

Quick guide on group dynamics in people's assemblies

This text has been prepared by the Commission for Group Dynamics in Assemblies of the Puerta del Sol Protest Camp (Madrid). It is based on different texts and summaries which reached consensus in the internal Assemblies of this Commission (and which will be made available on the official webs of the 15th May Movement) and from the experiences gained in the General Assemblies held in this Protest Camp up until 31st May 2011.

The purpose of this Quick Guide is to facilitate and encourage the development of the different Popular Assemblies which have been created since the beginning of the 15th May Movement. This Quick Guide will be periodically revised and updated. On no account is it to be considered a closed model which cannot be adapted through consensus by any given Assembly. From the Commission for Group Dynamics in Assemblies of the Puerta del Sol Protest Camp we invite our friends and comrades to attend and take part in the meetings, work plans and internal Assemblies of this Commission, which are open to anyone who wants to come to them and actively participate in maintaining, perfecting and developing them.

Open Reflection on Collective Thinking

While we would like to share our impressions so far, we encourage you to continue to reflect on and debate these impressions as we feel that Collective Thinking is an essential part of our movement.

To our understanding, Collective Thinking is diametrically opposed to the kind of thinking propounded by the present system. This makes it difficult to assimilate and apply. Time is needed, as it involves a long process. When faced with a decision, the normal response of two people with differing opinions tends to be confrontational. They each defend their opinions with the aim of convincing their opponent, until their opinion has won or, at most, a compromise has been reached.

The aim of Collective Thinking, on the other hand, is to construct. That is to say, two people with differing ideas work together to build something new. The onus is therefore not on my idea or yours; rather it is the notion that two ideas together will produce something new, something that neither of us had envisaged beforehand. This focus requires of us that we actively listen, rather than merely be preoccupied with preparing our response.

Collective Thinking is born when we understand that all opinions, be these opinions our own or others', need to be considered when generating consensus and that an idea, once it has been constructed indirectly, can transform us.

Do not be discouraged: we are learning; we'll get there: all that's needed is time.

>>THE BASICS

What is a People's Assembly? It is a participatory decision-making body which works towards consensus. The Assembly looks for the best arguments to take a decision that reflects every opinion – not positions at odds with each other as what happens when votes are taken. It must be pacific, respecting all opinions: prejudice and ideology must be left at home. An Assembly should not be centred around an ideological discourse; instead it should deal with practical questions: What do we need? How can we get it? The Assembly is based on free association – if you are not in agreement with what has been decided, you are not obliged to carry it out. Every person is free to do what they wish – the Assembly tries to produce collective intelligence, and shared lines of thought and action. It encourages dialogue and getting to know one another.

What types of Assembly have we used so far? Working Group Assemblies, Commission Assemblies, Local Assemblies (in neighbourhoods, villages and towns), General Assemblies of the Puerta de Sol Protest Camp and General Assemblies of Madrid (Puerta de Sol plus neighbourhoods, villages and towns). These latter (General) Assemblies are the final deliberative or deciding bodies from which the consensus are decided in order to articulate the different lines of Joint Action for the 15th May Movement in each city.

What is Consensus? It is the way that the assemblies make a final decision over each specific proposal. Consensus is reached when there is *no* outright opposition in the assembly against the proposal. The following format must be applied to each proposal: 1) What is being proposed? 2) Why is it being proposed? 3) How can we carry out the Proposal if a consensus is reached? To sum up: What? Why? How?

What is Direct Consensus? A Consensus that is directly reached *without* opinions against it: Proposal > Consensus.

