

Consultation: Bedrock of the New World Order

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In the Ridván letter of 1990, the Universal House of Justice declared that it was "... imperative for Bahá'í institutions to improve their performance, through ...", among other things, "... a keener reliance on the beneficial effects of proper consultation, so that the communities they guide will reflect a pattern of life that will offer hope to the disillusioned members of society." Consultation is something that, as Bahá'ís, we are enjoined in the Writings to do. It is something that we all have had experience with, and it is something that we probably think that we are doing fairly well. However, as the Universal House of Justice chose to use the phrase "proper consultation," this would serve to indicate that indeed we must achieve new and deeper levels of understanding of this unique gift of God to man, and greater commitment to its effective implementation. The purpose, then, of this paper is to delve into what constitutes Bahá'í consultation, how it differs from other types of problem solving techniques in common use today, how we can apply it in our lives and our institutions and how it can be promoted and used within a larger social context.

First, let us briefly explore a few of the many statements concerning consultation found in the Writings. For a comprehensive collection of these Writings, the reader is referred to the compilation on Consultation by the Universal House of Justice published in 1980.

In the Holy Writings, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that "*The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion.*" (CC 1) He further enjoins us to "*Take ... counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.*" (CC 1) He also tells us that "*No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.*" (CC 2) In The Promulgation of Universal Peace, `Abdu'l-Bahá stated that:

In this Cause, consultation is of vital importance; but spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views ... [in parliamentary opposition and debate] ... is intended ...

Consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth ... true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation. (PUP pp. 68-70)

The Master further stated that "*the principle of consultation is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice. Even in their ordinary affairs the individual members of society should consult.*" (CC 15) In 1933, the beloved Guardian wrote, in an amplification of the Master's statement, that "Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique order." (CC 32)

The question arises, then, how is Bahá'í consultation different from other so-called discussion methods and techniques? Let's briefly examine three of the most common types. The first of these is "brainstorming." In this method, many ideas are encouraged from the group. Negative aspects of any idea offered are not normally brought up, as this tends to inhibit the flow of ideas. The purpose of brainstorming is to generate ideas. There is generally no mechanism for implementing any of the ideas and thus the net result is that possible solutions to problems tend to remain in the realm of the abstract and are not implemented in the world of reality. Brainstorming can be a useful component, however, of consultation. This will be discussed later on in this presentation.

The second method is the so-called discussion group. This has the strength of brainstorming in that many ideas are possible. However, it's main weakness is that the strongest personality tends to become the leader and there then exists the strong possibility that weaker voices, or dissonant ideas are ignored or censured. These groups also tend to fragment because of a fundamental lack of unity and respect for the diversity of opinions in the group.

The third method is the one mentioned by `Abdu'l-Bahá above, parliamentary debate, where truth is not so much the concern of the participants, but rather the belittling of another's ideas or views so that one's own might find ascendancy, and thus becomes an exercise in fruitless wrangling and discord at the expense of truth and enlightenment.

In a unique letter written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, only three months after the passing of the Master, the Guardian described and gave detailed instructions for consultation. You can find this letter on pages 17-25 of Bahá'í Administration. If you carefully read this passage, you will find from the quotations of the Master cited by Shoghi Effendi, that there are seven 'prime requisites' for those who consult; two 'conditions' necessary before effective consultation can take place; five procedural rules which become the standard for all consultations; three steps that must be taken in making decisions; as well as warnings related to the failure to consult properly and two promises of wonderful bounties and rewards should we follow these steps. Many wonderful insights can be garnered by reading John Kolstoe's book on consultation (Kolstoe, 1985). He explores these points in much greater detail than space here allows.

First let's look at the seven prime requisites (see Chart). `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. (BA p. 21)

Certainly, none of us have achieved perfection in all of these attributes, however, it is our responsibility to work towards improving and reflecting these qualities in our daily lives and in our consultative groups.

The two conditions that are required before there can be effective consultation are found in the passage quoted by the Guardian, where the beloved Master tells us that

The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God . . . The second condition:--They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. (BA p. 22)

The five procedural rules, the standard for all Bahá'í consultations were given by `Abdu'l-Bahá when He told us HOW to express our views. He said we "must proceed" to do so "with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care, and moderation." (BA p.22) It is important to note, that He tells us that we MUST express our views. We are not allowed to remain silent or to ask someone else to speak for us. If someone has already expressed our view, it is still our responsibility to make sure that everyone knows what our view is on the subject at hand. It is also noteworthy that these attributes of expression could perhaps be considered to be among the prime virtues in the Bahá'í Writings, and should carry over into every aspect of our lives. `Abdu'l-Bahá also tells us that "Truthfulness is the foundation of all the virtues of the

world of humanity." (BWF pg.384) As the fundamental purposes in consultation are to find the truth and to promote love, unity and harmony, we find a lovely symmetry in the juxtaposition of these Writings--- this standard given us by the Master.

