

Book Reviews

Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles into Practice

Gerald Cormick, Norman Dale, Paul Emond, S. Glenn Sigurdson and Barry D. Stuart. Ottawa: National Round Table on Consensus and Sustainability, 1996, 135 pages.

Review by Susan Carpenter

Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles into Practice is a thoughtfully crafted primer to the process of building consensus on complex public issues. Building Consensus is packed with useful information, grounded in real world experience, delivered in an accessible style.

Building Consensus responds to the need for more systematic, sophisticated explanations of the consensus process. The book grows out of the experiences of the Canadian National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy and the subsequent National Task Force on Consensus and Sustainability which earlier identified ten principles for building consensus. Building Consensus builds on the premise that all ten principles are essential to the success of a consensus process.

The book begins by defining consensus, differentiating it from consultation, and offering tips on selecting a mediator. Subsequent chapters address each of the ten principles of consensus by explaining the principle, offering a rationale for its use, identifying and addressing issues associated with each. These principles cover consensus processes being purpose-driven, inclusive, voluntary, self-designed and flexible; providing equal opportunity, respecting diverse interests, setting time limits, as well as the accountability of the parties and implementation of agreements. The appendix provides brief descriptions of

cases where consensus processes have been applied to sustainability issues. The book's clear organization reflected in its Table of Contents makes it possible to find answers quickly to questions frequently asked about this process.

Its authors, Gerald Cormick Norman Dale, Paul Emond, S. Glenn Sigurdson and Barry D. Stuart, five distinguished practitioners, bring their combined wealth of experience to this work. Their insights are reflected in the realistic nature of the questions they pose, their straightforward answers to those questions and the range of case studies they present to illustrate their points. Unlike many jointly-authored books this one is well edited and provides a consistent writing style throughout the manuscript.

While grounded in issues of environmental, economic and social sustainability, the value of Building Consensus extends beyond these topics. At a time when consensus processes continue to receive greater acceptance as a tool for decision-making and conflict resolution at all levels of project and program development and policy making, this book offers solid generic lessons applicable to any large-scale consensus building effort.

In addition to serving as an excellent introduction to the practice of consensus building, Building Consensus can be used as a guide for groups that are designing their own consensus process and can provide the basis of a diagnostic tool to help parties determine why a consensus effort has failed or how it can be improved. This book belongs on the bookshelf of the practitioner, the policy maker, the program manager and any other interest group representative who is contemplating participating in a multi-party consensus process. It does for consensus building what Getting to Yes did for the field of negotiation.

Susan Carpenter is a mediator, trainer and writer on public dispute issues. She is based in Southern California.