What is Indirect Consensus? A Consensus that is reached after debating different opinions on a proposal which did not reach a Direct Consensus. The following steps are taken to reach an Indirect Consensus: 1) What? Why? How? 2) After the moderator asks 'Are there any strongly opposed opinions?', and if there are, a queue for floor time is prepared. The Floor Time Team and Coordinator(s) open the first round of debate. Three arguments for and three arguments against are allowed. After that, the Assembly is asked to show its opinion again through Gestures. If consensus is still not reached when asking if there are opinions against, the Moderator will ask the Assembly to discuss the issue for three to five minutes in small groups where they are sitting. After this small break a second round of interventions consisting of Proposals for Consensus takes place. If a consensus is still not reached after these two rounds, the following takes place: a) If the Proposal comes from a Commission or Working Group, it is returned in order to be reworked, b) If the Proposal comes from an individual, it will be taken to the competent Commission or Working Group so it can reach a consensus on its usefulness and present a reworked version of it in the next Assembly, where it will once again go through the same procedure. And so on until a Real Consensus is reached.

>> THE ROLES AND FUNCTIONS INVOLVED IN A MASS ASSEMBLY:

It is vital to remember to control our gestures and body language so that our own emotions do not confuse matters, and to remember also that a smile is hugely effective in moments of tension or in an apparent dead-end. Haste and tiredness are the enemies of consensus.

LOGISTICS TEAM: A minimum of three people who are responsible for the equipment of an Assembly. They draw a Map of the Site on the site itself, organising spaces and the corridors that run through these spaces, they are in charge of the megaphone, they provide seating for people with disabilities or who are very tired, they provide water and shade (parasols/umbrellas) if temperatures are high or the sunshine is direct, etc.

ASSEMBLY PARTICIPANTS: This includes all those people participating in an Assembly, including the Group Dynamics Teams and members of Commissions or Working Groups. Participants are the life blood and the *raison d'être* of an Assembly. We are all responsible for running and building the Assembly. Our functions are: listening to the different speakers; participating in matters that require debate in rounds of floor time, and making individual proposals or subjective evaluations (having requested the Floor-Time Team to do so) during the Any Other Business round (normally near the end of each Assembly).

FLOOR TIME TEAM: Two to four people (depending on the size of the Assembly) positioned amongst the participants and next to the corridors. They should wear a distinctive symbol in order to be identifiable easily and carry a card which says “TURNS FOR THE FLOOR” which they lift above their heads, particularly at the end of each intervention. Their main task is to note down the names of the participants who want to take a turn. When such a request takes place, they ask the participant:

1) Is your intervention related to what is being discussed? (Remind the participant of the issue being discussed). 2) Is it a direct reply to something that has been said? 3) If so, is it in agreement or disagreement? With this information the floor-time team member determines if the intervention should be passed to the Floor-Time Coordinator(s) or not. If the proposed intervention bears no direct relationship to the issue at hand, the person's name is noted so that they may be called upon during the Any Other Business round. They will also tell the participant about other debate forums (speakers' corners, working groups...). Members of this team should be conciliatory, positive, neutral and patient. They are also responsible for noting any request from the moderator(s) to be relieved. They should try and involve people who have not yet intervened in the debate. A common error is to omit announcing the end of the period for requesting floor time. The total amount of floor time should be limited using common sense in order not to allow each issue to drag on indefinitely.

COORDINATOR(S) OF THE FLOOR-TIME TEAM: Two people, in close coordination with the Floor-Time Team, whose task is to organise the requests to take the floor that are forwarded to them by this team before passing them on to the moderator(s). Should a heated debate be under way, their role includes both selecting speakers so that the same message is not repeated, as well as mediating between people with similar arguments with the aim of presenting a unified proposal for debate. The coordinators are a filter – they do not evaluate the content of each intervention. In order to assure that the interventions are relevant, they should remind speakers of the issue at hand and if this does not coincide with what the speaker wants to share, direct them to other forums (speakers' corners, working groups...). Once the intervention has been coordinated, the floor-time coordinator informs the facilitator who informs the moderator so that they can call on the speaker to intervene in the right order.

