

What does workplace democracy look like?

Part III:

Group communication and decision-making for worker cooperatives

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Membership Meetings

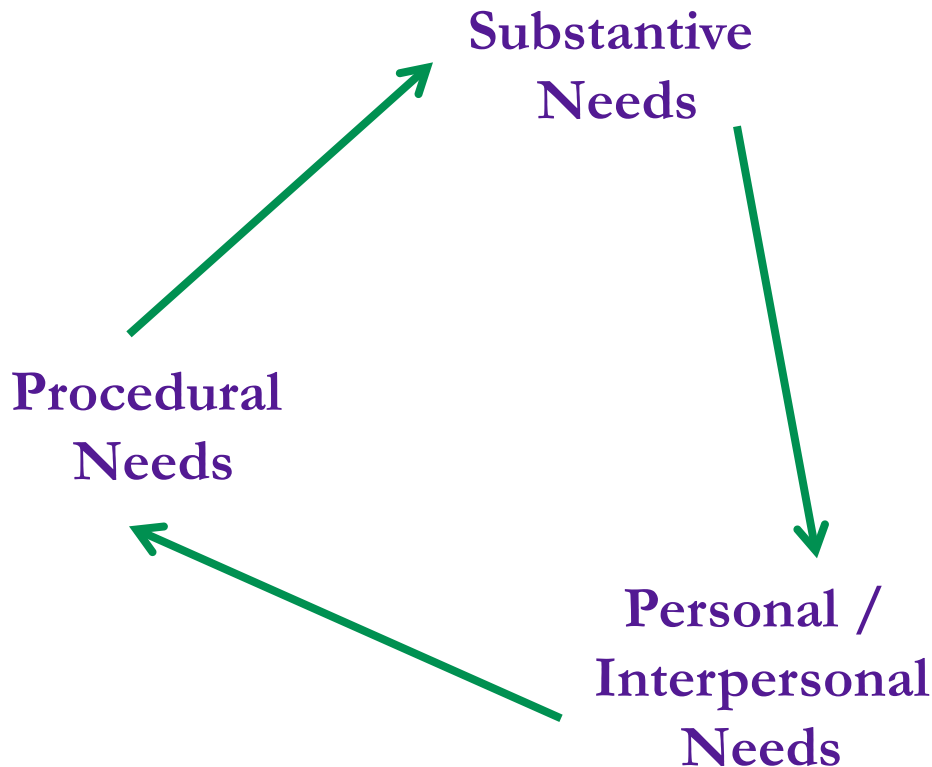
Most worker cooperatives have **regular meetings** in which members share **updates**, discuss **ideas** and **concerns**, develop or present **proposals** (sometimes called motions), and make **decisions** as a group.

Depending on the size and structure of the cooperative, general membership meetings (meetings that include all members) might take place as often as every week or as infrequently as once or twice a year. Smaller sub-groups (such as committees, departments, or teams) might have separate meetings.

Some meetings are very informal, while others are quite structured. It all depends on the size of the group and the needs and preferences of the members.

Different groups use different meeting styles and processes.

The particulars are not important, as long as these 3 related kinds of needs are addressed:



Personal / Interpersonal Needs

Do all members feel able to focus and comfortable speaking up? Personal and interpersonal needs may include everything from access to water and a bathroom to a respectful and supportive environment.

Procedural Needs

Do all members understand and accept the ground rules, agenda, and decision-making process? Do these procedures address everyone's personal and interpersonal needs? Do these procedures support the group's substantive needs?

Substantive Needs

Are members sharing important information and making necessary decisions? This is the "business" aspect of a meeting. However, members are often happier with meetings that effectively tackle substantive needs.

Ground Rules

Many groups have ground rules for meetings. Ground rules most immediately address personal and interpersonal needs, but often include procedural points. With or without ground rules, most groups take measures to create a comfortable meeting environment.

Common ground rules include:

Be open to hearing new perspectives. If you disagree with another member, try to understand and respect their point of view.

Be willing to respectfully disagree. Speak up if you have a disagreement. It is often helpful to voice questions and concerns, rather than allowing them to remain unspoken.

Be supportive. Express agreement or appreciation when appropriate. Offer to help or support other members, and ask for help or support if you want to.

