

Attitudes Necessary to Effective Consultation

By Susan Gammage ¹

Many of us are familiar with the prime requisites of consultation, thinking it only applies to Assembly members, but the quote says "for them that take counsel together", so that means all of us:

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. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Administration, p. 21)

Balance:

Speech ... calls for an acute exercise of judgement, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences. Thus there exist in the system of Bahá'u'lláh checks and balances necessary to the beneficial uses of this freedom in the onward development of society. (Universal House of Justice, Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 13)

Courteous and Considerate:

Bahá'ís are enjoined to be courteous and considerate of others ... (Universal House of Justice, NSA USA - Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities, 4.19)

Courtesy, Dignity, Care and Moderation:

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 88)

Detachment:

We need detachment in consultation:

The second principle is that of detachment in consultation. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 180, #590)

We can't insist that our views are the only correct ones:

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

Bahá'ís are enjoined to ... not insist on the correctness of their views; however, such conditions should not preclude the frank expression of differing views. (Universal House of Justice, NSA USA - Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities, 4.19)

If our ideas aren't accepted, leave it in God's hands:

Show forth that which ye have: if it be accepted, the object is attained; if not, interference is vain: leave him to himself, [while] advancing toward God, the Protecting, the Self-Subsistent. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, A Traveller's Narrative, p. 84)

We can't be upset if someone contradicts us:

Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 87)

We must set forth our opinions as a contribution to the consensus:

... every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. ... The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 87)

Shoghi Effendi has asked us to approach the task with absolute detachment:

The delegates must be wholly independent of any administrative agency, must approach their task with absolute detachment and must concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, pp. 14-15, #52)

But what does that mean? Let's take a look!

Let go of our preconceived ideas, prejudices and trivial notions:

If five people meet together to seek for truth, they must begin by cutting themselves free from all their own special conditions and renouncing all preconceived ideas. In order to find truth we must give up our prejudices, our own small trivial notions. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 136)

Let go of the need to be right:

The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is one. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 136)

Let go of stubbornness and persistence in one's views:

They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 88)

Let go of giving offense or taking offense:

Thus no member should ever allow himself to be prevented from expressing frankly his view because it may offend a fellow member; and, realizing this, no member should take offense at another member's statements. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 180, #590)

Concentrate attention on the most important and pressing issues:

The delegates must be wholly independent of any administrative agency, must approach their task with absolute detachment and must concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues. Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, pp. 14-15, #52)

Postpone secondary matters until the primary tasks are performed:

The problems with which the Faith is now grappling, whether national or international, are so pressing and momentous that no one among its loyal adherents can afford to dissipate his precious energies on details arising from the application of administrative principles, or even on the perfecting of the machinery of the administration itself. Purely secondary matters can be postponed until the primary tasks are performed. (Shoghi Effendi, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 130, #1506)

Diversity:

A diversity of ideas in matters of detail and procedure is encouraged:

In matters of principle, therefore, there should be uniformity, while in matters of detail and procedure not only is diversity permitted, it is also encouraged. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 38, #137)

Express your own thoughts:

The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts . . . he must with moderation set forth the truth. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 88)

In view of this important administrative principle of frank and open consultation, the Guardian would advise you to give up the method of asking other members to

voice your opinion and suggestions. This indirect way of expressing your views to the Assembly not only creates an atmosphere of secrecy which is most alien to the spirit of the Cause, but would also lead to many misunderstandings and complications. (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 177, #583)

Frank and Loving:

The members of an Assembly must learn to express their views frankly, calmly, without passion or rancour. They must also learn to listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offence or belittling the views of another. (Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 180, #590)

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 63)

Humility:

Meekness and humility are the hallmarks of faith. As soon as a believer feels himself the least degree superior to others, the beginning of his spiritual decline has set in, all unaware to himself. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Scriptures*, pp. 449-450)

It's most often the most lowly, untutored and inexperienced person who will have the most distinct and memorable share to offer to a discussion:

Not infrequently, nay oftentimes, the most lowly, untutored and inexperienced among the friends will, by the sheer inspiring force of selfless and ardent devotion, contribute a distinct and memorable share to a highly involved discussion in any given Assembly. (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 79)

Intuition

The capacity to link intuition to the other rational processes; facility with networking and cooperation.

