on that discussion. And they learn a lot even though they don’t assume that they’re being trained (R7).

Another limitation of negotiation training relates to the problem of fixing on methods, previously discussed under Principle 1. Given the need for flexibility in approach, initiating negotiation training (or any other methodological training) too early in a process can potentially force a decision down a particular “methodological path” regardless of how appropriate it is (R5). As one person indicated, negotiation training might be useful if the parties consider negotiation the most appropriate method for resolving the issue. But, it might be less appropriate if what is needed is a whole range of methods depending on the sub-set of issues and group dynamics being dealt with at the time (R11). Rather than fixing too heavily on “hard-fast” methods and steps (or the “how”), as a preparatory step it might be more important to impart the philosophical underpinnings of consensus
and to encourage flexibility and innovation among participants in devising a process and style of collaboration that meets everyone's needs. As respondent 11 notes:

The trap in [negotiation training and fixing on a particular method] is that it tends to support the use of vogues of a particular style of negotiation or management of a group, which then has to be followed from stem to stern, it can't be avoided.... So if there's a vogue that says "shared decision-making" is the be all and end all of methods and that's what we're going to use... then it's useful if everyone agrees to that and is trained how to use it.... But if you have an array of methods to bring to bear that deal with different aspects of the behaviour of the group as it emerges, you may not be able to train everybody in advance for some hard fast method that then has to be followed lock step from beginning to end.

Rigidly following one method can also disadvantage certain groups. Even with training, people do not end up on the same footing in terms of their ability to navigate processes. They start from very different points for one. Also, as mentioned earlier, some participants take to this style of decision-making more naturally than others. Respondent 2 felt particularly strong on this issue. She explained that although she herself works in negotiation training, she puts a lot of emphasis on process design as part of her sessions in order to level the playing field. Relating back to Principle 4 (Self-design), rather than train the people to fit the process, she encourages them to develop a process that suits their character and preferred discussion style. This same respondent spoke from her experience delivering training for First Nations to illustrate her point:

Well I know that in many consensus processes, the group itself can take training in negotiation skills as a way of helping to level the field and preceding their discussion of the issue. In many respects that has seemed problematic to me because people are at very different starting places.... I developed here, with the help of the First Nations consultants, a whole training program in negotiation for First Nations, which we deliver in the community context.... I've watched over seven iterations of that program with different communities — people struggling to absorb the skills — and even within the training group it's very very mixed. And so they don't bring to the table an equal skill set. And of course, historically they've approached it very differently, and they still want to learn the western way of negotiating because there's still a lot of comment out there that says: "We want to beat them at their own game. We want you to teach us how those guys negotiate so we know how to negotiate with them." And here am I saying: "You know what would also be really important for everybody is that you negotiate the process. You don't have to play by that set of rules. You can have a say in terms of how you negotiate as well as what you negotiate. So I might think that training could address both the western way if you want to know that. But also I want to encourage you and support you.... to have a say and voice in terms of the 'how'" (R2).
3.1.7 Principle 7 - Respect for Diverse Interests

The seventh NRTEE principle emphasizes the need for respect in consensus decision-making. For a group to move beyond positional stances, participants need to be willing to understand and respect the range of values and interests held by other parties. According to NRTEE “[r]espect and understanding begin by accepting that differences are real” (Cormick et al., 1996: 71). This does not mean individuals have to endorse or adopt the perspectives of other parties. But they must be able to show tolerance and respect for the people who hold them.

Although this principle was not included in my interview handout, the practitioners I spoke to repeatedly noted its absence and rated it among the most important elements for successful consensus building. Below are some of the key things respondents had to say on the question of respect.

Building Respect is Key Challenge and Chief Necessity

According to Respondent 13, getting people to respect and listen to one another is one of her top challenges. It is also an essential precursor to fruitful dialogue (R3; R8; R11; R13). Respect goes beyond quietly letting people speak. For true respect to exist and for people to genuinely express themselves, they need to have trust in the group. They must be given a “safe environment” where they can speak their mind without fear of attack. They also need to sense that their contributions are listened to and are valued rather than simply tolerated. This can only occur when individuals set aside their grievances and biases about one another and begin to regard other members as equal partners in a process. As one person explained, it is only when parties get past this point and come to respect one another that the real discourse begins:

[I]f you ever get beyond the respect boundary, then you’re into real negotiation, and usually not before that. So that’s the antidote in my experience to the disparate agendas and the disparate strengths and types of stake in an issue, that you only really start to negotiate with somebody that you’ve actually accepted and respected. And at that point you actually start to look for ways to maybe help them out a bit, which is when you start to bend. Before that they’re an enemy. In some of the environmental fields, people come in as implacable enemies before they even come in the door, and they go out the same way because they were never prepared to give that stance up — to see the other people as respectable human beings that could be negotiated with (R11).

Getting People to Listen to One Another Is a Critical Element of Respect

As touched upon above, a major component of respect is a willingness to listen to others and give them the attention they need (R9; R13). This goes beyond not interrupting other speakers. More broadly, respectful listening means silencing one’s own opinions at least temporarily, avoiding the tendency to conjure up counter-arguments while people are speaking, and making a legitimate effort to understand what they are saying and why.
Participants need confirmation that their opinions are being heard and are being taken seriously. If individuals are not given this recognition, chances are they will become more positional or will simply withdraw from the process. While it may seem a simple act, getting people to listen to one another is in fact a major challenge for practitioners (R3; R11; R13). As one person explained, people are often so preoccupied about being heard themselves that they simply neglect to listen:

People, because of our backgrounds, are always fighting to get their position put forward — fighting, fighting, fighting to be heard. That’s what it’s all about. They’re fighting to be heard. And you want the validation back that somebody’s listening to you. But we’ve become so trained when we’re at the table to start to answer the other person’s position that we stop listening. You know we’re sort of half listening. We’re half listening while we’re putting together our arguments to go back. And that’s not respect of the other person’s position. So until you can come to that place you won’t get through consensus... And that I think is key... (R13)

Trust and listening go hand in hand, and together contribute (at least in part) to respectful interaction. As several respondents indicated, practitioners can do a number of things in their third party role to cultivate trust, listening and communication in a group. The basics include: assuring confidentiality particularly if individuals divulge information in confidence (R4); creating opportunities for participants to interact informally outside regular meetings (R5, Cormick et al., 1996); going out of one’s way to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard (R2; R3; R4; R13); and helping members of the group understand the value of good and fair process so everybody buys into the process and is supportive of one another (R2; R3). Beyond these strategies, NRTEE also suggests conducting awareness-building workshops and exercises; committing to take the time to understand differences rather than rush through discussions; agreeing to share information; and using an independent mediator or facilitator to help work through difficult issues (Cormick et al, 1996).

According to Respondent 2, the need to establish trust and a non-threatening environment may be even stronger when working in different or mixed cultural settings. This is particularly so if there are participants “for whom the values of the culture do not include assertiveness” (R2). In such instances, and even in more culturally homogenous settings, it is helpful to continuously reconfirm what individuals have said and what has been agreed to — both for the facilitator’s own clarity and for that of the table. As respondent 13 put it: “it takes time to just keep saying as we move through this, ‘Am I getting this right?... Is this what is being said?’ Otherwise, you can have the whole thing blow up and all the good work that everybody’s done will be for naught.”

As previously discussed, having parties design shared ground rules is another important way to build trust. If parties have misgivings about participating, it may also be necessary to define with them the conditions and commitments they need to feel secure taking part (R10). For example, First Nations communities engaged in treaty processes frequently need written assurances that taking part in outside talks will not prejudice their
negotiations (R5). Respondent 10 gave yet another example when elaborating on the topic of trust:

There’s been lots of literature on the pieces that are needed. The challenge is making it work. And making it work is often at the individual relationship and trust level. Or... if you don’t have the trust, it’s determining what pieces you need to put on the table to make it work. So [for example] if you don’t have trust in the relationships, have you got a specific commitment that’s publicly accountable from the politicians that 12 per cent of protected areas is the goal and that’s what you’re working towards?... It’s finding out what is needed to overcome the mistrust before you start.

Shape of the Room Also Important Consideration

While previous discussions have centred on interactive and procedural ingredients to fruitful dialogue, the meeting venue is another element that should not go overlooked. The shape and atmosphere of the meeting room can affect an individual’s comfort with a setting, the spirit in the group, people’s degree of participation, and the group’s ability to communicate and work together. On a comfort level, a room with good lighting and windows is of course better than one without. But more importantly as well, to participate effectively, individuals should be able to see one another and should not feel removed from the conversation. For this reason, long narrow rooms and tables are not recommended for large groups. They are also not advised when working with First Nations communities who traditionally use circular seating arrangements. Respondent 5 considered the shape of the table and room a simple but essential aspect of good process that warranted special attention. He termed this requirement the “principle that you’ve got to be able to see each other” (R5). He explained his reasons stating:

The shape of the table and room is critical. A rural group in a room with no windows, you’re in trouble. They’ve got to be able to stare out the window when they’re either bored or they’re tense. The other thing is that if... you’ve got 30 people or 40 people, don’t have a long narrow room. If you’re really going to do this stuff seriously, make sure that you have a room that every participant can see every other participant. And that’s difficult when you start to look at rooms. I mean [in one process] we’re using the gyms in the schools... mostly on the aboriginal reserves. They work perfectly, and particularly with the aboriginal community you want a round table anyway. But it is imperative in my opinion that you have a facility that you can actually see each other, because if you’re negotiating and you’re trying to see: “Who is she? I can’t see who that is. Is that...?” It’s just a very simple thing.... but it’s incredibly critical — the principle that you’ve got to be able to see each other (R5).
Still Comes Down to Individual Willingness

While the various trust-building strategies described above can help contribute to respectful relations, when all is said and done, the success of these and other measures still rests with the people involved and their personal readiness to set their biases aside and work with others as equals. One respondent termed the necessary attitude as "reciprocity." As she explained it, reciprocity requires that one believe "that what you say is equal to mine," and that "our experiences and opinions are equal" (R9). According to Respondents 10 and 11, getting people to think this way is often more difficult when participants hold divergent world views and values (R10; R11). Even in such settings though, achieving respect, trust and reciprocity requires a willingness on the part of each individual to set their preconceptions aside, to empathize with the positions of others, and to accept that they are as much a product of their environment as anyone else at the table. As one participant so eloquently explained, this need to recognize one's own biases extends to everyone at the table, including — and perhaps especially — those individuals imprinted with professionally taught views of the world:

[O]ne of the biggest challenges in a way is that a lot of the people who sit around the tables are imprinted with those [professionally taught] views of the world. They think that cultures are all about ethnic groups or different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It's not about that at all. Their values, the way they view and see the world have been very much imprinted — to no lesser extent than someone imprinted culturally — by a whole set of professionally driven values. And as soon as they see a problem, they begin to define it in their own image. They try to say: "why I understand it." But they only understand it from their perspective. And they somehow see themselves as distant from it. You know they've got the training. They understand it in their own image. "It's those others. It's those people that see things culturally, those are really the people that have got the [wrong idea]." "Cross-cultural," you know to me it's not about culture at all. It’s all about how your head is imprinted to see things and whether or not you’re prepared to relinquish kind of absolute control over the problem so that you will allow yourself to try to see it through the eyes of somebody else for a while. Not to give up your own eyes, but you know, are you prepared to at least engage in the possibility that somebody else may have a legitimate way of seeing this a little differently than you do (R8).

3.1.8 Principle 8 - Accountability

Principle 8 in the Round Table list deals with the question of accountability. Representatives hold multiple accountabilities particularly in multi-party processes. First and foremost they are accountable to their constituencies whether these constituencies are formally or informally defined. They must have the authority to speak for those they represent and must do so effectively. Second, representatives are accountable to the other individuals at the table and to the process and ground rules they have helped to design.
They should enter the process willing to participate in good faith and prepared to work
with other members to find shared solutions. Beyond this, representatives are also
responsible for keeping non-participating groups and the wider public informed and, if
necessary, seeking their input and approval at critical points. This highlights the need for
an effective communications strategy to support two-way exchange with those not
present.

Below are some added observations respondents provided on the question of
accountability.

**Key Accountabilities Are Conflicting**

One of the challenges of the accountabilities mentioned is that the two principal ones —
“accountability to other representatives and the process” and “accountability to
constituency” — are at times conflicting (R10). When entering a process, parties are
first and foremost committed to those they represent. As they get more engaged however,
they must work to balance two opposing obligations: the need to protect the interests of
their constituents, and the need to work towards a solution that will involve
compromising some of these interests.

A key challenge in consensus-type processes is extending the learning that occurs at the
table back to constituencies and outside groups so everyone progresses at the same pace.
It can be difficult to translate the full nuances of a discussion and the learning that
happens at the table to those not present. For this reason, it is not unusual for delegates to
evolve in their thinking and in their understanding of the issue at a different rate than their
constituents (R3; R5; R10; R11). In worse case scenarios, they may lose touch with their
members altogether and may no longer speak for the interests they were meant to
represent.

The principal secret to keeping constituents on board is good and regular communication
(R7). To realize this aim, the table must devise a communication strategy tailored to the
needs and desired levels of involvement of the various interests. A table’s
communication strategy might include a gamut of activities that are either individually or
jointly done. Examples of joint initiatives or convenor-led activities include: circulating
table minutes, publishing joint newsletters, posting newspaper articles, and holding public
meetings to share information and obtain feedback at pivotal stages (R3). Having
representatives provide regular report-backs to the table outlining their constituency
response to process developments is another suggested way to build representative-
constituency accountability. Such arrangements encourage regular communication with
outside members and allow the group to deal with areas of discontent before they escalate
(R11).

The other side of accountability (individual obligation to the process) presents its own
hurdles for representatives. While participants often step into a process ready to
“participate in good faith” and “focus on interests,” it is not uncommon for them to fall
back on position-taking when discussions cut close to the bone (R6; R11). In fact, one
respondent recommended for his skill in reviving derailed processes considered the problem of position-taking his primary challenge. As he explained:

The [principle] that’s most difficult that I don’t see here... is to avoid position taking.... It seems like unless you keep repeating it in a group, in a multi-party group with a number of stakeholders, that they always fall back. When they get into a corner they’ll fall back on taking positions. And to keep them out of that I try to use humour. You know when somebody really makes an outrageously strong position: “That’s an interesting interest statement. Now could you tell me what your position is on this?” And of course they’re trapped (R5).

In addition to negotiation training and the use of humour, developing and recording formal ground rules helps to build accountability. As said earlier, the more involved participants are in laying down the terms of their involvement, the more likely they are to follow them. It is also important to keep a written record of these ground rules as a fallback when needed. To illustrate, one participant described how a representative in one of her processes used the lack of formal ground rules as a defence for non-compliance:

[T]his is the reason why we’re trying to revise our ground rules to come up with things that we can hold him accountable to, because [this] process never had formally defined ground rules. We have them and we used them, but they were informal. They weren’t documented. And so he’s always had a way out, because he says: “Well, where’s this written down? Where’s it written down that I can’t do this?” So we’re writing it down (R3).

Expectations Often Unrealistic

In spite of good intentions, some participants also fall back on their accountabilities because the expectations put on them are too high. Participants have to be prepared to make concessions. But, in instances where people’s livelihoods, security, economic interests, or deeply held values are on the line, these compromises can be difficult despite all the well-wishing. People are often working against their cultural grain and the shift required of them to arrive at a shared resolution is often downplayed by the idealism of the pursuit and over-confidence in the process. One participant saw this tendency to discount the amount of change — in attitudes, world views and character — required for these processes to work as the principal disparity between the list of principles she was shown and practice. In her words:

[T]he biggest disparity between the “theory” (this list) and the “actual” (what occurs in practice) is that we completely underestimate the contextual shift that is required to do this well. We totally underestimate it. We forget that the water we swim in is economic systems (capitalist right), justice system (adversarial), our cultural context, our dominant western culture (individualistic, me first, rights oriented). We think that
we can say that and then make a shift? And my sense is that the context setting that goes on with this kind of work is constant and extremely challenging. And people go forward into it and then they slip back to what they know. We don’t come from a world where this is natural to us. And so I think what happens is often people take on too daunting a task in the time frames. I mean we need time frames. But I think sometimes the task overwhelms because this is just such challenging work. So people will then fall back and they won’t remain accountable to their constituents. Or they’ll withdraw because the going gets tough. Or they’re not well enough organized to stay tuned with it (R6).

While providing training and devising common ground rules can help enhance accountabilities, this latter statement highlights the importance of setting reasonable expectations and timeframes\(^\text{17}\) as well. Rather than being over-zealous, it might make more sense to start off conservatively and tackle issues in manageable pieces that can show results and build people’s confidence at the same time (R6).

### 3.1.9 Principle 9 - Time Limits

Principle 9 in the Round Table list extends on the last point by underscoring the importance of clear and realistic deadlines to successful consensus building (NRTEE, 1993). As NRTEE explains, giving participants benchmarks to work towards helps keep them energized and allows them to gauge their progress and make adjustments when needed. Parties involved in a consensus process need some kind of assurance that they are working towards some foreseeable end. Without some target in sight, they risk losing enthusiasm and becoming frustrated. Setting clear deadlines and milestones not only keeps people motivated, but it also encourages better planning, greater efficiency, and a more effective use of people’s time. Respondent 6 described what she saw as the role of time limits stating:

> It seems to me that time frames are necessary. Some sense of goal posts. And I think that’s why sometimes people are afraid of [consensus processes], because it looks as though it’s right outside of time. You know it’s going to go on and on and on, and I think that [having time limits] helps. Realistic time frames really help parties to organize themselves and bring closure. You know, get some closure even if it’s where we have to go, where we’re disagreeing, what more work has to be done, what are the next steps. We need to have a sense of that.

**Must Balance Momentum with Need for Good Process**

Some timelines are non-negotiable because they are dictated by outside circumstances. Examples of external factors that may control the timing of a decision include seasonal

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\(^{17}\) Time frames are discussed at greater length in the next section.
migration patterns, elections, or timelines set by outside decision authorities or arbitrators. When decisions are not time-bound, parties are advised by Cormick et al. (1996) to build in flexible deadlines to keep momentum up, and to back them with contingency plans should they not be met. Deadlines, when not realized, should be used to review progress, to assess the value of continuing, and to determine the best way to proceed. It is also worthwhile to set shorter milestones along the way to help mark progress and bring developments to light.

Although keeping momentum and striving for closure are important, according to Respondent 8 these objectives should not come at the expense of other principles (R8). Developing ground rules, establishing foundations for respectful relations, and building accountability can all take time. But these elements of good process tend to be swept over if a group is too rushed. In the long run, no one is ahead if an agreement and the commitment to carry it through are built on shaky ground. For the same reasons, parties should never feel pushed into decisions they are not prepared to support in the urgency to move ahead. These types of knee-jerk reactions simply lead to other problems later down the road (R8).

**Often Not Enough Time**

Assuring good process and taking time to build solid foundations are essential aspects of good decision-making. But often the period accorded to make decisions is too short, not too long (R5). Despite their best intentions, practitioners do not always have the time to assure that all principles and procedures are carried out to their optimum. As one participant explained, practitioners and parties working under these time-pressured conditions must constantly make tradeoffs between developing good process and stable resolutions, and simply moving things along (R1). Even in situations without hard-set deadlines, the need to keep up momentum and interests imposes its own time limitations. As this latter respondent explained:

> There’s often not the time to build solid, enduring agreements. You don’t have the time. And so you’re ending up within a particular day, or a over series of months, trying to work towards some kind of agreement, but you’re pushed by other factors. You have to come to agreement “because,” or if you don’t, you loose momentum. So you’re continually trading off good process with just having to get on with it. Otherwise, people just kind of drift away from it. And I think that’s a really critical issue. From a very very practical point of view, the other issue is how much time you are given, or are paid to contribute, or have on your agenda. These things can suck up as much time as you’ve got. Usually you’re being paid as a third party. You don’t get paid to do as much as you need. You end up struggling to say: “look we need to do more work,” often up front. We often get called in too late (R1).
3.1.10 Principle 10 - Commitment to Implementation

The tenth and final NRTEE principle highlights the importance of building commitments to implementation (NRTEE, 1993). In addition to gaining constituency backing, it is also essential that the “influencers,” those with decision authority, and those responsible for executing a decision support the outcome. To better assure their commitment, where possible, these individuals should be involved from the outset (R6, NRTEE, 1993).

How an agreement is received by different groups and whether it eventually gets implemented often depends on the quality of earlier stages of decision-making and whether the process succeeded in involving the necessary parties, in keeping people on board, in maintaining connections with outside groups, and in making those involved feel ownership of the results. These things in turn are affected by people’s perception of the process and whether they are satisfied that their interests were heard and properly addressed. The more that parties buy into the outcomes, the more committed they will be to see them through to fruition (R2).

Practical Ways to Make Agreements More Durable

Beyond assuring that the right people are involved and that everyone feels satisfied, there are practical things a table should do to prevent glitches in implementation and make agreements more durable. Once a resolution is reached, for example, the participating groups need to clarify their commitment to implementation. They must also spell out the implementation details (R2; R4; R6). The more specifics they can build into the agreement and record in writing the more resilient the results are likely to be. The facilitator can support this process by encouraging participants to explore the downsides of the proposal, to envision potential pitfalls, and to build in contingency plans or “safety nets” should problems arise (R2; R4; R6, Cormick et al., 1996). The following statement from Respondent 4 highlights the role the third party can play in assuring these details are dealt with:

I think that as a third party you have to be dedicated to not necessarily suggesting ways to implement, but be responsible for ensuring that they think about ways to implement. Like any other agreement, if you don’t follow through on that it will fall apart, because when it gets time to implement and when the “rubber hits the road” it gets tough... And I think it’s your responsibility as the third party, if you’re going to be doing this as a facilitator/mediator, that the “i’s” are dotted and the “t’s” are crossed all the way through. Get people to “what if.” Get them to reality check. Get them to think about what this is going to be like when it actually happens. And that’s the way you get a more durable resolution, and hopefully agreement.

Among the “i’s” and “t’s” to be dotted and crossed in the final agreement, the parties need to specify their funding sources, their individual responsibilities, how each of them will ratify and sign off on the agreement, and how individual parties will be held accountable to their commitments (R2; R4; R6, Cormick et al., 1996). It is also important
to incorporate a monitoring or review process to encourage groups to revisit and fine-tune the agreement at later dates (R6; Cormick et al., 1996). Finally, groups may choose to build in ceremony as a way of marking their accomplishment (R2, Cormick et al., 1996).

Laying the Groundwork for Continuing Relationships

In many instances a practitioner will only be involved in one iteration of an ongoing process. For this reason, part of helping a group through a decision involves helping them predict the problems or contextual changes that might threaten the trust in the group or their capacity to sustain an agreement over the long term. As previously mentioned, a group can plan for potential problems by building contingencies into their final agreement. Even with such safety nets in place though, the capacity of parties to navigate future storms relies heavily on the relationships they established in the course of working together. In the words of Respondent 8:

As far as I’m concerned one of the interests that the parties have got, if they are going to develop a durable long-term solution, is finding ways to manage a relationship which includes managing the differences that are inevitably going to arise in that relationship. Because there’s no doubt that the one thing certain about a resource dispute is that what you solve today, you’re going to have to solve again tomorrow. So whatever the plan is you had last year, you’re going to start needing to rethink it. Hopefully you’ve built kind of the broad parameters, the style to manage the relationship that’s going to enable you to do that.

For this reason, the third party’s role goes beyond merely helping people work through a decision. Recognizing that they will likely not be present in later stages, they must also establish the necessary structures, dynamics and mechanisms to enable the participants to continue to work together and to tackle new problems without third party assistance. One way of helping this relationship-building to occur is to involve participants in procedural decisions all the way along (R8). Two respondents also suggested looking for the talents in the group and building these into the procedures so they are not entirely facilitator-led (R11; R7). Steps also have to be taken to extend the relationships and commitments to the constituencies represented so the arrangements survive the departure of individual people.

3.2 Principles Behind Principles - What Guides Practitioners

In the course of carrying out my interviews, it became apparent that the respondents approached the topic of principles and the list they were shown from slightly different angles, beyond what is described in Section 3.1. Some respondents examined the list from the originally intended perspective — namely, how parties in a consensus process should work together to build durable agreements. Others approached the topic of principles from a more personal standpoint, looking at inner tenets and principles that
guide their own work in this area. This variation in outlooks is reflected in some of the comments made about the list itself. While everyone found the list they were shown to be “good” or “very good” in terms of things they should strive for when working with groups, a couple of respondents who took this more personal standpoint questioned whether all items listed were indeed principles. As one of them put it: “Some of them are methods. Some of them are statements of value. Some of them are objectives. You know you could look at it in all sorts of different ways” (R9).

Points like this bring to surface a key issue about the nature and role of principles in the work of practitioners. It would seem, for one, that practitioners are making use, often simultaneously, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, of multiple layers of principles in their work. If one were to visualize these layers, they might resemble the layers of an onion. Although there is a lot of fluidity and overlap across these layers and frequent movement back and forth through them, in the case of the more external layers, the practitioner’s questions, observations, checks and balances are predominantly directed outwards, to parties at the table and outside processes. With the more inner principles, however, the balance of their attention shift inwards to their own role, actions and motivations.

In the outermost layers, we find the principles of consensus building (such as those discussed in the previous section and the Round Table list) and the principles of negotiation. They help guide how representatives and constituencies involved in consensus-type processes should work together. Moving further inwards through the layers, a practitioner might also refer to principles of facilitation and mediation. These principles deal more specifically with things that they as the third party — rather than the group — must be sensitive to (such as dynamics and power issues in the group) or must do (such as listening, recording, questioning and observing) to ensure a fair and effective process. At the core we find the underlying set of principles that guide the practitioner’s work, namely their own personal ideologies, values, ethics and worldviews. They determine how a practitioner regards his or her role in the process, and how they interpret and put into practice the other levels of principles.

This section examines a few key principles and attributes specific to the third party role that respondents identified as missing from the list they were shown. I begin by looking at core philosophies and ethics guiding the practitioner’s conduct. From there the focus progressively shifts outwards to personal tenets and behaviours practitioners monitor in themselves, and skills and aptitudes they deem essential when interacting with groups.

### 3.2.1 The Core – Keeping Site of the Fundamentals

**It Boils Down to Helping People Make Better Decisions**

The art of helping people work through their differences and build common resolutions does not come from simple rote learning and application of methods and stages. While it is possible to achieve some success with basic training in facilitation and mediation, a common theme from respondents is that being good at this work has more to do with...
personal character, attitude, consciousness of the situation, and ability to structure things properly than with one’s repertoire of techniques. It is not a simple matter of taking a group through a formula of steps and exercises, as useful as some of these methods may be. If anything, success in this field comes from a simple ability and desire to “understand people” and to “work with them to help them build agreements” (R5). As one person explained, to do this practitioners must not only support the group in its discussions, but they must also see themselves as participants in the learning process (R9). They need to keep sight of the fact that the underlying purpose of any consensus process is to help people make better decisions, not to work through a series of “must dos.” More importantly as well, they must understand on a deeper level and emulate in their practice, the philosophies, values and attitudes that they seek to develop in others. These elements represent the core upon which all else is built.

Without a sound grasp of these fundamentals and an understanding of what they are working towards and why, practitioners risk mechanically applying methods regardless of their suitability or their capacity to bring about favourable resolutions. For students of the “methods” reaching this realization may require that they undergo a deep-seated shift in thinking. In fact, Respondent 9 likened the change in mind-set that she needed to undergo to truly excel in this work to a paradigm shift:

It’s really a paradigm shift. Although that word is common, when you actually look at the deeper meaning of a paradigm it is so structural, and at an individual level it’s so structural. When I was training for conflict resolution I couldn’t do the work. In the first three courses I was having nightmares. And I couldn’t understand (I’m a person who learns things you know. Why couldn’t I do this work?) until I realized that it was an inner change and it happened to me. It isn’t about learning skills and doing well and demonstrating it in terms of content and knowing the steps. It was that I had to really believe that I wanted to resolve something with you; that I wanted to gain greater understanding of you and your interests; and that I am in this process with you so we both come out okay. Until I got that, I couldn’t do the work. So it was a structural change in me. So imagine magnifying that to groups and organizations.

### 3.2.2 Personal Tenets and Things to be Sensitive to in Oneself

#### Knowing Oneself

When it comes to personal tenets and ethics that should guide a third party, almost all participants highlighted the need to be self-aware above all else. It can be difficult for people in a third party role to maintain a “neutral” or “independent” stance if they are too close to the issue. For this reason, as a “first principle,” any good facilitator or mediator needs to “really understand who they are” (R12). They need to be aware of their biases and their assumptions about the issue. In addition, they should recognize that their views of how a process should work and the potential solutions are as tainted by their own mores and values as those of anyone else at the table. For this reason, they are not above
the need (that is expected of others at the table) to open their minds, to set their assumptions aside, to listen intently to what others have to say, and to gain new insights on the issue (R8; R13). This self-awareness is particularly important because, at times, individuals in a third party role see themselves as already well informed and open-minded. They may therefore see their task as one of helping to enlighten others, without embracing the need to learn themselves. Respondent 8 shed light on the importance of self awareness for those doing this type of work, explaining:

We’re working within a much closer simulation of reality where you can’t carve out a slice of life and say: “We’re now going to talk about its biological terms irrespective of the whole economic and social framework...” We take life holistically as it appears and try to manage by building a process that accommodates the full portfolio of perspectives and views around that problem. And as a consequence, it isn’t as capable of being professionally run by professionally driven values and rules that somebody has taught to you in university. You have to somehow engage the people that are players in that problem together with their information to shape the rules under which they’re going to govern their discussions around this problem. So you have to be a lot more flexible and malleable. And you have to retreat much more from your own sense of how this is going to go to allow it to take form and to move with that form as it’s taking shape. If you try to impose your own values on it, you’re already beginning to draw the energy out of the problem and recreating it in your own image. And as soon as you start creating it in your own image, you’re not any longer dealing with the problem and the players that have got the problem. You have to continue to give the ownership of the problem back to them.

Beyond recognizing their biases, practitioners need to be aware of how they respond to different situations, emotions and personality-types, and how their interventions affect the process. Although they may not intend to slant the discussions, they have considerable power to dictate the course of dialogue and whose voice is heard. They must therefore be conscious of the influences they exert and why (R12). They must also be sensitive to energy levels — both their own and that of the group — particularly in sessions of several days, and should avoid letting things slide to premature conclusions simply because their momentum or that of the group’s is waning (R3). These types of rushed decisions should always be questioned. Respondent 13, who has been involved on both sides of the table, described the ease with which one can influence a decision outcome if not cautious:

It’s difficult for me because I’ve been very vocal on issues and so I have to be very disciplined not to start to control it, because you can. When you get a group of people and you get them to a place of wanting to come to a decision, it can be easy to influence that. So I have to keep checking myself, checking myself, checking myself — making sure I’m not moving it the way I want it to go as opposed to where the group wants it to go. So I have to make sure that I don’t have a pre-conceived idea as well of what the outcome should be. So that means that there’s going to
be nobody on any side — whether it’s one, two sides, or three, or four — ever feeling that they’ve got influence over me as a facilitator.

