



JOSSEY-BASS

Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making

Second Edition

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with

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Foreword by Michael Doyle



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INTRODUCTION

The benefits of group decision-making have been widely publicized: better thinking, better “buy-in,” better decisions all around. Yet the promise often fails to materialize. Many decisions made in groups are neither thoughtful nor inclusive; they are unimaginative, watered-down mediocrities.

Why is this so?

To a large degree, the answer is deeply rooted in prevailing cultural values that make it difficult for people to actually think in groups. Without even realizing it, many people make value judgments that inhibit spontaneity and deter others from saying what is really on their minds. For example, ideas that are expressed in clumsy ways, or in tentative terms, are often treated as if they were decidedly inferior to ideas that are presented with eloquent rhetorical flourish. Efforts at exploring complexities are discouraged, in favor of pithy judgments and firm-sounding conclusions. Making action plans – no matter how unrealistic they might be – is called “getting something done,” while analyzing the underlying causes of a problem is called “going off on a tangent.” Mixed messages abound: speak your mind but don’t ask too many questions; be passionate but don’t show your feelings; be productive but hurry up – and get it right the first time. All in all, conventional values do not promote effective thinking in groups.

Yet, when it’s done well, group decision-making remains the best hope for solving difficult problems. There is no substitute for the wisdom that results from a successful integration of divergent points of view. Successful group decision-making requires a group to take advantage of the full range of experience and skills that reside in its membership. This means encouraging people to speak up. It means inviting difference, not fearing it. It means struggling to understand one another, especially in the face of the pressures and contradictions that typically drive group members to shut down. In short, it means operating from participatory values.

Participatory and conventional approaches to group decision-making yield entirely different group norms. Some of the differences are presented in the table on the next page.

PARTICIPATORY GROUPS

Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.

People give each other room to think and get their thoughts all the way out.

Opposing viewpoints are allowed to co-exist in the room.

People draw each other out with supportive questions. "Is *this* what you mean?"

Each member makes the effort to pay attention to the person speaking.

People are able to listen to each other's ideas because they know *their own ideas will also be heard*.

Each member speaks up on matters of controversy. Everyone knows where everyone stands.

Members can accurately represent each other's points of view – even when they don't agree with them.

People refrain from talking behind each other's backs.

Even in the face of opposition from the person-in-charge, people are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs.

A problem is not considered solved until everyone who will be affected by the solution understands the reasoning.

When people make an agreement, it is assumed that the decision still reflects a wide range of perspectives.

CONVENTIONAL GROUPS

The fastest thinkers and most articulate speakers get more air time.

People interrupt each other on a regular basis.

Differences of opinion are treated as *conflict* that must either be stifled or "solved."

Questions are often perceived as challenges, as if the person being questioned has done something wrong.

Unless the speaker *captivates* their attention, people space out, doodle or check the clock.

People have difficulty listening to each other's ideas because they're busy rehearsing what *they* want to say.

Some members remain quiet on controversial matters. No one really knows where everyone stands.

People rarely give accurate representations of the opinions and reasoning of those whose opinions are at odds with their own.

Because they don't feel permission to be direct *during* the meeting, people talk behind each other's backs outside the meeting.

People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.

A problem is considered solved as soon as the fastest thinkers have reached an answer. Everyone else is then expected to "get on board" regardless of whether s/he understands the logic of the decision.

When people make an agreement, it is assumed that they are all thinking the exact same thing.

As the table implies, a shift from conventional values to participatory values is not a simple matter of saying, "Let's become a thinking team." It requires a change of mindset – a committed effort from a group to swim against the tide of prevailing values and assumptions.

When a group undertakes this challenge, its participants often benefit from the services a competent facilitator can provide for them. Left to their own devices, many groups would slip back into conventional habits. A facilitator, however, has the skills to help a group outgrow their old familiar patterns. Specifically, the facilitator encourages full participation, s/he promotes mutual understanding, s/he fosters inclusive solutions and s/he cultivates shared responsibility. These four functions (discussed in depth in chapter 3) are derived from the core values of participatory decision-making.

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Putting Participatory Values Into Practice

The facilitator is the keeper of the flame, the carrier of the vision of what Michael Doyle described, in his foreword, as "a fair, inclusive and open process." This is why many facilitators help their groups to understand the dynamics and values of group decision-making. They recognize that it is empowering for participants to acquire common language and shared points of reference about their decision-making processes.

When a facilitator helps group members acquire process skills, s/he is acting in congruence with one of the core values of participatory decision-making: shared responsibility. This value played a prominent role in the design of *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. It was written as a series of stand-alone pages that facilitators can photocopy and distribute to the members of their groups. For example, newly forming groups often benefit from reading and discussing chapters 1 and 2. These pages take less than fifteen minutes to read; they are entertaining; and they provide the basis for meaningful conversations about the dynamics and values of participatory decision-making. Within the guidelines of the policy statement on photocopying (see page 313), feel free to reproduce any part of this book that will strengthen your group's capacity for reaching sustainable agreements.