Now, our attention will be focussed on the three steps to be used for making decisions. These three steps are to be taken only after the preparatory steps outlined previously have been attended to. These three steps are inferred from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá. As this is a long passage, it will not be quoted in its entirety. It can be found on page 22 of Bahá'í Administration for self-study. The Master says,

They must in every matter search out the truth . . . The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts . . . [they] must set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail . . . and all must obey and submit to the majority.

This seems disarmingly simple and yet, if we examine it closely, we can see that `Abdu'l-Bahá has given us a three-step procedure for making decisions. The first step is understanding. Searching out the truth implies being well enough informed to understand the real situation, the real problem. This means, of course, that in order to solve a problem or make effective plans, we must take great care to understand the basic, underlying issues rather than to look for quick, expedient solutions. This means that we must gather and agree on the facts. One of the most common mistakes in any kind of decision making group is that people try to reach a decision before understanding the real nature of the problem. In Bahá'í consultation we are required to have a full and frank discussion searching out the truth. When we begin to gather the facts, we may indeed find that what appears to be the problem on the surface, really is just a symptom of a more basic, underlying problem that must be addressed. We must also be aware that each member has their own perspective, and information can be understood quite differently when approached from another point of view. This is why it is so important to express our own thoughts with all freedom. Searching out the truth also implies reviewing the Writings to find if guidance has already been given for the problem under discussion and to get a firm understanding of the spiritual principles involved. It is then necessary that all of the information and opinions gathered must be integrated or combined and the truth established so that all the members share a unity and harmony of understanding, which in turn facilitates the next step of deciding on a solution. Here, once again following the 5 procedural rules, the members must share their ideas for solution with complete freedom. It is not only our right, the Guardian called it our "sacred obligation" (CC 33) to do so. We are not permitted. `Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, "to belittle the thought of another" and so all ideas that work toward solution are welcomed. It can be readily seen that the concept of brainstorming can be used here, once everyone has agreed on the same understanding of the problem to be solved. Any idea generated is given to the group and it then belongs to the group, so if one's idea is rejected or modified, there can be no cause for unhappiness. Additionally, it must be understood that it is "the clash of differing opinions" from which the "shining spark of truth comes forth" (BA p.21), not the clash of people or egos. It should also be mentioned that you cannot take sides in consultation. In searching for truth "sides" cannot exist. There are many different points of view, some of which may be in accord and some which may not. Likewise, should one's idea be accepted, if the group is working in love and unity and each is working on developing the attributes listed in the 7 prerequisites, normally no one can remember whose idea it was that was adopted. ~~It belongs to the group.~~ Shoghi Effendi described the final process of deciding on a solution in this way. He said,

And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote . . . (BA p.64)

'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that in making a decision, "all must obey and submit to the majority" should the assembly be unable to make a unanimous decision. And this brings us to the last step: putting the decision into action. After a decision has been reached everyone is under the spiritual obligation to support and help to carry out the decision. It is not permitted to criticize the decision either in or out of the meeting. (BA p. 22). If one doesn't agree with it, then the consulting group can be asked to reconsider the decision and new evidence or facts can be presented. However, the most important thing is to obey and follow the decision wholeheartedly as 'Abdu'l-Bahá assures us that if a decision made in unity and harmony is wrong, it will be made manifest to all and the decision can be changed (BWF p.411). Remember, in Bahá'í consultation, the concern is finding truth, not saving 'face.' There is still the remaining duty to insure the successful implementation of the decision. Carrying out the decision is an important part of the process, as we aren't really finished until the decision is fully implemented and working. This may involve monitoring the decision to see how well it is functioning, and modifying it as necessary.

Next, we should discuss one of the common sources of difficulty in consultation. This does not have anything to do with personalities per se. Rather it has to do with the way in which we comprehend things. In Some Answered Questions (p.297) as well as The Promulgation of Universal Peace, the Master identified four ways "in which the human mind reaches its conclusions." (PUP p.253) They are sense perception, reason, tradition, and inspiration. Everyone uses all four in varying degrees at different times, though we normally tend to rely on and be most comfortable with one pattern of comprehension. The person who relies most on sense perception typically wants to know 'what the facts are' right away and prefers to act on what is known rather than what is assumed. This is valuable in consultation as insistence on the facts is important to making good decisions. However, it is no more nor any less valuable than the others.

The individual who is most reliant on reason or cognitive processes 'thinks things through' and tends to be logical and rational in his thinking. This kind of thinking can allow one to go beyond the immediate facts and into logical connections between that being discussed and other matters of possible concern either now or in the future as a result of current decisions or problems.

Those who rely on tradition, precedent or past experiences for their understanding of the right way to do things, tend to insist on orderliness, explicit policies and routines. These individuals are concerned with structure, form and consistency and they are very helpful with details that require careful organization, following procedures or guidelines.