Part of the self assessment process involves knowing when one is suited and not-so-suited for a job, be it because one has too much of a stake in the results, because of character differences, or because there are others with more suitable skills and knowledge to deal with the situation. As several participants pointed out, some of them function better in mediative roles under highly charged situations. Others feel more comfortable working in less tense settings where they are leading people through a planning or decision-making exercise. Practitioners also bring different substantive knowledge and expertise to the table.

There is wide debate on whether substantive knowledge is a benefit or a detriment to those in third party roles. It is possible to lead a process without knowledge of the topic. But most of the individuals interviewed felt that it was good to have at least a basic understanding of the issue, even if this involved doing some research beforehand. On the other hand, few people can facilitate discussions on a subject they have strong opinions about without their biases having some influence (R12), so too much grounding in the issue is not necessarily good either.

**Being Open, Transparent and Clear**

Two recommended attributes (or principles) that are extensions of self-awareness are transparency and openness. On the procedural side, transparency involves being clear about the objectives of the process so everyone is on the same wavelength. It also involves clarifying people’s roles and expectations (including those of the third party) and how the process outputs will be used. Beyond these more external aspects, respondents also stressed the need to be transparent and open in one’s approach. Rather than claiming neutrality — which a number stressed was impossible — practitioners are generally best to make their assumptions known. They should inform parties if they feel they are biasing the process. They should encourage group members to challenge their objectivity if concerns exist (R13). They should also be upfront when they are uncertain how to proceed, and should not shy away from seeking the group’s opinion when doubts arise. Respondent 13 described how she has dealt with these types of doubts in the past:

> [W]hat I’ve done is say to the group: “I feel like I’m causing problems with this,” and then let them help me work through it. And that usually does it because as I said earlier, I don’t care who you are (you can be the Prince of England) you’re still a human being and you need to let people know that you are. It’s not weakness. It’s not a weakness at all, it’s a strength. You know, “I’m struggling with this right now and I don’t want to negatively impact the outcome, and if I’m going to, I need to talk to you about it.” And I think you’ve got to be up front all the time about where you’re at with the group.
Being Authentic and Genuine

According to Respondent 5, one of the worst things a facilitator can be is insincere (R5). Sincerity entails having honest intentions and standing behind the things one is asking a group to do. In a consensus process where one is seeking to involve people in decision-making, sincerity also involves having a genuine respect for people’s contributions, a desire to listen and learn from the parties at the table, and a legitimate interest in involving them. Building on this theme, Respondent 4 highlighted the importance of being oneself as well, noting:

[O]ne thing I’ve really learned is that people who are true to themselves tend to be very good at [this work]. People who use their own character, who aren’t obvious about what they’re doing, who aren’t contrived in what they’re doing, who are relaxed and portray, I would go back to saying “their own personality.”

Extending on this last point, another respondent noted that parties quickly pick up on contrived behaviour and unspoken intentions and this in part determines whether they warm up to a facilitator or not (R11). In fact, reiterating many of the conclusions previously touched on in section 3.2.1, this individual estimated that it is often an individual’s ability to gain people’s trust, rather than their skill in using particular methods, that dictates their success in interacting with a group:

I think people involved in a negotiation, or a facilitated event, or a meeting that’s chaired by a third party read the person, but not the method. They read sincerity, not methodology. So I’ve seen all kinds methods work and all kinds of methods not work depending on how the people read the person employing it, not upon the method itself. So you probably know from your own experience, when you walk into a room you pick up the signals of how it really is there, regardless of what people say. You’re either comfortable or you’re uncomfortable, and if you’re uncomfortable it won’t matter what method they are using. It’s because you pick up that sense that either people are not saying what they believe, or that there’s some other agenda behind the scenes here, or it’s not possible to achieve. Your field sense tells you that.... You pick up those signals and it really doesn’t matter what the method is.... So that’s why the appropriation of a particular method by a professional as a commercial tool is often suspect, because it actually doesn’t matter so much. Some methods I guess are more effective in different circumstances, but there’s no precise, perfect tool for all circumstances (R11).
3.2.3 Essential Skills and Attributes When Working With Groups

Being Able to Read the Group and Respond Appropriately

In addition to the tenets and principles guiding a practitioner’s own conduct, the respondents I interviewed also identified several skills and aptitudes they deemed essential to properly facilitate group discussions. Top on this list of skills was the ability to read the group and to adapt one’s style and approach accordingly. One respondent saw this as a particular challenge for practitioners and warned: “If you misread the group the first day, you may have to quit. I’ve actually done that. Yeah, made a mistake. Misread the group at the very first meeting. Had a second meeting and told them that I thought they needed someone else...” (R5). Reading and understanding the group requires that one be sensitive to various things. Among them, practitioners have to gain a good sense of the dynamics in the room, “how people want to interact,” the level of direction the group wants, possible hot spots between individuals, and how much control they as the third party should be exerting on the process (R4). They also need to assess how to work with different character-types in the room. For example, the facilitator should encourage participation and create space for quieter participants to express themselves, but they cannot be too pushy and must respect people’s styles and comfort levels. As Respondent 4 indicates:

> It’s just a fine line between how people want to interact. What their personality and character is. And some people need to speak a lot and some people like to listen quietly and then come up with the diamond. Others like to just spread all the crap around so to speak. And you sort of have to dig through it and build something. Those are just different ways and I can’t expect everybody to participate in the same way. So a challenge is recognizing different people’s characters and styles and then assisting them the best way I can and assisting the group the best that I can.

This ability to read a group is gained in a number of ways. One respondent’s strategy, if dropped into a new group he is unfamiliar with, is to use techniques that encourage people to speak a lot so he can listen to what they have to say. This helps him get a better feel for the personalities and dynamics in the group and the key concerns to address (R12). Another individual — who often works in cross-cultural settings — tries to build relationships with people of different backgrounds and cultures whom she can go to if she needs advice or a more attuned perspective (R2). A capacity to make sense of what one is hearing and to respond appropriately to the signals also comes from general life experience, an exposure to and respect for people from many backgrounds, and a willingness to see things from other eyes. Respondent 11 noted that a lot can be learned from books as well. He added that methodological resources like *Getting to Yes* are useful, but one “might just as easily read Aldous Huxley, or B.F. Skinner, or Bertrand Russell, or Andy Capp in the newspaper” (R11). In fact, in his view any literature that offers insight into the human condition is useful, because more than anything else, consensus decision-making is about working with people. As he expressed it:
You aren’t working with methods, you’re working with people. And as soon as you become fixed on methods from a methodological manual, you lose track of the fact what you’re really trying to do is find out where those people are coming from and helping them get to somewhere else. And all of literature is valuable for that.... I’ve written manuals, but I know that as soon as you’ve written one you realize that you’re adapting the hell out of it immediately, because people don’t come wired that way and they never do it the same way twice.... It’s just that the great trap is to say: “Oh man, this is a perfect method. I’m going to use it everywhere.” instead of saying: “What’s really happening here and which of the various possible methods would seem to fit this circumstance.” That’s the fit. It’s a design fit. And that comes from reading the people, not from reading the methods. So the biggest value for being a facilitator is life experience. And the next most important thing is some sympathy for a wide variety of points of view. The more people you work with, the more people you get to know, if there’s respect for that group of people, then that comes through in the approaches you take with people.... So the real fundamental is I guess liking people and also having some sympathy for a wide variety of walks of life which are what make people tick (R11).

Timing – Knowing How to Intervene and When

Finally, tied in with “understanding the group” and “understanding people” is one more highly regarded attribute referred to by one respondent as “timing.” Simply put, timing consists of knowing when to intervene in a process and when not to. Respondent 12, for one, considered this ability to gauge how and when to deal with a situation as one of the most difficult aspects of his work. To illustrate his point he further explained:

Sometimes when you intervene you shut down the conversation, or you control it, or, you can allow it to continue.... And that can be in situations where people are quiet. Sometimes it’s very important just to be quiet. Sometimes it is important to intervene at certain points. And then how do you do that? Do you do it with a question? Do you do it with a clarification? Do you summarize? It’s those sorts of things. So it’s when you intervene. And then of course “how do you intervene” is the second part of the that (R12).

Among other things, timing includes knowing when to deal with emotion in order to avoid heightening conflict, and when to let it happen because there is a need for people’s emotions and experience to be validated for discussions to proceed (R1; R12). Timing is also important in other instances. For example, a facilitator has to be able to field when they should be calling a break or when they should keep the discussion going longer than scheduled because the group is reaching a bend in the road. While a break called at a misappropriate time can hinder a discussion, breaks can serve as useful tools as well. They are not only beneficial when energy levels are declining, but they are also used to allow emotions to dissipate, to create space for the third party to speak to individuals on
the side, and to enable participants to talk amongst themselves and work through ideas on a more informal basis. This statement from Respondent 8 illustrates to some degree the importance of good timing and the effective use of breaks within a consensus process:

[You've got to be able to read where it's going. And if you don't know where it's going you should take a break for a while. Sort out what is happening. Let things settle down a bit. Often people need to talk quietly, discreetly amongst themselves. And not calling a break at the right time is very dangerous, because sometimes there are a whole bunch of other discussions that need to take place. Sometimes you maybe want to be a little late. But sometimes maybe you don't want to get the thing going.... Let people hang around for half an hour wondering what the heck's going on. It's not such a bad thing sometimes (R8).]

Together with the other attributes listed earlier in this section, timing represents one of a small cross-section of skills and aptitudes that the respondents deemed vital to their effective management of groups and their wider third party role. While the discussion has focused on only a few key traits, a number of authors present a more complete set of ethics, principles and practices that should guide third parties. Two good sources for those seeking further reading are: Beer and Stief (1997) and Kaner et al. (1996).

### 3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at some of the principles for successful consensus building as presented in resources by the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) and expanded upon by the 13 practitioners interviewed. It has also identified other principles more specific to the role of the third party that respondents considered important. To wrap up this discussion and bring some order to the findings, below I review some of the key conclusions I take home from this chapter relative to the four study objectives outlined in Chapter 1.

**Areas of Commonality**

The theory on principles and the respondent's views on this topic overlapped mostly at the ideological level. Conceptually there was in fact considerable support among the respondents for those principles that fell within the National Round Table list. No one considered these particular principles irrelevant. Some did find that they reflected more formal processes, but all still agreed that they were ideals that they at least aspire to in their work. Among the NRTEE principles, the two that shared most unquestioned support were "flexibility" and "respect." While respondents did raise issue with the difficulty in establishing respect among process participants, the common message was that both flexibility and respect are vital foundations for successful consensus building and true headway can not be made without them.
On another level, those respondents who added their own personal principles to the list demonstrated considerable consistency in their messages. The importance of attributes like self-awareness, transparency, good judgment and authenticity were repeatedly raised, as were skills like reading the group, and a good sense of “timing” (or knowing what to do when). Respondents also regularly downplayed the role of selected methods in consensus building. It was emphasized that consensus is fundamentally about helping people make better and more lasting decisions and that this ideal should guide practitioners — not the application of set procedures. As a couple of respondents explained as well, once individuals get caught up in the methods, they risk losing sight of what they are there to do, and then they begin to force decisions to fit the process rather than the other way around (R9; R11).

Examples of “Messiness” and Complexity of Practice

In the real-life interpretation and application of principles, answers are never black or white. Each situation presents its own set of dynamics and conditions requiring that one use one’s experience and reasoning to determine how each principle applies in that circumstance, what is the best way to move forward, and where lines should be drawn. Whether one is establishing the boundary between significant and insignificant interests, determining how much design responsibility to relinquish to the group, or assessing the appropriateness of a consensus process, one must rely on case-by-case determinations and personal judgment.

Real life processes also call one to make regular trade-offs between opposing needs. Examples of trade-offs identified in the interviews included:

- the need to take time to assure good process and the need to keep things moving to maintain energy and enthusiasm;
- the need to represent all significant interests and be inclusive and the need to keep the table to a manageable and effective size; and
- the need to get everyone on board and allow parties to organize themselves and the need to simply move forward or lose the opportunity altogether.

The complex interplay of factors and tradeoffs, the often less-than-ideal conditions, and the uniqueness of each situation render consensus processes much more challenging than they come across in many writings on the topic. More often than not, practitioners have to deal with messy situations where participation is never balanced (though they must strive to make it so), where expectations are unrealistic, where people are not fully on the band-wagon and respectful of one another, where everyone has numerous other things on their plates, where issues and questions are not clearly spelled out, and where resources and time are often lacking. As one respondent expressed it, what the books do not always convey is that consensus building is often a painful process:

I guess if I would say there’s any disparity it’s the expectations of people going into it.... I don’t feel generally that people understand, in theory or when they’re talking, how hard it is. That it’s really tough. Because you’ve got a group of people around saying: “we want to come to

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66
conclusion,” it would seem that you’d be able to reach a conclusion quicker..., when in fact it’s much more difficult. It’s very tough to get consensus. Very tough to get to a feeling of team. So if there is anything, it’s the expectation that consensus building is this new approach and it’s something that’s not as painful. It’s more painful.... It’s really tough and really painful (R13).

Areas of Disparity and Diversity

While on a conceptual level the NRTEE principles make sense, for reasons explained above and for stylistic and ideological reasons, there was considerable diversity in how and how fully individual respondents applied them. Because the respondents work in a wide spectrum of contexts, some viewed these principles as essential requirements that they needed to set in place. Others saw at least some of them as ideals that they should aspire to but not necessarily fully realize. As a general trend, those individuals involved in long-running processes tended to put more time and emphasis on getting proper structures in place. Those primarily leading informal and short-term initiatives were more apt to make trade-offs and to push ahead under less-than-ideal circumstances due to the many constraints binding them.

Respondents interpreted and applied principles differently for other reasons as well. Understandably every individual has their own unique style and no two practitioners will approach a task in quite the same way. But beyond this, there were also ideological distinctions in some of the variations among respondents. For example, the group held very different views on the value of negotiation-type training for very diverse reasons. Even those supporting some level of training tended to approach the task somewhat differently and to emphasize distinct elements. There was also considerable difference in how the respondents approached and involved participants in process design for both practical and ideological reasons. Their various approaches to process design are further described in Chapter 4 (section 4.3.2).

Useful Ideas and Advice Taken From Practice

Beyond these broad messages on principles, the chapter’s previous sections offer numerous ideas for building consensus from professionals who specialize in the field. A few good examples include suggestions around the selection of meeting facilities, pointers on the definition of ground rules and terms, advice on putting things in writing as a fallback for non-compliance, and recommendations for rendering agreements more failsafe and durable. Beyond these examples, one need only read through the various quotes throughout the chapter to find a whole range of tips and insights (big and small) for dealing with contextual situations and tackling tasks in real life.

While respect and flexibility tended to be deemed essential by the latter group, there was greater debate over the remaining NRTEE principles.

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Q - If you could highlight a couple of things, what do you think are the biggest disparities between the theory of this type of work and what happens in practice?
A- Those boxes. The idea that you can put techniques into pigeon-holes when they don’t exist.... The facilitation and mediation and negotiation don’t fit into those things in my opinion, because they’re always some place between the boxes.... I think that we tend to [put things into boxes] when we’re writing books.... And I probably would do the same thing, because you’re trying to diagram things.... I mean you can get away with it in chemistry and physics and soil science, but in this kind of thing where it’s so people oriented, I think that that’s one of the breaks. It is possible that students of the techniques would believe that that’s really going to happen when you’re out there in Bella Coola and you’ve got 40 people at the table. But all the things are going to fit in between. And you’re going to be using anything you can get your hands on to help you.... (Excerpt from Interview 5)

In this chapter, I extend my analysis of the theory and practice of consensus decision-making to examine the general stages practitioners work through when involved in consensus-type work and the different ways they tackle tasks in each stage. As a way of providing some order to what is in fact an immensely complex and diverse field of practice, I use the NRTEE four-stage consensus building framework as a base for structuring my findings. As emphasized in the next section though, my choice to use this framework to hang the threads of commentary over other related models is purely arbitrary.

The chapter is broken down into four parts. In Section 1, I review the NRTEE framework and contrast it against four alternative decision-making models that could have also served as backdrops. Building on this comparison, Section 2 looks at factors contributing to the diversity of practice that are good to keep in mind when interpreting such models. In Section 3, I review the approaches and strategies described by study respondents following NRTEE’s four-stage breakdown. Finally, in the chapter’s last section, I describe some of the ways practitioners modify their approach to suit different circumstances. As in Chapter 3, the data from primary and secondary sources is braided
together rather than being treated separately. One exception is Section 1, which is entirely literature-based.

4.1 Agreement Building Frameworks

4.1.1 NRTEE Consensus Building Framework

In its publication *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles Into Practice*, NRTEE outlines four broad stages one can expect to proceed through when undertaking a consensus process. They include: (1) the assessment stage, (2) the structuring the process stage, (3) the “finding common ground” stage, and (4) the implementation and monitoring agreements stage (Cormick et al, 1996). These four stages are described in greater detail below.

- **Stage 1 - Assessment:** The assessment stage of consensus building is actually a preparatory step aimed at informing affected parties of the proposed process and determining the suitability of a consensus-based approach for dealing with the problem. As part of this review, key parties are encouraged to assess their own commitment to the process and alternatives to getting involved. In the course of making these appraisals, organizers and potential participants work through a number of questions aimed at clarifying the issues, interests, stakeholders and possible table representatives. The outcome of these inquiries provides the fodder for their choices and also lays the groundwork for later stages of decision-making, if the process proceeds.

- **Stage 2 - Structuring the Process:** Provided the principal parties are interested in participating, or at least are willing to investigate the possibility, the process would proceed to stage 2. As part of this “Structuring the Process” stage, representatives of the various interests would come together to jointly design a decision-making process that they feel comfortable with. Depending on the formality and duration of the process, the resulting procedures might consist of one agreement or a range of smaller agreements, including a written set of ground rules, protocols, definitions and details on how the group will work together.

- **Stage 3 - Finding Common Ground:** It is at this third stage in the NRTEE process that the dialogue or “negotiation” on substantive issues truly begins. This stage, like those before, encompasses a number of smaller steps aimed at building a common definition of the issue, creating joint solutions, and searching for a shared resolution — where everybody wins — as opposed to simply middle ground.

- **Stage 4 - Implementing and Monitoring Agreements:** This final stage in the NRTEE process assumes that an agreement has been reached. Beyond laying the groundwork for the successful execution of the group’s decision, this stage also
encompasses the actual implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities and is therefore ongoing.

### 4.1.2 Alternative Agreement Building Frameworks

The four-stage consensus building process described by NRTEE is far from the sole framework of its type. In fact, the materials on shared decision-making, collaboration, strategic land-use planning and dispute resolution offer a variety of other agreement building frameworks to choose from. Table 2 on the following page presents a sample of four such frameworks taken from various resources, in addition to the NRTEE model summarized in Column 1. The four other frameworks include: (a) the five-stage shared decision-making framework adopted by CORE (CORE, 1992: 25), (b) the seven-step regional land use planning approach outlined in the British Columbia Land Resource Management Planning guides (LRMP, 1993a/b), (c) a three-phase collaboration model described by Gray (1989: 57), and (d) Susskind and Cruikshank’s breakdown of the consensus building model for dispute resolution (Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987: 95).

These frameworks share a number of similarities with the NRTEE four-stage process. Most notably, the various stages in all examples include more specific steps aimed at: clarifying the issue and stakeholders; designing or selecting appropriate protocols, methods and procedures; building agreement around the substantive issue; and implementing and monitoring the final agreement. Outside these broad commonalities though, the four other frameworks vary from the NRTEE approach in various ways. An obvious difference, of course, is the number of stages each framework breaks the process into, with the LRMP process listing seven separate stages and others condensing the activities into as few as three. Other differences are summarized below.

- **CORE Shared Decision-Making Framework**: Although the CORE shared decision-making framework in column 2 is closest to the process described by NRTEE, it includes an additional preparatory step detailing activities a convening body or third party should undertake prior to engaging constituencies. While these types of preparations no doubt occur in the NRTEE case as well, the actual agreement building process in NRTEE’s framework is deemed to begin at the assessment stage. The remaining four steps in the CORE process are almost identical to those in the NRTEE format, although CORE gives more detail about the activities under them. They also include some action points (such as “defining information needs” under Stage 3) that are not specifically outlined by NRTEE.

- **LRMP Regional Land Use Planning Framework**: Like CORE, the LRMP Regional Land Use Planning framework also includes a preparatory stage not covered by NRTEE. As well, the LRMP framework incorporates a number of smaller activities specifically tied to land use planning that are not necessary in the NRTEE or other frameworks. The LRMP process also differs from the CORE and NRTEE formats by not including an assessment step in its early stages. This marks a fundamental difference in approach that was also brought out in my interviews. In the NRTEE and CORE processes, all parties must assess the appropriateness of using a consensus
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<tr>
<th>Consensus Process (NRTEE)</th>
<th>Shared Decision-Making (CORE)</th>
<th>Regional Land Use Planning (LRMP)</th>
<th>Collaborative Process (Barbara Gray)</th>
<th>Consensual Approaches to Resolving Disputes (Susskind &amp; Cruikshank)</th>
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<td><strong>1: Assessment</strong></td>
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<td>• Review 10 consensus principles with parties</td>
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<td><strong>3: Finding Common Ground</strong></td>
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<td>• Participants define how to continue to work together</td>
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<td>• Incorporate contingency mechanisms in agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Undertake joint monitoring</td>
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<td><strong>1. Preparation</strong></td>
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<td>• Identify policy requirements</td>
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<td>• Build links with parties</td>
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<td>• Establish availability and means of getting information</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assemble process team</td>
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<td><strong>2. Assessment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Participants assess merits of shared decision-making</td>
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<td>• Assess constituent support</td>
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<td>• Third party assessment</td>
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<td>• Begin to build constituencies</td>
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<td>• Set up communication links</td>
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<td><strong>3. Process Design</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Participants jointly define:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- terms of reference</td>
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<td>- procedural framework</td>
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<td>- agenda</td>
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<td>- information needs</td>
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<td><strong>4. Building Agreement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Clarify issues to be resolved</td>
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<td>• Identify interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Create options to satisfy interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Build agreement based on objective criteria</td>
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<td>• Assess feasibility of agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Formalize agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Seek ratification</td>
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<td><strong>5. Implementation and Monitoring</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Preliminary Organization</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Set regional priorities</td>
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<td>• Identify agency commitments</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Appoint and train team</td>
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<td>• Contact stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify issues and area</td>
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<td><strong>2. Plan Initiation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Select public participation methods; provide training</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Confirm issues and area</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Define budget</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Confirm principles, process and products</td>
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<td><strong>3. Information Assembly</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Describe issues and linkages</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assemble resource inventory</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Conduct resource analyses</td>
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<td><strong>4. Scenario Development</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Define unit boundaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop objectives and strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify mgmt’ scenarios</td>
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<td>• Analyze/assess scenarios</td>
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<td><strong>5. Build an Agreement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strive for consensus on management direction or agree on range of options</td>
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<td><strong>6. Approval</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Submit report for approval</td>
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<td>• Prepare final plans</td>
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<td><strong>7. Implementation, Review, Monitoring &amp; Amendments</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Problem Setting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Build common definition of problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Determine:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- legitimacy of stakeholders</td>
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<td>- convenor characteristics</td>
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<td>- commitment to collaborate</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify resources</td>
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<td><strong>2. Direction Setting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Establish ground rules</td>
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<td>• Set agenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Organize subgroups</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Do joint information search</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explore options</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reach agreement and close the deal</td>
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<td><strong>3. Implementation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Deal with constituencies</td>
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<td>• Build external support</td>
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<td>• Set up implementation structures</td>
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<td>• Monitor the agreement and ensure compliance</td>
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<td><strong>1. Prenegotiation Phase</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Get started</td>
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<td>• Identify and select representatives</td>
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<td>• Draft protocols and set the agenda</td>
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<td>• Undertake joint fact finding</td>
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<td><strong>2. Negotiation Phase</strong></td>
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<td>• Invent options for mutual gain:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- identify interests</td>
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<td>- invent without committing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Create package agreement</td>
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<td>• Bind parties to their commitments</td>
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<td>• Undertake ratification</td>
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<td><strong>3. Implementation &amp; Post-negotiation Phase</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Link informal agreements to formal decision-making</td>
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<td>• Monitor activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Create a process for renegotiation</td>
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building or shared decision-making framework to address the issue in question. This assumes that they enter the process with a particular framework in mind. If the framework is deemed appropriate the specifics about how it will be carried out and the ground rules framing the group’s interaction are then hammered out by the parties. In the LRMP format, on the other hand, the focus is on the product — the land use plan and other outputs leading to its formation. While stakeholder involvement is a chief objective in the development of the plan, how this participation is manifested is not necessarily tied to a particular method. Instead the decision-making methods are selected and designed together with the parties involved. They may include shared decision-making or consensus building or any number of other public involvement mechanisms. This important distinction is further discussed in Section 4.3.1 (under the Assessment stage).

- **Collaborative Process (Gray, 1989):** Barbara Gray’s collaborative process differs from the NRTEE framework in three key ways. First of all, it divides the process into three phases rather than four, condensing the process design (or “structuring the process”) and agreement building (or “finding common ground”) stages into a single step. Secondly, Gray’s framework includes several action points not specifically spelled out by NRTEE, including: the identification of the convenor characteristics and resources (in stage 1) and the organization of subgroups and a joint information search (both in stage 2). A final difference relates to the accountability to constituents. As discussed in the previous chapter, NRTEE recommends maintaining regular representative-constituency communication throughout a decision to keep them on board. This contrasts with Gray’s approach, which puts most of the emphasis on constituency communication in stage 3 (Implementation), after the table has reached a decision. Representative-constituency communication at this late stage is largely aimed at “persuading” constituencies that the agreement “is the best they could secure” (Gray, 1989: 86), rather than informing the outcome itself.

- **Consensual Approach To Resolving Disputes (Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987):** Like Gray’s collaborative process, Susskind and Cruikshank’s consensus building framework for resolving disputes is also divided into three phases, but with a different breakdown. Susskind and Cruikshank also include a number of action points not specifically detailed in the more general NRTEE layout, including joint fact finding in stage 1 and ratification activities in stage 2.

4.2 The Complexity Of Practice

4.2.1 Diversity and Context-Dependency

The frameworks discussed in Section 4.1 serve to demonstrate that there is far from a single way to approach agreement building. Indeed, these frameworks represent only a small cross-section of the approaches described in the literature and used in practice. This same kind of diversity is also reflected in my study findings. In fact, working
through the interview transcripts in preparation for this chapter, it was far from evident what theoretical framework best suited my needs. The “boxes,” as Respondent 5 so illustratively defines them in the opening quote, did not necessarily jump out in an orderly and well-bound fashion. And while there were many parallels across what individuals said and the books recounted, each and every source presented a somewhat different twist and order to the tale. While some respondents claim to be guided by a process quite similar to that outlined by NRTEE and CORE, the approaches described by others more closely resemble one of the three other frameworks listed in Table 2, or contain aspects of more than one approach. Still others described processes that do not fit any particular framework, or include unique steps that do not appear in any of the staged approaches discussed above. Kolb and Associates (1994: 4) describe encountering a similar diversity in their own study of mediation practitioners. They write:

What we learned was that mediation is an adaptive and responsive process; in fact, it is altogether a rather loose process that captures considerable diversity under its label.... We learned that even within similar fields, little consensus is apparent on how to practice mediation.

Not only do processes vary across practitioners, but even the standard approaches described by individual respondents are so context-dependent that they never quite do the same thing twice. As some of them outlined, when it comes to real-life processes, the entry-points and order in which tasks are carried out are far from fixed (R7; R11), there is a lot of movement back and forth between stages (R1; R8; R10; R11), and the processes are often circular and iterative rather than linear (R1; R3). The same can be said for the theoretical frameworks listed in Table 2, which serve as loose guides and representations of practice, as opposed to inflexible formulas that must be followed sequentially (CORE, 1992; Gray, 1989; Darling, 1998). To emphasize the matter, Respondent 7 made the distinction between models, which he considers more rigid, and frameworks, which he sees as fluid and adaptable, and thus the more accurate term for this purpose. In his words:

I think we do need to be systematic. People need to understand that there’s a way through all this, but we also have to be flexible. So we can’t be resistant to a group of people saying: “Well you know we need to do this element before that element.” Or it can easily take on a different shape if that would be the case. That’s why, and I’m sure the materials probably made this point, but I’m much more focused on it I guess, and that is this notion [that] it’s an organizational framework, it’s not a model. And that’s really an important distinction for me, because models speak of hard edges. You know, “you do it this way” (R7).

Figure 1, taken from the British Columbia Dispute Resolution Office publication Working Together, helps illustrate in a visual manner the complex and adaptive nature of practice described above and the influence of context in these types of processes. While the figure is meant to represent a shared decision-making process, it can just as easily apply to NRTEE’s consensus building framework, which follows similar steps. The circular format used in the diagram depicts the iterative and non-linear nature of the decision-
making process. The arrows linking each of the stages signal that parties may have to revisit earlier steps as they move through the process. Also, the overarching umbrella indicates the need for all those involved in a process to understand the policy framework bounding a decision (including the timelines, available resources, relevant research, legislation and policy), so they can make informed decisions about getting involved (Darling, 1998). This umbrella could easily be expanded to include wider contextual issues as well.

**Figure 1. Complexity and Context-Dependency of the Agreement-Building Process**

4.2.2 Indistinct Boundaries and Overlap Between Stages

The dynamic character of a consensus-type process is rendered more complicated yet because, in practice, the stages shown in the diagram are far from discrete. Not only is there a lot of overlap between each of the steps, but they also include a number of iterative activities that cannot be isolated to one fixed moment, event, or stage. The Assessment stage and Design (or what NRTEE terms “Structuring the Process”) stage offer good examples of the overlap and inter-dependency between process stages. While most frameworks separate out these two tasks either as independent steps or sub-steps, there is in fact a lot of crossover between them. For example, in the process of assessing the appropriateness of a particular mode of decision-making with stakeholder groups,
there is often discussion on the different shapes this method can take and how it might be tailored to their needs. Therefore, already in the assessment stage, the individual groups, the convening body and the third party are working through aspects of process design.

Just as design activities are carried out in the assessment stage, the reverse is also true with assessment-type activities often carrying over into the design and structuring phase. As groups labour through how they will work together, they repeatedly shift back and forth between hammering out ground rules and procedures and assessing their willingness to adhere to the proposed structure. In fact, taking a broader view yet, it could be claimed that both assessment and design are activities that occur repeatedly, to varying degrees, throughout each and every stage of the process.