FACILITATING TEAM: Two or three people who back up the moderator. They are the moderator's “voice of conscience”. They are the only people in direct contact with the moderators in order to help them maintain their concentration and impartiality. The Facilitators should be positioned around the moderation space. They help the moderator synthesise and reformulate proposals in an objective and impartial way. They facilitate the flow of information between “Coordination” and the Moderator so that floor-time is fair and organised. They prevent assembly participants from distracting the moderator, help the moderator communicate with people who find it difficult to speak in public, make the moderator aware of any errors in their vocabulary or summaries, inform them of any last-minute announcements, help them stick to the agenda, etc. In large debates the figure of a “Direct Facilitator” may be created in order to even more closely help the moderator to follow the norms of the Assembly.

An important way of helping the Assembly to run smoothly is to incorporate one or two people who intervene when there are silences, over-heated discussions or serious digressions. Their main role is to remind assembly participants of the importance of Collective Thinking, Active Listening and the true meaning of Consensus.

ROTATING TEAM OF MODERATORS: One or more people (who rotate if the Assembly is large or there is a lot of tension). This rotation is decided upon by the whole team of moderators, with the greater good of the assembly in mind. The moderator can ask to be replaced. The

moderator should help the Assembly to run smoothly, should bring together the general sense of the Assembly rather than follow a protocol, Ideally, this figure should not need to exist. (everybody should respect everybody) The moderator(s) are responsible for: welcoming the participants to the Assembly; explaining the nature and workings of the Assembly; presenting the group dynamic teams and their functions; moderating positively and conciliating distinct positions without aligning themselves personally with any of these; informing the Assembly of the positions for and against during the process of Indirect Consensus; summarising each intervention during the rounds of debate should it be needed; and repeating the consensus as recorded in the minutes. The moderator also gives voice to gestures made should a speaker not have noticed (it is recommended that assembly participants wait for a speaker to finish their turn in order to express agreement or disagreement so as to avoid swaying the speaker). Furthermore, the moderator is responsible for ensuring an atmosphere propitious to the exchange of ideas and for establishing a positive tone. Should the need arise they might also release tension by reminding participants of the value that any debate adds to the 15th May Movement and by motivating participants in general. The moderator can also be replaced via consensus of the Assembly as a whole. Anything spoken off microphone should be relayed to the Assembly as a whole in order to foment transparency.

INTERPRETER TEAM: One or two people who translate oral interventions into sign language for the hard of hearing and vice versa. Their vision should not be impeded by standing in front of them. If the members of this team are in direct sunlight, the Logistics Team will assign two people to shade them with parasols.

MINUTES TEAM: Two people responsible for noting all interventions which do not have a script. In the case of consensus resolutions the minutes team can ask for any resolution to be repeated word by word and subsequently ratified by the Assembly. Normally one team member writes down interventions by hand whilst the other uses a computer in case what has been written needs to be cross-checked. If the members of this team are in direct sunlight, the Logistics Team will assign two people to shade them with parasols. At the end of the Assembly, the minutes taken by this team should be read out to avoid any confusion.

PROPOSAL – THE POSITION OF THE GROUP DYNAMICS TEAM IN EACH ASSEMBLY

LOGISTICS TEAM: Its purpose is to prepare and organise the Assembly area before it takes place in order to make it more efficient and functional. The logistics person(s) are in charge of agreeing on and marking out the area (within their possibilities) together with the other teams.

The Moderators' Area is a rectangle marked out with chalk (or coloured tape stuck to the floor) in front of the assembly area like a type of 'stage'. Between this area and the assembly area the Floor-Time Team is visibly placed and spread out amongst the participants. Within the Moderators' Area, the Moderator and the Speaker (person who has the floor) will stand in the middle, flanked by the Interpreter(s) and Facilitator(s) who will normally be squatting or sitting on the floor when not taking part, and always within reach of the Rotating Team of Moderators and the Floor Coordinator(s).

To one side of the Moderators' Area sit the Spokespeople of the Commissions and/or the Working Groups who will be intervening in the different parts of the Agenda; on the other side an area will be provided for the Floor Coordinator(s) who will always be within reach of the Facilitator(s) and as far as possible from the Minutes Team (who will always sit near the Moderators' Area in order to be able to request a repetition, summary or text that has been presented) in order *not* to distract their attention from the conversations which take place before each turn to speak, making their job easier.

