

Sunday October 13, 2013

Consensus as a solution for deadlocks

By Jim Taylor

Smaller organizations typically base their procedures on larger models. Community groups, for example, adopt the procedures defined for their governing body. So Canadian committees use Bourinot as their authority; Americans rely on Robert's Rules of Order, and so on.

Not that they actually follow those rules and procedures. In my experience, they ignore Roberts, Bourinot, etc., until they actually have to vote on something.

Most decisions evolve by a fuzzy consensus. In theory, any discussion requires a formal motion on the floor. Changes must come as amendments, which follow a strict order of precedence. But what really happens is that an idea gets discussed informally, until someone formulates a motion that captures the apparent agreement. Everyone votes in favour; the meeting moves on to the next item.

Rules of order get invoked mainly for unresolved differences of opinion. The matter goes to a formal vote, and the majority tramples over the minority.

Bitterness, hard feelings, and a sense of betrayal often result.

Which is, you might note, a reasonable description of the U.S. Congress this last few years.

I know, I tread in dangerous waters here. The U.S. is not my country. I don't live under its system of government. So I venture these thoughts very tentatively.

But maybe it's time larger organizations learned from smaller ones, instead of the other way around.

A different way of voting

Several churches in the Okanagan Valley now use a consensus model for reaching decisions.

When it comes time to decide, members don't vote yea or nay, for or against. Having only two options works fine for simple decisions, like approving the minutes of the last meeting, or declining a request to host a Hell's Angels picnic.

But for complex decisions on major expenditures, or for developing policy statements on anything from theology to sado-masochism, with at least 50 shades of grey to consider, a black-or-white choice polarizes opinions.

By contrast, consensus models permits varying levels of commitment. When an issue comes to a vote, members have five options, not two.

Those who support the idea strongly enough to commit themselves to working for it, hold up one finger. Those also in favour, but less strongly, hold up two fingers.

Those who don't care, either way, hold up three fingers.

Those opposed hold up four fingers.

Which leaves one more option – those so vehemently opposed that they're prepared to block any action. They hold up all five fingers, palm out – the universal signal for "Stop!"

Veto powers

Yes, that means that one person can veto the wishes of the whole group.

In a consensus model, that indicates a communication failure. Neither side has been able to convey their perspective adequately.

Or, as sometimes happens, both sides have refused to hear what the other side is saying.

In the consensus model, the five-finger veto forces both negotiation and education.

Now compare that model with, say, the U.S. Congress, where some 40 hard-line Tea Party Republicans have effectively exercised a veto on the other 495 members.

But from what I can read, there is lots of negotiation going on, but very little educating.

A veto, I should point out, is an act of arrogance, whether at the local or national level. It declares, in effect, what the rest of you think doesn't matter – my way is the only way.

Poor examples

It takes courage to grant veto power to one person or one representative.

The institution most noted for its veto is the U.N. Security Council. Five nations – the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China – have the right to block any decision.

Why those five? Simply, I suggest, because when the U.N. was formed, following World War II, they were on the winning side. So they got to make the rules.

Since then, a couple of the losers have outperformed the Big Five. Germany has become the economic powerhouse of Europe; Japan was for years the dominant economy in Asia.

If the Security Council were being formed today, Brazil and India might also qualify as superpowers. But it won't happen. Because any one of the original Big Five can veto the change.

At the community level, we've learned, such deadlocks rarely happen. Given sufficient time, several things may happen. The proponents see the wisdom in the opposition's stance, and modify their proposals. Or the blocker moderates his/her five-finger veto to just four-finger opposition, thus permitting the process to move on.

As a last resort, if a deadlock cannot be resolved, the individual blocking progress has little choice but to resign from the organization, to disassociate himself from its actions. The community frowns on those who stay on, just to foment discord internally.

It's a lesson the Tea Party representatives, who have chosen to hold the whole nation to ransom unless they get their way, might consider copying.

If you're out of step, step out of line.

Copyright © 2013 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; links from other blogs welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns too.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

I got a host of thoughtful letters about last week's column on our excessive intake of sugar.

James Russell referred to the CBC's Fifth Estate show on sugar aired two nights before my column: "Scientists interviewed on it also made links between increased rates of Alzheimer's and other dementias and increased sugar use. So add mental disease and disability to the physical ills to the list of 'benefits' from giving the sugar industry a free ride.

"The show also pointed out that the biggest sugar sources for adults were not just the obvious sugary drinks and deserts. Rather, almost ALL processed foods had incredible amounts of sugar added 'for flavour'. I just bought a 28 ounce can of stewed tomatoes that has 8 teaspoons of sugar in it, and a 14 ounce can of beans in tomato sauce that has 7. And these were the healthy choices!