This claim can also be made of the substantive discussions — usually associated with Stage 3 of the process. The assessment, design and agreement building stages all include activities aimed at clarifying issues and expectations. With each iteration however, the detail sought increases. The following statement from Respondent 8 paints a picture of this transition from preliminary issue-related questions aimed at clarifying expectations and procedures to the more formal substantive discussions associated with stage 3:

Now [the stages] take different forms in different circumstances, but broadly we take people through a process of assessing whether or not there’s some viable possibility of going into this kind of a set of activities and telling them “no” if we don’t think there is. We then take them through a set of discussions to try to develop clarity of expectations about what it is that they’re going to try to do, what the roles and responsibilities and activities within that are.... The third step is to take them right into the conversations. And we kind of back in because usually as we start evolving into a set of discussions around how we’re going to work together before we start trying to work together, we start inevitably talking about how we’re going to structure our discussion and we start identifying what the issues are. So we’re starting to crawl into substance. We start talking about how we’re going to inform that discussion and what information we need. We’re starting to crawl into the substantive end.... So the boundary kind of smooths one into the other, but the fundamental path is the same.

4.2.3 Diversity in Practitioner Involvement

People involved in consensus building work vary in the range of roles they assume, making how they approach practice more diverse yet. The role practitioners play in a process depends on a number of inter-related factors including: the purpose of the process, the particular third party function they are asked to fulfill, whether they are handed a rigidly or loosely framed structure to work within, their personal style, and tied
to this, how much their interest extends beyond facilitating in-meeting discussions to include any of a number of wider mediative responsibilities described in Appendix 5.

In addition, practitioners vary in the points at which they commonly enter and step out of processes. While an individual's point of entry and exit will depend on the role they are brought in to do, some practitioners are much more firm about being involved from the outset and typically refuse to step into initiatives designed by others. Respondent 1 felt particularly strong on this issue. He explained his reasons saying:

As a facilitator you're asked to facilitate to a set of objectives within an agenda and one of the things that most good facilitators would do would be to secure the consent of the group at the beginning to accept the objectives or refine them, so they all know what they're there to do.... and to accept to work within the agenda. Not that it can't be refined if the group decides to do something at some later date, but at least to start there. Without that consent, the facilitator has nothing to work with. If those objectives aren't clear, or if the agenda doesn't work, I get handed a set of tools or a direction and a process which is really awkward. And I will not compromise my professional reputation or the needs of the group to somebody else's lousy process that they've developed (R1).

Other practitioners are more flexible about when in a consensus process they get involved and occasionally or regularly accept to step in mid-way through talks (R4; R5; R6; R7; R9). Respondent 7, for one, explained that his role and the duration of his involvement vary with each decision. He prefers to be involved from the outset. But even when he is, his role may not necessarily extend to the facilitation of substantive discussions. In some instances, he might only assume a convening role — helping to get the parties to the table and supporting them through the design activities. This contrasts with other cases where he may only step in once substantive discussions are underway, and where he may have to do some back-pedalling to get talks on track. As he explains:

It varies a lot. Increasingly I like to be involved at the outset with the sponsoring agencies and go through the preparation stage.... And then the

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19 When asked how they would define the difference between facilitation and mediation, most respondents agreed that facilitation is more closely tied to assisting a group to improve its effectiveness in solving problems and making decisions (generally in meetings). Mediation, on the other hand, is more a way of gathering information and bringing people together to work through an issue and is often, though not necessarily, associated with some type of conflict. As Respondent 8 also indicates, mediation is the more encompassing of the two terms, embracing "everything from brokering information between parties, to facilitating large group meetings and everything in between." Extending on this theme, Cormick and Knaster (1986: 8) define mediation as "negotiation with the assistance of an independent intervener or third party" adding that this third party, or mediator, performs three major functions. These functions include: (i) convening where one assists the parties to define the terms and conditions under which they will negotiate; (ii) brokering where one represents the interests, concerns, and ideas of the parties to one another, often outside of joint sessions; and (iii) facilitating in joint sessions. While respondents generally agreed on the broad distinction between facilitation and mediation, all also stressed that in practice the precise boundaries between these two terms and other third party roles are far from clear cut. Also, while most practitioners lean more towards facilitation or mediation, almost all play a combination of all third party roles in practice and shift the balance of their focus depending on the situation.

Chapter 4 - Process and Stages of Consensus Decision-Making
next stage that I welcome being involved in is what I call “convening.” So it stops short of being appointed a facilitator or mediator, but simply assuming a role of bringing it all together through the assessment process, design stage and letting the participants decide at that point: “Do we need third party assistance?” (Important question.) “And if so, who?” It may not be me. It may be entirely appropriate that it be someone else. So allowing them to take responsibility for that I think is key. So yes, I try to be involved from the outset. But there are however times when I get brought in after they’ve been fighting for a year and you know they’re about to walk out of the room. Then it’s a need to again tailor a process to fit. You don’t want to give people the impression that they’re going back to square one. Yet, they have to go back to square one in some appropriate way that allows them to come to grips with the issue (R7).

4.3 More Directed Look at Process Stages

In this section, I use the NRTEE four-stage framework to structure respondent comments and strategies associated with the process and steps of consensus decision-making. On occasion, I also inject practical suggestions for working through specific tasks taken from various resources. While the NRTEE framework offers a convenient backdrop for organizing my study findings, as previously stressed, this is only one in an endless array of ways that I could “box” the information. Rather than being viewed as a rigid set of steps, the breakdown that follows should be read with an understanding of the iterative and dynamic character of most of the activities outlined (irregardless of where they have been slotted), the fluid boundaries, immense overlap and non-linear movement between the process stages, and the many contextual factors that give each decision its own unique nuance.

4.3.1 Assessment Stage

As discussed in Section 4.1, the assessment stage of consensus decision-making involves an overlapping set of activities aimed at defining the problem, identifying potential parties to involve, and assessing the appropriateness of a consensus-type process for dealing with the question. This section reviews a range of respondent comments on several sub-elements or tasks in this stage. These tasks include:

- defining the objectives and policies framing the process;
- determining the context surrounding a decision;
- clarifying stakeholders and issues;
- assessing the appropriateness of proposed methods and preferred modes of involvement; and
- helping parties prepare for the process.
Defining Objectives and Policies Framing the Process

There are a number of details a facilitator or mediator will generally want to know about a substantive decision they are being asked to facilitate before determining the best way to move ahead or whether to undertake the initiative at all. Logically, one of the first things practitioners do when they enter a consensus process is clarify the intentions of the group commissioning the initiative and what they hope to achieve (R10; R3). These details should form the backbone of whatever procedural structure they develop. As well, they will generally seek to clarify the policies governing the decision, the level of influence those taking part will have on the final outcome, and the resources, time and budget available to carry the process through. This information should be used by the third party and the commissioning body to determine the logic and viability of using some form of consensus decision-making over less intensive methods. It should also be shared with potential stakeholder groups so they can make an informed decision about their own involvement. In order to support this process, Darling (1998: 46) suggests having the sponsoring agency prepare a written policy framework that addresses these and other decision-framing questions in a language everyone can understand. As Respondent 7 highlights, in cases where a decision-maker is convening a consensus process around an issue they have authority over, they need to be particularly clear about their purpose, what will be done with the decision outcome, and the level of authority being delegated to the table:

I spend a lot of time early on in a process with the sponsoring agency. “Well let’s talk about what policy is going to govern this process, because you can’t abdicate your ability [to make decisions], you’re not going to abandon your statutory responsibilities, you’re not going to fetter your discretion contrary to the law. So given all of that, what guidance, what directions can you offer to the participants?”.... I think it’s very important that people know up front what is the overarching policy umbrella and then they can make an informed decision about “can we work within that umbrella.” “Is it likely that this will change legislation?” “No it’s not.” So you need to know that up front. On the other hand, [if they say]: “We’re open to that possibility.” Great. So that too is an important part of the process.

Determining the Context Surrounding a Decision

Beyond understanding the policies bounding a decision, practitioners usually try to get a sense of the history and broad socio-economic and political factors underlying the issue and potentially affecting the process. For example, in the course of identifying the affected parties, and prior to meeting with them, third party practitioners will generally get an overview of the economic factors that might affect people’s sense of security and receptiveness to dialogue. They will also try to understand the historic interactions among the stakeholder groups, potential hot spots that might impact on the process, and the level of trust both among the parties and between the parties and the sponsoring agency. According to one respondent, these types of contextual factors affect how easily participants work together, their openness to compromise, and the pieces a third party has
to get on the table to overcome mistrust before the group can discuss more substantive matters. In her words:

[I]t’s not like you can take any old process, and walk into any old group, on any old issue and it’ll work. You have to be mindful of context.... What’s the history of trust between the decision-maker — in this case the Government — and the public. If they have nothing but mistrust and bad experiences, then you’re starting with a deficit. In the case.... where there’s been a history of good involvement with the public and between Government and public, you’ve got a balance in your account. You’ve got that working towards it. And you need to be mindful of that because different groups and communities with different levels of experience and nervousness around issues and economics and so on are going to receive a process differently. And I think to go in oblivious of that is dangerous (R3).

Clarifying Stakeholders and Issues

The identification of stakeholders and the clarification of their concerns and expectations are two iterative tasks that a third party begins addressing in their earliest discussions with the sponsoring group and continues to investigate more and more intensively as they progress through the assessment and later stages. If time allows, practitioners will generally meet privately with some or all of the stakeholders before the table convenes to discuss the group’s take on the problem, their concerns, their objectives, their sense of the timing and urgency of the decision, and their view of where other parties stand (R11). While the type of information the third party tries to gather about and from individual groups is quite similar from one practitioner to another, how they go about collecting this information varies. For example, one person in my study explained that he generally asks each group to provide a one-page written statement outlining their expectations for the process. “Basically it’s a position,” he added. “What is their position? Why are they coming? What do they expect to get? Where do they think this is going?” (R4). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover the full range of other strategies described by respondents, below I present two other approaches used by Respondent 1 and Respondent 12 respectively.

Respondent 1 is one of several study participants who insist on being involved in processes early on. His standard approach to identifying issues and stakeholders is to work with a steering committee or subgroup of stakeholders who assist him with preparations and inform him of the issues. To get a broader view of the situation, he often also speaks with constituencies, solicits input from friends and colleagues, and attends related events. As a common practice, as part of his preparatory activities, he takes the information he has collected from various sources and develops a summary document outlining the issue — as he understands it — and a proposed process for dealing with it (R1). In his own words:
What I would be doing is a bunch of initial prep where I would work maybe with a steering committee... I would then basically get a whole bunch of information from them. Ask them questions.... All the design parameters. There’s a list in my head. But certainly: What are the issues? Who’s involved? How long do we have? What are the points of closure? What are the things we really need to decide? What are the things we’re just trying to get more information on? What don’t you want to talk about? What are your biggest fears about this event? The scope, objectives, participants, pace, and so on. What are the other things going on? The other thing I try and figure out is context.... Then what I do is I take all this information away and I go and develop a draft of something that pulls these ideas together — that says: “Here’s what I think I’ve heard.” And it’s part of my process of making sure that they’re comfortable with what I’m doing, and explaining what we intend to do in this event. And you begin to negotiate some framework for the discussion. And that is iterative. You go back and forth through the planning committee. And maybe then you’d also be, in this phase, talking to other parties.... You might go to another event and hang around and talk to people.... You might talk to some trusted friends and colleagues about: “What do you think is going on here?”

As explained in the above statement, Respondent 1 generally makes repeated passes through his summary document incorporating outside and committee feedback each time. Once the document is complete, he takes this information and, in consultation with the steering committee, works it into what he terms a briefing guide or workshop guide. While Respondent 1 did not list all the items covered in the briefing guide, some things he did mention were:

- information on the background and history leading to the proposed initiative;
- some background information on the third party or parties assisting with the process;
- a breakdown of the issues and concerns;
- a list of “outcome framed” objectives;
- the anticipated outcomes (including both soft and hard outcomes);
- a description of who is taking part and who is not and why;
- a proposed agenda; and
- details on how participants might be involved (for example, a series of proposed questions or a suggested discussion framework).

In expanding on some of the items addressed in the briefing guide, Respondent 1 highlighted several points to keep in mind. First, he stressed the importance of framing the objectives so the expected outcome or product is clearly communicated. As he stated: “They’re not: ‘The objective is to discuss...’ They are: ‘The objective is to determine the specific allocations within [fishery ‘x’]’” (R1). Secondly he described the purpose of the anticipated outcomes section, which is to ensure yet again that the purpose of the initiative is clear and that everyone shares the same understanding of what they are working towards. In addition to hard products, these anticipated outcomes might include
softer outputs, such as improved understanding among parties and the clarification of points of agreement and disagreement (R1).

According to Respondent 1 the briefing guide, once complete, is generally circulated to all participants before they convene. Among other things the document helps to orient people to the “event” and its purpose. It allows them to see that their concerns are being addressed. It enables them to correct any misconceptions about the issue or objectives early on. Also, on a more substantive level, the guide begins to introduce stakeholder groups to one another’s concerns and is therefore an example of the crossover into substance in the preparatory stages.

While the briefing guide is meant to provide some structure to the table discussions, Respondent 1 also indicates that the proposed framework within it is not cut in stone. The parties, once convened, sometimes choose to throw the suggested design out and go with another plan. Even in these instances though, the original framework can still serve as a contingency if the group hits a wall. As Respondent 1 explains:

They may say: “We don’t want to talk about it.” In which case, that’s fine. But, we’ve got something to fall back on. And I try and get agreement to that first and then we have a default.

Respondent 12 presented yet another approach to clarifying issues that offered a slight variation to the strategy outlined above. According to what he describes Respondent 12 puts a lot of emphasis on trust-building and one-on-one interactions with individual groups before convening the table. He also tends to assume a stronger brokering role — meeting with individual parties to discuss their issues and concerns, and also relaying misconceptions other parties have about their position. In doing so, he tries to encourage groups to clarify to themselves and to others what their precise interests are, so they come to the table better prepared. As in the previous example, Respondent 12 also crosses into more substantive dialogue even in this early stage. However, in his approach, most of the communication between the parties is initially channelled through him. Also, most of the communication is done verbally, and less focus is put on getting the various interests down in writing. To better illustrate his approach, he described a multi-party process he led to determine the future of a park:

For me it was very important that there was trust built up between myself and each of the groups.... So I would go to where they lived so it felt very comfortable and I would talk to them and get to know them and about their issues.... Now say group number “C” here felt that they really wanted a park. Now [another group] thought this was ridiculous. So I would go to the people and I’d listen to their perspective and then I would say: “Okay, people feel that you want to have a park. Is that true?” “Yes” “So okay a park. What does that mean? Others feel that when you say ‘park’, you just want green grass.” And they would say to me: “No that’s not exactly what we want at all…. We want...” And then they’d describe what is a park. And then I would say to them: “How others view you is this way. But you don’t see yourself that way, so how
are you communicating that? Are you really clear what you want as a park?” Many times they weren’t able to articulate their position clearly so others could understand it. So what I would do is I would work with them on clarifying their position (R12).

Assessing Suitability of Proposed Methods and Preferred Modes of Involvement

As previously discussed in Chapter 3, despite consensus decision-making’s many benefits, there are cases when it is not the best means of dealing with a problem for any number of reasons. There may be a lack of time and resources to support the process or inadequate means or authority to implement the outcomes. Affected parties may lack interest in participating. Or it may simply not be a cost-effective means of dealing with the problem. For these and other reasons, one of the things most practitioners will do in the assessment stage is determine the appropriateness of the proposed process and possible ways of structuring steps to enhance the chance of success. As Respondent 6 stressed:

We shouldn’t just consider that it’s the way to go at all. We need to do assessments. We need to ask ourselves a whole series of questions around that..... I mean there are about 15 questions I would want to look at before moving into a mediated or facilitated process, a larger process. And sometimes it’s that they’re not resourced adequately in terms of time or resources for the parties to actually do the work that they’re being asked to do. If you’ve got a better down side. If the parties with authority aren’t going to be there. All those basic threshold questions. You need to look at that and see how you can structure a process that’ll be viable. If you can’t, then it’s not the right time.

Below I discuss three specific considerations related to the assessment of methods raised in the interviews or the literature. They include: (a) the balance between assessing proposed methods and tailoring approaches to context; (b) the role of good communication within the assessment process; and (c) suggested tools for selecting among methods.

a) Balance Between Assessing Methods and Tailoring Approaches to Context

As previously mentioned, beyond evaluating the feasibility of a process independently and with the sponsoring agency, most practitioners also carry out assessments with each stakeholder group (R3; R7). According to Respondent 7, in the large processes he is involved in, this is often done in a multi-layered approach with parties appraising their options on their own first and then as part of the convened group. “So we independently think this is a good idea,” he said, “together we think this a good idea, and the third party, me, I also reserve the right to assess.”

Broadly put, the assessment of methods involves two types of activities: (i) assessing the appropriateness of a particular decision-making approach, and (ii) tailoring methods to suit the situation and people’s desired level of involvement — thereby crossing into design (R3). While practitioners will do a mix of both assessing and
When working through this stage, as shown in Figure 2, these activities tend to be inversely related. Put simply, the more rigidly defined a process is, the more a practitioner’s focus is on determining the suitability of the proposed approach and the less flexibility they have to tailor their methods to the situation. Conversely, the less defined the process is, the less a practitioner needs to assess methods, and the more opportunity they have to customize their approach.

Figure 2. Relationship Between “Assessing” and “Tailoring” Methods

How the assessment process is approached and the weight given to assessing and tailoring depends on a number of factors. These factors include: the role the third party is brought in to do; whether a particular method has been proposed; whether this chosen approach is tightly or loosely conceived; and the resources and time available. It also depends on the practitioner’s own expertise, style and outlook. For example, some practitioners interviewed specialize in certain styles of consensus building and may even be hired because of their expertise in a certain methodology. Conversely, other respondents prefer to be less tied to a particular approach — and in some cases are recognized instead for their substantive expertise — and feel it important to start with the parties, the issues and the objectives, and to devise a strategy from there. Respondent 11 was a particularly strong proponent of this latter (tailoring-type) style. He described his personal approach to assessment as follows:

[T]he first thing to find out is who are the people who are materially engaged in an issue, what it is they believe the issue to be, what sense of timing or urgency they have, what they believe to be at stake.... In other words, it’s an investigation of the people and their views.... That’s the bedrock upon which everything else is based. And then I guess the next thing to do would be to decide what approach to take towards resolution, or discussion, or consultation, or whatever you’re planning to do. And that’s something that can also be discussed with those same people.... This is different, by the way, than offering shared decision-making, or offering consensus-building, or offering a judicial review,.... and then asking people whether or how they want to use that system. To my mind that’s turning the whole system on its head (R11).

The line between the two personal styles described above (i.e. those tied to a particular method, and those who prefer to start with the task and context and choose
a method from there) is far from clear-cut, of course. Individual practitioners do not necessarily fall into one camp or the other, and many fall somewhere in between, having at least a loose conception of how they might tackle a task. Some also shift their style depending on the mandate they are presented. Furthermore, because practitioners frequently use a whole range of techniques when addressing an issue, even those who enter with a predominant approach in mind can be very flexible in how they mix and match the activities within it to fit the context and stakeholder preference (R7). The following statement by Respondent 7, who relates his experience with a government commission, offers a good example of this flexibility within a selected approach:

We’re at the assessment stage where we’re inviting prospective participants to assess the merits of a negotiated approach. We assumed and had proposed as part of our policy umbrella a shared decision-making approach or a consensus-based approach.... We were somewhat surprised to hear the employer community in this case saying: “Well no, we don’t have the time.... This is not the best way of doing this.” And that turns on a lot of things. One, misunderstanding.... Or “we’re not on the same page” is probably a better way of putting it. They have a different perception of what shared decision-making is than the sponsoring agency did. So there’s a need to work through all of that and, without departing from the organizational framework, tailor to fit in that context something that will work. It may be shared decision-making with a heavy emphasis on consultation in order to feed shared decision-making. It may rely on a lot of communication in order to support that kind of process.

b) Communicating Options

In addition to illustrating the adaptive nature of processes like shared decision-making and the overlap between assessing and tailoring, the previous statement by Respondent 7 signals the need for clear communication among the sponsoring agency, the third party and the wider interests when doing assessments. For one, it helps assure that everyone is working from the same assumptions. Also, whether a specific mode of decision-making is being proposed or the parties are assessing how they would like to deal with the problem, it is important to ensure that people understand the procedural options open to them and how these might be modified so they understand their choices (R4; R7).

The LRMP publication Land and Resource Management Planning: Public Participation Guidelines (1993: 40-48) offers an example of how one agency has gone about communicating procedural options to participants. As part of its participation guidelines, LRMP outlines a sample of 17 public involvement techniques that participants might incorporate in any combination into their sub-regional planning processes — running from steering committees and round tables at the more intensive end, to summary reports and newsletters on the least intensive side. They also include details about each technique that LRMP planners are expected to review with participants before deciding on methods. These details
include a description of why and when in a process the technique might be used, who it is meant to target, and ways the method might be implemented to have wider reach.

c) **Tools for Determining Best Level of Involvement**

Determining what level of involvement is appropriate for a situation is often a matter of judgment and is guided by such considerations as the nature and significance of the issue, the level of controversy and stakeholder interest, and the financial, time and policy constraints (Darling, 1998). While there is no sure fired way for choosing among methods, the literature on governance, multi-party planning and participatory decision-making provide a range of tools to help in the task. These tools are generally targeted at decision-makers and are meant to assist them in determining the level of public involvement that best suits their purpose. But, they can also be used by parties at a table when evaluating the appropriateness of proposed methods; determining how best to deal with individual tasks or sub-issues; or deciding how they will work and communicate with their constituents and other outside groups.

**Figure 3. Stakeholder Participation Continuum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Educate</th>
<th>Gather Information</th>
<th>Consult on Reactions</th>
<th>Define Issues</th>
<th>Test Ideas, Seek Advice</th>
<th>Seek Consensus</th>
<th>Delegate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Some Applicable Methods:

- Position Papers
- Written Briefs
- Opinion Surveys
- Public Meetings
- Workshops
- Task Groups
- Public Advisory Committees
- Joint Planning Teams

Increasing Expectations

Increasing Level of Commitment

Source: Darling, 1998; Dorcey et al., 1994

Figure 3 is an example of one such assessment tool that is included in decision-making resources by the British Columbia (B.C.) Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (Dorcey et al., 1994), CORE (1994b) and the B.C. Dispute Resolution Office (Darling, 1998). It is devised to help decision-makers select the most appropriate level of public involvement based on their purpose for seeking people’s participation. It lays out various public involvement methods along a spectrum that runs from least intensive methods (such as information dissemination) on the left, to most intensive (such as workshops and consensus processes) on the right. These methods correspond with the series of “purposes” running left to right at the top of Figure 3. According to the diagram, for example, if a decision-maker is seeking to involve stakeholders for the strict purpose of *gathering information*, they are best to use *opinion surveys* or *public meetings* over more intensive forms of
participation. On the other hand, if their intent is to seek consensus or delegate responsibility for a decision to outside parties, methods such as public advisory committees or joint planning teams would be the more appropriate choice.

CORE (1994b) and Dorcey et al. (1994) offer other suggestions for using Figure 3 as an assessment tool. For one, CORE (1994b) recommends a shift rightward to more intensive forms of participation as decisions become more challenging, complex and controversial. As a way of aiding in the choice, Dorcey et al. (1994) also advise a shift towards the more intensive forms public involvement if: (i) public values are unclear or are mixed; (ii) there is no clear stakeholder desire for action; (iii) the interest groups are not well defined; (iv) there is a lack of factual information or a considerable disagreement about its validity; and (v) the decision-making authority and the affected parties have conflicting goals and perspectives. As indicated on the bottom of the diagram, this type of rightward shift generally calls for higher commitments in time and money, increasing levels of interaction with affected parties, and a greater transfer in decision-making authority from the decision-maker to those taking part in the process. Thus, if money and time are a factor, or if there is no will to share decision-making authority, the use of less intensive methods is probably advised.

Table 3. Choosing Between Consultation and Consensus Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions That Favour Consultation</th>
<th>Conditions That Favour Consensus Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• decision non-controversial</td>
<td>• controversial/must balance competing values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• insufficient concern to sustain lengthy process</td>
<td>• sufficient concern to sustain intensive process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• straightforward (few issues/relatively homogenous interests)</td>
<td>• complex (many issues / range of interests)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• minor social, economic, biophysical impacts</td>
<td>• high social, economic, biophysical impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• limited discretion being exercised</td>
<td>• wide discretion being exercised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• constituent expectations for involvement low</td>
<td>• constituent expectations to be involved high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• key players not organized/representatives lack constituent support</td>
<td>• representatives empowered to speak for constituency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• limited time /need timely decision, emergency</td>
<td>• time available/ motivating urgency but not emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• general agreement on data</td>
<td>• disagreement or gaps in data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• constituent commitment not essential to implement</td>
<td>• constituent commitment essential for implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• groups unwilling to work together /face-to-face</td>
<td>• groups willing to work together /face-to-face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from CORE, 1994b: 33 (with additions from Brown, 1996).

As a complement to Figure 3, Table 3 (above) offers more specific criteria for choosing among two of the more intensive forms of public involvement — public
consultations and consensus-type processes — by outlining conditions that favour each approach. According to Darling (1998) an important factor to consider when choosing between these two process-types is the degree of stakeholder support required to implement the resolution. Research has shown that people are more likely to accept a decision if they feel the process leading to it was fair and allowed for their adequate, legitimate and effective representation (Hillier, 1994). So, if stakeholder support is needed to implement the agreement, the costs of involving them through a more intensive process might be warranted (Darling, 1998).

Helping Parties and Representatives Prepare for the Process

I have already discussed several tasks that practitioners commonly work through with the relevant parties as part of the assessment stage, namely: defining objectives and context, clarifying the issues, and evaluating (and tailoring) the methods to be used. A final thing a practitioner may do before convening the table, is help individual groups with their pre-process preparations. In constituencies with a high level of organization and cohesiveness and with a decision-making and communication structure already in place, the practitioner may have little need to get involved. But, in situations where there is considerable diversity or disagreement among constituents, the third party may need to work with them to determine where they stand as a group, the best person to represent them at the table, and how this representative will communicate back to the constituency. The following example taken from my interview with Respondent 2, shows the range of things she had to do to help set up a mediation table to deal with a troubled government-funded program in a small rural community. Three key parties were involved in the process: the government ministry, a First Nations organization, and a parents’ group of mixed First Nations cultures.

What it involved was deciding who the players needed to be at the mediation table. So who — given that each of these parties was quite big — who were going to be the people to represent the parties at the table, and what voices would be trusted to be representative of that party. So there was a great deal of preparatory work involved in me going to this community on more than one occasion, interviewing a number of people from those two groups [the First Nations organization and the parents’ group] —the government folks were from downtown Vancouver so they were more accessible — and then making recommendations about representation.... Then, once we got agreement on who would be at the table, then working on who the elder would be.... And so there was a considerable amount of discussion about who that person should be and what tribe they should be from.... And then a lot of work involved in helping that elder to understand the kind of process we’d be using. And then working with the people to try to modify the process so it would be acceptable to them (R2).
4.3.2 “Structuring the Process” Stage

Provided the key stakeholders come out of the assessment activities willing to explore the possibility of collaboration, they would then proceed to the next stage in the NRTEE consensus process aimed at structuring (or designing) the process (R4; R7). While proposed structures, objectives, conditions and methods begin to be floated during the previous assessment, it is in the structuring the process stage that the party representatives formally meet to work out, and hopefully approve, the details of their collaboration. Among other things, parties try to build agreement on what precisely they will try to do, how they are going to proceed, and the things that each of them need to gain comfort on before committing themselves. Also, in more formal processes, groups generally prepare a written set of ground rules and procedures to guide their work together.

Several respondents noted the ability of this stage of decision-making to either make or break a process. Respondent 8, for one, saw great importance in taking the time to lead participants through these structural discussions so they gain ownership of and comfort in the procedures they come up with. As he went on to explain, it is the quality of the structures guiding a group’s interaction that generally determines their level of trust in the process and in one another. More importantly too, it is the strength and resilience of this trust that enables them to “have difficult conversations” without suspicions that tend to derail such talks creeping in. In his words:

We then take them through a set of discussions to try to develop clarity of expectations…. because we believe, simply put, that a lot of the poison that crawls into negotiations is not about the problem, but it’s the way that people have failed to make explicit how they’re going to interact and engage with each other, and that most of the misunderstandings in negotiations and the challenges that are represented can be excised from that set of interactions earlier rather than later. If there isn’t clarity up front and that clarity isn’t achieved through joint ownership of discussion then you’re building a time-bomb that’s going to reverberate back into something that’s going to have the appearance that maybe it was a discussion about the substance. It usually is not. It’s more likely that somebody thinks that somebody’s trying to slip in a new issue or is working on some different time agenda, or trying to spin it off to the control of a small group. That’s usually what causes people to become mistrustful, not the actual core issue that they’re trying to resolve (R8).

Questions Addressed in Structuring the Process

The questions addressed by process participants in designing their procedural guidelines will vary from situation to situation. The key ones listed by respondents are summarized in Box 4. Most of the questions listed are discussed at length in Chapter 3 under Principle 4 (Self-Design) and will therefore not be re-addressed here. Two exceptions are the points dealing with (i) breaking the problem down into manageable pieces and (ii) determining information needs and how they will be collected and shared.
Box 4. Possible Questions To Address When Structuring a Process

- What is the problem?
- What does the group want to achieve? What are the objectives?
- What is the expected outcome or product?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- Can the problem be broken down into more manageable pieces and how?
- What structures need to be in place before parties are comfortable getting involved?
- What ground rules will guide the group’s interactions at and away from the table?
- How does the group define key terms used in their procedural agreement?
- What is the general agenda and what process and activities will be carried out as part of it?
- What is the timeline and how will the group use this time?
- What are people’s roles, tasks and responsibilities (including the convenor and third party)?
- How will the representatives communicate with constituencies and other outside parties?
- How will the process be resourced?
- How will the group deal with situations of non-compliance?
- What will the group do if no agreement is reached?
- What information is needed before starting and how should it be collected and shared?

Source: Respondents 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12; Cormick et al., 1996.

The first of these two points (breaking the problem into manageable pieces) was raised by Respondent 10. He suggests that with larger and more complex issues, it can be helpful to divide the problem into manageable parts to make progress easier and more visible. Doing so might involve breaking the problem into sub-issues that can be tackled piece by piece. It might be a matter of splitting it into subgroups if some elements only concern selected parties and can be dealt with on the side. It might be a matter of differentiating between what is deemed “discussible” and what the table wants to build agreement on (R1). Or it might entail dividing the problem along geographic lines, if the boundaries between issues and area overlap (R10).

The second point not yet discussed (determining information needs and collection methods) was raised by Respondent 7 in describing his approach to process design. Particularly in complex situations relying on a lot of scientific information, he suggested that the table jointly determine the information needed to make effective decisions before starting. He advised against groups bringing their individual sets of information to the table stating that this practice only encourages position taking and a battle of opposing theories. “[T]he tendency is ‘I’m going to use my information and you can use yours and we’ll beat each other up with it’” he explained, adding that such an approach “doesn’t work” (R7). Instead he recommended that, as part of their wider procedural discussions, the groups negotiate a sub-agreement detailing their combined information requirements, how this information will be collected, and who will collect it. Not only can such an agreement reduce disputes among the parties, but it can also help level the playing field by ensuring that everyone, irregardless of their training or resources, has equal access to the information and is working from the same knowledge base.
Different Approaches to Process Design

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the amount of time spent having participants hammer out their procedural guidelines varies with each process and each practitioner. In shorter or less formal processes, working out structural details might be as simple as reviewing a pre-drafted list of ground rules and agreeing on the agenda and procedures before proceeding to the substance. In cases where there is a great deal of mistrust among the parties, or in longer running processes, more time is generally spent establishing a solid base before getting started.

