Consensus Decision Making in the SCA

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Introduction—Why decision making?

Too often in the SCA, as is the case in most organizations, the *way* we make decisions is overlooked in the hurry to get to a particular decision. This haste sometimes leaves a trail of devastation in its path—hurt feelings, lost trust, feelings of not–belonging, spoiled SCA experiences. It hurts to see people who used to be friends, or at least who used to enjoy "playing SCA", now circling each other looking for an opening to lunge. Frequently, these sorts of feuds are so old, and so buried that even the individuals involved don't really understand why "that so–and–so is an evil person who can't be trusted." Such hurts frequently result from the way decisions are made, not from the result of a particular decision. The sad and heartening thing about such intra–group disasters is that they are often preventable and correctable, if the people who are committed to the group look in the right places.

In this article I will briefly discuss some characteristics of decision making in the SCA, then explore some of the strengths and weaknesses of three major forms: Voting, dictating and consensus. Finally I will suggest some ways in which consensus decision making can be constructively utilized in SCA groups.

Decision making in the SCA

One of the problems that tends to be amplified in the SCA is the apparent inaccessibility of decision making throughout the organization. It is true that "the SCA is not a democracy," but there are few organizations that flaunt this so vividly. As medieval as it may (or may not) have been, "Sovereign by Right of Arms" somehow just doesn't fit in our contemporary notion of "fairness" and "equality" and "justice." But before we concede the strangeness of the SCA, let us look at what we mean by "democracy" and how the SCA is similar to or different from other organizations in the Twentieth Century. If by "democracy" we mean "everyone votes on the important stuff," then there are very few democracies in the Modern world. I didn't vote for my professors in school, my clergy, my employers, or even my Boy Scout leaders. I don't vote for

when my local Post Office will be open or the speed limit on the road that goes by the front of my house. In the Modern world, few important decisions are voted upon by the people who are most affected. The SCA is no different. If by "democracy" we mean "voting", the SCA is not a democracy—neither is the Church, the PTA, the Girl Scouts, Greenpeace or Amnesty International. If when we say "democracy" we mean "self–governing," then the SCA is a democracy—*e.g.* members of the Board of Directors are selected only after soliciting recommendations from all members; Peerage orders must be consulted before others are added; the membership of a barony must be consulted before a Baroness or Baron is changed. In this sense, the SCA is no less a democracy than most other organizations. We just make voting a bigger issue because it feels so unmedieval.

Forms of Decision making

There are at least three major forms of decision making practiced in the Modern World and in the SCA: Voting, dictating, and consensus. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, each is more appropriate in some situations than in others. The key to selecting an appropriate decision–making form is a recognition of the assumptions, biases, and emphases of each and matching those to the needs of the situation.

Voting: Majority rules, preventing the tyranny of a minority

Voting assumes conflict. Its very form assumes that there is the threat that an aggressive minority could dominate the will of the majority. Voting is based on the assumption that the will of the majority should prevail. It assumes that all participants are equally capable of expressing their points of view. Voting places the responsibility for maintaining order on pre–determined rules for conduct of the group.

No decision–making process is without shortcomings, and voting is no exception. Voting yields a defeated minority, a sub–group who has been publicly beaten. Also, voting lessens the likelihood that the entire group will feel an "ownership" in the voted–on project, a sense of responsibility for its success. This can be a real problem, for after a group of people have gone on record as opposing a course of action and lost the vote, it is unlikely that they will then support the winning action with the same enthusiasm as if theirs had been the winning side. Chances are, the whole–hearted support of everyone is necessary for success in any group.

For example, suppose three major votes are taken about your shire's upcoming event. Of the dozen people in your shire, three lost the vote over autocrat, five lost the vote over the site, and four lost the vote over the site fee to be charged. Conservatively, we will assume that there is overlap, that five people were on the winning side in each case. This means that seven of the twelve lost on at least one issue, and it is likely that at least two lost on every issue. Yet the decision has been made in a "clean" and orderly fashion. But the event about which we were voting has not yet happened. Assume that by the time the event finally gets here, something goes wrong (not an unreasonable assumption) and that some extraordinary effort is required to ready the site at the last minute. Seven of the people in the shire are at least as likely to grumble "I thought this site was a mistake from the beginning" as they are to pitch in with their complete, uncomplaining support. Meanwhile, there are at least two people who are at best not participating and perhaps offering morale–sapping predictions of disaster. Often three or four people end up doing most of the work for the event, for they are the ones who have gone on public record as supporting it. Everyone else, faced with one problem or another, will be tempted to say "if only they had listened to me, we wouldn't be having these problems—such–and–such would have been better." Note, I am not saying that everyone is bound to refrain from lending their total support to a project they voted against. But I would maintain that it is more likely that someone who has voted for a project will support it than someone who has voted against the project.