Step forward, step back. After you speak, make space for others to talk while you listen. Be aware of each member's speaking time, language, tone, and non-verbal cues.

These are just a few examples of ground rules. **Groups often brainstorm ground rules together**, and adopt communication and meeting guidelines that meet their needs.

Meeting Roles and Preparation

Even in relatively informal meetings, members are sometimes tasked with certain roles. These roles can help to address **personal / interpersonal**, **procedural**, and **substantive** needs. Commonly assigned roles include:

Facilitator (or Chair): helps to keep the meeting on track by keeping the group focused on substantive goals while encouraging member participation. The facilitator may also prepare for the meeting in advance by soliciting agenda items and structuring the agenda.

Scribe: records the meeting minutes, including the date, agenda, who was present, the outcome of any votes or decisions, and the content of discussions.

Stack-keeper: notes when members raise their hands (or look like they have something to say) and calls on members, sometimes giving preference to those who have not yet spoken. In smaller groups, the facilitator may play this role.

Time-keeper: watches the clock and makes sure agenda topics do not exceed the allotted time. If discussions run over time, the time-keeper may ask the group if they would like to extend or table the discussion.

In some groups, members **volunteer** to fill these roles at each meeting. In others, roles **rotate** on a set schedule or are **permanently assigned** to members who fill certain positions. Some groups prefer not to use these roles, or assign additional roles based on specific needs.

A typical meeting agenda might include some of these items:

Check-ins: 5 minutes

How is everyone feeling? In a small group, everyone might be invited to speak up in a “go around.”

Announcements: 5 minutes

Does anyone have any announcements or reminders?

Review last meeting’s notes: 5 minutes

Some groups also formally “approve” the last meeting minutes, to make sure the scribe correctly documented everything.

Reports: 20 minutes

Individuals or committees update the group about their work since the last meeting.

BREAK 10 minutes

Today’s agenda items:

