

# Occupy Melbourne Guide to the General Assembly

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### a. What is the General Assembly?

The General Assembly (GA) is the forum through which Occupy Melbourne (OM) shares information and makes collective decisions by working towards consensus. The GA deals with practical questions that concern everyone in the OM community. It is based on free association; meaning if you are not in agreement with what the GA decides you are not obliged to carry it out.

### b. What is consensus?

Consensus is a constructive process enabling people with different ideas and opinions to work together to build something new that neither had envisaged before. This requires active listening, rather than just focusing on preparing an oppositional response while a person is speaking.

By actively listening to one another, we can gain a deep understanding of both our differences and common ground between us. Because of our differences, consensus will often require compromise. This can be achieved when we are empathetic and consider others not as opponents, but rather as important components of the Occupy Melbourne community as a whole.

## 2. GENERAL ASSEMBLY ROLES

### a. Participants

- Engage peacefully and respectfully with each other and the Facilitation Team
- Actively listen to the proposals and arguments of different speakers
- Participate in small group discussion when consensus is not reached
- Make individual proposals or subjective evaluations (having requested the Participants Team to do so)

### b. Moderator

- Responsible for welcoming the participants to the GA, explaining the nature and workings of the GA, conciliating distinct positions without aligning themselves personally with any of these, summarising each intervention during the rounds of debate if needed and repeating the proposal as recorded in the minutes before it is taken to a vote
- Works to create a positive atmosphere favourable to the exchange of ideas

### c. Moderator Support

- Only person in direct contact with the Moderator
- Prevents the assembly participants from distracting the Moderator, makes the Moderator aware of any errors in their vocabulary or summaries, informs them of any last-minute announcements, helps them stick to the agenda, etc.
- May assist the Moderator (with her or his consent) by intervening when there are silences, over-heated discussions or serious digressions

### d. Coordinator

- Organises requests to speak that are forwarded to them by the Participants Team
- May mediate between people with similar arguments with the aim of presenting a unified proposal for debate
- Once the round of speakers has been coordinated, the Coordinator informs the Moderator Support so that speakers will be called in the right order
- Ensures that the Minutes Team are briefed on their role, and that they understand that minutes need to be e-mailed through to [talslome@gmail.com](mailto:talslome@gmail.com) CC-ing [occupymelbourne@gmail.com](mailto:occupymelbourne@gmail.com) within 24hrs of the GA
- Takes down contact details of Minute Team, and follow up if minutes aren't sent through

#### **e. Participants Team**

- When someone raises a hand or has a point of information, someone from the Participants Team attends to that person, records their name and a brief summary of what they wish to say and relay that information to the Coordinator
- May also help clarify exactly what a person wants to do (Eg. Sometimes what someone thinks is an amendment is sufficiently different and not mutually exclusive to the proposal under discussion that it is more appropriate to be put forward as its own proposal at a later time. At other times someone may think they have a point of information but their intervention may be more appropriate as speaking against a proposal.)

#### **f. Minutes Team**

- Two people responsible for recording summaries of Working Group report-backs, announcements, decisions reached by the GA, whether decisions were passed at 90 or 100% support, and the procedures through which decisions were reached, eg. whether the GA broke into small groups, took speakers, took amendment's etc.
- May ask for any resolution to be repeated word-by-word and subsequently ratified by the GA
- Should crosscheck their minutes and email them to [talslome@gmail.com](mailto:talslome@gmail.com) CC-ing [occupymelbourne@gmail.com](mailto:occupymelbourne@gmail.com) within 24hrs of the GA.
- For detailed instructions on minute taking see "How to take minutes at Occupy Melbourne General Assemblies".

#### **g. Timer**

- Times the people speaking and notifies them when 2 minutes is nearly up
- Notifies the Moderator Support when the GA reaches 2 hours

#### **h. Logistics**

- At least one person responsible for the equipment of the Assembly
- Organise the crowd with corridors running towards the speakers' floor
- In charge of the PA system

-Provide seating for people with disabilities (or who are very tired), water and shade (umbrellas) if temperatures are high and sunshine is direct, etc.