The second potential problem with voting is that it privileges those who are more vocal and more aggressive. In the voting process, the bias is usually toward the quickest way to a majority. Once such a majority exists, there are procedures (e.g. Robert's calling for the question) to force a quick decision. Given the assumption that the will of the majority ought to prevail, time spent debating the issue after a majority has been formed is wasted time. However, the most aggressive and vocal members will tend to go first in any public discussion. This would not be a problem if the most vocal and aggressive members were the wisest and most capable of making good decisions. They aren't. It is perhaps more likely that the quiet person in the back of the room (who has been listening instead of arguing) sees things in the situation that those in the heat of the debate don't see. The vocal and aggressive debaters are still going strong when the group

forms a majority (without the benefit of the quiet person's insights), and therefore the group will not ever hear the wisdom of the quiet except in her silent dissenting vote.

Finally, majority rule contains a potential problem. It doesn't take a professional historian to find many cases in history in which the majority was flat out wrong. One of the strongest archetypes across cultures and times is that of the prophet, one who sees and understands things that the majority cannot. In the voting decision–making process, the prophet doesn't have a chance—the bias is toward the simple, apparent answer, and against the complex, hidden answer. Thus the vote tends to lead toward "satisficing", or finding the first satisfactory answer, rather than working towards the optimal solution.[1]   Sometimes a much better answer could be found if only a little more time was wisely spent.

Dictating: Quick and efficient

As I am using the term here, dictating is simply one party telling another party what will be done. Dictated decisions can originate from one person or from a small group of people. Whatever form it takes, dictating is the quickest form of decision making. Done well, it also is most likely to lead to consistency across decisions. Responsibility is clear, authority direct. In short, dictating is efficient.

There is a particular form of dictating that tends to emerge in SCA groups. Frequently, a small group of people will end up being "the backbone" of a group. They will assume the responsibility for making decisions and carrying them out. This sort of situation is often marked by business meetings in which decisions are announced by the officers, who then ask for volunteers to help implement the decisions. This occurs because the real decision making has already occurred in someone's kitchen—there among a small group of friends, the alternatives were hashed out and decisions made. By the time the SCA meeting rolls around the only thing left to do is solicit support. Of course, these business meetings tend to be poorly attended and boring. Any questions or suggestions for alternative courses of action are interpreted as a challenge and either vehemently counter–attacked, or dismissed outright as irrelevant. The

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[1] It is important to note here a distinction that is important in the SCA. In the dictionary, polling can be a synonym for voting. In the SCA, polling is not voting, in one very important aspect. Even though polling may take the form of voting, in that people may fill out ballots, or raise their hands, etc., in the SCA, polling is not a form of decision making, but is rather a form of advising. Thus when an Order is polled by Their Majesties, the Order is giving counsel. The decision, however, remains in the hands of Their Majesties.

individual who persists in making such suggestions is labelled a "troublemaker," for they are interfering with the smooth business of announcing decisions and recruiting volunteers. The decisions have already been made, and to spend more time rehashing those decisions is just to subject the entire group to longer meetings.

Sometimes, dictated decisions are made in the absence of the dictator. When a group forms around someone who is particularly charismatic, or has lofty titles, or who is wealthier, or a better fighter, or whatever, the decision–making group can become so attuned to the wishes of this individual, that even in his absence, people decide on the basis of "what he would want." In an insidious derivation, the idolized individual is removed from the process, or more likely removes himself, and the small group of admirers end up making decisions perhaps even counter to the wishes of the idolized, but do so because they mistakenly think that "this is what he would have decided." We end up with more bad decisions.

Probably the greatest potential harm of dictating is a tendency to homogeneity in the group. People tend to feel more comfortable among people most similar, but groups that are able to maintain a certain diversity tend to be more stable, longer–lived, and better able to adjust to changes in the social environment. When a diverse group is faced with a new problem, it is more likely someone in the group will be able to suggest a way to creatively and constructively manage the novel situation than if the group is comprised of people who tend to see things in the same way. Yet dictating tends to discourage people who are unlike the people making the decisions. If someone is an intelligent, creative, responsible person, she is likely to quickly become frustrated in a group that seems to make the same poor choices over and over again. So the group becomes self–selecting—the people who are most similar to the decision makers stay, and the people less similar leave. If your group seems to be comprised of people who are pretty much similar in outlook, attitudes, beliefs, etc. look carefully at who has come and who has stayed in the group. Then look and see where the important decisions are being made.