The personal strategies to process design described by members of the study group were quite varied. At one end of the scale, a couple of respondents who tend to work on shorter term processes or workshop-type sessions, noted that, either because of geographic or time constraints, or because of the large number of parties involved, they generally develop a draft framework in consultation with a planning committee or cross section of participants before getting to the table (R1; R9). Once all participants are convened, the table then reviews the proposed framework and can either adopt, amend or reject it. As the third party, they must be ready to help the group restructure what is proposed at the drop of a hat, and need to be able to adjust their methods accordingly.

At the other end of the spectrum, Respondent 7 described a considerably different approach to process design. First and foremost, he tends to lay the responsibility for process decisions back on participants so they take ownership of the initiative and come to their own agreement on how they will work together. "Increasingly I find the way to deal with all this stuff is to pose the questions and let the group respond," he said. "Develop it for themselves. Sharing ownership.... All the work I do in the preparation, assessment, convening, process design area is all focused around that," he added (R7). Whether he is helping a group determine its ground rules, or addressing any other "structural" question, Respondent 7 generally proceeds through the task in a step-by-step fashion using an "interest-based" approach to decision-making similar to that commonly used when carrying out the substantive negotiations associated with stage 3 of the process. Respondent 3 described using a similar approach in her work as well. She explained that each stage of the consensus process — whether working through the assessment, design, substantive discussions, or agreement writing — is much like a mini-negotiation and she uses a similar four-stage "negotiation model" for framing the discussion in every case. This four-stage model is reviewed in greater detail in the next section.

Respondent 8 offered yet another take on the question of participant design noting that he approaches the task a bit differently every time depending on the group and the context. Like Respondent 7, he puts a lot of emphasis on participants designing and taking ownership of their own process and sees this as a foundation for successful agreements. But he varies in how much direction he offers each group and how he paces the discussions. Some groups he works with desire more direction from him. Although he usually gives this guidance if asked for, he does so only after weighing the nature and needs of the group and assessing from there how much detail he can give them without short-changing the benefits they get from working through these structural questions.
themselves. Other factors he looks at in gauging how to pace and guide a group are people’s level of familiarity and cohesion and “the chemistry in the room” (R8). In cases where parties are unfamiliar with one another, they generally need more time to become acquainted and to interact on their own terms. On the other hand, if a process has gone on a long time in a group that is already quite cohesive he might begin encouraging participants to bring closure to the discussion. He described his adaptive approach to process design saying:

There’s no doubt that I work on the basis that people will only cause to happen that which they own. If you don’t have ownership at the front end, you sure won’t have ownership at the tail end when it counts. So whatever it takes to ensure that I’m not taking energy and ownership away from the parties developing their own process and their own outcome, it’s a key consideration for me. Now in certain instances, that requires one to evolve into a relationship with the parties in a very different way than you might with another group of people. Certain groups of people are looking for, given the nature of the issues they’re dealing with and the circumstances, a higher degree of directiveness at the front end…. They say: “Well what’s worked in other settings? We’d like you to give us some of that material. That’ll help us.” And I’ll make a judgment call because if I give them too much then it’s not theirs, but if I don’t give them enough they could be frustrated…. So I don’t come in and say: “Well here’s the way I do it.” I know where I want to go, and I know that my role is to help people to have a difficult conversation. But the speed and timing and the nature of it, I’ve got to play by ear (R8).

4.3.3 “Finding Common Ground” Stage

Once participants have agreed on some type of procedural framework they generally proceed to the next step of consensus building which NRTEE terms the finding common ground stage. It is in this stage that parties work to build agreement around the substantive issue that has brought them together. This part of the process is also referred to as the “negotiation stage” because groups frequently use a negotiated approach to decision-making to work through the task. While the methods used at this point are not restricted to negotiation, it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the full range of techniques in any great detail. I therefore restrict my discussion to the negotiated approach to agreement building. I also discuss the significance of away-from-the-table activities within this process.

The Negotiated Approach to Agreement Building

The shared decision-making materials put out by CORE (1992: 29) and the B.C. Dispute Resolution Office (DRO) (Darling, 1998: 38) each outline seven key tasks that participants commonly work through when negotiating substantive agreements. These tasks include:
1) identifying the issues they wish to resolve;
2) converting their positions on the issues into more fundamental interests;
3) inventing a variety of options capable of satisfying the interests of all stakeholders;
4) building agreement on these options based on an objective set of criteria;
5) assessing whether the agreement can be implemented;
6) formalizing the agreement; and
7) seeking ratification from the constituencies.

While this list of tasks is useful in that it breaks down the negotiation process into basic activities, most practitioners I spoke to condensed these tasks into a smaller number of steps. The most common breakdown among them was the “four-stage negotiation model” shown in Figure 4 on the following page. The approach portrayed in the image includes an introductory step not outlined in the CORE and DRO list of tasks. But otherwise both frameworks are quite similar and only differ in how the seven tasks are broken down. In broad terms, the Issues stage in Figure 4 corresponds to task 1 from the above list (identifying the issues). The Interests stage corresponds with task 2. And finally, the Resolution stage in Figure 4 combines tasks 3 through to 7 into one step (R3; R4).

**Figure 4. Four-Stage Negotiation Model**

![Four-Stage Negotiation Model](image)

Source: Adapted from process diagrams sketched by Respondents 3 and 4.

As with the shared-decision making framework discussed in Section 4.1, the negotiation process depicted in Figure 4 is often iterative. Also, there can be a lot of “back and forth” between the stages as implied by the arrows (R4; R6). As one respondent explained, the steps described in the four-stage negotiation model make sense “like any textbook does” and may apply “in most normal conditions” (R11). But ultimately, it should be the context that defines the steps, not the other way around. He described what he meant by noting:
It isn’t that you don’t have any steps, but they’re evolved in context.... It may be more important for instance for a group of people to go and visit a group home and see exactly what people are living through there than to jawbone about it in a meeting room in a hotel for six weeks.... Or maybe it’s better to get the whole group into a helicopter and fly into a logging shoal and listen to the logging superintendent talk about what he’s actually doing and why before you make a lot of cosmic judgments about how nasty loggers are.... So that may be more important, or it may be more important to diffuse huge angers which some participants have for the others. So where you choose to start depends on the circumstances. There is an orderly flow, but the orderly flow is design responsive and people responsive, not prescriptive. Again the prescription follows the diagnosis, not the other way around (R11).

More specific points raised about each of the four negotiation stages are discussed below.

1) *Introduction - How Are We Going To Talk?*
   Respondent 4 referred to the introductory stage of negotiations as “how are we going to talk?” Broadly speaking, the purpose of the introduction is to ensure that “everyone is on the same sheet” before they jump into the substance (R4). If participants have previously met to build a procedural agreement, they may simply review what was agreed to before moving on. If parties are meeting for the first time though, they will generally begin by introducing themselves, explaining their reasons for attending and outlining their expectations (R3). The group will then set out their ground rules — whether these have been pre-drafted or are brainstormed on the spot — and confirm the agenda and procedures to be followed. Beyond these more general tasks, some practitioners also incorporate other activities into the introduction stage that are aimed at building a sense of group and setting the tone for the remainder of the process. Respondent 12 gave an example of one such activity from one of his past processes.

What I try to use at the beginning of the process is usually something that’s humiliating, humbling, so what it does is it says, we probably all have to learn some things about the topic. So in [one process involving a park]... I created a questionnaire as a quiz. This doesn’t talk about negotiation, but it’s building the group. It’s the facilitator’s hat. So I gave them 30 questions or so about [the park], because they’d all said they knew about it. So I said: “Okay, three people had died and are buried on the site. What are their names?” Some people didn’t even know that. And what you’re really trying to do at the beginning is to try to open people’s minds to other perspectives.
2) **Clarifying the Issues - What Are We Here to Talk About?**

The next step in the negotiation process is to clarify the issue that is to be discussed, or what Respondent 4 refers to as "what are we here to talk about?" As noted in the opening section of this chapter, this is a question that is addressed in increasing detail beginning in the assessment and design phases and continuing into this agreement building stage. Once at this latter point however, the group’s focus is on detailing with much more specificity the full nature of the problem and the questions and objectives they are going to address. While on the surface the issue may seem clear to everyone, people often enter these processes with very different views about the root of the problem (R1; R4). Determining what the crux of the matter is and what the pivotal question should be is therefore much more difficult than it might first seem.

The following statement from Respondent 1 offers a good description of the challenge involved:

> There’s often not one critical issue. There’s a problem and it’s a big problem. It’s a wicked problem and all the pieces are inter-linked. So there is a problem with [the management of fishery “x”] on the West Coast. What is the problem? Is it management issues? Is it rights issues? Is it ecosystem problems? What’s the real nut of the thing? And part of it is trying to work the process so you actually bring clarity to that and then resolving pieces of it.... So they don’t even agree on the problem let alone on the solution. That’s more the rule than the exception.... When you really get down to it there’s often many many related pieces, and so people don’t know what they’re arguing about.

When dealing with complex problems of this type, part of the practitioner’s job is to help frame the central question so it encompasses all the different issues that are raised. At the same time, they have to keep the question from getting so broad and abstract that it is no longer useful (R4; R10). As Respondent 4 put it: "you’ve got to make sure that it’s small enough that you’re actually keeping on subject, otherwise you’ll go all over the place."

While clarifying the problem is a critical step in any consensus process, not all practitioners jump into problem identification right away. For example, Respondent 9 — who frequently deals with inter-cultural conflicts (using the wide definition of culture) — generally starts this step of negotiations by having participants discuss how they have experienced one another and the context surrounding the issue. Her aim is to get them to reflect on and reassess their different views of reality and to look at wider possibilities for dealing with the problem that can potentially incite deeper structural change. In her words:

> I would get them to define their experience rather than approach the conflict right away. I’d say: “Well wait a minute, how have you experienced each other?” And then I would get them to talk about how they would assess or describe or analyze that experience. What’s positive about it? What is not so positive about it? What is liberating about their
experience with each other? What’s oppressive? And then I might get them to imagine the ideal. And then I might get them to talk about what the barriers are — what gets in the way of that ideal. I always get groups to do a social, historical, political and economic analysis, because we are all sitting in a context.... And then a vital part that I always do is to get them to think what the structural change is (R9).

3) **Defining Interests - What Is Important About This Issue?**

Once the issue and pivotal question are clarified, the next stage of the negotiated process is to look at interests. This involves getting participants to identify “what is important about the issue” they have come together to talk about and their particular reasons for being at the table (R4). In doing so, it is critical not to confuse interests with positions. Positions, according to Respondent 4, are ideal outcomes or resolutions. Interests, on the other hand, are the motivations and concerns that lie behind the positions. As he explains:

> [Interests are] the things that drive the people. And in training it’s their hopes, fears, desires, needs, concerns. You’ll hear people say that. It’s “what they’re concerned about.” It’s “what they want.” It’s what sort of lies behind their position. And a position is basically made up of a whole bunch of interests. And so your job is basically to help them to express what those interests are because sometimes they don’t know it (R4).

As noted in the above statement, a big challenge in unearthing interests is that participants often do not know what their interest are themselves. In some instances, their interests come out in angry statements. In others, they may be expressed as a positional demand. In such cases, the role of the practitioner is to pry out the reasons behind the statement. At the same time, the third party must track the points that are raised and frame them in a way that illuminates for the group what their shared interests are and where they differ (R4).

4) **Building a Resolution - What Are We Going To Do About It?**

Respondent 4 refers to the resolution building stage of negotiation as “what are we going to do about it?” It is at this point in the negotiated process that the group takes the structured list of interests that they have jointly developed and works to devise a joint-solution that meets everyone’s approval. Depending on the context, this stage can involve all or some of the last five negotiation tasks listed earlier, including: inventing options that satisfy all interests; building agreement around the options; determining the feasibility of the agreement; refining and formalizing it; and seeking approval and potential amendments from constituents and other outside groups (or what is also termed ratification). In carrying out these steps, one respondent explained that he tries to encourage as much divergent thinking as he can before getting people to package solutions. “I’m not interested in reaching solutions too quickly because then I don’t feel from the quality side that what we’ve done is [good],” he added (R12).
While practitioners vary in how they lead a group through the resolution-building process, the following statement from Respondent 4 illustrates how one person interviewed approaches the task. The description he provides also shows how each stage of a negotiation can encompass its own set of “mini negotiations,” and thus the multi-layered quality of these types of processes:

When you’ve sort of gone through [the interests] as much as you feel you can..., you go to stage 4 which is some sort of “resolution.”... That is where you would then feed back to them: “So we’ve been sitting here and what I’ve heard is that you want this and this. And I hear a common interest in there that you guys want this, this and this.” And they might never have realized that they had a lot of common interests. “But you have your own interests which are this, this, and this. How are we going to fit that all together? Let’s come up with some ideas.” That’s when you go into resolution. Within all this you might have some meaty mini negotiations or mediations where you come out with resolutions. And then you have to fine tune them and tweak them. You have to go through the things we talked about before which are the “what ifs,” the implementation — “How is this going to happen?” “Who is going to do this?” (R4)

Once a group arrives at a resolution that meets everyone’s satisfaction, a common next step is to record and review the final agreement before having it approved. To avoid misunderstandings about what is proposed, it is important that the alternatives and their implications be stated in plain language and that no jargon be used (R12). Whenever possible, Respondent 12 also recommends using visuals to illustrate ideas.

According to Susskind and Cruikshank (1987: 123) the written agreement serves two purposes. First, it helps ensure that all parties share a common understanding of what they have agreed to. Secondly, it provides parties something concrete, and more importantly an identical document, to bring back to their constituencies in processes that require ratification and wider outside approval. This said, not all processes have a formal agreement that everyone signs onto. How the agreement is written up and the role of the third party in its preparation differs depending on the practitioner and the process purpose. For example, Respondent 1, who most commonly leads multi-party workshops aimed at developing or informing government policies, generally writes up a summary report of the event which is shared with and reviewed by those involved. He may also take part in some follow-up meetings. On the other hand, Respondent 4, who is most often involved in shorter mediations, generally drafts a memorandum of understanding or a letter of consensus outlining what he has heard. Rather than have people sign off on the document, he asks them to use what he has drafted to write up their own agreement either with the help of their lawyers (if it is a legal matter) or some other organizing group. In yet other situations, the third party may be responsible for the development of some type of formal plan, in which case she or he may be more involved in drafting the written agreement and developing the supporting materials (like maps, inventories, budgets, etc.) that go along with it.
No matter what form the written agreement takes, how it is put together, or what role the third party plays in its development, Susskind and Cruikshank (1987) advise against parties each writing up their own understanding of a decision. Experience has shown that when doing so, parties tend to interpret proposed resolutions from their own perspectives, making it more difficult to piece together a single statement later, and often forcing another round of negotiations as a result. Instead, Susskind and Cruikshank (1987:124) suggest using a single text procedure to write up a shared statement. As part of this procedure a subgroup or individual (such as the third party) is given the task of drafting the agreement as they understand it. This document is then circulated back and forth among the other parties who then offer suggestions for amending and improving the draft. This process is repeated until the written agreement is approved by everyone. In cases involving ratification, this step may be followed by one or more rounds of review and negotiated amendments at both the constituency and table level.

Work Away From the Table

One aspect of consensus building and negotiation that gets less air time in the literature is the breadth of activity that is often going on away from the table, even once the group convenes and substantive discussions are underway. As indicated in earlier sections, before getting to the table, a third party often meets independently with the stakeholder groups to discuss their take on the issue and to assess if and how people want to participate. As well, in large, complex and highly charged processes, where there tends to be a lot more posturing, practitioners often have private discussions with parties to build a rapport with them, to help them anticipate and better respond to heated situations, and to gain a better sense of where the parties are coming from (R8). As Respondent 8 explains in the following statement, without this individual contact, the third party has no way of fully knowing what lies behind the positions put forward in meetings, and how to properly navigate the barriers they present.

Mediation is all about understanding what really is causing people to take the positions they take and to try to understand what the underlying set of concerns are. And you're just not going to be able to do that in a large group context to the same degree as you might be able to do [by having direct discussions with the parties].... All I know is what ostensibly is put before me, which is going to be defined in terms of how people see their strategic interest in terms of the mandate that I have.... But in terms of what may be really driving their interests, I may never know that, and I have no way of penetrating through it because the only thing I'm told is what everybody hears in an open forum. So anybody who thinks that you can mediate or facilitate without having private discussions is living in a different world than I live in.

Other reasons third parties and process participants undertake activities away from the table is to make more effective use of people's time when they are convened. Particularly in larger processes, it can be hard to make substantial progress solely in meetings since doing a single go-around of the table can swallow up considerable time (R10). For this
reason, large processes will often commission sub-committees and task groups with between-meeting duties that they then bring back to the table for discussion. Individual members may be commissioned tasks as well. This said, a certain level of trust generally has to be built in a group before individuals will accept to hand over aspects of their discussion to a subgroup they are not part of (R6; R8). As further discussed in Chapter 5, until this confidence is gained, most discussions need to take place in-meeting and in the presence of everyone.

Respondent 10, who works mainly in large land use and resource planning processes, sees away-from-the-table activities as particularly important in these types of initiatives. In fact, based on his account, it is between meetings, rather than during them, that the bulk of the work is done in such processes. “The tables are often just the theatre,” he explained. “Or else it’s the formal affirmation of all the work that’s done between the meetings.” Given this reality, he questions the value of strictly hiring facilitators to help lead in-meeting discussions, noting:

There’s never enough prep-time between the meetings, or work between the meetings, when that’s where the substantive work is; where you’re dealing with subgroups or individuals who have particular issues or aren’t getting it; or taking steps so that you’re not taking the whole meeting time dealing with crisis (R10).

As touched upon in the last statement, the third party can play a range of different roles to help a process along between meetings. Among other things they might: facilitate the work of the task groups; assist with communication between parties; touch base with the participants independently to field their sense of and comfort with the proceedings and decisions; and help to record, structure and play back the essence of large group and committee discussions as a reference for later sessions (R1; R10). The third party may also deal separately with problems or conflicts involving select individuals or a sub-set of the group, particularly when addressing such matters in-session would be an inefficient use of people’s time and an ineffective way of resolving the issue. The following statement offers just one illustration of the broad range of actions one particular respondent finds himself performing between meetings:

I will be developing a series of notes that capture the fundamental outline of what the meeting’s going to look like, or has looked like. I may be engaging with the parties checking with them and saying: “Look this scenario... I’m concerned that you were sending a real strong message, but yet I don’t want to capture that message in a way that doesn’t appropriately reflect what I thought I heard you saying. Now have I got it right here? Is this going to hit it?” It may be me perceiving that somebody is really off in left field on something and I’ve got to have a careful discussion with them about where it is that they see their interest lying here. “What is it that you’re trying to accomplish here.” The great bulk of it would be small group meetings where I’m trying to move forward a complex problem on a number of fronts. Often it’s managed in conference calls, not face to face. Sometimes it’s face to face. So it’s a
whole range of different actions and the more complex the problem — the more intense it is — the more intense the activity has to be (R8).

4.3.4 “Implementing and Monitoring Agreements” Stage

The fourth and final step in the NRTEE consensus decision-making framework deals with the implementing and monitoring agreements stage. Respondents in my study spoke less about this aspect of consensus building, possibly because many of them are less involved in these post-agreement activities. Given the elements of successful implementation are discussed at considerable length in Chapter 3 (Principle 10), I only touch on them briefly here. As noted in Chapter 3, success in implementation often depends on the quality of the earlier stages of consensus building and whether the process has succeeded in achieving the necessary trust, openness and participation in the group to enable them to create a resolution that everyone feels ownership of. It also depends on a number of other factors, including:

- the quality of the agreement, the absence of assumptions within it, and the amount of forethought and specificity; it includes about things such as resources, responsibilities and timelines;

- whether the group has sufficiently tested their proposal to anticipate potential drawbacks and whether they have incorporated contingencies to deal possible pitfalls;

- whether the relationships and collaborative structures among the parties are resilient enough to withstand future storms without outside assistance, and whether these relationships extend beyond the people at the table to their constituencies so they endure the departure of individual representatives;

- whether the people with the authority and responsibility to implement the outcome have been involved and support the proposal; and

- whether the financial, technical and practical content of the agreement match the systems, resources and technical capacities of the implementing bodies (R6; R10).

Beyond what is discussed in Chapter 3, Respondents 6 and 7 also shed light on two elements of implementation that often go neglected, namely: monitoring and evaluation. Review activities of these types play a key role in enhancing the success of implemented agreements by helping parties identify and iron out unanticipated kinks as they arise. For this reason, monitoring and evaluation should be recognized as essential parts of the consensus process — which itself should be seen as ongoing — rather than possible add-ons. Unfortunately, they often go neglected because they simply are not budgeted for (R7). As Respondent 7 also points out, even when evaluations are carried out, there is no agreed upon method for measuring the benefits of the consensus approach over other forms of involvement. There is therefore need for exchange and learning in this area. He
summarizes some of the current problems with monitoring, implementation and evaluation as follows:

"The monitoring, implementation and evaluation stages, we don't spend nearly enough time on, often times because the process ends then. They've run out of money.... In some cases, like in [a process I did in Alberta], there was a process that we survived the agreement for a while, so that people could come back together and monitor implementation and even ideally do some evaluation. The two key points about that are: one, we don't allow that to happen usually because we don't have the budget for it (So people, although we say bravely they're going to be involved in implementation, it doesn't really amount to much); and secondly, on evaluation, we don't know enough about evaluation. How do we know that we've engaged in a process that generated better outcomes than what might be the case? Is it actually addressing the problem that we identified? And so evaluation is something that folks have gone very light on. We don't know enough about how to evaluate a process, and there's a lot of need for work in that field (R7)."

4.4 Contextual Considerations

A recurring theme throughout this and previous chapters relates to the context-dependency of consensus building processes and the need for practitioners to customize their approach to the circumstance. For example, in Section 4.2, I discuss how the practitioner's mandate, role, style and stage of involvement can influence how they tackle a process. Other factors that might impact a practitioner's approach include: the allotted timeline, the geographic scale, the number of stakeholders involved, the magnitude of the stakes, the level of conflict and controversy involved, the nature of the issue, the personality and make-up of the group, the degree of familiarity and cohesiveness among the parties, whether a process is initiated from the bottom-up or from the top-down, and wider cultural considerations.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all these variables at any length, in this section I review what respondents said about the influence of three factors on their approach. These factors are: (i) the number of parties involved; (ii) the type of process and issue they are engaged in; and (iii) the make-up and nature of the group (including cultural considerations). While these three factors are only a small representation of the contextual considerations raised in the interviews, they give a glimpse of the adaptive nature of this work and some of the things practitioners consider when deciding how to proceed.
4.4.1 Number of Parties at the Table

Earlier in this chapter, I explain that large multi-party processes often rely more heavily on sub-committees, task groups and between-meeting activities than do small processes involving two or maybe several parties. This is particularly the case when the issue is complex and there are a lot of pieces to fit together. Larger groups also tend to spend more time working through the preparation, assessment, and design stages of decision-making, especially when dealing with controversial and highly charged subjects. The level of reliance on away-from-the-table activities and time spent in pre-negotiation preparations are just two of many ways practitioners adjust their approach to deal with differing group size. Two other adaptations noted in the interviews are not so much procedural as stylistic in nature. They are described below.

More Joint-Facilitation in Large Processes

The range of tasks a practitioner has to do and the details they have to observe and track tend to increase in both amount and complexity as the number of stakeholders rises. For this reason, some practitioners prefer to tackle larger processes in teams rather than go at it alone (as often done in bi-party and small multi-party processes). The advantage of teaming it in large processes is quite obvious. It reduces the risk of verbal and non-verbal cues slipping by the facilitator and allows for crosschecking and idea sharing with other practitioners. Because members of a facilitation team often switch facilitating and recording roles, they get a chance to view the group from both an active and passive angle, which can open the door to added insights. Also, having someone else record frees the facilitator to better help the discussion along, draw people out, and ensure everyone has the opportunity to speak — something that is particularly important when working in large groups (R4). These and other elements of good facilitation are discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

Change in Group Dynamics and Style of Intervention

According to Respondent 6, she is much more cautious about how she intervenes in sessions involving a large number of people than in smaller processes. "[W]orking with a large group..., you've got to really watch mediative interventions," she said, "because the face saving issue is so much bigger when there's 20 people at the table" (R6). In contrast, smaller groups tend to be more direct and more hands-on to work with (R4; R6). Not only are participants in these smaller processes more willing to express their true feelings, but they are more likely to show emotions as well. As Respondent 4 explains, this is particularly the case in bilateral situations:

[W]hen you’re dealing with something bilaterally, I just find it much, obviously, easier in that you can really focus on the people who are there in front of you, their dialogue. It gets more personal. And people are inclined to be more personal and you have to deal with emotions of a different sort more often when it’s just two people. While there’s a lot of
posturing in a large group, when it’s just two of them, they will open up I think a little bit more.

4.4.2 Process Type

The nature of the process can be divided along several lines. Two key distinctions when it comes to contextual considerations are: (i) whether the process is meant to resolve a conflict or to support a strategic planning initiative, and (ii) the type of issue being addressed. Below I briefly discuss how some members of the study group adapt their approach to respond to these different scenarios.

Conflict Resolution Versus Strategic Planning Process

A practitioner’s approach might vary in several ways depending on whether they are involved in a conflict resolution or a strategic planning process. One distinction relates to their different reliance on brokering. Brokering is a third party task that is seldom necessary in processes that are strictly “strategic planning” in nature, particularly if there is no element of conflict or controversy involved. While not all conflict-based processes require that the third party broker between parties, there are situations where people are so resistant to working together that this may be the only way to first get them to the table, or in other instances, to keep them there when crisis hits. This said, prior to attempting to broker an agreement it is important to get people’s consent and to gauge the likelihood of success. As Respondent 8 explains:

Now if I don’t think there’s a chance of doing it, then I wouldn’t broker that deal that heavily. But sometimes I broker it only to jump-start it, to get it to the point where we could actually get in a room.... And if I get licensed to do that, then I’ll get license from everybody and make sure that they all agree that that’s what I should do. But then, in all likelihood, I’ll never share a piece of paper until the day they’re all in a room, and I will have then worked the thing with such a degree that I know with a high level of confidence that the thing is going to work.

Another distinction between conflict-based and planning-based processes lies in their respective focus on the past and the future. According to Respondent 4, those involved in strategic planning processes are generally forward looking. The discussion of conflict and difficulties is more of the hypothetical and speculative nature rather than related to past events. Also, there is more space for creative thinking early on in the process. In contrast, groups working to resolve a dispute deal more with past events and experiences tied to the issue. The practitioner dealing with such conflicts not only needs to help people get their issues and ideas out, but perhaps more importantly, they must create a setting where people’s past experience can be expressed, heard and validated. As Respondent 4 also explains, given there is likely to be a lot more posturing and tension in conflict-based situations, it is helpful to tackle these processes with someone else and to have access to neutral individuals with substantial knowledge of the issue if needed. In his words:
I think that when you’re looking at an information exchange or strategic planning you’re trying to envision possible conflicts. That’s where it’s sort of similar to a mediation. You’re trying to envision what possible conflicts could lead from certain actions that are proposed. But you’re also looking for certain opportunities. And so I think that you can allow for a little bit more imagination and creativity in the earlier stages. You’re not necessarily talking about how something has affected somebody, or the hurt that they felt, or the concerns they have over something that has happened. You’re dealing with things in the future.... Not what [the issues] have been, but what they’re going to be. So there tends to be a little bit more forward thinking when it’s strategic planning, just by nature.... When you’re dealing with a multi-party mediation,.... I don’t think I ever want to try and do one alone again.... I actually don’t care often whether I have a lot of substantive knowledge. But I think it is important to have someone there who can assist you in having some of that substantive knowledge.... And in there you’re dealing more with conflict. You’re dealing with the past. You’re dealing with people who are very aware of how something did affect them and you’re having to dig for how it affected them.... So that would be one of the differences (R4).

Type of Issue Being Addressed

The question being addressed also has a big influence on how a group approaches consensus building. This is especially true in more technically-based decisions requiring the development of a clear set of “hard” products to inform the agreement — be these maps, inventories, budgets, or other technical products — and a logical series of steps geared at arriving at these products. As Respondent 11 highlights in the statement below, the interactive methods used to engage people in the development of these products are highly adaptive because one has to constantly mold one’s response to what is happening in the group in that instance. In contrast, details that do need to be rigidly defined are the hard products that must feed into the agreement, the precise form they will take, and the technical procedures for assembling them. As he explains:

Let’s just say the approach that you use is hard design, highly structured in the product, but the process is infinitely variable.... And where mistakes are made in this field is when you substitute structure into the process rather than into the product generation. So in a land-use dispute for instance, you need a meticulous planning sequence which says, for example, the data you create, the maps you submit, various scenarios to test in a systematic, economic model. Those things are the scientific tools of the trade which have to be followed in a sequence that makes sense structurally.... So for instance, in [one process I was involved in], we had to build a sequence of planning steps that was in fact quite structured.... because in the end you had to produce a plan that had certain characteristics. For those there was a lot smaller zone of forgiveness for
mistakes. So the maps had to be accurate.... Engagement methods of people discussing this, and bargaining, and negotiating, and consensus building, and all of that was infinitely flexible. You had to play with what was really happening with people and that takes a variety of methods at a variety of times and not a canned approach (R11).

4.4.3 Nature and Make-up of the Group

A practitioner may vary his or her approach in many ways depending on the atmosphere at the table and the make-up of the group. As previously mentioned in Section 4.3, a third party will often put greater or lesser emphasis on having the parties hammer out their procedures depending on the level of familiarity and cohesiveness in the group (R8). They may also vary their approach depending on how well they themselves know the parties. In cases where the third party is still establishing their neutrality, they will usually tread more cautiously when carrying out interventions. They might also be more precise about what tasks they take on to avoid confusing people about what they are there to do (R5). To give one example, when asked if he carries out his own negotiation training or brings a trainer in, Respondent 5 responded that he does it “both ways.” “Sometimes, depending again on the personality of the group, it’s better to have somebody from outside do [the training],” he explained. He expanded by saying: “I tend to do that more with a group that I don’t know, so that I’m keeping my role to the mediation/facilitation, and the other [person] is the trainer, the teacher. So they don’t confuse the roles.”

Beyond changes made to suit the level of familiarity and cohesion in the group, study participants also described ways they modify their approach in different cultural environments. I outline some of what they said below. I also discuss more specific ways individual respondents have adjusted their approaches when working in different First Nations settings.