### **3. GENERAL ASSEMBLY PROCESS**

#### **a. Agenda**

At the beginning of the GA, the Moderator will present an agenda to the GA and notify people that they may propose changes to the agenda at any time during the GA by raising a Point of Process (see below), which can be passed by a simple majority (51%). The framework agenda is:

1. Working Group Report-backs
2. Working Group Proposals
3. Individual Proposals
4. Announcements

#### **b. Changing a Moderator**

At the start of the GA, the Moderator will announce that a Point of Process (see below) can be raised to change the Moderator at any time during a GA. If a proposal is put forward to change the Moderator, the Moderator steps aside and the Moderator Support facilitates the following process. The person who put the proposal speaks for removing the original Moderator then the Moderator is given a chance to reply, each within 1 minute. A test for support is taken. Unless the moderator achieves at least simple majority support, they stand aside.

The Facilitation Working Group (FWG) may put forward replacement candidates. Those candidates must achieve simple majority support to take over as Moderator. If the FWG runs out of candidates, it is opened to the GA to put forward Moderators. If no Moderator receives simple majority support, the GA cannot proceed.

#### **c. Duration**

The default time limit for each GA will be 2 hours. When this time limit is reached but there are still matters to be dealt with, the Moderator will ask the GA if it wishes to continue for a further 30 minutes. Simple majority support is needed for the GA to be extended.

#### **d. Hand Signals**

The following hand signals will be explained by the Moderator at the start of each GA and can be used by people at the GA at any time:

1. Twinkling fingers up high: "I support this"
2. Twinkling fingers in the middle: "I'm not sure about this"
3. Twinkling fingers down low: "I dissent to this"
4. Point of Information (raised index finger): This allows a person to speak to the GA directly for up to 20 seconds to relay information that is critical to the proposal being discussed. It must strictly be information, not an opinion, argument or counter-proposal. Because of their potential for misuse, Points of Information have to come through the Participants Team (see 'Roles' above).
5. Point of Clarification (hand in a 'C' shape): This is used to ask a question about a proposal, reportback or announcement. Depending upon the size of the GA, these may need to go through the Participants Team (see 'Roles' below).
6. Point of Process (2 hands making a triangle): This is used for both to make a 'Point of Process' (see below) and to express "Someone is not following process". These are attended to directly by the Moderator.
7. Raised hand: "I would like to speak for or against this proposal, I have an amendment to

this proposal, or I have an individual proposal of my own.”

#### **e. Points of Process**

At any time in the GA, people (including members of the Facilitation Team) can raise ‘Points of Process’ by making a triangle with their fingers. Points of process can be issues or complaints that the process is not being followed or make a proposal as to how the GA should proceed. All the following Points of Process need a simple majority to pass, that is, to make a change from the status quo.

1. Adding an agenda item or making a process suggestion such as 20 minutes open discussion on a topic, or breaking into small groups to discuss a topic (status quo is the item or suggestion is not integrated).
2. Changing the order of the agenda (status quo is originally agreed agenda).
3. Whether to end or continue discussion on a particular issue or proposal, including allowing more speakers to be heard (status quo is discussion continues as outlined in ‘Discussion’ below)
4. Whether to extend the time someone is given to speak over the initial 2 minutes (status quo is no extension)
5. Whether to extend the time of the GA after the initial 2 hours by 30 mins (status quo is GA ends)
6. Whether to remove the Moderator

It will be at the Moderator’s discretion whether to take speakers for and against prior to testing for support on procedural matters. If people want to speak for or against a Point of Process and the Moderator has ruled it unnecessary, they will need to raise a new Point of Process and gain simple majority support to make their point.

#### **f. Report-backs**

Working Group (WG) report-backs will be limited to 2 minutes, after which the consent of at least a simple majority will be required for them to speak for additional time blocks of 1 minute. WGs are empowered to make autonomous decisions about actions that are not contentious or do not affect the OM community as a whole.

#### **g. Proposals**

All proposals should be delivered to FWG one hour before GA (both WG proposals and individual proposals). Proposals not provided to the Facilitation Working Group prior to the GA can still be put to the GA. However, if the GA has already gone for more than 2 hours, the GA needs to approve extending the GA to hear the additional proposals.

A Working Group or individual participant makes a proposal using the following format:

1. What is being proposed?
2. Why is it being proposed?
3. How can we carry out the proposal if it is passed?

Each proposal should be presented within 2 minutes, unless the GA approves an extended time limit (see ‘Points of Process’ above).