>>GESTURES USED TO EXPRESS COMMON OPINION OF THE ASSEMBLY

The following gestures have been agreed on in order to permit the expression of common opinion during assemblies:

- 1) APPLAUSE/AGREEMENT: Upraised, open hands moving from side to side.
- 2) DISAGREEMENT: Arms folded in cross above the head.
- 3) "THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN SAID"/"GET TO THE POINT": As if requesting a substitution in sport, revolving upraised hands.
- 4) "YOUR INTERVENTION IS TAKING UP TOO MUCH TIME": Crossed arms. Forearms come together and move apart as if they were the hands of a clock so that palms touch above head.
- 5) "DIFFICULTY HEARING INTERVENTION": Cupped hands to ears or hand moving up and down as if to indicate, "turn the volume up".

It is advisable to remind participants of these signs at the beginning of each Assembly. It is also advisable to inform participants that is more useful to display disagreement once the person speaking has finished in order not to condition their intervention, whenever possible.

>>ORAL EXPRESSIONS RECOMMENDED FOR MODERATORS AND SPEAKERS

We use Positive Speech avoiding negative statements which close the door to constructive debate. It is a less aggressive and more conciliatory type of communication. It is useful to open a debate with the points that unite before dealing with the points that separate. Examples:

- 1) 'Don't touch that dog or it will bite you' could be phrased as 'Be careful with that dog because it could bite you and neither of us would like that.'
- 2) 'If we don't reach a consensus here all efforts will go to waste' could be phrased as 'It's important we reach a consensus in this point or we could end up losing strength as a group and nobody wants that to happen.'

We use Inclusive Speech which makes no gender distinctions. It is clear that force of habit can be hard to break, but it is convenient that between all of us we mutually remind ourselves to remember this.

>>KEYS TO CREATING DYNAMIC AGENDAS

What is the Agenda of an Assembly? What is it for? The Agenda is a summary of the topics to be discussed during an Assembly. Its function is to make sure no important issue is left out, to establish an order in the type of interventions and to make it possible to calculate how much time each part of the Assembly should take. The agenda is drawn up by the Group Dynamics Team and the Moderator of any assembly should be familiar with it before opening an assembly as it is a basic guide to that assembly's contents. The Group Dynamics Team does not have jurisdiction over the contents of the Agenda; its members merely organise the issues to be discussed as reflected in the consensus reached by the representatives of all participating commissions in preparatory meetings. The agenda contains an outline of what issues are to be discussed in the Assembly and as such should be read out loud at the beginning of the Assembly so that the all present are aware of what is going to take place. Experience will help improve the design and relevance of each Assembly agenda. We recommend setting time limits for each Assembly depending on the number of participants and the issues to be discussed, in order to avoid loss of concentration and unfruitful assemblies.