One of the nice things about this particular problem is its ease of diagnosis. If your group shows some of these warning signs, it *may be* that some people in your group feel that they have been excluded from the decision–making process:

1) A withdrawal of some members to a barely active role in the group. This might come in the form of households or guilds, or simply by a gradual growing disinterestedness in the affairs of the group.

2) The formation of "unofficial meetings", especially if these seem to be attended by the people "not in the know" in your group, and if the topic of discussion tends to shift toward what is right and wrong in the group.

3) The emergence of "trouble makers", people who frequently oppose group decisions, often for no apparent reason. These outspoken people often have a small group of followers and frequently engage in sniping at those who are "in" in the group.

4) A tendency for a small number of people in the group to do most of the work. In particular, you should be concerned if it seems that a large portion of the group only grudgingly helps with the "chores" of the group.

5) A physical separation of sub–groups at meetings, especially if the people who tend to make the decisions tend to hang out together. It ought to be considered a dangerous sign if you can predict who will be sitting next to whom at meetings. It is usual for people to sit next to a good friend, but if the same group of people tend to cluster, and if there tend to be several such clusters, chances are some people are feeling more a part of the sub–group than of the group as a whole.

6) Certain phrases heard commonly, especially from the leaders of your group:
   a) "We gave them opportunity to participate, and they didn't"
   b) "We have a right to spend time with our friends"
   c) "They don't come to the business meetings, so they don't have a right to complain"
   d) "We are doing the dirty work so they can have fun, and they don't even appreciate it."
   e) "If (fill in the name) would just go away, all of the problems of the group would go away, too."
   f) "But the SCA is not a democracy—we don't vote for the Crown, either. Besides, voting isn't period!"

The common thread running throughout these comments, of course, is the paternalistic notion that "we" know what is best for "you." Again, it may be that "you" would not change any of "our" decisions. The feeling that you don't belong is more likely to occur if you feel that you aren't a part of the process of making important decisions.

Consensus: Big Picture solutions, relationship–sensitive

Consensus as a form of decision making is broadly defined and widely misunderstood. I am proposing a particular model for consensus decision making. First of all, as I am speaking of it, consensus is not merely a formality. Some groups legitimize other forms of decision making with a consensual window–dressing. For example, a decision that has been made by a small group may be dictated to the whole group, then the leader asks, "so do we have a consensus?" People in the group have learned that dissent is fruitless, so the room sits silently, or attendees absently nod their heads. They know the real decision has already been made, but to the careless observer it appears as though the entire group is in agreement.

Second, consensus is not unanimity. To require unanimity from a diverse group of people is setting the stage for the worst sort of tyranny—depriving individuals the right to disagree. If your group consistently comes to agreements without disagreements, you either are presiding over a dead group who doesn't care, a group that recognizes the futility of expressing opinions, or you are avoiding any issues even potentially important. Life and interpersonal relationships are too diverse and too complex to allow quick unanimity amongst people of diverse backgrounds who think and who care.

In a consensus decision–making process, time is allotted for thinking about the problem. Everyone is allowed to speak, and dissent is encouraged. People are heard. Instead of beginning by seeking a solution, consensus begins by attempting to understand the limits of the problem. Since there is plenty of time allotted to speak, there tends to be less pressure to interrupt. The pressure to push your opinions on someone else is diminished, for ultimately, the group will not make a decision over your objections. Only after it is apparent that the group has come to an agreement, however complex and multi–dimensional, does the leader ask for a confirmation that it is time to move on. Again, one last opportunity is granted to people to speak their mind, if they feel it is necessary. No decision is forced: If people do not feel they understand well enough to decide, the decision is delayed. People do not always agree on what should be done, but there will come a point at which people will see the need to act, and will agree that a "second choice" action is better than no action. So while no decision can be made without my consent, I may choose to accept the decision as the best available decision, given the group's situation.

It may seem to someone accustomed to the combative voting process that given the opportunity, some people would monopolize the group's time, and nothing would get done.