Cultural Considerations

The practitioners I interviewed differ in the types of cultural settings they have been exposed to and commonly work in. Some, for example, have been involved in work both in Canada and overseas and, in so doing, have been exposed to a wide range of cultural contexts (R2; R5; R9; R11; R12). Others commonly work with First Nations groups or people of different ethnic origins within their North American practice and are quite comfortable in this role (R1; R4; R7; R8; R10; R13). While there was no one who had not worked in some form of inter-cultural or multi-ethnic setting, two respondents did express some reluctance in leading processes of these types. “I have to admit that it’s not something that I have sought out,” one of the two explained, adding: “I have been a bit reluctant because I have a very great appreciation for the differences in approach, the differences in thinking, the differences in values, and I don’t want to presume that what works for me and for people from my culture will work for them” (R3). To help get around this problem and improve the appropriateness of their approach, when working in
cross-cultural contexts a couple of respondents said they try to co-facilitate such processes with someone from the culture in question, or at least seek advice from colleagues with roots in these communities (R2; R6).

Below are some added ways individual respondents adapt their approach in different cultural settings:

- **More Caucusing:** In certain collectivist cultures in South Asia, the Pacific and other regions of the world, the direct and assertive approach of western-styled negotiations runs against the cultural grain (R2). Saving face is also much more important and individual-specific problems tend to be addressed one-on-one, rather than in a group setting. When working in these contexts or with people whose dominant language is not English, Respondent 2 suggests doing a lot more private caucusing with individuals to check for clarity and problems. A lot of the success of this type of caucusing also lies in the ability of the third party to connect with individuals, to gain their trust, and to communicate a sincere desire to hear what they have to say. The use of caucusing by the third party is discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

- **More In-Field Activities:** Another piece of advice offered by Respondent 5 is to meet people “on their own ground.” As an example, he described a process which brought together a group of consultants and a rural community in Zimbabwe to discuss rural sustainability issues. At his suggestion, the group decided to conduct the discussion on the Zambezi River rather than in a rural classroom. “And you know, I don’t think we’d accomplish anything like what we did in the two days we had, had we not,” he said. “In the community, they were so happy to be able to show us, and then we’d discuss right on the river the interface between agriculture and wildlife, rhino habitat versus water for irrigation” (R5). He also pointed out that the principle of meeting people on their own ground often applies to rural communities in Canada as well. “You will find the more rural the group, the more they want to be where the action is. They’ll want to go on field trips,” he said, demonstrating as he did how culture is defined along more than ethnic lines.

- **More Emphasis on Trust Building:** While western-styled negotiations tend to see trust as something that develops in the course of discussions, for a lot of cultures, trust is in fact a precursor to meaningful dialogue. As Respondent 2 states: “Trust isn’t something that’s built within the process. Trust is something they need to have fairly well established before they engage in the process and the relationship building needs to be already underway up front before the actual issues get discussed.” Not surprisingly then, by far the most common advice respondents offered for responding to other cultures was to spend more time up front getting to know the people and their communities on a less formal and more significant level. This recommendation applies as much in overseas settings as it does in situations where one is working locally with different ethnic groups, First Nations communities, or people of significantly different backgrounds.

As an added guidance, it was also noted that in some cultures the natural mediator in the community is not so much someone who is impartial and skilled in discussion
methods. Rather it is someone of high status that people trust such as “a chief or elder who’s well respected, has high integrity, and whose goals are for the harmony of the community” (R2). Practitioners entering such a setting need to realize that they are asking people to switch from relying in someone who is respected and has long-standing reputation in the community, to putting their faith in someone who is skilled in techniques but that they do not know. As can be expected, individuals in these communities are often hesitant to give this trust until some “connection is built” (R2). The following statement from Respondent 11 offers a good overview of why trust and relationship building is so important when working across cultures:

We’re doing a lot of work in Southeast Asia right now and there’s an old saw in China that “I meet you once, you’re an acquaintance. The second time you’re a friend. And the third time we’re old friends.” It just illustrates that it takes a while to build that trust and build up understanding.... People have to learn that you’re real and that your differences are not as relevant as your similarities, and that takes quite a while doesn’t it. And if they don’t believe that you’re real, they will tell you whatever you want to hear, or what they think you want to hear. Or they’ll find a way of pleasantly diverting you. So after the second or third time you’re demonstrating that you actually believe what you say or are prepared to follow through on what you say. [It is then] that you start to become real, and then trust is built. The method for that is different in every culture.

Working in a First Nations Context

Many of the above suggestions for working across cultures might apply in certain First Nations settings as well. Of these suggestions, the importance of taking time to build trust and relationships before jumping into discussions is again seen as critical. Extending on what was already said, Respondent 13, who is a member of a First Nations in British Columbia’s Lower Mainland, stressed the need to go beyond simply paying lip-service to the fact that an individual or group is of indigenous origin. As she indicates in the following statement, trust is not something that grows out of words. Rather, it is something that develops when people sense that someone is sincere in their intentions and that they have a genuine interest in and respect for the people, their community, and — in the case of First Nations groups — their own unique heritage and place in Canadian governance and society. Part of showing this respect also involves not making blanket assumptions about people of First Nations heritage, and making an effort to be culturally aware by understanding who they are on a deeper level. In her words:

I think for too long First Nations have felt as if they haven’t been a part of the building of this province and this country, or acknowledged as being a part of it.... But that acknowledgment is not enough if you’re going to work with First Nations. You have to have a depth of who the people are, and not just superficially say: “Oh well, I know you’re a part of the Athabascan speaking people.” If you’re truly going to do anything that comes to a fruitful conclusion with First Nations, you have to become
more significantly involved in their life as a community. But, there’s a very fine line too. You can’t cross over that line. And so it takes a skill because you cannot be condescending. So it’s got to be meaningful. It’s got to be felt at a different level, not just with words, and not just with acknowledgments of the “arts and craft” kind of thing. More cultural awareness, more in depth understanding of the society as a whole as opposed to just the numbers and the geographic location. So you have to spend that time and show that respect. Right back to respect (R13).

Beyond trust and relationship building, possibly the biggest secret to creating culturally appropriate processes is to actively involve the parties in the design. The following example from Respondent 2 shows some of the unique cultural features First Nations participants included in a process she helped facilitate. They included:

• **Integration of Elders into Processes**: In addition to having representatives from each of the groups, the parties in the process also identified an elder that everyone agreed to and respected to sit at the table to bring a spiritual presence to the group, “to dignify the process, and to turn to if things got out of hand” (R2). Aside from helping the parties identify an elder that was acceptable to all of them, Respondent 2 also spent considerable time describing the process to the elder, and in turn revising it with her so that she had “an appropriate voice” and was comfortable with the structure.

• **Use of Prayer**: In the case described, the group incorporated prayer into their process as well. Because participants came from a number of First Nations cultures, they chose to do it in a way that was appropriate to everyone rather than using a prayer tradition specific to a single group.

• **Separation of Issues Dealt By Table and Issues Dealt in More Spiritual Context**: The parties also identified what issues the table should deal with in the mediated process, and what issues were better addressed in a spiritual context. As Respondent 2 explained: “Some parts or issues needed to have a healing ceremony involved and a shaming [ceremony]... so we moved the ceremonial parts off the agenda and dealt with the issues that we could deal with.” In contrast, items dealt with at the consensus table were generally discussed using a “very fluid” process that included occasional “around-the-table consecutive speaking” modeled on traditional discussion circles. The use of discussions circles is further discussed in Chapter 5.

• **Use of Ceremony to Honour the Agreement**: Finally, once an agreement was reached, the table marked the event with ceremony. In this case, because a parallel youth conference was being held concurrently at the same location, the two groups united to celebrate the resolution. Respondent 2 described the ceremony and its symbolic significance in this way:

> Every youth at that conference went through a line and shook everybody’s hand, and then they did a little drumming ceremony for us. So it was really honoured, the agreement was honoured by ceremony. And food was a part of it and there was really a reintegration factor that
came into play in terms of the community. And it was really wonderful to have the youth part of that. And everybody, the people representing the parties and the elder all spoke.... It was a beautiful ending. It was not just the handshake and a written agreement kind of deal. It was really honoured by ceremony.

In addition to cultural considerations like those mentioned above, processes involving First Nations in Canada may need special considerations for legal reasons as well. This is particularly true for First Nations communities involved in the treaty process. Such groups are at times reluctant to enter land and resource related processes because they do not want to compromise future negotiations. More and more, to encourage and facilitate participation of such groups, consensus tables have developed preliminary agreements with them assuring that their involvement will not prejudice their treaty considerations (R5). As an added assurance, in some cases, a similar signed statement is attached to the table’s final agreement. According to one respondent, so far these types of arrangements have been effective and have been respected by the Government once treaty discussions are underway (R5).

Additional Outlooks

In discussing how people adapt their approach to cultural contexts, it is important to point out that not all practitioners I spoke to considered it necessary to do things differently when dealing with other cultures (R4; R13). Acknowledging that he might be “chastised for it,” Respondent 4 for one, admitted that he tends “to treat all cultures equally.” As he explained it, he sees his role as one of assisting people in their communication, which includes helping to translate across cultural barriers. No matter what group he is working with, he seeks to put into practice the many principles previously discussed in Chapter 3. He also endeavours to help participants communicate their interests to other parties in a language everyone can understand, however they feel comfortable doing it — “whether it’s in the form of a story, or whether it’s in the form of evidence, as lawyers would like to give” (R4).

Taking the question from the perspective of “interactive approach,” Respondent 13 also saw no need to change her style to suit the cultural setting. She explained that after first being intimidated by some of the high profile processes and people she has worked with, she has come to conclude that at the basic level people — no matter what their background or culture — are all at the table for the same reasons, and that is to create a good life for their community, their families and their children. “I’ve come to find in the last two years that it doesn’t matter whether you’re sitting with the Prime Minister, or a [First Nations] Chief, or a Regional Director General, the context of just being human is the most successful,” she said. Using the example of treaty negotiations in British Columbia, she explained how she will in fact challenge people at the table to think about their motivations for negotiating for their interests, and the fundamental reasons Canadian society has evolved the way it has. “It’s all about our family life,” she added (R13). She concluded saying:
So the long answer to your question again, I don’t look at the context anymore because I think it’s a hindrance and if you keep taking it from the perspective that we’re all doing this for one reason, it helps to build those bridges. My desire for my child’s life is not any different than yours and that’s why we’re all fighting so hard. It sounds simplistic, but it becomes very complicated because people look at you sometimes like she’s got that emotional touchy feely stuff. And that’s not what it’s about either. It’s reality to me, and I’ve become more comfortable in that. And so the context, the environment, all of that now, it’s not so important. It was a few years ago. Not anymore (R13).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the general process and stages practitioners work through when leading consensus processes and how they tackle tasks in each stage. As in the previous chapter, below I review some of the key conclusions I take home from this chapter relative to the four study objectives to bring the discussion to a close.

Areas of Commonality

As in Chapter 3, a key message to bring home from this chapter is that the overlap between the NRTEE framework and what practitioners do occurs mostly at the conceptual level, though in the case of the stages of consensus building these similarities are much less visible on the surface. When asked to outline the steps they undertake when leading groups in decision-making, the respondents in this study described a range of processes that were quite unique from one another. No two individuals tackled the task in quite the same way, and no single theoretical framework fully encompassed the breadth of approaches they described. That said however, the NRTEE four staged consensus building framework was sufficiently broad to capture the basics and offer a good foundation to build from. On a high level, almost all practitioners touched on aspects of the four steps NRTEE describes20 (provided they were involved in all process stages), though not necessarily in the same order, way or level of detail. Once at the agreement building stage, many practitioners also worked through the broad steps of negotiation21, though not always in a linear fashion and without necessarily identifying what they were doing as “negotiation.”

20 The four NRTEE consensus building stages are: the assessment stage, the structuring or designing the process stage, the agreement building stage, and the implementation and monitoring stage.

21 These are: (a) introducing the process and expectations, (b) clarifying the problem and issues, (c) identifying interests that should guide the decision, and (d) building a resolution that meets everyone’s approval.
Examples of “Messiness” and Complexity of Practice

While the basic steps in the consensus process apply in most circumstances, the amount of emphasis put on each task, when and how practitioners carry them out, and the many sub-activities encompassed within them vary enormously across individuals and contexts. Indeed, even the standard approaches used by single practitioners are so context-dependent that they never quite do the same thing twice. As some respondents outlined, when it comes to real-life processes, the entry-points and order of tasks are far from fixed, there is a lot of movement back and forth between stages, and the processes are often iterative rather than linear. The tasks associated with each stage are also far from discrete and may be repeated more than once at different points in a process. Also, in numerous cases, practitioners will inject unique activities as required.

It is this highly dynamic and situation-specific aspect of practice that is most difficult to convey in writing and is often less apparent in literature and guidebooks. For these reasons, to be properly interpreted and applied, any framework needs to be read with an understanding of the dynamic character of the activities outlined and the many contextual factors that render each response unique. As respondent 8 illustrates in the statement below, if not understood, it may seem that practitioners approach each process completely differently. But, at a more basic level, they are often doing the same things and working towards the same ends every time. In his words:

In a way, I always do something different, but I always do it the same. And the reason that I say I always do it the same is that I always first try to get a measure if there is a will among this group of people to start exploring whether they want to do business with me. And then, once I’ve satisfied that there’s a will to come into a set of discussions, I always try to achieve clarity of expectations as to what it is we’re doing, how we’re going to do it, what are the roles and responsibilities, what are the timelines we’re going to work. I create kind of a structure. And then I go to the next. And each one of the contexts, the kind of the emphasis, the punctuation, the texture will change because they will respond in different ways.... So the energy level and the intensity is different at each of those kind of points, so the context changes. But I will always be trying to do the same thing.... In that sense the context for me as a process manager never changes in its most fundamental architecture. But if you looked at each one of those things you’d say: “He did something completely different here then he did there.” But I didn’t really you know (R8).

Areas of Disparity and Diversity

Many factors affect how individuals approach the consensus building task. Beyond what is noted above and the contextual considerations outlined in Section 4.4, the practitioner’s mandate, function, style, and stage of involvement (and how much their role extends beyond facilitation to encompass wider mediative responsibilities) play an important role as well. The earlier sections of this chapter offer various examples of how respondents
view and approach tasks differently because of contextual and style differences. For instance, in section 4.3.1, I outline different ways three practitioners clarify issues when first entering a process. These include: having participants put their expectations in writing; consulting with a committee of stakeholders; and using one-on-one meetings and brokering. The respondents also varied in how they tackled and involved participants in process design, how much work they did away from the table, how much emphasis they put on tailoring methods to circumstance (as opposed to entering with fixed methods in mind) and how they adapted their approach to suit different group and cultural settings. Beyond these more fundamental distinctions, there were also smaller variances in the way respondents worked through each stage of decision-making, including a range of non-standard activities specific to certain individuals only.

Useful Ideas and Advice Taken From Practice

While this chapter sheds light on key trends, similarities and disparities in practice, above all else it is intended to enrich theory by offering practical hints and strategies for tackling the various consensus-building tasks. As in chapter 3, the general text and quotes provide ample food for thought from which to glean ideas. Each section outlines key considerations to be aware of when working through process stages from the experience of practitioners who do this work. There are also examples of personal strategies interspersed throughout. Finally, the closing section outlines a range of ways that respondents adjust their methods depending on the group size, the process and issue type, and the make-up of the group. While these three factors are only a small sample of the contextual considerations identified, they demonstrate the responsive character of this work and some of the things practitioners think about when tailoring approaches to context.
CHAPTER 5

Techniques Used in Facilitating At-the-Table Discussions

This chapter rounds off the study of consensus decision-making by examining the tools and techniques practitioners use when leading at-the-table discussions. Rather than cover the wide range of methods presented in the facilitation literature, I restrict my analysis to key techniques identified by the professionals interviewed.

The chapter is divided into five sections. In the next section, I describe the four categories that I sort the techniques into and my reasons for structuring them in this way. I also touch on the role of principles within this “facilitation framework.” In the last four sections of the chapter, I review what respondents identified as their principal at-the-table techniques using the four-category breakdown described. In addition to outlining basic facilitation practices used by all study participants, I explain some variations across the group, and reasons behind their different styles. I also expand on certain techniques by including more specific how-to advice taken from various resources.

5.1 General Facilitation Framework

5.1.1 Breakdown of Techniques

Figure 5, on the following page, groups the tools and techniques discussed in this chapter into four broad categories. Each category represents one of four procedural functions that facilitation techniques are meant to support. These functions — represented by the four ovals in the diagram — include: (i) structuring the process; (ii) supporting communication and interaction; (iii) tracking and recording points and ideas; and (iv) synthesizing and organizing what is said. The figure also shows how the techniques are further broken down within each category and how I structure the discussion in the sections that follow.

While the main resources I refer to in this chapter structure these same techniques in a variety of other ways (see Kaner et al., 1996; Avery et al., 1981; Rees, 1991; Williams, 1993), I have chosen to frame the discussion using the breakdown in Figure 5 because, in my view, it best reflects the themes I encountered in my interviews and also the recurring set of actions that a practitioner works through when facilitating at-the-table discussions.
Figure 5. Facilitation Framework

STRUCTURING
- Structure Process Framework
- Structure Individual Steps

SYNTHESIZING & ORGANIZING
- Summarizing
- Sorting
- Prioritizing
- Diagramming

SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION
- Basic Communication
  - Active Listening
  - Paraphrasing
  - Questioning
  - Refocusing
- Alternative to Open Discussion
  - Go-aroounds
  - Breakout Groups
  - Brainstorming
  - Caucusing
- Colorful Techniques
  - Exercises
  - Discussion Aids

TRACKING & RECORDING
- Flip Charts
- Alternatives
  - Screen Projection
  - White Boards
  - Transparencies
As with the frameworks discussed in Chapter 4, the four facilitative functions in the diagram should be viewed as iterative, non-linear and overlapping. Not only is there no fixed start point or order in how they are applied, but practitioners often carry out two or more of these actions at the same time. The same can be said of the techniques listed under them — which are far from exclusive and are generally best carried out in combinations. In fact, in the case of techniques aimed at supporting communication and interaction, this is expected practice.

5.1.2 The Role of Principles in Facilitation Practice

It is important to keep in mind when reading through this chapter, that the purpose of facilitation is not to lead a group through a formulaic application of tools and exercises. Rather, as Kaner et al. indicate, it is “to support everyone to do their best thinking” by encouraging full participation, promoting mutual understanding and cultivating shared responsibility (Kaner et al., 1996: 32). Many of techniques listed in Figure 5 and described in the following sections are devised to help facilitators do just this. But, these same techniques can just as easily reinforce existing divisions and imbalances if not used appropriately or in the spirit of the principles they are intended to advance. The arrow on the right of Figure 5 is intended to highlight the vital role principles play in shaping and directing a practitioner’s facilitation approach and choice of techniques.

As previously touched upon in Chapter 3, among their utility, principles offer a mental checklist of things a facilitator should be sensitive to when appraising a situation and determining how to respond. When leading group discussions, these considerations include factors such as: people’s comfort levels with the process and with one another; people’s energy levels; who is speaking, who is not and why; and the barriers to trust and participation. Principles should also guide the practitioner in their application of the methods they choose and should serve as models for their own behaviour (R4; R12). As one respondent expressed it:

The difficulty with all this.... is that through the preparation and through the way in which you approach [a process], many people are much more articulate than others. Some people dominate the discussions. Therefore, in all the group dynamics that happen, the facilitator has to understand the group dynamics; understand what’s happening; understand that there are a lot of decisions that are made outside the group.... So when you look at your style as the facilitator, when you ask questions about the principles, [one question to ask is] does the facilitator or the mediator also use those principles? So what I’m pushing for is really good listening skills; appreciating and valuing everyone’s different perspective; making it so that —whether it’s visual or not — I’m using as many of the senses as possible and challenging people to look at alternatives (R12).

The next four sections of the chapter extend on the facilitation framework discussed here by taking a closer look at the techniques themselves. Referring back to Figure 5, the
following section begins by examining procedures used to fulfill one particular facilitative function, namely *structuring the process*. Moving clockwise through the diagram, Section 5.3 discusses methods that help *support communication and interaction*. Section 5.4 looks more closely at techniques used to *track and record* people's contributions. And finally, Section 5.5 discusses ways to *synthesize and organize* the resulting information.

### 5.2 Structuring the Process

#### 5.2.1 Structuring and Restructuring the Process Framework

The mention of "facilitation techniques" tends to bring to mind activities like icebreakers, role-plays, brainstorming sessions and flip chart writing. This is at least the image it conjured for me before I launched into my interviews. As I quickly learned however, facilitation is much more than the use of interactive exercises and colourful tools to get ideas out and keep people engaged. In fact, for most practitioners, these types of activities come second to the basic structuring and communication practices that a facilitator uses on a regular basis. Facilitation is also much more than the use of techniques aimed at supporting the actual discussion and interaction between participants at the table. Indeed, in order for this interaction to be effective, the facilitator, in collaboration with the participants, must first structure the process in a way that allows them to get from point "a" to point "b" (and potentially to points "c," "d" and onwards) in some logical series of steps.

While there are some broad decision stages that all groups tend to work through to give coherence to their discussions, the process is rarely linear and the sequence of the steps is highly flexible and under constant adjustment. In some cases, these steps may correspond with the four stages of negotiation outlined in Section 4.3.3. In other cases, the steps may be defined by a series of agenda items, tasks or questions that need to be addressed in some logical order to get to where they want to go. In yet other cases, the process may take a very different form altogether, incorporate unique activities (be it field trips, outside consultations, or other events not regularly listed as part of standard decision-making frameworks), or be broken down into a more complex set of sub-issues and sub-steps.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the general framework of steps that a group works through is usually laid out with the "negotiating" parties as part of the design stage of consensus building and must be tailored to the people and the circumstance. Even when the facilitator has not been involved in the preliminary design stage though, they will usually want to re-examine and fine tune the proposed framework upon stepping in. As the table progresses through each step, the facilitator must also encourage them to revisit and potentially revise their process to respond to new issues, and their growing understanding of the problem and how they interact best together.
5.2.2 Structuring Individual Steps

In addition to helping to organize the process into a logical series of activities, before each meeting the third party must also work in the details — the objectives, desired outputs, methods and approaches — for each step in the session. To illustrate what this might involve, Respondent 1 drew an image resembling that shown in Figure 6 exemplifying the strategy and flow of discussion he generally leads a group through during a multi-step event. As he did so, he explained that people generally begin each step by engaging in an expansive discussion on the question put forward to them. Once people have sufficiently discussed the topic and gotten their ideas out, they will then redirect their discussion inwards to reach some point of closure. Pointing again to the diagram, Respondent 1 went on to stress the need for clarity on the points of closure (indicated by the arrows in the Figure) noting that one needs to know “where they are going to come” and “what they are for.”

Figure 6. Example of Flow of Group Discussion in Multi-Step Event

![Diagram](image)

Source: Adapted from diagram drawn by Respondent 1

The flow of discussion portrayed in Figure 6 closely resembles that described by Kaner et al. (1996). They postulate that in addressing individual questions or issues, groups generally proceed through a two-stage process that begins with divergent thinking (in which individuals explore their diverse perspectives on an issue) and progresses into convergent thinking (where they then work to synthesize what has been said and bring some conclusion to the discussion). For example, in the first step of a process, a group might begin by gathering different views on the nature of the problem (divergent thinking) and then proceed to synthesize the points (convergent thinking). In another step, they might brainstorm a list of interests related to the defined problem (divergent thinking) after which they might sort these different interests into categories (convergent thinking). In yet another step, they might generate a list of options for addressing these categorized interests (divergent thinking) and then work to create and evaluate various solution packages (convergent thinking).

22 The diagram prepared by Respondent 1 did not include written terms, which were instead described orally. For purposes of clarity, I have chosen to incorporate Kaner et al.'s descriptors (divergent and convergent thinking) and other written details into the diagram.

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When working through each of these steps and tasks, practitioners generally adjust their approach by pacing and combining the techniques in their portfolio in different ways (R1; R8). In deciding what techniques to use in a situation and how to structure them, Respondent 1 explained that he considers a number of design parameters, among them “pace, energy levels, and needs for points of closure.” Other considerations that might influence a practitioner’s choice of approach include: the preference, size, familiarity and character of the group, the type of output (or “closure”) being sought, and whether they are trying to encourage divergent or convergent thinking. While it is important to have a clear plan when tackling individual steps, Respondent 1 stressed that what needs to be tightly defined is not the techniques (though many resources tend to put most emphasis here). Rather it is the scope, entry point and expected product for that particular session. In his words:

You need to have a clear scope for the discussion whatever point you’re at. There needs to be some logic where it’s come from…. And then there’s an entry point. Now, is that a question? Is there a prompt? What is it that people begin talking about? I hate the discussion that says: “well let’s talk about this,” because there needs to be an objective for that discussion. There needs to be a clear entry point that stimulates discussion: a question, or a problem that people focus on, or a series of options that they want to discuss and look at the relative merits of…. And then there needs to be a clear point of “what are we trying to get to.” And the facilitation tools you use there could be a whole range: big group, small group, brainstorms, diagrams. You know, it’s really not easy to describe the full range quickly, but it’s the framework for the discussions that needs to be tight, not the tools. The tools are just a whole bunch of things that you apply in different ways. But “What’s the issue? What’s the objective of that particular point of discussion?” (R1).

5.3 Techniques That Support Communication

Practitioners use a wide range of tools and techniques to enhance trust, communication and interaction in a group and render discussions more inclusive, productive and participatory. To be most effective, they generally draw on a mix of these methods simultaneously. In this section, I begin by discussing the basic communication skills that, along with structuring activities noted above, are a mainstay in any facilitator’s tool kit and are a base for all other methods they employ. I then proceed to look at more structured alternatives to open discussion commonly mentioned by the study participants and why and how these techniques might be used. In the last section, I discuss what respondents said about their use (or non-use) of more colourful and visual methods as part of their practice.
5.3.1 Basic Communication Techniques

If there is one key message on techniques that I took home from my interviews, it is that the art of good facilitation rests not with the number and variety of techniques one has in one’s portfolio, although having a capacity to use different methods as needed can be very helpful. Rather, it rests with a person’s perceived sincerity, their ability to empathize with others, their ability to structure things properly, and their mastery of the basics of communication. Below I discuss four of the most fundamental communication techniques used by respondents in my study, namely: active listening, paraphrasing (or translating), questioning, and refocusing. While I discuss these four methods separately, they are in fact strongly inter-dependent and are almost always used together. They represent only a few of the basic communication techniques used by facilitators on an almost ongoing basis to assist discussions, convey interest, and encourage participation. A more extensive list of basic communication techniques is provided in Box 5.

Box 5. Verbal and Nonverbal Techniques for Encouraging Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Asking open-ended questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Phrasing requests in a way that encourages more responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledging and positively responding to contributions made by participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asking for more specifics or examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Redirecting questions or comments to other members of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encouraging non-vocal participants to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asking for and encouraging different points of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Paraphrasing for clarity and understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoiding stating one’s opinion or interjecting one’s own ideas while facilitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Referring to contributions people have made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Verbal Techniques or Behaviours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Attentiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Patience(^{23}) and calmness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Voice – clear and displaying confidence and enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Facial expressions - smiles encourage and relax (but too much smiling can discredit the facilitator); deadpan or overly serious expression can bring energy level down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Movement and position in the room – should not be too rigid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Rees, 1991: 101-109

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\(^{23}\) Patience is not included in the list of techniques outlined by Rees (1991). However, two respondents noted it among the key nonverbal techniques that they use (R4; R10). I have therefore incorporated it into this list.
Active Listening

According to Rees (1991: 107) one of the most important things a facilitator must do when working with a group is “pay attention to the person who is talking.” A facilitator who is not attentive and does not listen well often obstructs rather than enhances group productivity. Active listening involves much more than simply receiving information. In the practice of facilitation, and in wider social interactions as well, good listening requires an active effort by the facilitator or listener to: (a) understand what is being said, (b) convey interest, and (c) confirm the message and seek clarification. These three elements of active listening are further described below.

a) Understanding what is said: Part of the skill of facilitation comes from being able to read individuals, to put oneself in their shoes, and to interpret the beliefs and values that lie behind their words. To do this, one has to be sensitive to how someone says something — their tone of voice, eye contact, emotions, and other body language — as much as what they say (Rees, 1991). Respondent 7 suggests paying attention to how people use metaphors too. As he explains:

A dispute resolution practitioner should be conscious of [the metaphors being used] because it reveals a great deal about what’s important to you and why. So when I hear you talking about the forest as a cathedral, that tells me something. When I hear your counterparts talking about the forest in terms of a crop to be harvested, that tells me something too (R7).

Other rules of active listening include: not passing judgment; not being distracted by the surrounding environment; and refraining from the habit of thinking up replies as someone is speaking (Avery et al., 1981; Rees, 1991). While the ability to listen well comes with conscious effort and practice, there are practical things practitioners can do to enhance their ability to pay attention, particularly in larger and more complex processes where distractions and demands are greater. Working with a co-facilitator or assistant is one good example. Facilitators often have to juggle more activities and information as the number of stakeholders and the level of controversy and complexity grows. For this reason, some practitioners like to tackle these types of situations with the help of at least one other person. As previously discussed in Chapter 4, “teaming it” provides an extra set of eyes and ears to absorb information. It also allows practitioners to share and alternate facilitation responsibilities, so they each pay more attention to what is being said (R10). Beyond these more communicative advantages, teaming it can also energize the proceedings and cater to different personality-types by injecting diversity and a mix of facilitation styles into the process (R4; R10). In the words of Respondent 10:

It’s very helpful teaming it.... Often you’re working at lots of different levels so you may have a lot of agenda that you want to cover, and so you’re pushing and you’re not able to hear some of the other things that are happening. So having somebody else working with you that can
process and help check the different levels that you’re working in — what you’re hearing — I find really helpful.... And that also gives an opportunity for judicious checks of interventions and different styles. You know a variation in styles helps.

b) **Conveying interest:** Active listening also requires that the listener demonstrate an interest in what is being said. This is often done using body language and gestures that reassure the speaker that one is engaged. Examples of signals of interest listed in the literature include: an open and relaxed posture, head nods, eye contact (except in cases where direct eye contact is culturally inappropriate) and occasional verbal affirmations (Rees, 1991; Avery et al., 1981).

c) **Confirming and clarifying the message:** Finally, active listening involves letting people know that their message is understood and seeking clarification when something is unclear. Paraphrasing and questioning are two of the more common communication techniques used to do this, so although these procedures are discussed as separate aspects of communication below, they are in fact components of active listening as well. The statement below by Respondent 11 gives a snapshot of how various elements of active listening work together. It also highlights the central role of what he terms “sympathetic and full listening” among the tools a practitioner uses and the degree of attention and perception this type of listening requires:

I think probably of all the techniques of this field of activity, it’s extensive listening — hearing people out to the end of what they’re wanting to say and then reflecting it back so that you’re sure that you actually understood what they were saying and understood it as closely as another person can understand — [that is most important]. What you might call “sympathetic and full listening” would probably be the single most powerful tool in anybody’s kit. So what is it that they are saying? And why are they saying it? And what are their feelings as they put these ideas forward? How honest a statement is this? Or is this a partially crafted position?... Listening for the reality of what people are saying. And to some extent probing it to find out if you actually understand what they’re getting at, because often what we find in facilitation is that people are angry with each other for some good reasons, some bad reasons, some doctoring their reasons, and they can’t hear through that to what the person’s actually saying (R11).

**Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing is one of the more common techniques used by facilitators to clarify something someone has said. An element of active listening, paraphrasing involves restating in one’s own words what one has heard and then asking the speaker if the statement captures what they said (Avery et al., 1981). When paraphrasing a statement of one or two sentences, Kaner et al. (1996) suggest using roughly the same number of words as the speaker. If the statement is many sentences long, the facilitator should just
summarize the key points. In doing so, Respondent 4 advises against “parroting” what people say. He elaborated by saying:

One thing you have to be careful about is not to parrot, but just to let people know you’ve heard them. To summarize it. If they’ve said a lot, take what’s important out. You’re doing that for the other people and for the person who spoke. You usually try and define a question with what they say just to let them know you’re listening (R4).

As Respondent 4 points out, paraphrasing serves several purposes. First it helps to reassure the speaker that their point is understood and, in so doing, has a calming effect (Kaner et al., 1996). Secondly, it provides the speaker an opportunity to clarify any misinterpretations. Thirdly, it serves to ensure that everyone in the room has a common understanding of what was said. Beyond this, paraphrasing is also a useful way to clarify or summarize messages that are repetitious or poorly stated without putting the speaker on the spot or making them loose face.

While the standard practice, as Respondent 4 indicates, is not to repeat a statement in the speaker’s exact words, there are some instances when doing so is acceptable and can even be beneficial. for example, Kaner et al. (1996) suggest repeating statements verbatim (a practice he refers to as “mirroring”) when the facilitator is unfamiliar with a group and feels a need to demonstrate his or her neutrality. Because mirroring speeds up the tempo, it is also the “tool of choice” when facilitating a quick-paced brainstorming session (Kaner et al., 1996: 46). The general rule for mirroring is to repeat single-sentence statements in the speaker’s exact words, and to summarize longer statements by picking out and playing back key phrases using the speaker’s words as much as possible.

Methods like paraphrasing, mirroring and questioning (discussed below) tend to work well in a “western” cultural setting. But it is important to keep in mind that they may not be received the same way by people of other backgrounds. According to Respondent 2, practitioners need to be sensitive to people’s responses to different methods when working across cultures. In addition, they must be particularly cautious about translating statements “from one world view to another.” As she states:

Certainly all the communication skills have cultural limitations. Whether they be questions (because some people find those invasive) or whether they be summarizing across cultures (because sometimes you just don’t have the same worldview — you’re translating from one world view to another and you don’t get it and you distort the message), or reframing where there can be considerable distortion and you’re trying to take a message, flip it over and identify a matrix. All those communication skills have to be regarded really carefully, and with astute attention to how they’re being received and a willingness to undo what you’ve tried to do (R2).
Asking Questions

Like paraphrasing, open-ended questions are another communication technique used by consensus building practitioners to convey their interest in what a speaker is saying and to seek further clarification when something is unclear. Although I discuss paraphrasing and questioning separately here, these two elements of active listening are often used together to “draw people out,” with the facilitator first paraphrasing a speaker’s statement and then soliciting additional information through an open-ended question (Kaner et al., 1996: 45). Follow-up questions help signal to the speaker the parts of their message that are unclear or that they wrongly assumed to be common knowledge (Avery et al., 1981). In addition to asking questions for their own benefit, facilitators generally try to identify points that may not be clear to other people in the room. As Respondent 4 reveals in the following example, this is particularly important when individuals do not want to appear uninformed to the group:

I worked on a large corporate mediation. It was a high technology deal…. They’d been going at this for a year and hadn’t been able to come to an agreement. We spent the first day going through things and it soon became apparent to me that there was a real lack of understanding because there was a mixture of knowledge about this technology among the people sitting there…. And what I ended up doing even though I knew nothing about this technology was translate things, because as their mediator you can ask the stupid questions. You can see when someone’s confused, but not wanting to ask the question because they don’t want to look stupid. So you can ask the stupid questions: “You know I’m really just here as the mediator, but it’s important for me to be clear on this. Maybe you could put that in simpler terms. What exactly is it that this piece of equipment is going to be doing?” And in explaining it to me, I can see that [another person in the group] is all of the sudden getting it.

Facilitators use questions for other purposes as well, most notably as part of wider encouraging and balancing techniques. Encouraging techniques, as the term implies, are aimed at “creating an opening for people to participate without putting any one individual on the spot” (Kaner et al., 1996: 50). Examples of encouraging techniques presented in Kaner et al.’s book include questions and statements like: “Who else has an idea?”, “Let’s hear from someone who has not spoken for a while.”, or “Is there a worker’s perspective on this issue?” These types of questions and statements play a key role in communicating to participants that everyone’s voice is important and is being sought. While encouraging techniques can be used throughout a process, they are particularly useful early on when people are still establishing how they will interact (Kaner et al., 1996).

Balancing questions resemble those used to “encourage” participation, but rather than simply invite participation, they are meant to draw out other perspectives on an issue. Examples of balancing techniques include questions like: “Are there some other points of view on this subject?”, “Is there something we haven’t thought of?” or “Can anyone think of a way this does not fit?” (Rees, 1991: 105). According to Rees, facilitators

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should make use of balancing questions when everyone is in quick agreement and no alternative viewpoints are expressed. While general accord may in fact mean everyone is in agreement, it can also signal that people are uncomfortable expressing minority views, or that the group — in the haste to make a decision — has not moved beyond the standard ways of thinking to consider more diverse possibilities.

**Refocusing**

A last basic communication technique that stood out in my interviews and that I discuss in this section is *refocusing*. Refocusing (or what Kaner et al. term “deliberate refocusing”) is a method that seeks to balance a discussion by preventing a single issue or group from dominating the conversation. This is done by purposely redirecting the group away from one track of discussion and prompting them to examine other areas. The following statement by Respondent 8 describes why and how refocusing might be used:

> Well I work very much from the theory that you kind of nudge around the problem. This is not like a military operation where you’re trying to take ground on the field. I think much more in terms of more holistic plans, where we’re working in the air at 30,000 feet first, trying to get a sense of what the various areas are that need to built. It would be like drawing a picture. If you suddenly started to sketch in great detail an owl in the corner before you decided whether you were working in a desert or a northern boreal forest, you know, you start putting in the detail too early presumes that you know what the ground cover’s like. And people often start developing this kind of rigidity, because they start arguing about: “Well it’s not a snowy owl. It’s a great horned owl.” And we’re going to have a big debate now about the detail connected with the owl and we really haven’t even figured out what the landscape is, forget about whether or not we’re going to detail in an owl.... So one of my roles is to try and nudge people back and say: “Well, we’re going to poke around there for a while, but I think we’ve poked there for a long enough time. Let’s go on to somewhere else.” I’m trying to get a sense of what the whole picture may look like and to get them to get a sense of it.

According to Kaner et al. (1996), deliberate refocusing is more “directive” than the previous communication techniques discussed. Because it has the potential of moving the conversation away from concerns of one group to those of another, facilitators must take special care not to be perceived as biased when using this technique. This is especially true in the early stages of a process when suspicions are higher. The more trust and transparency that is established between the practitioner and the parties, and the more people see themselves as participants in a shared process as opposed to adversaries, the more supportive they are likely to be of refocusing-type interventions.
5.3.2 Alternatives To Open Discussion

Open discussions are only one of many forms of group interaction used in at-the-table discussions. While they have their place in the continuum of techniques, most practitioners will switch between open discussions and other styles of interaction, particularly when facilitating multi-party processes. Mixing discussion formats helps energize a process by injecting diversity and changes of pace. It also encourages more balanced participation by catering to people’s different communication needs. When used and combined appropriately, changes in interactive styles can also contribute to more productive meetings and a better use of the people’s time.

Below I examine the three main alternatives to open discussion used by practitioners in my study — structured go-arounds, brainstorming and break-out groups. Although not considered an alternative to open discussion per se, I also discuss the role and use of caucusing as a means of supporting at-the-table activities. Finally, in the closing part of this section, I look at what members of my study group said about their use of more colourful techniques to enhance group interaction and communication.

Structured Go-Around

The structured go-around is a common way of gathering different perspectives in the group. It helps make space for quieter people to speak and is therefore a good way of balancing participation. As the term implies, this technique involves identifying each person individually in round robin fashion and seeking their opinion on the topic in question. While structured go-arounds are used at all points in a process, they are particularly useful in the early stages when people are not yet acquainted and may be uncomfortable speaking before others (Kaner et al., 1996).

The structured go-around is used in various ways. In some cases, it is simply one of many encouraging and balancing techniques used intermittently in a session to give everyone a chance to speak and to ensure that all viewpoints are heard. As one person described: “If you find that there are a few people who aren’t participating you go around the room and say: ‘You know that’s a great idea (from the dominator), maybe we can see what other people think about it.... Why don’t we go around the room and see.’” (R4).

In other cases, a discussion may be carried out entirely using the go-around format. This approach is commonly used in processes involving First Nations participants, particularly if they have a tradition of using discussion circles (R2; R8). Under this style of discussion, each person at the table is given an opportunity to speak without interruption. In some First Nations settings, a feather may also be passed around and would carry the same function as the talking stick in other traditions. By assuring everyone an opportunity to speak, the structured go-around frees people from looking for chances to express their opinions and lets them be more attentive to what others are saying. Even if individuals choose not to “fill the space with words,” Respondent 2 has found that just having an opening set aside for them “has encouraged people to speak.”
**Breakout Groups**

As indicated in the previous chapter, breakout sessions and task groups are frequently used in larger processes to speed progress and make better use of the table’s time when convened. In some cases, subgroups may be asked to tackle different elements of a problem simultaneously. In others, they may deal with the same question, but are able to do so with greater depth and intensity, and with more attention to each individual’s contribution, than could be done in the large group in the same time span (R3).

Breakout groups have other advantages beyond simply enhancing efficiency and productivity. First, they offer a change of pace from standard plenary discussions and are good energizers when momentum is waning. Secondly, breakout sessions provide a less intimidating discussion environment and make it easier for people who are uncomfortable speaking in large groups to express themselves. Thirdly, they encourage participants to interact with one another on a more personal level, thereby fostering working relations.

Despite these and other recognized benefits of small group work, participants are often reluctant to break away from the table especially when they are just entering a process (R3; R8). According to Respondent 3, there are several things a facilitator can do to help minimize this resistance. For starters, she suggests explaining how the use of small groups can benefit the table’s work. Other recommendations include outlining the breakout process and function so people know what to expect, and assuring them that they will hear back from all subgroups once the table reconvenes. In Respondent 3’s words:

> [M]any are very reluctant to break into a small group because they want to hear what everybody has to say. And so you really need to help them to understand that “you’re going to work in your breakout group, and you’re going to generate some ideas, and we really want to hear about all of them. You are going to have a chance to report back to the larger group.” And sometimes it can be a bit heavy-handed if their numbers are just too big and you’re not going to be able to accomplish what you want in a large group.

While the approach Respondent 3 describes may work in less tense environments, in more highly charged and controversial processes, breaking through the resistance to small group work is not quite so straightforward. Participants in these settings are often suspicious of proposals to break into small groups because of their fear of hidden agendas (R8). Forcing the issue and pushing small group work on sceptical parties will do little to alleviate their mistrust and can even aggravate it. As Respondent 8 explains, in these types of settings, the third party may need to do everything in plenary, at least until the participants establish the relationships and structures they need to feel comfortable entrusting tasks to others:

> At [the early] stage, it’s very important before you go into small groups that you have a lot of large group discussion.... I’m talking about big controversies.... Let’s assume a real deep controversy. You have to
gradually build through broad group dynamics a comfort level around working in smaller groups, because a lot of people have a high degree of suspicion that the real agenda was to get you into small groups. So to set that properly. So the front end of these processes is usually more volatile…. I’ve got to somehow make it possible for people to all perceive in fact and in perception that they have an equal right to participate in this conversation as anybody else participating in it. And gradually out of that kind of moving mass there will gradually emerge a much much greater sense of discipline and structure to it. And I will be trying to grow that discipline and structure. But to take that dynamic out of the environment will not work in my judgment.

In addition to the above suggestions, Respondents 3 and 4 offered several other pointers when dealing with subgroups. As a precaution, Respondent 4 warned against allowing subgroups to form along factional lines. In cases where people show a tendency to split off into interests what he tends to do “without being too directive” is “mix the people up in the room.” Respondent 3, on her side, offered several tips for increasing the effectiveness of small groups. Beginning with group size, she suggested keeping groups to no smaller than six people to ensure adequate energy, and to no larger than 10 or 15 participants so the discussion remains manageable. She also recommended that subgroups and (if applicable) those appointed to facilitate them be given clear directions and objectives so they return to the plenary with comparable products. Otherwise, she explained “it makes it harder to then wrap up the results... in any kind of meaningful way, because you’re comparing apples and oranges” (R3). If the subgroups are self-facilitated or are being led by technical people, she said steps should also be taken to ensure that the appointed facilitators understand their responsibilities. To help, some practitioners distribute a sheet outlining people’s roles (R1; R3). Respondent 3 also suggested providing subgroups with a template of questions, expected outputs and proposed time limits to further assist them. As she explained:

In a breakout group I try and make sure that there is structure. If you’ve got self-facilitated groups, or if you’ve got technical people, [it’s useful] if you provide a sheet that’s got some of the questions. It’s got the time break down. Some suggestions of ways that they can use their breakout time to make sure that they stay on line. Templates. Templates that are going to help them to see how they can record their results in a way that we’re going to end up with consistent products. So those are the things I look for... And it’s not: “You must do this and fill this out exactly.” It’s just saying: “This will help to guide you” (R3).

**Brainstorming**

Brainstorming is a structured discussion technique that is used to generate lists of ideas quickly and productively. It can be used at any point in a process where one needs to draw out the range of perspectives on an issue or question. Examples of consensus building tasks that might benefit from brainstorming include: the identification of ground
rules and procedures, the clarification of issues and interests, the generation of ideas for resolving a problem, and any other occasion requiring divergent thinking.

In brainstorming’s most standard form, participants are asked to call out their ideas as they come to mind. These points are then recorded for later discussion. The tempo is generally quick and energized in order to keep people thinking on their feet, and statements are kept as brief and to the point as possible. As a way of encouraging participants to put forth even their most undeveloped and unusual ideas, the group is also asked to refrain from critiquing one another’s points during the session itself and to save any comments for later discussion (Moore and Feldt, 1993; Eitington, 1996; Williams, 1993; Moore, 1994).

The facilitation and team-building literature offers a number of variations to this standard brainstorming format. For example, Moore and Feldt (1993) describe what they refer to as brainwriting. It differs from typical brainstorming in that participants are given a few moments to individually reflect on and write down their responses to the discussion question or task before starting. Once the participants reconvene, the facilitator then does a round robin — collecting points from each person — and records their contributions onto flip charts (Moore and Feldt, 1993).

Another method called cardstorming is described in Box 6. It is similar to brainwriting in that participants are asked to write down their ideas before starting. However, in the case of cardstorming, each point is written on a separate adhesive-backed card. These cards are then posted as the point is called.

**Box 6. Cardstorming**

- In cardstorming, participants are asked to write their responses to a particular question on individual adhesive-backed cards (usually 8" x 5" or larger).
- They should only record one response per card.
- Each point should be summarized in 4 to 5 words so it can be written in large block letters in the center of the card and be read clearly from a distance.
- After the participants have written their ideas, the group either reconvenes in small groups for further discussion and prioritization of the points, or meets as a large group.
- In the final report back to the large group, the cards are posted onto the wall as the points are called.
- The cards eliminate the need to record points onto a flip chart. They can also be moved around, thus facilitating the categorization and organization of issues and ideas.


Only two members of the study group mentioned using cardstorming among their various techniques, and this only occasionally (R5; R10). While recording points on individual cards makes structuring and categorizing lists much easier, Respondent 5 said that the relative merits of this technique over other forms of brainstorming and the method he ultimately chooses is dictated by the type and quality of the materials at his disposal. Of
course, literacy would also be a consideration in the choice of brainstorming methods. Respondent 5 described his experience with cardstorming in this way:

It’s just a faster way of doing what I’m talking about [listing and categorizing ideas]... When [the sticky cards] first came out they’d drop. They wouldn’t stick very long to certain surfaces so they’d be on the floor and you say, “Where does that come from?”... The initial ones weren’t that great, but they’re really good now and you can move those [cards]. And people can say: “Well no, I don’t think that goes there. It should be over there.”... It just comes down to whatever happens to be available. I mean, I’m not likely to have much access to sticky cards unless I fly them in... in the Northwest.

Brainstorming is often carried out using a combination of other discussion methods. For example, some practitioners use a layered approach — having participants brainstorm in small groups first, then opening the discussion to the large group — to encourage wider participation (R3) and, as one person put it, “surface individual thinking rather than bury it in group process” (R11). Another common practice is to combine brainstorming with structured go-arounds. This helps ensure that everyone has a chance to have their say and prevents more vocal individuals from monopolizing the airtime.

Box 7. Nominal Group Technique

- The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was designed to circumvent factors that impede effective group participation such as verbal aggressiveness, status and strong personalities. It does so by using a round robin technique to record brainstorming or brainwriting ideas.

- Participants can only raise one point at a time. Points are recorded as they are raised.

- Once everyone has noted their first point, the facilitator can do a second sweep of the group. In order to achieve even greater participation, the facilitator can also change the order that individuals are identified (e.g. going around the table clockwise then counter-clockwise) so that the same people are not always last to respond.

- Participants are asked to refrain from commenting on the points raised until the list is complete. Although clarifications can be requested, criticism is not welcome.


Some resources recommend combining brainstorming with a more controlled version of the structured go-around, described in Box 7 (above), called the Nominal Group Technique (Moore and Feldt, 1993; Moore, 1994). But, at least among the practitioners interviewed, the tendency was to take a looser approach to brainstorming and go-arounds than what the guidebooks describe. Indeed, based on the responses I obtained, it would seem that the boundaries between brainstorming and approaches like open discussions and structured go-arounds are much fuzzier than they appear in theory and that practitioners tend to use all these techniques interchangeably to help generate lists. While traditional brainstorming calls for brief, fast-paced responses, this type of approach is not always appropriate in consensus-type processes. In certain instances — such as early in a process, or when dealing with questions participants feel particularly strong about —
individuals need sufficient time to vent and express their views. Forcing them to encapsulate their concerns to a few brief words without allowing them an opportunity to fully explain themselves, may simply leave participants feeling frustrated and invalidated. To accommodate people’s need to be heard, the third party may instead use slow-paced discussions and go-arounds as a way of generating lists although they may still refer to what they are doing as “brainstorming.”

Many other factors can affect how one goes about generating lists. Additional considerations include: the group size, the sensitivity of the issue, trust levels in the group, and whether the question concerns all the participants or only a subgroup. In the statement below, Respondent 5, who frequently leads large multi-party processes, describes the two key techniques he uses to generate a list of solution ideas. One technique involves the use of task groups and the other involves structured go-arounds. Respondent 5 also gives examples of how the factors noted above might affect his choice of approach:

I keep [the generation of solutions] relatively simple, but I have two techniques. If it’s a problem that I think is between two or three groups, I will try and establish a task group to do it right there.... “Well you know we have to really look at how we’re going treat the riparian area on [River X]. Could I suggest that the member of BC Environment from the inter-agency planning team, the member representing the mining industry, and the member that’s representing the.... fishing community all meet at lunch and maybe an extended lunch. We’ll work on some other things until you get back at two o’clock, and then report back to the table with what you think might be the resolution options.” When I get into a very confrontational kind of sensitive issue that I think the table needs some time on, I do it around the table and force every individual to say something. Now they don’t have to, but they usually are forced by their colleagues to say something anyway. Now that’s very time consuming. If you’ve got 30 people, or 25 people, that takes up a lot of time, so it has to be something that’s really serious.... So it’s almost an “at the second” kind of judgment as to how you go about it and what you do.

Caucusing

Practitioners use caucusing within a facilitated event in the same way that they use between-meeting consultations (discussed in Chapter 4) in more extended processes. Caucusing is often used to deal with problems or difficult situations without putting individuals on the spot. This might include: dealing with overly talkative or aggressive participants; resolving conflicts concerning two or more individuals; or prepping individuals for possible crisis or venting by other parties to avert knee-jerk reactions. Caucusing is also used to improve the involvement of quieter individuals. In the latter case, a facilitator may first use encouraging techniques to draw quiet individuals out. If this does not work, they might approach the individual on the side. In the words of one respondent: “You can at times... either in the group, or if you don’t feel comfortable doing it in the group, outside of the group ask them. ‘You know John you haven’t said
much. Is there something I’m missing or are you just more comfortable listening?... Is there something that you [want to raise?]” (R4).

When asked what one can do to support quieter and more passive participants, Respondent 2 first highlighted the importance of not putting individuals on the spot or causing them to lose face before the group. “[T]hat is something that would be very counter-productive to a group process, and certainly potentially to the individual,” she stated (R2). This also applies in situations where someone appears to not fully understand what has been said, though they say they do. In addition to checking for comprehension privately with these individuals, and communicating to them that their contribution is valued, Respondent 2 also suggests having them input into the session design. This is particularly important in groups where the direct approach of western-styled negotiations runs against certain people’s cultural grain. In her words:

If you are seeing that someone’s in an awkward situation, or they don’t appear to understand, but they say that they understand (because this is also an issue is language fluency and comprehension issues), putting them on the spot is probably the worst thing you could do. Call a caucus if you need to. Talk to them in private so they don’t have to lose face in front of the party or parties.... So, in terms of comprehension, checking for comprehension is a very important factor.... You know this is where the group can be very useful in talking about it, or the individual whom we want to make sure expresses their voice can. I mean we don’t have to know all the answers, but we have to know how to ask the questions; how to make sure they know we care enough about hearing their voice that we want to know from them what would be of aid to make that happen (R2).

5.3.3 Use of More Colourful Techniques

Basic communication techniques like listening, paraphrasing, questioning and refocusing, and alternatives to open discussion like structured go-arounds, brainstorming, breakout groups and caucusing are mainstays in almost any facilitator’s toolkit. All the practitioners interviewed claimed to use all of these methods to some extent when facilitating discussions, although they applied them in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of regularity even within their individual practices. Where respondents varied more widely was in their use of wider, more colourful methods — beyond the basics already covered — including game-type exercises, visual aids, and methods requiring participants to draw on their creative senses. This section reviews some of what the respondents said about their use and (more commonly) their non-use of colourful techniques.

Range of Practitioner Views on the Use of Colourful Tools and Exercises

When asked about their use of colourful tools and exercises, only a few members of the study group claimed to use any such methods on any regular basis. Most tended to stick with the standard interactive techniques previously discussed. The reasons respondents
gave for their limited use of colourful techniques varied as much as the individuals themselves. Some, for example, found that colourful techniques were not always well received by participants, and that they could achieve much the same results by mixing and matching the more conventional methods to vary the pace and dynamics (R1; R4). One respondent who approached facilitation from this angle summarized his outlook this way:

There are a number of “techi” things that people do. There’s a number of facilitation folks around that use things like “open-space” and “future search” and some “moment circles.” And I think the shine’s gone off them. I think people get kind of glaze over their eyes when a facilitator asks them to do something kind of weird. We [my colleagues and I] use a lot of changes of pace. We try and use a lot of different dynamics in the group because different people operate in different kinds of settings better and worse. So we’d use small groups, big groups and little buzz groups and so on (R1).

Other respondents who made limited or no use of colourful methods simply did not feel comfortable or suited to using them (R2; R6). For some, this discomfort even extended to the use of flip charts. Interestingly, one respondent who did training outside her practice and was considered a mentor by several interviewees, admitted to using very few visuals and colourful techniques herself (R6). She attributed her style to her personality that she saw as “intuitive” in nature. While some facilitators have a talent for using techniques that stimulate dialogue by tapping into people’s senses, she viewed herself as weaker in this area. Instead, her approach was to work with the energy in the room. She used the Jungian theory of personality types to help illustrate her point:

You know the Meyers-Briggs stuff. Meyers-Briggs personality type indicators. It’s Jungian stuff.... It’s a framework for how people take in data and how they make decisions and how they orient themselves in the world. And you know one of the indicators on it is sort of “sensing the concrete” (what is, what you smell, what you see, what you hear) versus “intuitive” (which is more ideas and possibilities). You can do both at the same time.... We use both ways of taking in data. I use much more intuition. And the “sensing” thing is the place cards, name cards, visuals, games, that kind of stuff. And I’m sure that’s why I use that less. I recommend it to people as a teacher because there are a lot of facilitators who really use those aids well. But I just don’t. I just tend to work with the energy in the room, the group. And I mean there are things like [sticker] dots and stuff that you can use, and flip charts and boards and those are aids. But I’m not like Sam Kaner24, right. He’s got a great book, so I just refer people to that book. But I don’t do it a lot (R6).

Taking yet a different approach, another respondent explained that he varies his use of colourful techniques depending on the group he is working with. He tends to throw the

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question of design back to the participants and to see how they want to proceed. While he sees himself as less visual and animated than many practitioners, he still sometimes finds himself using colourful techniques or playing a more dynamic facilitative role if that is what the participants ask for. “So it’s not always comfortable,” he said, “but if that’s what they want, that’s what they agree on, great” (R7). In other cases, he might invite group members skilled in certain techniques to design and lead an exercise. He described his adaptive approach to facilitation as follows:

It varies a lot. It really does depending on the people in the room. Some people are very resistant to [the use of colourful techniques]. On the other hand, sometimes I’m very resistant to it. I have to say [to myself]: “Hell..., lighten up a little bit.”... But it varies so much. If people want to engage in a visioning exercise, there’s often times people in the room who know about that, and so I invite them to design it. Make it theirs. Sure I draw upon the usual kind of resources: the brainstorming, the various techniques, the colour dot..... But... I’m very careful about kind of coming in as the facilitator’s facilitator. You know, the book says we should do this. I find.... business people are a little more conservative in that. The environmentalists perhaps are a little more open to kind of an unstructured thing. So it varies a lot and I’m very sensitive about what techniques are appropriate (R7).

Of the respondents who described using a wider range of colourful techniques (R5; R9; R11; R12), Respondent 9 was by far the most experimental. Perhaps because of her background in theology and education, her focus on transformative learning, and the fact that most of her facilitation work revolves around social and cultural issues rather than land and resource-related ones, she tends to put a greater emphasis on the use of communicative, sensory and artistic techniques that encourage people to express themselves, their feelings and their experience in new and insightful ways. Her portfolio of methods incorporates a range of activities that were not raised by any other participant (including drawing and the use of the body and voice to convey messages). This notwithstanding, she also saw a need to tailor the use of such methods to the circumstance and to people’s comfort levels. She described her approach and some of the reasons she uses these more experimental techniques in this way:

Well it’s a very left-brain society and that’s intuitive, so I use a lot of drawings, because then I just say: “Don’t talk about it, just draw it.”.... So I do that all the time, because it just accesses part of ourselves that’s different. I try to do movement if I can, because again it’s how do we embody this in our bodies. You know the body is a source of knowledge. Nobody even talks about that in organizational facilitation, the knowledge that we get from our bodies. Everybody has it, the “gut feeling” and the “I feel sick” and all that. But nobody really works it into the methodology. How we embody all this process into our physical body. So that’s something I also try to do, not as a break, but really do it. “How would you show it? How would you show change in your life?” “How would you move that?” Again it depends on your group.... Or I
use voice sometimes. “What sound would you use?” “Invent your own songs.” Depends on your group (R9).

The colourful methods described by other respondents in the study group tended to be more conventional. Two examples were the use of metaphors to communicate complex ideas (R8) and writing exercises aimed at encouraging participants to recap the interests of other parties “to see how much they had heard” (R4). Even the three respondents who discussed using icebreakers and team-building techniques showed preference for exercises that fell at the more conservative and practical end of the spectrum. They included the use of introductory quizzes (such as that described in Chapter 4), and other openers aimed at acquainting people and setting the right tone for the process (R11; R12). According to one of the three respondents, the traditional game-type icebreakers also have their uses in some instances, but they can be “limiting” as well:

You can have tools like getting people to go through little canned exercises which have a predictable result for insight building. Getting everybody to decide the content of the spaceship and evolve them through those parlour game type of set pieces. And personally I find them limiting and limited. But sometimes they’re useful to highlight a point. Ice breaking things that help people see the world with a little humour at the beginning. Finding out who you’ve actually got in the room in structural terms — age, origin, languages, family — helps to make people a group of people rather than a group of contestants. So I guess that’s how I come at it (R11).

Visuals and Other Discussion Aids

While, with a few exceptions, most members of the study group tended to shy away from colourful exercises and “canned” games, they were much more open to using visuals and other discussion aids as foils for dialogue. Below I discuss field trips and mapping — two visual techniques several respondents noted among their portfolio (R5; R8; R10; R11). Flip charts and diagramming — the two other visual aids commonly mentioned by respondents — are addressed under Section 5.4 (that looks at tracking and recording techniques) and Section 5.5 (that deals with synthesizing and organizing techniques) respectively.

• Field Trips: Field trips are one discussion aid used by practitioners to “break the formality” of meetings and help parties “feel what’s important to people” (R10). Chris Maser, an American specialist in conflict resolution, also echoes this message from Respondent 10. According to Maser, as part of his approach, he tries to get participants “physically out” into the area of conflict so they can discuss issues in their environment. He notes that doing so helps “transform the abstractions of the conference room into concrete examples of the field which one can see, touch, smell, hear, and, if necessary, taste” (Knight, 1999: 2, 7). Of course field trips are not always possible because of the cost involved and limitations on time and group size. They are therefore generally restricted to processes with a small number of parties (R10).
Maps: Maps are another type of visual aid most commonly used to support land and resource-related decisions. Maps can be created in a number of ways. In large complex processes, more and more mapping is done on computers using Geographic Information System (GIS) software. Not all situations are suited to the use of computers however. Time, costs, and the availability of equipment, data and technical expertise are only some of the criteria one needs to consider when choosing among different mapping methods. Respondent 5, who uses everything from GIS to aerial photographs and paper maps, also emphasized the need to choose methods that participants are familiar and comfortable with to avoid alienating certain groups and to help even the playing field. As he explained, if people are anti-computer or fear being misled by unfamiliar technology, it is probably better to work with a simpler form of mapping, or no maps at all. He recounted an example from his practice to illustrate his point:

In a map-oriented process there’s a big advantage to that individual that’s the geographer, or forester or whatever it is. It’s hard... to get people to the level playing field. And this [principle] says “strive” [for level playing field]. I think that’s all you can do. But it can be a limitation [to using maps] and some people will fight against using the information. You know I had this happen a couple of years ago. An approach was taken to use a Geographic Information System (computers) and then put the stuff up on screens so the table could see it. Two people refused to participate on that basis because they didn’t want that technology. They wanted to back off of using maps because they didn’t understand what was going on and they thought this was something to show them with. So one has to be very careful. You try to hit the level that is the most appropriate for the middle group, the middle part of the group, because if you’re catering to the ones that are the most used to the subjects that are there, then you’re probably missing the target (R5).