-Brainstorm 10 minutes

-Proposal 15 minutes

-Discussion 20 minutes

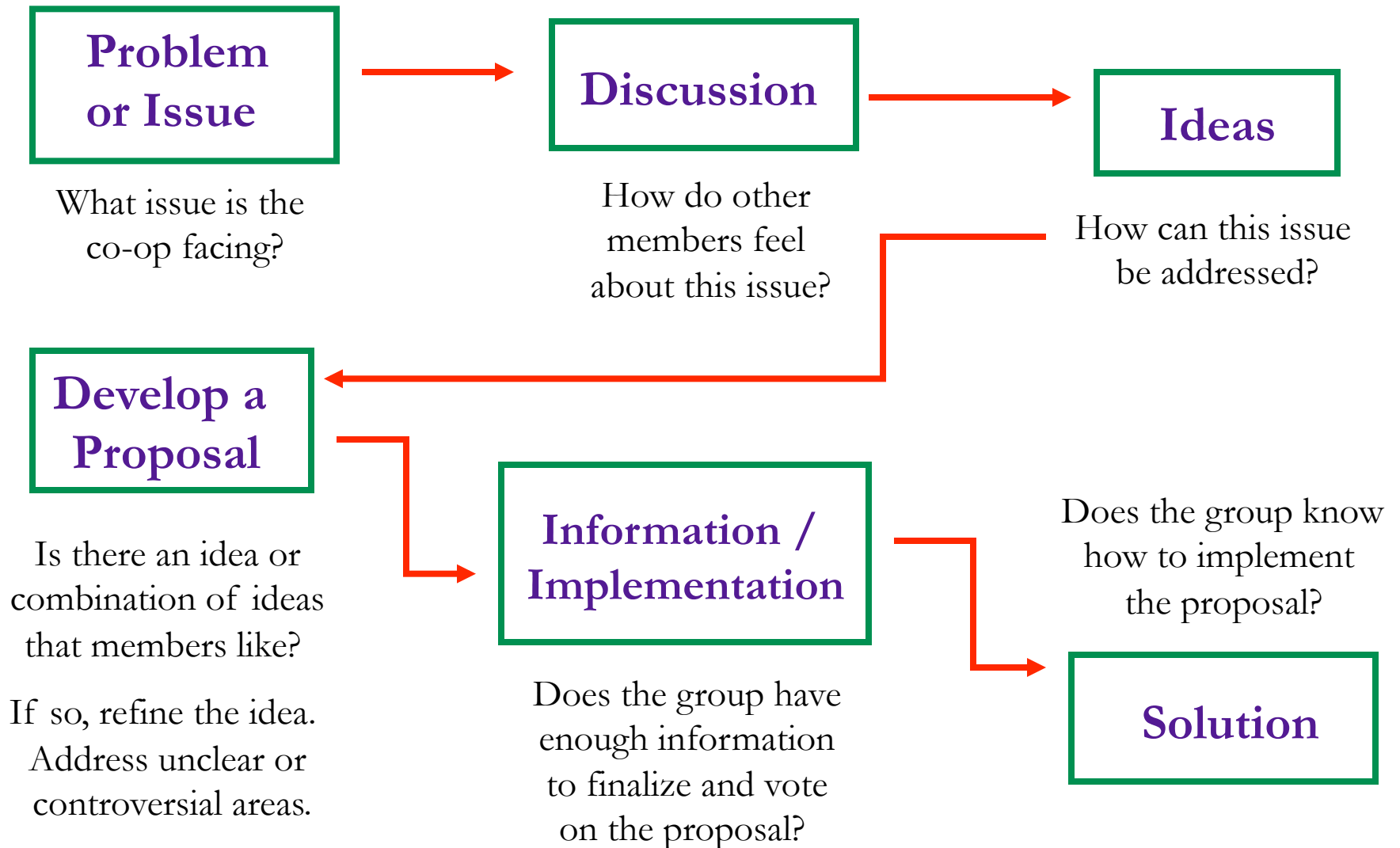
-Proposal 10 minutes

Each agenda item might have a brief description, including the name of the member who is presenting the agenda item and what they hope to achieve in the meeting.

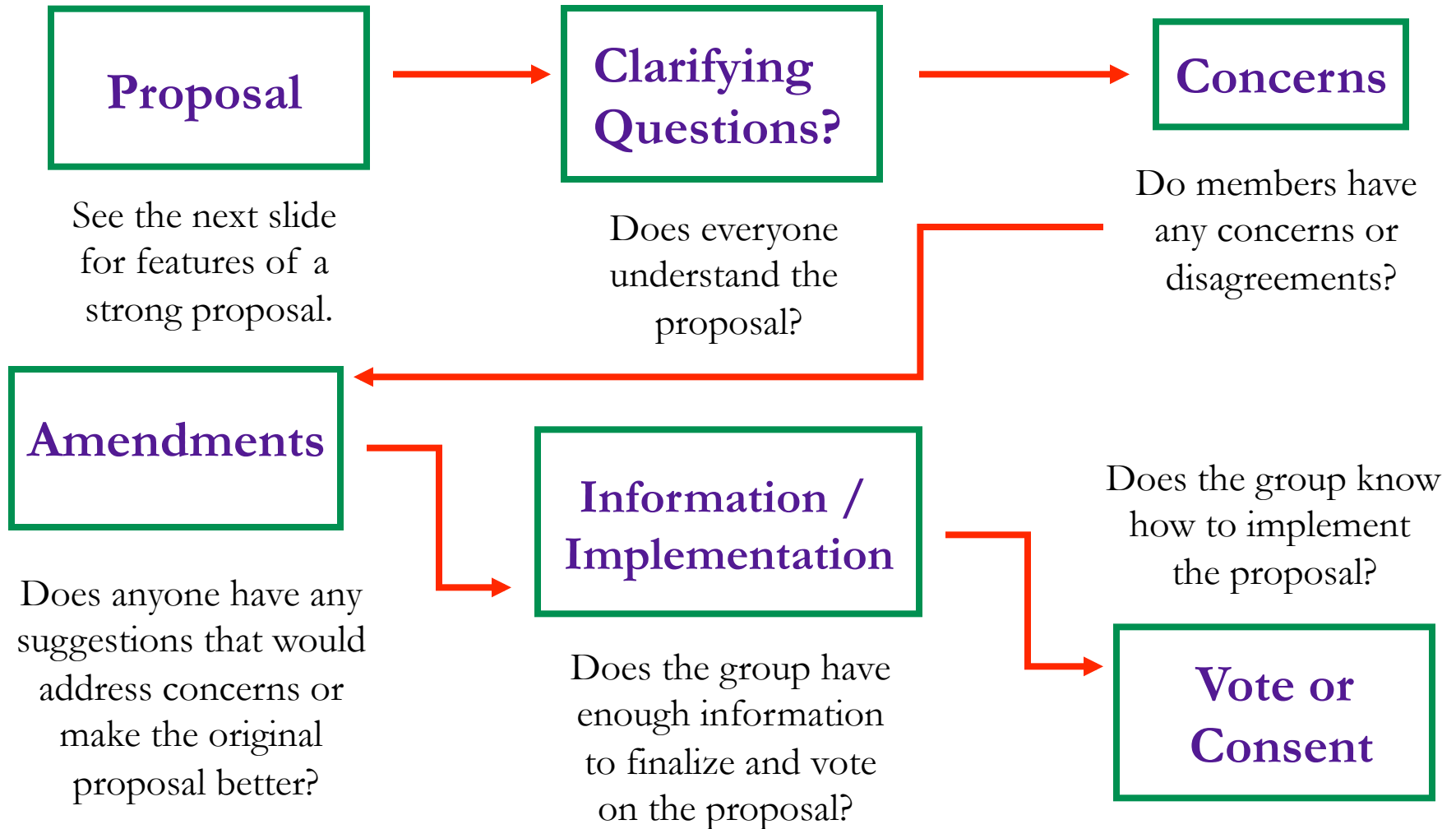
Check-outs or Meeting Evaluation: 5 minutes