****Schematic, practical example of an Assembly Agenda****

- 1) Welcome and Positive Presentation. The Assembly is the effective celebration of the power of the people.
 - 2) Summary of the consensuses reached in the previous Assembly and all outstanding issues.
 - 3) Presentation of the Group Dynamics Team for the Assembly in question. The roles of each of its members.
 - 4) Explanation of the concept "Assembly". We do not "vote", we reach consensus.
 - 5) Explanation of the concept "Consensus" (direct and indirect). Explanation of the process used to reach an indirect consensus.
 - 6) Examples of how the mechanics of the Floor-Time Team and Facilitators during an Assembly.
 - 7) Reminder of the gestures used in an Assembly and suggestions of how to express oneself verbally in concordance with the 15th May Movement style, as approved by the General Assembly.
 - 8) Reading the Agenda out loud.
 - 9) The turn of the Commissions and Work Groups *without* specific proposals for the Assembly, only information which does not require consensus. It is advisable that a spokesperson from each Commission or Working Group attends the preparatory meeting for the Assembly in order to help organise the list of issues to be discussed.
 - 10) The turn of the Commissions and Working Groups *with* specific proposals for the Assembly. If a direct consensus is not reached, the floor is opened to debate. Remember: there should be a maximum of two rounds of debate to defend each position (in groups of three speakers) and/or find a point of agreement. If the debate becomes heated, a period of common reflection can be opened and if after two rounds no consensus is reached the issue can be adjourned to the following Assembly. Opinion > Debate > Resolution or Adjournment.
 - 11) IMPORTANT NOTICES. Citations, general interest information, latest news, etc.
 - 12) ANY OTHER BUSINESS. During this round, there is no opportunity for debate. The information is not to be ratified at this point, rather taken up by the pertinent working group or commission. Important: if it is necessary to cut short this round because of lack of time or tiredness, announce this and tell those who have not had a chance to intervene in this round that the subjects they wanted to mention will have priority in the any-other-business round in the next Assembly.
 - 13) Conclusions and notification of time and place of next Assembly.
 - 14) Message of motivation and reminder of common purpose. Now is the time to use memorable words, which may be in verse, a piece of good news, a highly-charged quotation or a short text, etc.
 - 15) Closure and acknowledgements.
- (+ SHORT MOTIVATING MESSAGE. STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE. ENCOURAGEMENT.)

AN OPEN DISCUSSION ON SOME THEORETICAL CONTENT

What is horizontal organisation?

It is a type of social organisation which implies equality for everyone participating in a group or society. There is no hierarchy and it is the opposite of vertical organisation in which some people make decisions and others obey them.

The method used to take decisions in a horizontally-organised group or society is through assemblies.

What is an Assembly?

An Assembly is a gathering place where people who have a common purpose can meet on equal footing. It can be for:

- * Information: the participants share information of mutual interest. They do not debate the content of this information.
- * Reflection: to jointly think through a subject, situation or problem. Information must be given, but there is no need to arrive at an immediate decision.
- * Decisions: when the group must reach a joint conclusion or decision about a subject it has been involved in. To reach this, the two previous steps (having information and reflecting on it) must have been taken in order to build a consensus.

What do we understand by consensus?

A consensus is a collective construction of a solution to or a decision on a common interest.

It is not drawing up a proposal which includes each and every individual need, but is rather a the synthesis of all the individual opinions which give shape to the best way to achieve reach the group's common interest.

It implies:

- * Being very clear about the group's common interest.
- * Being aware that anything collective is the sum of all the individual knowledge and input; to this end, each individual's opinions must have been be communicated, listened to and respected.
- * Realising that it [consensus] is a commonly constructed end, rather than a function in itself.
- *Realising that consensus involves a process and that time and the necessary steps must be provided for it.

The necessary steps are:

- * Creating a relaxed group atmosphere which encourages participants to listen to, respect and support each other. climate which listens to, respects and has complicity amongst its members.
- * Making sure that the task which will to be worked on is crystal clear.
- * Sharing the information of each individual or sub-group so it can be properly taken into account.
- * Considering all points carefully.

- * Identifying and using points which clearly fall on common ground in order to begin building the proposal.
- * Gradually drafting the proposal through collective thinking.
- * Celebrating your achievement.

What do we understand by collective thinking?

It is like a synthesis of individual talents and ideas, not an eclectic summary of what is best but rather a synthesis of all. Individual talents placed in the service of common good, creating through differences, understanding differences as elements which enrich our common vision or understanding.

It implies:

- * Feeling that one is part of a whole.
- * Letting oneself 'blend into' others.
- * Not considering others to be opponents, but rather components of the whole group and in equal conditions.
- * Respecting opinions not through obligation but rather through desire.
- * Having a positive attitude to be able to see what unites, rather than what separates.
- * Going *for* instead of going *against*.
- * Thinking in advance that others' contributions will enrich the process.
- * Not reacting immediately, allowing what others say to sink in first.

This document is the result of the experiences of the Group Dynamics Commission for the Assemblies of the Puerta del Sol Protest Camp, and contains only suggestions. We encourage you to add to it, to improve it and to share it around so we can all learn to participate in an Assembly.