In addition to the criteria mentioned above, Respondent 11 saw area size and map scale as other important considerations when choosing mapping methods. In the case of scale, when asked if it might be possible to do map overlays using overhead transparencies, he said it might work for maps of smaller scale, but not for most purposes. “[A]n overhead projector is so simplified that you can get about three symbols on before you’ve lost it in projection,” he explained (R11). For this reason, when doing serious mapping, Respondent 11 generally works in small groups “using a light table,” or projects GIS representations onto a large computer screen that everyone can read. He has also found mylar overlays useful when discussing spatial issues in informal settings. “It’s amazing what you can do with a set of [mylar] overlay maps on somebody’s kitchen table to explain quite complex interactions in the field,” he said in example (R11).
5.4 Tracking and Recording Techniques

Another important function practitioners perform when supporting at-the-table discussions is track and record what is said. This section examines how different professionals interviewed described going about this task. I begin by discussing what members of the study group said about the use of flip charts — the most common tracking and recording technique. I also look at alternatives to flip charts used by some individuals, and reasons behind their choices.

5.4.1 Flip Charts

Flip Chart Use and Functions

Flip charts are by far the most common visual tool used by facilitators and mediators to track and record people’s comments. Flip charts serve several purposes. First of all, recording someone’s comment onto a flip chart so it can be seen communicates to them that their message is understood and will not be lost among the flurry of other points (R11). To effectively fulfill this function though, the facilitator needs to ensure that the points recorded accurately reflect what individuals said by both checking for comprehension and being receptive to corrections. Otherwise, participants may simply let errors pass and feel frustrated as a result. As Respondent 11 explains:

[T]he real value of the flip chart in the notes that it creates is the evidence of having heard accurately. That’s its absolutely, quintessential, primary purpose is that what you write up there accurately reflects what people said. So when you’re using flip charts you’re constantly checking: “Did I get that right? Is this a fair representation of what you said?” Otherwise what happens is the person who’s doing the notes skews the information either subtly or grossly. You know what it’s like when somebody’s up on the flip chart and they’re writing stuff down and you see they’re missing it. Nothing makes me more annoyed than that. So the principal tool is: “I heard you. I got it.” That’s the principal tool. Because anybody can sit there on a laptop and write verbatim notes (R11).

A second thing flip charts do is function as a foil for discussion. By offering a common point of reference and a running summary of what is said, flip charts help focus the group’s attention, keep people on track, and enable parties to build on one another’s contributions in a productive manner. “It helps so that discussions don’t sort of go all over,” Respondent 3 explained. She went on to note that, as the facilitator, she prefers not to be the focal point of the discussion. Rather she wants people’s collective attention to be on the flip charts and their recorded points, “so that they’re responding to each other’s ideas and they’re building on it,” she added.

Finally, flip charts provide a paper trail of the discussion and decisions (R3). As Rees (1991: 116) notes, people can become overwhelmed by the amount of information they...
must absorb in meetings, particularly when they are trying to put their own ideas forward too. Not surprisingly, Rees has found that individuals in such settings tend to remember the points they consider important most. Posting flip chart sheets sequentially around a room as they are produced makes it easier for the people to review and refer back to past discussions as needed. It also helps keep the group on track and prevents points from being overlooked later on.

Frequency of Flip Chart Use

About half of the individuals interviewed claimed to make extensive use of flip charts in their work (R1; R3; R4; R5; R9; R11; R12). Two others, given the choice, preferred to use other visual media that serve the same function as flip charts (R8; R10). Still others made limited (R2) or almost no use of these or other front-and-centre recording methods for various reasons (R6; R7; R13). Among the latter group, Respondent 7 admitted that he is “not heavily reliant on flip charts” in part because he is left handed, which makes it awkward to write on the charts. He still records issues on flip chart on the odd occasion if that is what the group wants. Alternatively, Respondent 13 tends to have someone take minutes rather than use flip charts. In special cases (like in brainstorming sessions) where flip charts are deemed beneficial, she works with a facilitator skilled in this area who generally leads the exercise and records the points.

Even practitioners who use flip charts more regularly will employ them with varying frequency depending on the task and type of process. According to Respondent 5, for example, although he uses “a whole menagerie” of flip charts and visuals in his work, his use of them is sporadic and largely dependent on what he is doing. “I may not use them for a day or a day and a half,” he notes, “and then all of a sudden everything is used” (R5). Respondent 2, on her side, observes that she uses flip charts less when working in mediation than when doing straightforward facilitation. While she may still post points or summarize issues on flip charts in mediated events, she tends not to use them to actively record (or track) people’s contributions as they are speaking. She described her use of flip charts in the following way:

As a general facilitative strategy I use different coloured markers when I’m recording, but the type of [mediated] situations I’ve just described to you don’t involve a lot of flip chart work. So you’re not tracking people’s ideas as much visually. As a mediator I’m less inclined to do that. I’ll put the issues up on a flip chart, but I’m less inclined to use the flip chart in the tracking process. I’m not that type of facilitator who has a number of very skilful techniques about how to put ideas up and get them visual. I really see a value in people being able to see something and focus on that collectively, but it’s been less present in my practice than some facilitators who will cover all the walls in the room with paper because they’re using it a great deal to track stuff. So it depends. In the types of situations I just described to you I did not use flip charts (R2).

The size and make-up of the group as well as confidentiality issues may also influence the extent to which practitioners use flip charts. According to Respondent 4, for example, he
uses flip charts constantly when working in multi-party situations. "I would write up 20 pages of flip charts in an hour," he said, "because people want to see that. They want to see something of themselves... in the outcome" (R4). In contrast, in other circumstances, including bilateral mediations and situations where there is a lot of sensitivity around confidentiality, he may not take notes at all or may have to destroy anything he has written when he is done.

5.4.2 Alternatives to Flip Charts

Large Screen Projections

Extending on the above context-dependency theme, there are times when flip charts do not work well as recording tools, most notably in processes involving large numbers of people. While flip charts might still be useful in breakout sessions even in these settings, the value of the flip chart as a visual aid and focal point is lost in a large plenary if what is being written down is not visible to some or most of the group. As an alternative in such situations, Respondent 12 has projected notes onto large screens using computers. In the following statement he describes his use of large screen projections in a process involving 60 people:

"It’s a large group. So what we do is we have a large screen at the meeting and we use PowerPoint. So there’s a secretary there and what we do is when a decision is [made], we put it up. She types it in and we put it up. Everybody can see it up on the screen. ‘Is that what we’ve all agreed to?’ So what we then do, which is visual, we have the conversation: ‘Are there other different points of view?’ ‘No?’ ‘That’s the way we’re going.’ So the minutes clarify that, but we use a very large screen so people can then see it, because sometimes what I’ve heard isn’t necessarily it. You know, I may have misinterpreted. So we try to use the verbal with the visual (R12)."

White Boards

Some practitioners prefer using other recording tools over flip charts for other reasons. Respondent 10, for example, said that if given the choice he would opt for white boards over flip charts because it is easier to modify things as the discussion moves along. "You know my ideal room would be a room papered in white boards," he stated, "because it allows you to change.... You can sort of change, and rearrange, and structure and it’s easier to get somewhere — to actively change. A flip chart’s more static," he concluded (R10). Of course, one of the limitations to using white boards is that, to be effective, and to keep things posted for people to see, one needs to have quite a few white boards in the room. Also, the content of the boards must be copied down before being erased if a written record is needed, whereas flip chart sheets can easily be rolled and stored for later reference. Respondent 10 went on to explain that the real value of white boards is that it allows a group to structure the outputs of a discussion. "So you can do a brainstorming session with a whole bunch of ideas and say well here’s the structure for it," he said,
"...and then people can challenge the structure and change that as you go" (R10). Hence, one solution when access to white boards is limited and tracking individual contributions is important, is to use flip charts when generating initial lists of points and ideas and white boards when subsequently organizing and synthesizing their contents.

**Overhead Transparencies**

Overhead transparencies are another alternative to flip charts that, like white boards, have the advantage of being changeable rather than static. But Respondent 8 prefers transparencies for other reasons as well. Unlike some respondents who like using the flip chart as a focal point for discussion, he finds that focusing the group's attention on the facilitator and the flip chart only detracts from their exchange. Writing things on overhead transparencies helps him to shift people's attention away from the board and himself, to one another and what they each have to say. Furthermore, by playing a more subtle role in the discussions, he is better able to listen and synthesize what people are saying — which he sees as one of his principal functions when talks are underway — thereby helping to lay the groundwork for the next stage of discussions. As he explained:

I'm not big on flip charts. I find flip charts detract so much energy from the meeting onto the flip chart and the writer of them that everybody starts focusing on what people are writing there. So I find them unhelpful. I use transparencies where I'm much more innocuous, because I can try to detect the flow. I often try to synthesize. I look at people as delivering a series of strands and somebody's got to weave this thing the other way alongside. So my real goal is to try to pull synthesis across. And oftentimes that creates a new platform. So a bunch of people are moving with their threads and if I can cross-thread them, then I may give them a new platform to work from (R8).

Of course, one disadvantage of transparencies is that only one sheet can be projected at a time, so participants do not get the paper trail they would with posted sheets (Rees, 1991: 117). To get around this problem, Rees suggests distributing photocopies of the transparencies as discussions move along. This way, participants can refer back to previous points and sheets with ease. Rees also recommends updating photocopies about every half hour so everyone has a current set of notes to work from. In practice of course, the frequency that transparencies are copied will depend on whether there are copying facilities on premise, whether someone is available to run copies while discussions continue, or whether the group needs to break for this purpose. It also depends on the task being undertaken and the rate at which sheets are produced. In synthesizing and organizing exercises, for example, a group may spend half an hour or more discussing and making changes to a single projected sheet and may not need a copy until the final version is complete. In sessions where a large number of lists are developed though, copies may need to be run more frequently.
5.5 Synthesizing and Organizing Discussion Points

I have already discussed three of the four functions that facilitators carry out when leading at-the-table discussions, namely: structuring the process, supporting communication, and tracking and recording what people say. A fourth task they must perform to move the dialogue forward is assist the group in synthesizing and organizing the product of discussions to bring out key themes, relationships and priorities. Referring back to the flow of divergent and convergent thinking discussed in Section 5.2, these synthesizing activities tend to come after people have engaged in divergent thinking. Not only are they intended to support convergent thinking, but more importantly, they serve to bring closure to one stage of discussion while simultaneously laying the platform for the next level of talks (R1; R8). This section takes a closer look at the use of synthesizing and organizing techniques within the facilitated process.

5.5.1 Ways to Synthesize and Organize Discussion Outputs

The products of a discussion can be synthesized and organized in a variety of ways depending on the question being addressed, the information-type, how the results are to be used in later stages, and of course, people's judgment of what serves their needs best. Some of the more common means of synthesizing and organizing information and lists include:

- **Summarizing** the key points of a discussion;
- **Sorting** points into categories according to theme (R3), areas of commonality and divergence (R4), complementary relationships (such as the packaging of solution ideas), or other logical lines;
- **Prioritizing** ideas based on their level of importance or urgency; and
- **Diagramming** or communicating information in some visual form, whether this is through charts, diagrams or other visual representations.

Each of the methods described above can be used alone or in combination with other organizing techniques. For example, if a brainstormed list is too extensive, it may be helpful to first narrow it down by sorting points into categories. Once this is done, the table might then identify priorities among the groupings using any number of other

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25 The respondents used a number of different terms to describe the act of organizing discussion outputs including "grouping," "synthesizing," "creating a structured list," "diagramming," and "structuring." I have chosen to use the terms synthesizing and organizing, to differentiate this category of techniques from the 'structuring the process' activities discussed in section 5.2. As previously mentioned, these two procedural functions are closely related and are often overlapping. Not only does the process framework and the question being asked serve to define how a list of ideas might be synthesized and organized, but the synthesized results are also used to guide and restructure later process steps.

26 Kaner et al. (1996) caution that categorizing lists in groups is much more difficult. They advise using pre-established categories to facilitate the exercise and having a small group of two or three individuals do the initial sorting on behalf of the group. I discuss this issue at greater length in section 5.5.3.
prioritizing techniques that exist. Examples of two such prioritizing techniques are the **sticker dots exercise** (described in Box 8), the **ranking exercise** (described in Figure 15).

Going back to the grouped list, an alternative thing the table might choose to do with it is illustrate the relationship and influence between the different categories using a chart or diagram. I discuss the role and use of diagramming at greater length in the next section.

### Box 8. Sticker Dots Exercise

The Sticker Dot exercise is used to narrow down priorities in a list in a quick and effective manner.

- As part of this exercise, individuals are given a fixed number of sticker dots. Some books recommend giving 5 or 7 dots if there are more than 30 points listed. Others suggest giving 20% of the total number of points.
- The participants are then asked to place the dots by the points they consider most important to address. If they desire, they can put all dots by a single point.
- Once all the dots are in place, the group should discuss those items that received no dots, some dots and most of the dots. They should also use this information to identify the issues of highest priority.
- Generally, the points with the most dots beside them are selected for further discussion.

Source: Moore and Feldt, 1993; Williams, 1993.

### Box 9. Ranking Exercise

This prioritizing exercise is particularly useful in cases where one does not want the priorities of a minority group to be drowned out or neglected if they did not coincide with the majority. The advantage of this exercise for achieving this objective is that the individual rankings attached to each issue are also noted. Thus, even if a point is only ranked important by one person, if it is viewed as their top priority, the group might choose to include it within their final list. The general steps are as follows:

- Participants are asked to individually select their five most important items on the list being prioritized. Each participant is then given 5 recipe cards and is asked to write his/her points in the center of each of the cards (one point per card).
- Once this is done, they are asked to lay their cards face up in front of them. They should decide which of the five priorities identified is most important to them, put a number “5” on that card and turn it over. They should proceed in a similar fashion with the rest of the cards, with “4” being the next most important item and “1” the least important.
- Once the participants have finished ranking their five priorities, the cards are collected and shuffled, and the rankings are tabulated for each of the points. It is important not to sum up the rankings to come up with a single total because part of the value of this exercise is the added information it provides about individual preferences. For example, a point given a ranking of “5” by one person is probably more important to include than a point given a ranking of “1” by five participants.

Source: Senge et al., 1994.
5.5.2 More on Diagramming

Of the organizing techniques listed above, respondents discussed their use of diagramming most. Charts and diagrams are common organizing tools used by practitioners to portray information, relationships and patterns in a visual manner (R1; R5; R11). As the saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” indicates, visual representations of information tend to communicate complex ideas much more quickly and often more effectively than words alone. By presenting a common point of reference, diagrams can also uncover areas of accord and disaccord about the relationship between elements much more readily than text. That said though, not everyone processes information in the same way. It is therefore a good practice to combine visuals with verbal descriptions to cater to individual differences (R11).

There is, of course, no fixed type of chart or diagram that works in all situations. Ultimately all visual representations must be tailored to the elements under consideration, how they relate to one another, and the diagram’s intended use. The literature offers numerous examples of diagrams that can be used to structure information. Flow charts, for example, are a good way to group information into categories while also displaying points in each category in a hierarchical manner. Organizational charts are a common form of a flow-chart encountered in many aspects of work life. Another flow-chart type diagram used in decision-making is the objective hierarchy.

Figure 7. Example of an Objective Hierarchy

![Objective Hierarchy for Selecting Water Treatment System for City of Vancouver](image)

Figure 7 (above) shows one type of objective hierarchy I produced for a paper on water treatment risks and alternatives. The paper examined the implications of new findings associating chlorinated water consumption to increased spontaneous abortion rates on the City of Vancouver’s choice of future water treatment technologies. The question it hypothetically analyzed was whether this new information would shift the scales in
favour of another treatment alternative and warrant a re-examination of the City's decision. The objective hierarchy shown gives a breakdown the key concerns considered when the City of Vancouver originally selected its water treatment system with the new concern in question — minimizing spontaneous abortions — added to the health related objectives. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to describe the process involved in creating this and other objective hierarchies at a great length. However, a good description is available in Chapter 3 of Ralph Keeney's book *Value-Focused Thinking* (1992) for those wanting to know more on the topic.

Cause-effect diagrams, or what the policy analysis literature also refers to as influence diagrams, are another type of visual representation regularly used in practice. They are used to portray interactions and cause-effect relationships between different concerns, issues or elements in a system. In developing such diagrams it is important to focus on the key factors affecting the system in order to keep the models as simple as possible.

In the case of influence diagrams, shapes representing individual variables are interconnected by arrows to show the relationships among them. Figure 8 provides an example of one such diagram that I produced for the same water treatment paper discussed above. The diagram examines the factors influencing the risk of spontaneous abortions from consuming chlorinated tap water.

**Figure 8. Example of an Influence Diagram**
As the above diagram illustrates, the influencing factors in this particular case include things as far ranging as watershed protection, the season, the weather, the primary and secondary treatment methods, the particular source reservoir used, and the amount of chlorine added as a result. All these factors affect the level of organics and chlorine at various points in the disinfection process and thereby the amount of problem-causing by-products (trihalomethanes) that end up in the tap water. Additional factors affecting a pregnant woman’s risk of spontaneous abortion — that they have more control over — include their access to and use of home filtration systems (including common carbon filters) and the amount of unfiltered tap water consumed on a daily basis.

As demonstrated in the example provided, one can use various shapes to indicate fixed and non-fixed factors in an influence diagram. For instance, in the case of Figure 8, double squares indicate a predictable factor, single squares represent a policy or decision, and circles represent variables that cannot be directly controlled, predicted or influenced due to their complexity. Also, arrows are used to indicate the direction of influence. Influence diagrams are particularly useful in providing a simplified model of complex systems and processes. They help uncover areas of agreement and disagreement about the functioning of systems. They can also pinpoint information gaps and thereby questions in need of clarification, expert input or research. Chapter 3 of Robert Clemen’s book, Making Hard Decisions gives a simple introduction to the art of influence diagramming for those interested in further reading.

Maps (R5; R11), budgeting cycles (R1), and calendars (Williams, 1993) are three other ways practitioners organize spatial and time-related information visually. Along with flow charts and influence diagrams, they represent only a small segment of the endless array of adaptive visual tools that practitioners use to structure what they hear. Of course, as Respondent 1 explains in the statement below, it is not the type or quality of the diagram that determines its value. Rather, it is whether it succeeds in breaking down and communicating the elements of a discussion in a way that makes sense to people and that helps them to structure their talks, to pull things together, and to move ahead on selected elements while keeping track of the bigger picture.

I do a lot of graphical diagrams, because I think conceptually in diagrams and people often get lost in the discussion and I continually need to restructure that and say: “Here’s where we’re at, let’s try and focus on this.” But often the problems are so complex that people can’t focus on one bit of it, they run around in circles. And it’s in my mind, part of the secret, part of the sort of key to getting results out of those discussions is breaking it down into some kind of logical diagram conceptually. And so, as a facilitator, part of your role is to try and structure that discussion (R1).

5.5.3 Different Practitioner Approaches to Organizing Outputs

Practitioners organize and synthesize group comments differently depending on the information-type and their individual styles. While some use a lot of visuals and
diagrams, others tend to be more verbal and lean towards the summarizing and sorting of points. Practitioners also vary (both across contexts and individuals) in whether they do this synthesizing and organizing during or between sessions, and how they involve participants in the exercise.

In some instances, the third party will organize the product of a discussion together with the participants. Respondent 3 described her use of this approach in the initial “issues identification” stage, saying: “I generally generate a bunch of lists on paper with the issues, and then we’ll work together to group them.” While it may appear straightforward, Kaner et al. (1996) offer a word of caution when trying to categorize lists in a group, because it is often more difficult than it seems. According to Kaner et al. (1996: 106-108) categorizing involves two activities: creating the categories and sorting the items into them. When categorizing lists in groups, the creation of categories tends to take most time, stimulate most debate, and cause participants most frustration for two reasons. First, people do not share common meanings for terms because of their different worldviews, values and points of reference. Secondly, some individuals tend to be more detail oriented than others. They therefore see more distinctions between listed items and identify more categories than those who think more abstractly. To avoid getting bogged down in conceptual debates and to speed the sorting process, when the purpose is the render a list more manageable, Kaner et al. recommend using predefined categories and having two to three individuals sort the items on the side. The sorted categories can then be shared and more easily fine tuned with the group. Because of the philosophical discussion such an exercise can incite, Kaner et al. only advise creating categories in group when the parties can benefit from the exchange by gaining a deeper understanding of one another’s perspectives and worldviews.

As an alternative to the above approach, rather than have participants do the sorting, some practitioners like to first take a run at organizing discussion points on their own (R1; R4; R8; R10). They then run their synthesis back by the group for further discussion and revision. Respondents who describe using this approach fall into two camps. On one side, there are those who prefer to synthesize what they hear as people are discussing. One example is Respondent 8 whose approach to threading together the strands of discussion is previously described in Section 5.4. In contrast to Respondent 8’s approach, several other respondents said that, rather than synthesize points in session, they generally use breaks and, in the case of multi-day sessions, overnights to do it (R1; R4; R10). Of course, in many cases practitioners do not restrict themselves to any single approach. As Respondent 11 notes in his discussion of diagramming, there are situations when it is better to structure points with the group, occasions when doing it on one’s own is most effective, as well as times when a different strategy altogether is best:

It’s a very powerful tool for getting direct involvement if you engage people in creating a visual because there’s active participation in it and commitment to it, and usually insights you could never have thought of. On the other hand, sometimes it’s good to come back and say “well here’s what I thought people were saying” in a diagrammatic form and that gives people then a foil to react against and say: “No, no that line should really go here.” or “Those people are actually connected over this
way.” or “No you’ve got it backwards.” The ability to represent things physically like that, sometimes it’s better in a group; sometimes it’s better for the facilitator to reflect; sometimes it’s better to find an individual in the group that has real talent in that regard and use them as that foil. The artist in the group can be a great assistant.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has extended on the discussion of the theory and practice of consensus decision-making by examining the principal techniques used by consensus building practitioners when facilitating at-the-table discussions. To bring conclusion to the discussion, as in previous chapters, I close by reviewing the key messages I take home from the previous sections relative to the four study objectives.

Areas of Commonality

As noted in the chapter’s opening section, based on feedback in the interviews, it would seem that practitioners fulfil four common types of functions when facilitating at-the-table discussions:

(a) They help structure the steps to be followed (or process framework) and plan out how each of these steps will be tackled;
(b) They support communication and interaction among participants;
(c) They track and record the points and ideas raised by the group; and
(d) They help synthesize and organize people's comments to bring out key themes, priorities and relationships and lay the groundwork for later steps.

While the precise techniques individuals use to fulfil these tasks may vary, from what respondents described there are certain methods that appear common to most practitioners. These include structuring activities aimed at organizing the steps in the process and basic communication techniques like listening, paraphrasing, questioning and refocusing. Not only were these particular methods consistently noted as mainstays in people’s toolkits, but they also formed the foundation of any other methods they applied. Beyond these basics, the respondents also made common use of activities like go-arounds, breakout groups, brainstorming and caucusing. Among other things, these latter techniques were seen as ways to draw out quieter individuals, balance participation, and introduce variety, energy and changes of pace to a process.

Examples of “Messiness” and Complexity of Practice

While the facilitation functions and techniques listed above tend to be consistent across all practitioners, when and how they are applied is far from fixed. It is again this dynamic and situation-specific aspect of practice that is hard to capture on paper. As with the frameworks discussed in Chapter 4, each of the four facilitation functions noted above
should be seen as iterative, non-linear, and overlapping. There is no set start point or order in how they should be applied. Also, they are often best carried out in combinations. The same applies to the techniques within each function, which are repeatedly used in different ways throughout a process and are customarily mixed and matched to add variety, enhance participation, or inject changes of pace as needed.

Areas of Disparity and Diversity

Basic communication techniques like listening, paraphrasing, questioning and refocusing, and alternatives to open discussion like structured go-arounds, brainstorming, breakout groups and caucusing are foundations in any practitioner’s portfolio. All the individuals in the study group claimed to use all these methods to some extent when leading group discussions, although they applied them in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of regularity even within their own practice. Where respondents varied more widely was in their use of more colourful methods — beyond the basics — including game-type exercises, visual aids, and methods requiring participants to draw on their senses. While some practitioners claimed to make regular use of colourful methods, most individuals preferred to inject variety by simply combining and pacing more standard techniques in different ways. The reasons individuals gave for their use (or non-use) of colourful methods also varied quite widely. Some saw them as a hindrance. Some simply felt uncomfortable using them. Some considered at least some of the more conventional ones useful in certain instances. And yet others took a more experimental stance and felt much could be learned by having people express their experience in new and insightful ways that require them to tap their other senses.

The members of the study group also varied in the methods they used to track and record points raised. While the bulk of the group used flip charts to a greater or lesser degree, there were also some who leaned towards other recording methods (including minute taking, overheads and white boards) for often distinct reasons. For example, one individual expressed a preference for white boards because they allowed for easy adjustments. Another preferred overheads because they allowed him to play a more innocuous role rather than being the focal point in the room. By taking a back seat on discussions this latter respondent aimed to encourage participants to interact face-to-face and build working relations. He also focused more of his own efforts on synthesizing what was said and laying a foundation for later stages (which he considered one of his key functions during meetings).

Finally, the respondents also varied in how they went about synthesizing and organizing ideas. Some were more visual and used a lot of diagrams. Others were more textual and made greater use of sorting and categorizing techniques. When respondents carried out these synthesizing activities (whether in or out of session) and how much they involved participants in the process also differed.

Useful Ideas and Advice Taken From Practice

As noted in earlier chapters, a primary aim of this thesis has been to offer practical ideas and strategies for assisting groups in decision-making from the experience of skilled
practitioners. The text, the quotes and the textboxes in this as in previous chapters offer tips and ideas on an assortment of facilitation techniques. They also shed light on key elements of facilitation required to support productive discussions. Beyond the lessons and pointers that can be gleaned from the examples, possibly the key message to take home from this chapter is that good facilitation is not defined by one’s range of the techniques. Rather, good facilitation rests with a person’s ability to listen and empathize with others, their knack for structuring processes properly, their skill in tackling pieces of the problem while keeping track of the big picture, and their mastery of the basics of communication.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

The previous chapters have presented a mix of theory and hands-on perspectives on many aspects of consensus decision-making, meshed together with my own analysis and impressions. The task of this closing chapter is to pull taut the threads of discussion by recapping principal themes and highlighting some lessons for would-be practitioners and planners.

As noted in Chapter 1, among its objectives, this study has sought:

a) to relay some areas of commonality between selected writings on consensus decision making and practice — including similarities among the practitioners interviewed;
b) to provide a glimpse of the "messiness" and complexity of real-life processes; and
c) to give witness to the diversity that exists in practice by highlighting some key differences in perspectives and methods encountered in the interviews.

The next section reviews key findings related to these objectives.

Beyond these three aims, the prime purpose of this study is to offer hands-on advice for building consensus from experts who do this work. While the practitioner insights woven through earlier chapters are too numerous to recount here, Section 6.2 presents a few of the many messages that have stayed with me, and ways my view of practice has changed as a result. From there, Section 6.3 takes a retrospective look at my research approach and offers suggestions for future inquiry. Finally, Section 6.4 brings this thesis to a close with some concluding messages for would-be practitioners.

6.1 Review of Key Themes

General Commonalities

In terms of commonalities, possibly the most important message to take home from this study is that, on a conceptual level at least, the theoretical frameworks used as backdrops for discussion in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 do hold some relevance to practice. In fact, they are for the most part reasonable reflections of the very loose lines of consistency encountered across practitioners. NRTEE’s ten consensus building principles, for example, are an apt representation of the ideals and conditions most practitioners strive for when working to build consensus — though how and how far they apply them (or can apply them) varies with each practitioner and each situation. In a similar vein, while not all agreement-
building frameworks are so easily transportable, NRTEE’s four-staged framework is sufficiently broad to capture the basic steps or tasks most practitioners work through at some point in a consensus process — though not necessarily in the same way or order. The same can be said for the facilitation framework presented in Chapter 5. On a high level, it typifies the four repeated functions practitioners carry out when assisting at-the-table discussions. But again, how, when, and in what sequence and combination these functions are performed are limitless.

Among other commonalities, the practitioners who added personal principles to the Round Table list raised a lot of similar themes as well. They tended to downplay the importance of specific tools and techniques and to warn against fixing too rigidly on set methods. Instead, they often put emphasis on “soft” requirements like: an understanding of the core purpose of consensus building, an ability to structure and adjust processes properly, an innate sense of what to do when (or timing), and a capacity to tackle pieces of an issue while keeping sight of the big picture. Other important skills and attributes commonly listed by respondents included: self-awareness, authenticity (or “being oneself”), transparency, an interest in people, and a natural tendency to put principles into practice. They also noted the ability to empathize with individuals from many walks of life, and the need to see oneself as a participant in the learning process along with everyone else at the table.

When it came to facilitating table discussions, the members of the study group shared at least a core set of techniques. These basics included: active listening, paraphrasing, asking questions and caucusing. Most respondents also used brainstorming techniques and breakout groups to some extent when working with larger groups, in most cases to introduce changes in tempo, re-energize participants, encourage divergent thinking and participation, and add diversity to the process.

General Examples of the “Messiness” and Complexity of Practice

As repeatedly mentioned throughout this thesis, while the frameworks discussed have some broad relation to practice and reflect very loose similarities shared by many practitioners, the way individuals interpret these frameworks and how they set about applying them (consciously or unconsciously) are endlessly diverse. The practice of consensus building is not a science with black and white answers, or recipe book solutions. Rather, it is a responsive art. Each situation brings its own unique set of conditions and third party roles, requiring one to respond differently every time, though the concepts or “frameworks” guiding one’s actions might be very similar. In the case of the principles of consensus building, individuals must rely on judgment and experience to determine what each principle means in specific contexts, how they are best achieved, what tradeoffs must be made to balance opposing needs, and where the line of acceptability is drawn. In the case of the four stages of consensus decision-making (Chapter 4) and the facilitation framework (Chapter 5), complexity takes a slightly different shape. Both these procedural frameworks, while portrayed by simple

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27 These functions include: structuring the process; supporting communication and interaction; tracking and recording points and ideas; and synthesizing and organizing what is said.
illustrations, are in fact fluid, malleable and iterative in nature. The boundaries between the steps or functions are indistinct. There is no marked start point or order to their application. There is a lot of back-and-forth and combining of elements. And, there is an endless array of process permutations as a result. Not only do no two individuals approach a process or function in exactly the same way, but given the context-dependence of this work, even individual practitioners never quite do the same thing twice.

General Areas of Disparity and Diversity

Individual styles, philosophies and worldviews also add to the diversity of practice. For example, when it comes to the principles of consensus building, the practitioners interviewed varied in whether they saw the principles as essential requirements or as ideals to strive for (but not necessarily attain). They also differed in the amount of emphasis and importance they attributed to each principle and the types and levels of trade-offs they were willing to make in response to conflicting pressures.