What went well in today’s meeting? Is there anything that could be improved upon next time?

Sometimes **discussions** requiring **decisions** begin with a member identifying a **problem** or **issue** the cooperative needs to address.



Sometimes **discussions** requiring **decisions** begin with a member sharing an idea or presenting a **proposal** they have already prepared.



When an individual or group is developing a proposal, it is often helpful to consider the following questions:

- What **problem** or **issue** does the proposal seek to address?
- How does the proposal relate to the organization's **mission, values, existing policies, and previous discussions?**
- How will the proposal affect **individual members, committee or team members, or the group** as a whole?
- Will this proposal have a **financial impact?**
- What **information** is needed in order for members to be able to make an **informed decision?**
- How will the proposal be **implemented?**

Decision Time: Using Majority Vote

In groups that use **majority vote**, a member (often the meeting chair or facilitator) can call for a vote when the group seems ready to make a decision.

In some groups, a proposal is approved if a **simple majority (half plus one)** votes in favor. In other groups, at least **67% or 75%** (or a different percentage) of the members must vote “yes” in order for a proposal to pass.

Groups can establish different rules about voting and decision-making, depending on what works best for them. Some groups even have different voting rules for different kinds of decisions. At **Equal Exchange**, more important decisions require at least a 67% “yes” vote but smaller decisions require only a simple majority.

Decision Time: Using Consensus

Some groups use **consensus** instead of majority vote. This means **all members must agree**, or “reach consensus,” in order to approve a proposal. Consensus decision-making often requires that groups spend more time trouble-shooting proposals together and amending them in order to address concerns.

Because it only takes one “no” vote to block a decision, most consensus groups emphasize that a member should only **block** if they feel very strongly. Consensus groups also may try to limit stalemates (instances where a decision cannot be made because members do not agree) by **delegating** smaller decisions to committees or individuals.

Groups can tweak their decision-making process as needed. **Design Action Collective** requires full consensus on certain important decisions, but uses “modified consensus” (requiring at least 2 members to block a decision) for other decisions if necessary. **Beyond Care** has used both consensus decision-making and majority vote at different stages.

Review and Wrap-Up:

- What kinds of **needs** should be addressed in meetings? What steps can groups take to ensure that meetings are both **comfortable** and **productive**?
- What is the difference between **majority vote** and **consensus** decision-making? What are some advantages or disadvantages to each decision-making process?
- How might you **apply** these different decision-making processes within different organizational structures?

The next discussion will focus on some of the **steps necessary to building a strong foundation for a group**, including developing a **shared vision, policies or procedures that support your goals, and tools for healthy communication.**