



BLUE SKIES DECISION MAKING -- HOW WE GO ABOUT IT

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

So, what is this thing we call 'Blue Skies consensus'? It's not anybody's textbook consensus, that's for sure. It's a changing and evolving method we've come up with to help us reach the decisions we need in order to stage, maintain and enrich the festival.

It's a bit like we built the method, then applied a handy name to it. People who were around during the earliest days of the festival remember rolling up their sleeves, working stuff out and reaching agreement on how to put the Festival on for another year. At some point, someone realized there was a ready-made name for something similar to the way we were doing things. The name was 'consensus'.

We weren't really following anyone's model. We were really just -- in typical Blue Skies fashion -- making it up as we went along.

HOW WE GO ABOUT IT

The approach we've come up with depends a lot on allowing the Hats broad autonomy on the day-to-day decisions required to make their areas work. It also depends on our 'flat' organizational structure, in which each member of the organizing committee (hats, perennial organizers, TLC members, HSC members and others who are at a given meeting) has an equal voice and responsibility for the overall running of the festival.

In broad strokes, the Hats accept full responsibility for the running of their area, and we leave them to it. It's the larger, more 'philosophical' issues -- issues such as those involving unusual expense, new construction, changes to our footprint on the land and similar questions -- that are brought to the larger group for discussion. Sometimes, maybe even usually, our decisions are made easily and quickly. Other times, we take much longer, with much back-and-forthing, nattering, and gnashing of teeth.

Our guiding principle has always been to reach complete agreement on any decision we take, or at least a decision that all can ultimately agree to, even if with some head-shaking. In general, a notion is brought to the large group and presented with as much, or as little, supporting material as the proposer feels like presenting. The discussion then opens to the entire group. Everyone is invited to make comments on the notion and help us work our way towards a decision -- sometimes yea, sometimes nay, and sometimes a completely different decision that emerges from our collective mind jam.

The job of the General Coordinator in these discussions is to make sure everyone who has something to say has the chance, that the conversation remains close to the topic at hand, and that the discussion is neither monopolized by a few or railroaded with bluster. This job has been lovingly referred to by at least one GC as 'herding cats'.

The General Coordinator who has valiantly attempted (with his or her own particular brand of deftness) to keep the discussion on track and within some vague time constraint, will eventually ask the group if we can reach a decision. At times, we've been asked whether everyone can 'live with' a decision. At times, whether we can achieve a general 'murmur' of approval. These approaches reflect the personal style of the Coordinator, but all are attempts to discover whether the group approves or disapproves of the notion and whether we should move forward with it. At times, on particularly thorny questions, it becomes necessary to specifically ask whether there is anyone in the room who feels so strongly that they cannot support the group in moving forward with a decision at this time.

Though our decisions are usually made quite easily with minimal discussion or bother, there are times when issues can be quite contentious with deeply held opinions and emotions taking the fore and tensions reaching the boiling point. At these times it is crucial to remember that differing perspectives are the heart and soul of Blue Skies style decision making. These are the times when it is most important to fall back on the key values of truly listening to one another, being respectful to those who hold opinions different from our own, phrasing our viewpoints clearly and constructively, looking for ways to bring diverging opinions together, and remembering that everyone in the room has the best interests of Blue Skies at heart.

WHAT WE ASPIRE TO

There are a few principles that we try to abide by. Think of them as 'thought balloons' that hover over our discussions:

We try and make sure:

- 1) That everyone who wishes to speak to a particular notion, has the opportunity to, and is treated with respect and attention. This makes our decisions inclusive, collaborative and open.
- 2) That every opinion, even those we don't immediately understand or agree with, is truly listened to and understood. Often our best decisions emerge from melding apparently irreconcilable positions into brilliant new thoughts.
- 3) That when there is serious disagreement on an issue, we slow down, reflect and look for a way to bridge conflicting opinions. Though the pressures of the moment sometimes seem immense, we always need to step back, breathe and truly consider.
- 4) That the quality of our decisions is paramount. What we're looking for is the best decision rather than the easiest or most convenient.

5) That at the end of the day, what we are doing is putting together a three day festival. It's supposed to be fun!

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Blue Skies is a music festival. And, at its best, our decision making process is like a well-honed jam. We're all playing together to create the song. Sometimes each of us leans back and lets the music take us. Sometimes we move a little forward to fill in an empty space. All the time, we're exploring the same tune . . . together. If things get a little discordant at times, or maybe a little too free-form, by working together we nearly always find our way home.

And like any good jam, we're building this thing together. Blue Skies consensus is our jam etiquette. The good manners we show each other to make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute, to explore each other's ideas, and to reach the final note with authority and aplomb.

February 22, 2012