In the case of the process stages, not only did all respondents break down their approach along somewhat different lines and occasionally inject unique steps, but individuals also differed in how they worked through common stages and tasks and how they modified their approach to suit different contexts. To get an assessment of the issue prior to convening the table, for example, one respondent described circulating a written questionnaire; another claimed to consult with an organizing committee of stakeholders; and yet another tended to use a brokering type approach and meet with each party separately. As another example, respondents also varied in how they went about designing the process and how much they involved participants in the task.

All consensus-building practitioners interviewed made at least some use of basic communication and structuring methods when facilitating at-the-table discussions, though how and how often they applied them, and how spontaneous or pre-planned they were varied. Where individuals differed more widely was in their use of colourful techniques and in the methods they used to record discussions. When it came to colourful techniques, some saw them as a hindrance and refrained from using them altogether; some used them on the odd occasion; and still others used them regularly to encourage people to think about an issue in non-conventional ways. In the case of recording techniques, some leaned towards flip charts, while others were more apt to use minutes, white boards, overheads, or occasionally no recording methods at all.

Another key difference among those interviewed related to the facilitation role assumed. While a number of respondents described taking a more front-and-centre facilitator’s role, at least one individual — considered a leading mediator in the field — purposefully assumed a more supportive and innocuous function when in meetings at least. He preferred to encourage participants to interact directly in such settings to build their working relations and enhance their ownership of the process. In addition to reducing the group’s long-term reliance on third party assistance, this approach also allowed him more freedom to track and synthesize discussions as a jumping point for later steps.
Implications of these broad themes and trends for would-be practitioners are further discussed in the closing section of this chapter.

6.2 Useful Insights and Lessons Learned

This research was initiated at a time when consensus decision-making was in mode. Now, several years later, much has changed both in the political environment of British Columbia and my own context. Since initiating this thesis, I have gone on to work as a government planner and analyst, and now find myself coordinating internal-external planning and cross-departmental initiatives as part of my wider responsibilities. The half-finished thesis has sat on the side over much of this period. And now, as I dust it off and pull the last pieces together, I find a number of the messages contained taking on new relevance and meaning, while others are put to question.

While the insights and lessons that can be gleaned from earlier chapters are too numerous to cover here, below I review a few of the many comments and messages that have stayed with me since entering planning practice. They include points I occasionally find myself thinking back to when engaged in consensus-type work, at times with a newfound appreciation for what the speaker meant.

- **Do not forget to clarify the issue:** It may sound straightforward, but it can be quite easy to plunge forward into a decision, without first clarifying the issue or problem — in part because those calling for a decision or solution often present the decision as a task. “We need a new strategic plan because people are not satisfied with the old one.” “The departments are duplicating services and must determine ways to work more effectively together.” “We need to resolve the dispute between these two stakeholder groups.” These are only a few examples of the many problem or task statements one might be presented with. But what is at issue and why these problems are occurring are not always clear. More often than not, if one takes the time to delve into the question, one will find that those involved have very different views of what the root matter is, not to mention what the purpose of the process is and what the ultimate solution should be. When it comes down to it, there are often many pieces to a problem and these pieces are frequently inter-linked. While the books continually push the matter, the importance of clarifying the issue early on, and determining what pieces will and will not be dealt with at that given point, cannot be understated as part of any consensus process. Doing so contributes to clearer mandates and objectives. It can also prevent a lot of misguided work and misunderstandings, and save a lot of time and discontent.

- **Need to keep checking oneself:** Individuals managing consensus-type processes (whether as a third party or internal participant playing a coordination-type role) can very easily influence the outcomes if they do not keep check on their actions and motives. Given the amount of time they spend thinking about and discussing the
issue, and taking in each party's perspective, those fulfilling such functions frequently
develop their own opinions of what good solutions might be. They may even see
themselves as more enlightened than others because of the "neutral" position they
play. If they are not careful, they can easily steer results in desired directions by the
simple questions they ask and the way they structure activities. For these reasons,
individuals in facilitative-type roles need to understand their biases and must
continuously be cognizant of the influences they exert and why. Attitude also plays a
big part. As with all other participants, process facilitators need to realize that they
are imprinted, as much as anyone, with set views of the world; that others may hold
views as legitimate as their own; and that they are not beyond the need to learn and
question their assumptions like everyone else.

- **Often have to make tradeoffs:** Large-scale consensus processes can consume as
  much time as they are given. While good foundations need to be set in place to
  sustain enduring decisions, in the cross-government and large multi-party settings I
  have been exposed to at least, there is often not the time or resources to do as
  thorough a job as one would like. Conditions in much of this work are such that,
  particularly when dealing with high-pressure decisions with short timelines (and more
  so when involving a large number of defined and undefined interests spread over
  wide geographic areas) groups are continually balancing and trading off good process
  with the need to move forward. The parties involved (and individuals facilitating)
  often have many conflicting priorities on their plate and cannot always allocate as
  much time, resources and attention to these processes as desired. For any number of
  reasons, sometimes it might not be possible to get all desired parties at the table, to
  prepare everyone sufficiently, or to establish accountability and communication
  structures as thoroughly as wanted before proceeding. At the same time, internal
decision deadlines and outside contextual pressures impose their own demands and
limits on the process. For these reasons, in some instances, practitioners or those
initiating the process may have to do some backtracking, realigning of decisions, and
mending of fences later. In fact, in many multi-party situations I have observed, the
processes tend to be more iterative in nature — with high-level agreement being
reached first among parties, and the details and structures being refined, improved
and occasionally modified with each pass.

- **Trends in consensus decision-making are shifting:** As mentioned, this research was
  initiated at a time when consensus decision-making was still in vogue in British
Columbia. Much has changed in the province in the years since I first conducted my
interviews. A change in government has been accompanied by a swing away from
formal consensus-type processes at the provincial level, to more top-down and less
time and resource intensive decision-making. In fact, this shift has forced me to
question the content of my introductory chapter and to consider downplaying the
value of consensus decision-making in governance. In the end, I have decided to
leave the chapter as is, and to simply highlight the fact that support for such processes
is in constant flux. Like most things in governance, the pendulum tends to swing
back and forth over time. While the 1990s saw support for consensus decision-
making at its peak — with everyone jumping onto the round table bandwagon —

*Chapter 6 - Conclusion*
rising costs, decreasing budgets and fiscal austerity of recent years is forcing many government agencies to rethink their strategy, to prioritize more, and to impose more restrictions and tradeoffs onto such processes. While British Columbia has perhaps taken a more austere stance than most provinces in this country, these changes are happening everywhere. In some cases, decisions are being made more centrally using less intensive forms of consultation. But in others, I would hazard to say that, rather than completely shucking consensus processes altogether, they have simply forced them below the surface — to less formal, less costly, more ad hoc, and less “perfect” types of arrangements involving a range of communication methods to reduce costs, speed decisions and compliment face-to-face dialogue.

- **Changing contexts can have big impacts on relations and trust:** As repeatedly mentioned throughout this thesis, relationships and trust are critical to productive dialogue and enduring decisions. But, the foundations on which such relationships and trust are built are prone to context changes themselves. The recent downsizing undertaken by the British Columbia government has given me an unexpected opportunity to view the immense role that trust and transparency play in collaborative relations. These restructuring activities introduced a new operating environment among provincial departments marked by confidentiality requirements (to avoid leaks while downsizing was in process), a newfound sense of competition for funds, and the sparking of hidden agendas. These factors in turn instilled an atmosphere of caution in cross-departmental relations — even among longstanding partners with a good history of sharing and collaboration. Interestingly, the key lesson I have taken home from what I observed is that suspicion and mistrust tend to breed more mistrust, as parties begin to hold their cards closer to themselves, and in seeing others do the same, proceed to pull them in tighter yet. Breaking the cycle can only come with communication, a rebuilding of relations, and a clear sense that everyone’s intentions are genuine. Often, the challenge rests with the individual to make the first move by demonstrating resumed openness to share in good faith, and hoping others will follow suit.

- **Consensus decision-making is a way of working with people, not a formula:** Finally, a sixth lesson I leave with you is that consensus decision-making is not about learning skills and working through steps. Rather, it is about helping groups make better and hopefully more long-lasting decisions that reflect the range of interests involved. It is not a simple matter of taking a group through a formula of steps and exercises. While it is possible to achieve some success with basic training in facilitation and mediation, a common theme from the interviews is that being good at this work has more to do with personal character, attitude, consciousness of the situation, and structuring capabilities and that those who tackle the task from a strictly “techy” viewpoint, risk pushing things down a methodological line — whether it is appropriate or not. Methodological know-how and adeptness are helpful, but one’s main inspiration and guidance should come from within — from a simple ability and desire to understand people, to learn along with them, and to work with them to devise processes that allow them to understand the issue and one another’s perspectives better, and from this knowledge build agreements they can all accept.
6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

This research was undertaken using a new and developing form of inquiry called communicative action research. Having taken a number of courses on negotiation, multi-party decision-making and related topics as part of my graduate requirements, I was looking for a thesis topic that would allow me to learn practical ideas for applying such methods from people who do this work professionally. Also, having undertaken case-study type research in my undergraduate years and sensitive to the immense challenges and context-dependency of practice from past work in development, I wanted to avoid playing the “armchair critic,” and was looking for an opportunity to discuss how things were, rather than how they should be or could have been done better. Communicative action research offered me just this opportunity.

When I initiated my interviews, this type of study had never been attempted at the University of British Columbia planning school and so I had no knowledge of how the synthesis of information might differ from other qualitative research. As I quickly learned upon analyzing my findings though, this type of cross-comparison is probably best done with few respondents. In fact, some communicative action studies focus solely on one individual (Kolb and Associates, 1994, Healey, 1992). Once I began pulling the pieces together, it became clear that I would have had ample fodder from even three or four practitioner interviews. I could have also narrowed the scope of my questions to one or two subjects and still had plenty to write about.

The relatively large number of respondents used in this study and the broad range of topics covered made pulling together the findings much more challenging than first expected. With so much diversity within the group, I had difficulty giving full witness to the breadth of views received and points discussed, and had to make a number of judgment calls about what to include and what not. Tying the theory and quotes together so they flowed in a coherent fashion presented its own formidable challenges. While not all could be included, it is my hope that those pieces that were offer a representative view of the stories that exist and the diversity and complexity of practice.

In light of my experience, my first recommendation for those interested in undertaking similar research is to use fewer respondents and keep the topic narrow. As mentioned, some communicative action studies centre on a single individual. The subjective nature of this form of research, and the fact that it is not intent on rule setting, makes these limitations acceptable. Three to five respondents are probably sufficient in most cases. With each added person, the work of cross comparing among them becomes all the more complex and demanding. The same goes for the scope of subjects covered. One or two key topics are probably adequate, particularly if one wants to examine them in any great depth. For example, in retrospect, I could have easily built a thesis around a single chapter topic (be it principles, process stages, or facilitation methods). Had I done so, I would have probably had fuller responses from all respondents on the various elements of the subject and would have been able to filter out areas and commonality and disparity more thoroughly.
While this study relied solely on interviews to collect primary data, an interesting alternative would be to combine the interviews with in-field observations of the same individuals at work. In a study of mediators using such an approach, Kolb and Associates (1994) found that not all individuals, when observed in practice, did things as they initially described in their interviews. The study of consensus building could benefit from a similar combination of interviews and in-field observation to further identify the true lines of distinction between theory and practice.

Beyond recommendations on the research approach, there are also a few consensus-related topics not covered in the previous chapters that might benefit from more focused inquiry. While the range of possibilities is quite long, three principal themes come to mind. The first relates to earlier comments about the various third party roles individual practitioners customarily assume. Among the study group, for example, some respondents tended to assume a more meditative-type role, some considered themselves facilitators, and still others preferred to use another term altogether to describe the third party function they performed. Respondents also customarily entered and exited processes at different points and put varying levels of attention on process and product. While I did not investigate the impact of their assumed third party roles at any great length, an examination of practice within one specific role-type, or a comparison across several types might offer useful insights on these related but at times distinct forms of practice.

A second topic not covered in the previous chapters, in part because it was not addressed in the interviews, is the issue of power in decision-making. In his book, Planning in the Face of Power, Forester discusses the various ways power is exerted by stakeholders and decision-makers within the planning process, and the role of planners in addressing these imbalances and creating more level playing fields. How much consensus building practitioners consider power issues, to what degree they see their role extending to include the “balancing” of powers, and how they go about doing so (including helping individuals understand and navigate such situations) represents yet another area of inquiry warranting further research.

Thirdly, given the current shift away from consensus processes, or at least towards less high cost and formal initiatives, we also need to know more about how well consensus processes measure up against alternate forms of decision-making. As mentioned in Chapter 4, evaluation has been a weak area in the consensus decision-making discipline. There is therefore a lack of concrete evidence substantiating the value of such processes. New writings are also putting this value to question. For example, in a recent study, Gregory et al. (2001) argue that the use of consensus building, in environmental dispute resolution at least, can in fact inhibit the generation of value-based information needed to make well-informed decisions, and thereby result in poorer choices. While theoretical writings propound the benefits of consensus processes over other modes of public involvement, whether these methods in fact result in better and more lasting decisions as claimed has yet to be demonstrated through more directed assessments. Research on this topic would not only offer a more solid grounding for choosing among public involvement methods.

---

An example is Respondent 8 who preferred to describe himself as a process manager.
involvement methods, but it might also present a framework for evaluating the
effectiveness of individual consensus processes — which as explained in section 4.3.4
lack evaluation standards at this time.

6.4 Closing Message for Would-Be Practitioners

In bringing this study to a close, a concluding message I would like to leave would-be
practitioners and planners is that there is no magic recipe to consensus building. Not only
must each response must be tailored to the decision and context in question, but there are
also a wide a variety of approaches that work in any given circumstance depending on the
person applying them and the group involved. For those intimidated with fitting a
stereotype, the good news is that there is no one style or personality among those who do
this work professionally. One need not necessarily be a master facilitator in the
traditional sense (equipped with flip charts, a dynamic personae and an assortment of
interactive tools) to excel in this field — though some practitioners are extremely well
suited and effective and with this approach. In fact, some of the leading professionals I
spoke to admitted to assuming a much more subtle role in processes they led. Nor need
one necessarily have a portfolio of colourful techniques to keep people engaged —
though such methods do work very well for some people.

The key for those entering this field or involved in consensus decision-making as part of
their wider responsibilities is to be true to their character, to know their own comforts and
niche strengths, to gain an affinity for the intricacies of a situation, and to develop an
adaptive style and approach that works for them. They must also learn to structure
processes properly, to break the tasks down into manageable steps (with clear entry
points, objectives and outcomes), to detect when things are not working properly, and to
make quick adjustments as they move along. The theoretical frameworks and
professional insights presented in this thesis can serve as helpful guides in this learning
process by providing knowledge of common practices, along with examples of how
people might approach tasks differently. Ultimately though, the intricacies and artistry of
this work can only come from a combination of judgment and experimentation. One
cannot expect to get it right every time. Indeed, possibly the key value of frameworks
such as the consensus building principles, the four-staged consensus building process and
the facilitation framework discussed in this thesis is as a point of reference when one first
begins to assess and design a process, or hits a wall along the way. Such frameworks
help bring the basics back into focus; they offer a source of orientation and direction
when one is not sure how to proceed; and they can aid in pinpointing problem areas when
things go awry. While much of the adaptive expertise that goes beyond these
frameworks can only come with time, it is my hope that the content in this thesis offers
readers some useful food-for-thought and perhaps some new ideas to try along the way.
REFERENCES


The relationship between consensus decision-making and other decision-makings terms listed in Chapter 1 (Section 4) is far from straightforward. Though there exist no standard definitions for these terms, Figure 9 provides a rough illustration of how I see them relating together with both some overlap and some distinctiveness across each term. For example, shared decision-making as defined in this study\(^{29}\) is one among many decision-making methods that might be used in a consensus decision-making process. Conversely, consensus though implicitly sought, is not necessarily essential for a process to fit under the rubric of shared decision-making.

**Figure 9. Relationship between various decision-making terms**

\[^{29}\text{Shared decision-making as defined in this thesis is a consensus-based approach to public consultation, decision-making and dispute resolution in which those with authority to make a decision and those who will be affected by that decision are jointly empowered to seek an outcome that accommodates the interests of all concerned (adapted from CORE 1994b; Brown, 1996; Darling, 1998).}\]**
Similar parallels and contrasts occur between consensus decision-making and principled negotiation. Principled negotiation represents an approach to group decision-making and dispute resolution first made popular by Roger Fisher and William Ury in their 1981 book *Getting to Yes*. It is characterized by face-to-face dialogue and the search for win-win solutions. As part of this approach, participants are led through a series of steps aimed at identifying interests (not positions), developing common objectives and criteria for selecting among solutions, elaborating alternatives for mutual gain, and jointly choosing among them. While consensus decision-making is generally carried out using this ‘negotiated’ approach, other methods of decision-making can be used as well. Coming at it from the other angle, it can be argued that not all principled negotiation is carried out in a consensus decision-making context either.

I view ‘collaborative process’ or ‘collaboration’ as the most encompassing and extensive of the terms identified. In her often cited book *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problem*, Barbara Gray (1989: 5) defines collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.” Collaboration therefore centres on the process of working together and building solutions to a common problem. If we look back at the other terms, consensus decision-making, shared decision-making and principled negotiation are generally carried out through a process of collaboration and aspire to build a collaborative spirit among those involved. On the reverse side though, collaborative processes do not necessarily require that agreement be sought (London, 1995: 6). Gray (1989: 25) acknowledges this as well, but adds that “when agreements are reached, they are arrived at by consensus.”
APPENDIX 2

Interview Questions

RESPONDENT'S BACKGROUND

• What is your background and training?
• How did you become involved in this work?
• What types of consensus process have you been involved in?
• What do you see as the distinction between facilitation and mediation? And how would you characterize your style?
• Are there any individuals who strongly influenced you? Who are they and why?

PRINCIPLES OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

• What principles of consensus decision-making (from those listed in the sample handout or other principles) have you found most difficult to achieve in practice? Why?
  - Can you offer examples?
  - What factors affected your ability to achieve these principles?
• How have you dealt with these shortcomings?
• What was the impact on process outcomes?
• Do all principles have the same weight?
• If you were to draft your own list, what principles do you think are most essential to achieving successful agreements?
• Are there any principles that you would add to this list?

STAGES OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

• If you were to describe the consensus decision-making process you follow going from preliminary stages to the actual implementation, how would you describe it?
• How would you break this process down?
• **If incomplete response** — How does your approach compare with the process and stages that are outlined in the literature, such as that in the NRTEE documents?
  - Preparatory or assessment stage
  - Structuring the process stage where terms are set out
  - Negotiation stage, and
  - Implementation / monitoring stage.

• At what points in the process would you step in (as a facilitator or mediator)?

**FACILITATION STYLE**

• Once ‘at the decision-making table,’ what steps do you lead a group through when facilitating a consensus process?

• Can you give examples of facilitation techniques that you would use in each step?

• Do you use colorful exercises in your practice? Why? Why not?

• Do you use flip charts or other recording tools?

• Can you give examples of the most common problems you encounter when facilitating group discussions and ways you have dealt with them?

**ADAPTING STRATEGIES TO CONTEXT**

• How would you group the different contexts you work in?

• Do you generally use the same approach and techniques in all processes you work in?

• If not, can you give examples of how your approach might vary and why?

• What key factors do you consider when deciding what approach and techniques to use?

• Can you give examples of disasters you have encountered in your practice? Surprising successes? The dark side of facilitation?

**CLOSING QUESTIONS**

• If you could highlight a couple of things, what do you feel are the biggest disparities between the theory of consensus decision-making and what occurs in practice?

• Are there any books or resources on facilitation you’ve found particularly useful?

• Do you attend workshops or take part in other forums?

• Do you have any questions or closing comments?
APPENDIX 3

Some Principles Of Consensus Decision-Making
(Compiled from various sources\(^1\))

- The process is purpose-driven – people have a reason to participate
- The process is inclusive
- Negotiation must be best alternative for all involved
- All parties are sufficiently organized (no strong internal divisions over issues and participation)
- Parties are accountable to the process and committed to participating in good faith
- Participants are accountable to their constituencies
- Participation is voluntary and participants are free to withdraw
- There is equal opportunity to participate including equal access to info and opportunity to participate effectively (strive for level playing field)
- The participants design and control the process
- Flexibility is designed into the process
- Participants are trained in negotiation before starting
- The process is facilitated by a neutral third party
- Commitments to implementation are an essential part of any agreement

\(^1\) Sources: Cormick et al, 1996; CORE, 1994a; CORE, 1994b; IPRC, 1993.
### APPENDIX 4

**Training, Background And Area Of Expertise of Study Respondents**

**Note:** To preserve the respondents' anonymity, their information is presented randomly in the table below. The order of the rows does not correspond with the interview sequence or the number used to reference each respondent's comments in the thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent's Academic Training</th>
<th>Formal Facilitation-Type Training</th>
<th>Previous Related Work and Informal Training</th>
<th>Type Of Consensus Processes Involved In</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Adult Education (Mid-1980s)    | • Extensive training in Mediation and Facilitation  
• Experienced trainer and educator in this field | • Worked many years in adult education  
• Became involved in mediation work and mediation training  
• Highly involved in education and curriculum development in conflict resolution | • Involved in social issues (not resource based)  
• Facilitate gatherings/discussions where number voices must be heard  
• Mediate within organizations  
• Lots of work with First Nations - between individuals, between groups, or in multi-party contexts with government & outside groups  
• Not involved in processes that stretch over many months or years (more short term) |
| Biological Sciences  
• Plant Ecology  
• (Early 1970s) | • No specific training in facilitation and mediation  
• Some formal training in human relations and interpersonal methods | • Taught Forestry, Planning and Biological Sciences  
• Former College President  
• Became involved in public processes for resolving environmental issues  
• Worked as public involvement specialist with provincial ministry  
• Sat on provincial conservation committee | • Involved in variety land-use and resource management processes including the development of sub-regional and regional land-use plans such as CORE and LRMPs  
• Also involved in consensus processes as part of international development activities, strategic planning work with non-governmental organizations, the management of institutions, and a wide variety of applications in the consulting field |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent's Academic Training</th>
<th>Formal Facilitation-Type Training</th>
<th>Previous Related Work and Informal Training</th>
<th>Type Of Consensus Processes Involved In</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Community Development</td>
<td>• Trained in facilitation,</td>
<td>• Extensive work in community development</td>
<td>• Involved in many types of multi-party initiatives dealing in the resource and other sectors (e.g. fisheries, BC Ferries, issues in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, urban land-use disputes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Late 1960s-Early 70s)</td>
<td>negotiation, mediation as part of community development studies</td>
<td>in Mexico and most particularly in British Columbia</td>
<td>• Also heavily involved in processes associated with health care issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Earth Sciences</td>
<td>• No formal training in</td>
<td>• Spent fair amount of time doing</td>
<td>• Involved in environmental planning and resource management type work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resource Management</td>
<td>facilitation or mediation</td>
<td>leadership and group-type work with both</td>
<td>• Most common work aimed at building policies, plans, agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Early 1990s)</td>
<td>except odd course</td>
<td>Youth and with Social Services (viewed this experience as valuable source of skills for current consensus-type work)</td>
<td>• Involved in strategic planning as well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recently did vocational</td>
<td>• Involved in provincial roundtable</td>
<td>• Mostly government funded projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>training in negotiation</td>
<td>around resource issues</td>
<td>• Occasionally work on First Nations or community initiated issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Occasionally carries out</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Also do work for environmental community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>training in facilitation and</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Not involved in multi-year processes (do more short-term supportive work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conflict resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economics</td>
<td>• Took series of courses on</td>
<td>• Worked in law before getting into</td>
<td>• Primary focus is public sector dispute resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Law</td>
<td>mediation and related skills</td>
<td>mediation</td>
<td>• Involved in short-term and ongoing land-use and environmental issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>including courses offered</td>
<td>• Also does some mediation training</td>
<td>• Also becoming more involved in other areas of public sector (e.g. health systems)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through Continuing Legal</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mostly involved in multi-party processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education and other specialized</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Works in both short and long-term processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>institutes</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Also designs dispute resolution systems for Government bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's Academic Training</td>
<td>Formal Facilitation-Type Training</td>
<td>Previous Related Work and Informal Training</td>
<td>Type Of Consensus Processes Involved In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Economics (focus on resource based issues)  
  (Late 1960s-Early 1970s) | • Grew up in fishing community (fisheries central to lifestyle)  
  • Worked a lot with First Nations people around resource based issues  
  • Worked with research centre (researching single enterprise towns etc.)  
  • Became lawyer and quickly became involved in negotiation from there | | • Involved in almost all types of multi-party complex disputes  
  • Works mostly, but not exclusively, with resource based issues (e.g. fisheries, forestry, hydro-electric development, mining, wildlife diversification)  
  • Involved in many large, long-running processes |
| • Forestry  
  • Planning  
  (Early 1990s) | • Course in negotiation as part of studies  
  • Additional training in mediation, facilitation, etc.  
  • Extensive experience training others in these skills | • Notetaker in public consultation workshops and progressively took on role as facilitator  
  • Does mediation training  
  • Conducted research on public participation | • Most work in land-use and environment related issues  
  • Involved in number of long-term resource planning processes (including LRMPs)  
  • Most work associated with helping groups bring ideas forward and build agreement rather than "highly charged" conflict situations |
| • Law  
  (Mid-1980s) | • Certificate program in mediation  
  • Has extensive experience as a trainer in this field. | • Worked in law before getting into mediation  
  • Continues to be involved in training in consensus building and conflict resolution | • Has done everything from parent-teen mediation to a year-long multi-party land use plan for a large region of B.C.  
  • Involved both in conflict resolution and more multi-party agreement type processes  
  • Prefers and works best in crisis (short term) situations rather than long-running processes  
  • Most mediations are multi-party |
| • Natural Resource Management  
  • (Early 1990s) | • No formal training in facilitation and mediation | • Background in education and adult education teaching wilderness first aid and rural ambulance attendance first aid  
  • Also did group work with youth and young offenders  
  • Did research in land-use planning | • Works a lot in land-use planning including more long-running regional land use processes such as the LRMPs. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent's Academic Training</th>
<th>Formal Facilitation-Type Training</th>
<th>Previous Related Work and Informal Training</th>
<th>Type Of Consensus Processes Involved In</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• No post-secondary training</td>
<td>• No formal training in consensus type skills</td>
<td>• Former Chief of First Nations Band -- involved in negotiations on service and land-related issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trained in the “school of hard knocks”</td>
<td>• Firsthand training as participant in numerous negotiation processes</td>
<td>• Former Vice-Chief of Assembly of First Nations -- involved in various multi-party processes on fisheries issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attributes skills and training to kitchen-table “teachings” from Father and Grandfather who were leaders in her community</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Member of Pacific Salmon Commission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Currently works with Federal Government on First Nations issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Planning</td>
<td>• Course in negotiation as part of studies</td>
<td>• Gained leadership and group skills working as river guide and running own ski company</td>
<td>• Works mostly on Government led processes involving First Nations and various federal and provincial government departments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Early 1990s)</td>
<td>• Additional training in mediation, facilitation, etc.</td>
<td>• Does mediation training</td>
<td>• Also led processes in past roles as Band Chief and Vice-Chief with Assembly of First Nations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Soil Science and Agriculture</td>
<td>• Conflict resolution course as part of degree</td>
<td>• Worked in resource inventory and planning where needed to deal with land use conflicts</td>
<td>• Worked in multi-party and bi-party processes doing anything from mediating conflicts in organizations to building multi-party recommendations for submission to government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resource Management</td>
<td>• No more specific formal training</td>
<td>• Also involved in impact assessment work</td>
<td>• Worked with Ombudsman's Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Late 1960s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Worked with First Nations groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speech language pathologist</td>
<td>• Formal training in conflict resolution</td>
<td>• Works in education as speech language pathologist</td>
<td>• Generally involved in shorter term processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Theology, education and feminist theory</td>
<td>• Does some work as a trainer in this field</td>
<td>• After studies in theology started doing community facilitation work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Late 1980s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Also does some training</td>
<td>• Deals more with social conflicts including individual conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, conflicts among groups or sectors within a community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Involved in gender issues and racism issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Also does work around cultural and class conflict, cultural understanding and communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 5 - Tasks of the Mediator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Before convening parties**  | • assess conflict  
                               | • determine what issues are  
                               | • determine appropriateness of mediation  
                               | • determine willingness of parties to discuss differences  
                               | • conduct interviews with interested parties, knowledgeable individuals  
                               | • conduct interviews with interested parties, knowledgeable individuals  
                               | • read background material.  
| **Designing a process**       | • establish common definition of problem  
                               | • clarify goals for process  
                               | • recommend general process model  
                               | • outline specific tasks for negotiators  
| (with the parties)             |                                                                      |
| **Preparing to post**         | • determine how project managed (funding, third party involvement)  
                               | • prepare description of consensus building process  
                               | • collect background information about the issues  
                               | • draft and circulate operating ground rules  
| (with the parties)             |                                                                      |
| **After parties convened**    | • oversee activities at and away from the table  
                               | • work with task groups  
                               | • communicate with individual negotiators  
                               | • help constituency groups reach agreement  
                               | • provide information to other interested organizations  
| **Designing & running**       | • design and conduct negotiation sessions  
                               | • determine appropriate topics for discussion  
                               | • develop agenda  
                               | • decide on meeting format  
                               | • facilitation of group discussions  
                               | • mediation between interests  
| **sessions (with parties)**   |                                                                      |
| **Promoting and monitoring**  | • Encourage productive communication among negotiators  
                               | • Promote regular and thorough discussions between negotiators and their constituencies  
                               | • Work with parties to determine how much and what type of communication appropriate for general public and other outside groups  
                               | • Possibly oversee communications with outside as well  
| **communication away from table** |                                                                     |

---

1 Adapted from Appendix 2 of *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future* (Cormick et al. 1996), which in turn was borrowed from the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR) publication, *Competencies for Mediators of Complex, Public Disputes: An Overview Developed by the Environmental/Public Disputes Sector*, January 1992.
### Phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating activities of</td>
<td>• General logistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different players</td>
<td>• Arrange time and location of negotiation sessions and notify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Work with resource experts, observers, and sponsoring and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>convening bodies to keep them informed and clarify their roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Coordinate activities of mediation team (if applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseeing requests made &amp;</td>
<td>• Implement or oversee completion of task identified by negotiators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approved by negotiators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubleshooting</td>
<td>• Troubleshoot at the table and away from it (when multiple parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and complex issues involved)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Find ways to reach agreement over controversial data or over impasse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Secure more information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identify resource person all sides can accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Set up task group to handle impasse outside regular sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Hold private conversations with individual negotiators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementing agreement</strong></td>
<td>• Help with implementation of agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting the monitoring process</td>
<td>• Oversee monitoring activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as requested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Convene and run particular monitoring committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Help parties avoid or go around obstacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting with additional</td>
<td>• Work with new committees that may be established as part of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negotiations and renegotiations</td>
<td>implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Help renegotiate parts of an agreement that parties later discover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are not workable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

2 Cormick et al. (1996) use the term "negotiator" to indicate the individuals or party representatives engaged in a consensus process.