#### **h. Discussion**

After a proposal has been presented, the Moderator will open discussion of the proposal, during which people can ask for clarifications and provide points of information. If there are questions or clarifications relating to the proposal, the person making the proposal (the proposer) will be given

a chance to answer, with a time limit of 2 minutes.

To determine whether to take speakers for and against a proposal the Moderator will conduct a quick temperature check by asking if there is any dissent or suggested amendments to the proposal.

If there is dissent to the proposal, the Moderator will allow 2 additional speakers for and 3 speakers against the proposal (as the proposer counts as being a speaker for their own proposal), with each speaker having 2 minutes to speak. Speakers for and against are balanced, so that if there are only 2 speakers against, only 1 additional speaker for the proposal will be heard.

If there are suggested amendments to the proposal, these will be heard after the round of debate (if there is outright dissent).

Additional speakers can always be added via a Point of Process to continue discussing a topic.

### **i. Amendments**

During the discussion of a proposal, people at a GA can raise their hand to suggest amendments to the proposal. The person suggesting the amendment will state their amendment and why they are suggesting it within 2 minutes. Then one speaker will be allowed against the amendment, with priority given to the proposer of the unamended proposal if they desire it. The amendment will then be put to a simple vote. After stating the original proposal and then the amended proposal, the moderator will ask 'who prefers the original proposal?' and then 'who prefers the amended proposal?'. Whichever gains more support is adopted as the proposal being discussed.

To avoid excessive confusion, we will not take votes on amendments to amendments. Instead, the person putting the original amendment can decide whether or not to change her or his own amendment if a speaker suggests a change. If they refuse to do so, there is always the option for the rejected 'amendment to the amendment' to be put as its own amendment as the discussion continues.

### **j. Testing for Consensus**

When speakers for and against are finished and there are no more amendments, clarification or points of information, the Moderator will test for support on the proposal under discussion. The Moderator will say - "Decision time. All those in support of the proposal raise your hand." Then directly after a count is done, "All those who dissent to the proposal raise your hand." Substantive proposals (i.e. everything that is not a Point of Process) need at least 90% majority support to be passed.

If a proposal is not passed, the Moderator or anyone else at the GA can make a Point of Process regarding whether to continue the discussion and try to keep reaching consensus or to move on. If there is less than 50% support for a proposal then the proposer will be invited to withdraw the proposal, but of course may propose an alternative manner in which to proceed. Proposals can always be raised again at future GAs.

When testing for simple majority or 90% support, the count will only include people who vote. For example, if at a GA of 150 people, 100 vote and 50 abstain, only 51 people must be in support for a Point of Process to achieve its required simple majority.

### **k. Open Discussions**

Another tool that may be used during GAs to help discussions is a set time period devoted to the open discussion of an issue, where a speakers list is taken and speakers are given two minutes

to talk on a subject, without necessarily speaking for or against a given proposal or having an amendment. Any Point of Process to start an open discussion will need to gain at least a simple majority support from the GA.

### **i. Breaking into Small Groups**

Another tool that can be used in GAs is breaking into small groups for a defined period and then having each group report back on their discussions and offer any proposals or amendments they came up with. Like open discussions, breaking off into groups will need to be put as a Point of Process and will need at least simple majority support from the GA.

### **m. Temperature Checks**

Another tool that can be used at GAs, both by the Moderator and speakers, is a temperature check. Temperature checks will most often be used after a proposal is made to see if there is dissent or suggested amendments that will determine how to proceed.

Temperature checks are especially useful when there are a number of options on the table. For example, when a number of competing Points of Process have been raised or when a number of different proposals have come back after breaking into small groups. They can indicate which idea has the most support and give a good idea of what the next step in a discussion should be.

### **n. Progressive Speakers List**

Speakers may be requested to drop down on the speakers list so that voices that are marginalised in mainstream society (e.g. the voices of people of colour, women, disabled people, LGBTI people etc.) or that have been less heard in GAs are prioritised.

### **o. Announcements**

At the end of the GA, time is given for Announcements. These must be relevant to Occupy Melbourne.

### **p. Speakers' Forum**

Following the GA, the Speakers' Forums will be opened, during which anyone can speak on any topic of their choosing for 5 minutes.

