On the Bias

"Martha's Rules"
An Alternative to *Robert's Rules of Order*

For several years I have been teaching a social work course on how social workers can make their employing organization more responsive to consumers. We study how decisions are made in organizations. The students and I have become intrigued with the use of consensus decision-making in some organizations. Many—but by no means all—of these organizations are feminist organizations that wish to put feminist beliefs and philosophy into practice within organizations and to avoid structured administrative hierarchies for decision making. In their study of "consensus decision-making" organizations, students have reported that some participants are impatient with the time required by the use of consensus decision-making for all decisions—large and small. One student brought to class a copy of "Martha's Rules" that were developed by Martha's Housing Co-op for families in Madison, Wisconsin. "Martha's Rules" are not only an alternative to Robert's Rules, but provide ideas for people in organizations who are committed to consensus decision-making and who want to make it work well.

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These rules were developed at Martha's Co-op because we were dissatisfied with *Robert's Rules of Order* as a way to make decisions. Every decision we make we have to work with; thus, it seemed essential that we understand and be committed to the things we decide. We recognize that although "consensus" decision-making makes for high-quality decisions, it takes a lot of time and energy. Some decisions are simply not worth the effort. Therefore, we developed a way to test whether an issue is important enough to warrant the extra time necessary to achieve a consensus while an issue is being discussed.

"Martha's Rules" involves a five-step procedure for discussing and deciding on issues in large group meetings. The participants must share certain skills if the process is to be effective. They must be willing and able to listen to what others are saying. They must be trusting enough and brave enough to speak their minds. They must care about the group's welfare as well as their own, and, on occasion, they must be willing to shed intense personal attachments to favored ideas.

The five steps are a framework, and they need not be followed to the letter. They have proved helpful in focusing the discussion and in giving

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first-time facilitators some suggestions. The five steps in the order in which they are taken are as follows: (1) preparation; (2) generating proposals; (3) making proposals concrete; (4) voting a "sense" vote and then a "vote" vote; and (5) implementation and review.

Preparation.

Ideally, the facilitator and the participants should know the topics under discussion ahead of time, so they can prepare and reflect. Also, it is easier if the facilitator is chosen early, so she can plan a strategy for the discussion. When the meeting begins, the facilitator should propose an agenda and estimated time limits on the discussion to which the group should agree before proceeding to the next step.

Generating proposals.

This step is necessary when a member raises an issue but a specific proposal has not been presented to the group. For example, a member might want to take a particular action but is unsure of the best way to go about it. After she raised the issue, there would be a limited period of freewheeling discussion. The aim of the discussion is to explore the alternatives and bring up the effects and implications of various actions. The participants must listen carefully to what is being said to avoid endless repetition. When the facilitator senses that the issue has been well explored, she guides the discussion on to the next step.

Making proposals concrete.

The facilitator tries to bring together the ideas into one or more proposals. Here, the group finds answers to such questions as, How much money do we want to spend? To whom do we want to give the authority to make that decision? What are the different goals underlying each suggestion? The facilitator must try to separate questions of principle from questions about practical details. Also, it is important to identify people who are willing to work on a proposal if it is implemented. When the time is ripe, the facilitator guides the group to the next stage.

Voting: The "sense" vote.

The point of the sense vote is to discover how the group feels about a proposal. It is possible to put more than one proposal about the same topic through this procedure, so it will not be necessary to attempt to fuse different proposals into what might be an unwieldy compromise. Table 1 presents an example of how to interpret a sense vote.

Some people find this procedure complicated. Watch for the key words:

1. The facilitator states the proposal.
2. The facilitator takes a hand count on the following questions: (a) Who *likes* the proposal? (b) Who *can live with* the proposal? (c) Who is *uncomfortable* with the proposal?
3. The facilitator repeats this process with all the proposals on a topic.

TABLE 1. Interpreting the Results of the Sense Vote at a Meeting of Twenty People

Proposal	Like it	Can live with it	Uncomfortable	Response
A	4	6	10	Ditch it—not enough support
B	7	4	9	Try for a more palatable proposal, but run 'through the "vote" vote
C	8	7	5	Run through the "vote" vote
D	3	15	2	Suggest that three and two discuss the issue further among themselves; the meeting as whole does not care

Voting: The "vote" vote.

The point of this vote is to find out what those who are "uncomfortable" are uncomfortable about and then to find out whether the group as a whole wishes to decide by majority rule. The facilitator asks those who were uncomfortable to state the reasons for their discomfort. The suggested time limit is two minutes per person. The facilitator may allow questions and answers but should diffuse bitter dialogues (usually a sign that there is some other issue at stake that hasn't been brought out). Someone who spends two minutes repeating, in great detail, what she has already said courts hostility from the group.

After hearing the objections of those who are uncomfortable, a vote is taken. The question is, *"Should we implement this decision over the stated objections of the minority, when a majority of us feel it is workable?"* A "yes" vote means that *majority rule* is favored in this case. A "no" vote means that the person favors *postponing the decision*. If the "yes" votes have a numerical majority, then the proposal has been adopted. If the "no" votes have a numerical majority, the proposal under consideration has been defeated, the status quo has been maintained, and there are several options:

1. Generate a new proposal, taking into account the objections raised by those who are uncomfortable.

2. Continue discussing the issues until those who are uncomfortable change their minds.

3. Accept that the issue cannot be decided at this time and bring it up later in the hope that time and further (private) discussion will allow a new proposal to be adopted.

Why would someone vote that she "can live with" a proposal? She may agree with the general principle, but be skeptical about the particular steps necessary to carry it out. She may be interested neither in the issue at hand nor in getting in the way of the issue at hand. She may be apathetic. The sense vote identifies who is willing to work with a proposal that is not totally to their liking. If a majority of people vote that they "can live with" a proposal, it shows that the issue is simply not yet of gripping interest to the group as a whole. A person may vote that she is "uncomfortable" with a proposal so she can get a chance to speak. Then, she can make some points that she could not get through in the discussion phase before the decision is final. I have seen a majority of the group, previously committed to a proposal, drop it when they heard an eleventh-hour comment from an "uncomfortable" member.

Look out for the proposal that has the most positive votes as the one most likely to be implemented by the group.

Implementation and review.
It is crucial that everyone understand what has been decided. The facilitator should state the adopted proposal and make sure that everyone agrees to it. Some people think that silence is dissent; others think that silence is assent.

Implementation is the final test of the workability of a decision. It should be made clear what will be done, who will do it, what criteria will be used to judge when the job is done, and whether and when the decision should be reviewed.