... qualities in which women are strong, such as the capacity to link intuition to the other rational processes, and facility with networking and cooperation, are gaining importance. (Bahá'í International Community, 1993 Mar 15, Women Peace Process)

Kind:

Be kind in truth, not only in appearance and outwardly. Every soul of the friends of God must concentrate his mind on this, that he may manifest the mercy of God and the bounty of the Forgiving One. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 217)

Listening:

Contemplate your response in silence:

Bahá'u'lláh says there is a sign (from God) in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time—he cannot both speak and meditate. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 174)

Everyone must listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offense or belittling the views of another:

They must also learn to listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offense or belittling the views of another. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 179, #590)

Here are 3 stories of how 'Abdu'l-Bahá listened:

- Another characteristic always apparent was His silence. In the world of social and intellectual intercourse to which I was accustomed silence was almost unforgivable. From the collegiate with his, or her, "line," to the lawyer, doctor, minister, statesman—a ready answer, a witty bon mot, a wise remark, a knowing smile was stock-in-trade. They all had their "line," and it was upon their readiness or unreadiness to meet every occasion verbally that their reputation largely rested.
How differently 'Abdu'l-Bahá met the questioner, the conversationalist, the occasion: To the questioner He responded first with silence—an outward silence. His encouragement always was that the other should speak and He listen. There was never that eager tenseness, that restlessness so often met showing most plainly that the listener has the pat answer ready the moment he should have a chance to utter it.
I have heard certain people described as "good listeners," but never had I imagined such a "listener" as 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It was more than a sympathetic absorption of what the ear received. It was as though the two individualities became one; as if He so closely identified Himself with the one speaking that a merging of spirits occurred which made a verbal response almost unnecessary, superfluous. (Howard Colby Ives, Portals to Freedom, pp. 194-195)
- Stanwood Cobb took his 75-year-old father to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Boston. His father was sympathetic to Stanwood's attraction to the Bahá'í Faith, but claimed that he himself was too old to change. When his father met the Master, Stanwood was bewildered to see his father dominate the conversation. His father proceeded to enlighten 'Abdu'l-Bahá about spiritual themes. Stanwood was shocked. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, though, simply smiled and listened, covering them both with His love. Stanwood's father left feeling that he had a wonderful interview with the Master and Stanwood learned a lesson in humility and the power of being a good listener. (Earl Redman, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 137)
- That was just it! 'Abdu'l-Bahá seemed to listen with my ears.

...

And when, under His encouraging sympathy, the interviewer became emptied of his words, there followed a brief interval of silence. There was no instant and complete outpouring of explanation and advice. He sometimes closed His eyes a moment as if He sought guidance from above himself; sometimes sat and searched the questioner's soul with a loving, comprehending smile that melted the heart.

And when He finally spoke, and that modulated, resonant voice of music came, the words were so unexpected, often, so seemingly foreign to the subject, that the questioner was at first somewhat bewildered, but always, with me at least, this was followed by a calmness, an understanding which went much deeper than the mind. (Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*, p. 195)

Love:

Therefore, 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. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73)

Clearly, then, there is more to be considered than the critic's right to self-expression; the unifying spirit of the Cause of God must also be preserved, the authority of its laws and ordinances safeguarded, authority being an indispensable aspect of freedom. Motive, manner, mode, become relevant; but there is also the matter of love: love for one's fellows, love for one's community, love for one's institutions. (*Universal House of Justice, Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 15)

Meet people as Equals

It is a great mistake to believe that because people are illiterate or live primitive lives, they are lacking in either intelligence or sensibility. On the contrary, they may well look on us with the evils of our civilization, with its moral corruption, its ruinous wars, its hypocrisy and conceit, as people who merit watching with both suspicion and contempt. We should meet them as equals, well-wishers, people who admire and respect their ancient decent, and who feel that they will be interested as we are in a living religion and not in the dead forms of present-day churches. (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 523, #1777)