Inspiration is a precious gift and one of the most interesting ways of approaching the search for truth. Nearly everyone has at some time experienced some degree of inspiration, but for some, inspiration is their principal source of guidance. Those who rely on inspiration offer a wealth of ideas, awareness and intuition that others may not have. This can lead to an exciting consultation, full of vitality and encouraging to others to share their own ideas. (Kolstoe, 1985)

Each of these methods of comprehension has particular advantages to offer and also particular dangers to be aware of. This is undoubtedly one reason why we are warned "not to insist on [our] own opinion." (BA p.22). "Two people relying on different methods may reach different conclusions using the same information." (Kolstoe p.121) Certainly, this is a possible

source of contention and difficulty. However, if we understand what these four types of comprehension have to offer, and how vital each is in consultation, it will perhaps make it easier to accept the divergent points of view found through these methods. Certainly, it presents a challenge to each of us at the root level of our belief in unity in diversity. We might consider, however, that if unity in diversity were easy, why did it take a Manifestation of God to enjoin it on us with the binding force of spiritual law? Each perspective has the value of throwing new light on the problem being discussed and thus causing greater illumination. `Abdu'l-Bahá has told us that any decision that can withstand the rigors of all four can be relied upon. (PUP p.255) Individually, they are all faulty and cannot be depended upon completely, but in "*spiritual conference*," the "*promptings of the Holy Spirit*" enable "*true conclusions*" to be made from the differing approaches to truth. (Kolstoe p.124 and PUP p.22)

We are told by the Universal House of Justice, that we must teach the rest of the world how to consult. (Universal House of Justice, 1989) Of course, we must teach ourselves first. In Wellspring of Guidance, we are told by the House of Justice that "Consultation is no easy skill to learn, requiring as it does the subjugation of all egotism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision." (WG p.96) We are assured, though, by `Abdu'l-Bahá, that "*Should [we] endeavor to fulfill these conditions, the Grace of the Holy Spirit will be vouchsafed unto [us]. . . and we "will be the center of the Divine blessings."* (BA p.22) In The Promise of World Peace, the Universal House of Justice gave a very special promise to the leaders of the world when they told them that "The very attempt to achieve peace through the consultative action [Bahá'u'lláh] proposed can release such a salutary spirit among the peoples of the earth that no power could resist the final, triumphal outcome." These are just a few of the promises given us in the Writings should we even try to follow and institute this wonderful gift. Consultation is indeed spreading into the non-Bahá'í world. In addition to being taught as an academic subject in some high school and university classrooms in various countries around the world, Rosenfeld and Winger-Bearskin have identified the following companies as using an adapted form of Bahá'í consultation. They are: Eastman Kodak, Amoco Chemical Company, Union Carbide, American Greeting Cards, Hallmark Cards, Atomic Energy of Canada and The Electronic Security Command of the U.S. Air Force. (JBS Vol.3, No.1) And according to some sources, the Non-Governmental Organization of the United Nations also uses the Bahá'í consultative model for its deliberations.

In conclusion, let's highlight a few points concerning consultation. Rosenfeld and Winger-Bearskin have defined consultation as "a method of communication. However, unlike most communication, it is structured to find a solution to a problem or determine a course of action--it is solution-driven." (JBS Vol.3, No.1, p.35) Kolstoe tells us that "consultation requires the disciplined use of communication skills. The germ of an idea needs to develop through changes resulting from each contribution. The ideal is to produce the best possible results that can be obtained from the minds, the backgrounds, the feelings and hearts of those participating. Consultation has a purpose; talking, listening and communication are the skills which can move an idea toward that objective. Yet no matter how well-developed these skills are, they do not result in consultation if they do not contribute toward the goal." (Kolstoe p.39) The Writings tell us that the purpose of consultation is to find the truth and promote love, unity and harmony. `Abdu'l-Bahá further tells us that "*the purpose of consultation is to show that the views of several individuals are assuredly preferable to one man.*" (CC 17)

To summarize, there are three basic features of Bahá'í consultation. First, it is oriented toward meeting group goals. It focuses the contributions of individual members on uncovering all relevant facts and views of a given problem. Second, the discovery of truth

depends on using the diversity of opinion, views and styles of comprehension and communication of all the members. Third, consultation is based on respect. Without respect there can be no trust and without trust, it is not possible to capitalize on human diversity. (Kolstoe, 1985)

Consultation is a set of prescriptions given to us by God to guide our actions. It is not an idealistic description of how the world should be. Rather, it is an immensely valuable tool. The future of any complex social system or organization, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, depends on how well it is put into practice. It requires work to learn and develop it, and discipline and volition to put it into action. If we are to become truly noble, creative and innovative human beings, we must have a channel through which these attributes can be fully expressed. Consultation bridges the gaps of culture, background, language and method of comprehension, allowing everyone the greatest freedom of expression of their subjective views, thoughts, emotions and ideas within an objective format based on common goals and held together by the genuine, collective goodwill of diverse individuals. The unity of our thought and action that results from successful consultation is born from a profound respect and acceptance of our differences and our diversity, not from an insistence on rigid uniformity. Consultation is a God-given gift to an age torn apart by dissension and strife. It is the bedrock of the New World Order.

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