When consensus decision making first begins, this indeed often happens. But it doesn't last. If a group is comprised of people who honestly care about the group there will come a time when people will see the need to step aside and let things go on. The key to consensus, the "trick" to making things work, the reason an individual will be willing to support a decision with which she might not fully agree is the presence of a higher goal, something that is larger and more important than any individual issue. This is what makes consensus particularly suited to the SCA. Most people in the SCA are here because of a love of history and an earnest desire to capture the "feeling" of a recreation of the Age of Chivalry. Some may think of this as "the Dream", others may see it as "living" history instead of simply studying history. However it conceptualized, for most in the SCA there is something far more important than any particular decision. To a certain degree, we are self–selecting in that those who don't experience this "something greater" tend to become frustrated and leave. But the larger mission or vision extends throughout the organization. This is why "Sovereign by Right of Arms" works— individuals are willing to give up things they might otherwise choose to do so that Kings and Queens can be Kings and Queens, and not just players in a script. This is why tournament fighting works—individuals are willing to accept a blow on their honor in order to preserve the integrity of the list. This is also why consensus works in local groups—individuals are willing to give up individual decisions, as long as they feel that they are a legitimate part of the process, in order to allow the group to move ahead.

There are situations in which agreement may not be reached. Sometimes people get hurt in a group, and more often than not, those hurts get ignored. Unfortunately, perhaps, the hurts tend not to go away. It is common to find situations in SCA groups in which individuals were hurt a long time ago, and the issue was never resolved. In this case, those individuals will never be able to give the full support to the group that consensus demands. However, it is in the interest of the group to confront the problems and move toward healing these old wounds. No matter what decision–making process is utilized, if there is hurt in your group, it is better for everyone to work towards healing.

One of the biggest problems of consensus decision making is time. Forging a consensus takes time and a lot of effort. In this regard it runs exactly counter to the "business is bad" mentality. Consensus requires taking the time to work through issues, the discipline to be unsatisfied with

the first acceptable solution, to look ahead to find the optimal solution. The payoff for the invested time and energy is a tendency to a better decision. Consensus–derived decisions have the entire group's backing and are more likely to escape "fatal flaws", initially hidden problems that jeopardize the success of the project. No decision–making process guarantees there will be no surprises, but if you take the extra time to more thoroughly explore an issue initially, you will be less likely to have to redo a project, or to panic at the last minute. Consensus decision making often saves time in the long run.

Another problem with consensus is that it places much responsibility on the leadership. Instead of relying on a body of rules, the leadership must actively monitor the decision–making process. In order for the process to work well, the leadership must be committed to the health of the group, sensitive to the opinions in the group, actively seeking out the views of those who are initially reluctant to express dissenting opinions. It is the leadership's responsibility to avoid groupthink. There will also be times in which the leadership needs to calm things down, to help people step back from the heat of the discussion, to regain a perspective. The leadership must be patient.

Probably the biggest benefit of consensus decision making is an increased participation in the life of the group. Because the base of decision makers has been expanded, and everyone's opinion has been heard, people are more likely to feel that the group is their group and that its projects are their projects. It is also more likely that when you need extra help, everyone in your group will be more willing to help, because everyone in the group will have had a part in deciding that the project should be done.

How to do consensus

1. Use business meetings to discuss problem, not to simply announce decisions.

2. Purposely invite people who tend to be shy to offer their opinions.

3. Be willing to stand up for people when they are "stepped on" for stating their opinion, even if you don't agree with them.

4. Encourage discussion, but discourage decision making outside of group meetings.

5. Keep meetings on–track and moving (especially with routine and extraneous things) but allow whatever time it takes to discuss the important issues.

6. If necessary, meet more frequently, making smaller decisions more often.

7. Develop an attitude of patience when it comes to discussing important issues, resist the temptation to jump at the first possible solution to a problem. Be willing to let people think during meetings, even if that means sitting in silence for awhile. Find the necessary courage to put off a decision if the group is not ready to make a decision. Few important decisions really need to be decided "right now," and too many of these panic decisions shows poor planning.

8. If your group seems to be headed in many conflicting directions, consider a local daylong event to discuss the future of group.
> a) determine group priorities
> b) talk about the kind and timing of events you wish to host
> c) come to an agreement about the group's short–term goals (more members, or more activities, or more awards, not everything)

No form of decision making is appropriate for every task. One of the most important skills for group leadership is the ability to select appropriate decison–making processes for each type of decision. Consensus, however, does offer some attractive benefits that can work to involve more people in the life of the group and make the SCA even more exciting.