Mild as Milk:

Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. (*Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 173)

And likewise He saith: One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison. It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station. (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 173)

Lay not on any soul a load which ye would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for any one the things ye would not desire for yourselves. This is My best counsel unto you, did ye but observe it. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXVI, p. 126)

Follow thou the way of thy Lord, and say not that which the ears cannot bear to hear, for such speech is like luscious food given to small children. However palatable, rare and rich the food may be, it cannot be assimilated by the digestive organs of a suckling child. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 268-269)

Moderate in tone:

Bahá'ís are enjoined to be ... moderate in tone ... (Universal House of Justice, NSA USA - Developing Distinctive Baha'i Communities, 4.19)

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 88)

Open receptive mind:

...an open receptive mind is essential. If our chalice is full of self, there is no room in it for the water of life. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 136)

Patience and Restraint:

Patience and restraint, however, should at all times characterize the discussions and deliberations ... (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 81, #284)

Prayerful:

They must, when coming together, turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 88)

Regard for the interests of others:

It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own

interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God, the Gracious, the Pardoner, commanded you. Beware lest ye put away that which is clearly revealed in His Tablet. Fear God, O ye that perceive. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 29, #31)

Reliance on God:

In its own meetings it [the Assembly] must endeavor to develop skill in the difficult but highly rewarding art of Bahá'í consultation, a process which will require ... complete reliance on the power of Bahá'u'lláh. (Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 224, #118.5)

Respect:

Look at everyone with respect:

I

n accordance with the divine teachings in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know'. Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found.' The teacher should not consider himself as learned and others ignorant. Such a thought breedeth pride, and pride is not conducive to influence. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 30)

Self-Discipline

In its own meetings it [the Assembly] must endeavor to develop skill in the difficult but highly rewarding art of Bahá'í consultation, a process which will require great self-discipline on the part of all members. (Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 224, #118.5)

Spiritual Principles:

Consultation allows an open examination of fears and misconceptions, the gathering and presentation of facts, the identification of relevant spiritual principles, and a collective exploration of ways to implement those principles so that unity is preserved and enhanced. (Baha'i International Community, Report on Rural Poverty Alleviation Efforts in Asia and the Pacific, Focusing on Activities for Disadvantaged Women)

Timely:

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 172-173)

'Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.' Such is the consummate wisdom to be observed in thy pursuits. Be not oblivious thereof, if thou wishest to be a man of action under all conditions. First diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skilful physician. (Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 269)

Truthful:

Without truthfulness, there can be no progress:

Truthfulness ... is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 26)

Search for the truth:

They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 88)

Don't promise what you can't fulfill:

It is an important principle of the Faith that one must not promise what one is not going to fulfill. (Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 554, #336.4)

Unity:

It's better to agree and be wrong:

It is my hope that the friends and the maid-servants of America become united on all subjects and not disagree at all. If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 411)

If one person is right and they disagree, that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs:

Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs... ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 411)

If they agree and both are wrong, the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right:

... but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 411)

They must be wholly free from estrangement and manifest the Unity of God:

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, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 87-88)

Find ways to help people participate:

The handicapped person, seemingly incapable of taking part in consultation, may in fact be able to function quite adequately, provided his fellow Assembly members are determined to find ways in which they can help him to participate. (Universal House of Justice, NSA USA - Developing Distinctive Baha'i Communities, 2.9)

Welcome differences of opinion:

The friends should therefore not feel discouraged at the differences of opinion that may prevail among the members of an Assembly for these, as experiences has shown, and as the Master's words attest, fulfil a valuable function in all Assembly deliberations. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 81, #284)

Consultation requires all opinions to be valued equally:

... "resolving differences," ... implies a relationship in which all opinions are valued equally and where true consultation may occur and produce a beneficial outcome. (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence, p. 101)

Wisdom:

Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXIX, p. 176)