“Individual consumers, of course, are supposed to make sensible choices, says the sugar lobby, without relying on nanny-state governments to protect them. But look how effective lobbying has been in obscuring those choices. The labels on my cans give sugar content in metric (as grams per serving) the contents are specified in imperial ounces, and it's up to me to do the arithmetic for total sugar content, then convert it back into units I understand (tsp). . . . Bring on the nanny state!”

Steve Roney thought I was being unfair in focussing on the sugar industry alone: “It is the wider processed food industry. The problem is that most people like sweet things. We are programmed for it. And sugar is cheap. So makers of processed foods of all kinds pile in sugar almost automatically as the cheapest way to make their products more marketable.

“This alone probably explains the growing problem of obesity in the US and Canada. With both parents usually working, and more single parents, people are eating far more processed foods than they used to.

“The solution, I believe, is to require manufacturers to indicate clearly and prominently how much sugar is added to their products. When you hear there are X teaspoons of sugar in a soft drink, most people tend to gag at the thought.”

Isabel Gibson wasn't convinced that regulation was the answer: “I don't doubt that the sugar industry is eager to keep us going on sugar, but they don't hold us down and force it down our throats.

“I believe it to be true (that is, I read it in a B.O.O.K.) that we have no natural governors for the tastes of foods that were in short supply as we evolved: foods or elements of food that were important to our survival. And so we will eat as much fat, salt, and sugar as is put in front of us. Adding them to any food makes that food more palatable, and we eat more of it. I never eat more than one apple a day, but I could eat apple crisp for breakfast, lunch, and supper.

“Even more insidious, as I understand it, is that our consumption of artificial sweeteners just supports our taste for ‘sweet.’

“I also believe that part of the increase in our consumption of sugar in processed foods has to do with our relatively recent obsession with fat in food. To keep foods palatable, you have to replace the fat with something and there's sugar, just waiting to do the job.

“It's a complex problem, to be sure, that I suspect argues for a variety of measures. Maybe regulation is one of them. But we'd better not stop there, because it won't be enough.”

Cliff Boldt used to be a school teacher: “As a classroom teacher for many years, I can attest to the sugar highs that hit my classroom in the days following Hallowe'en. Kids were bouncing off the wall. I even changed my daily plans for a couple of days after Hallowe'en to accommodate those highs, with variable success. It wasn't pure Science, but I can tell you that anecdotal, experiential evidence can be very credible.”

Pat Brush weighed in with her own experience: “When I went cold turkey from sugar in all its forms, I had a three-day migraine. That is when I realized that it really is an addiction. I went off all sweeteners: sugar, honey, maple syrup, and corn syrup. I did continue to eat food with naturally occurring sugar like fruit and veg. I do not go near artificial sweeteners as they aggravate my chemical sensitivities.

“Now I might have one coffee a day with a teaspoon of sugar in it, or one cookie with lunch, but I am aware of the addiction cycle so I do not continue to eat mindlessly when the sugar high is over. Maintaining a diet where every meal is in balance also helps to fight the sugar crash because other foods give a slower peak that will come after the sugar.”

Ted Wilson also endorsed the value of anecdotal evidence: “From personal observations of people who use(d) marijuana, the symptoms and responses [to sugar addiction] are to quite similar. It's a different chemical process without the energy burst but the side effects are just as negative. Legalizing pot is likely to take us down the same

road, *again*, putting considerable stress on users and society in general unless we go into it with our eyes wide open and as much information available as possible in advance.”

Ted Swart agreed with my criticism of the sugar industry: “However, when it comes to the global warming story you have things back to front. The sugar lobby and the tobacco lobby -- with their pseudo-science nonsense -- are (or were) extremely well funded. But, in the global warming world, it is the believers in dangerous CO2 caused warming that are the well-funded ones. They receive huge gobs of government funds and misled environmental organizations. And they are the purveyors of what can only be regarded as pseudo- science. All the leading skeptic blogs live off a shoestring and have no funding from the oil companies... They are the ones that have kept a true scientific attitude alive.”

Finally, Gayle Simonson wrote, “While for the most part I agree with your column on sugar, be careful with statistics. Of course the rate of diabetes is higher now than it was many years ago. People now live with diabetes. Many years ago, people died shortly after diagnosis. Today with insulin treatment, better monitoring, kidney transplants, etc. many people can live fifty years or more with this metabolic disorder so numbers are now cumulative.”

OLD BOOKS AVAILABLE

I have a couple of boxes of old books that belonged to my father and grandfather. As near as I can tell, the oldest is a Shorter Catechism from 1863, the newest a 1994 text by John Polkinghorne. If you're interested in any of them, please let me know and I will send you an Excel spreadsheet with the full list of books – all I ask is that you pay for shipping.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com

- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](http://www.churchwebcanada.ca)
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