Facilitating Sustainable Agreements

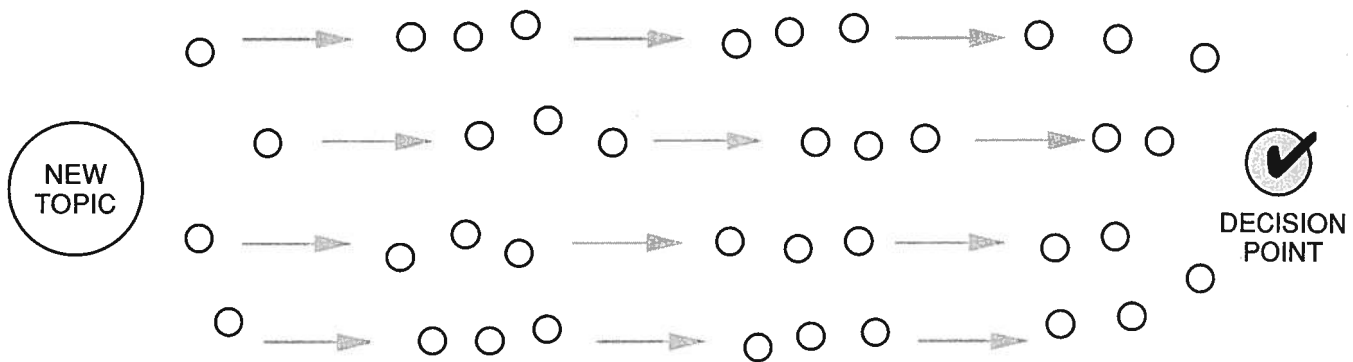
The process of building a sustainable agreement has four stages: gathering diverse points of view; building a shared framework of understanding; developing inclusive solutions; and reaching closure. A competent facilitator knows how to move a group from start to finish through those stages. To do so, s/he needs a conceptual understanding of the dynamics and values of participatory decision-making (as provided in Part I of this book). S/he also needs a standard set of process management skills (as provided in Part II). And s/he needs a repertoire of sophisticated thinking tools, to propose and conduct stage-specific interventions (as provided in Part III and Part IV).

Fulfilling The Promise of Group Decision-Making

Those who practice participatory methods often come to see that facilitating a meeting is more than merely an occasion for solving a problem or creating a plan. It is also an opportunity to support profound personal learning, and it is an opportunity to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of the group as a whole. These opportunities are only realizable – the promise of group decision-making can only be fulfilled – through the struggle and the satisfaction of putting participatory values into practice.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

INTRODUCTION



This picture portrays a hypothetical problem-solving discussion.

Each circle – ○ – represents one idea. Each line of circles-and-arrows represents one person's line of thought as it develops during the discussion.

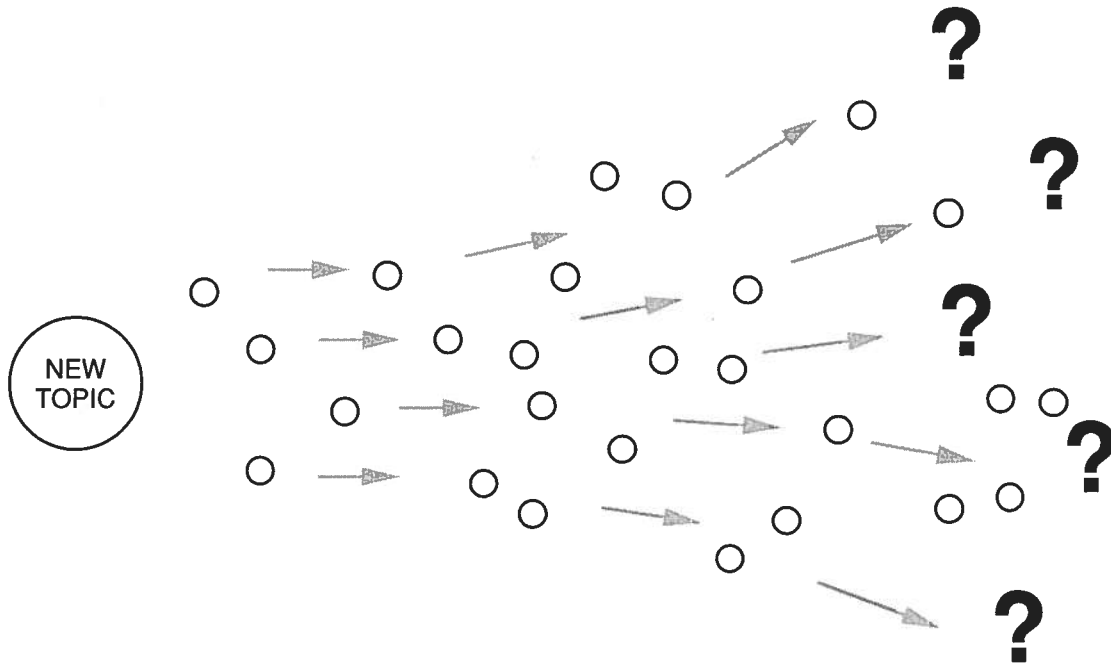
As diagrammed, everyone appears to be tracking each other's ideas, everyone goes at the same pace, and everyone stays on board every step of the way.

A depressingly large percentage of people who work in groups believe this stuff. They think this picture realistically portrays a healthy, flowing decision-making process. And when their actual experience doesn't match up with this model, *they think it's because their own group is defective.*

If people actually behaved as the diagram suggests, group decision-making would be much less frustrating. Unfortunately, real-life groups don't operate this way.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

SAD BUT TRUE



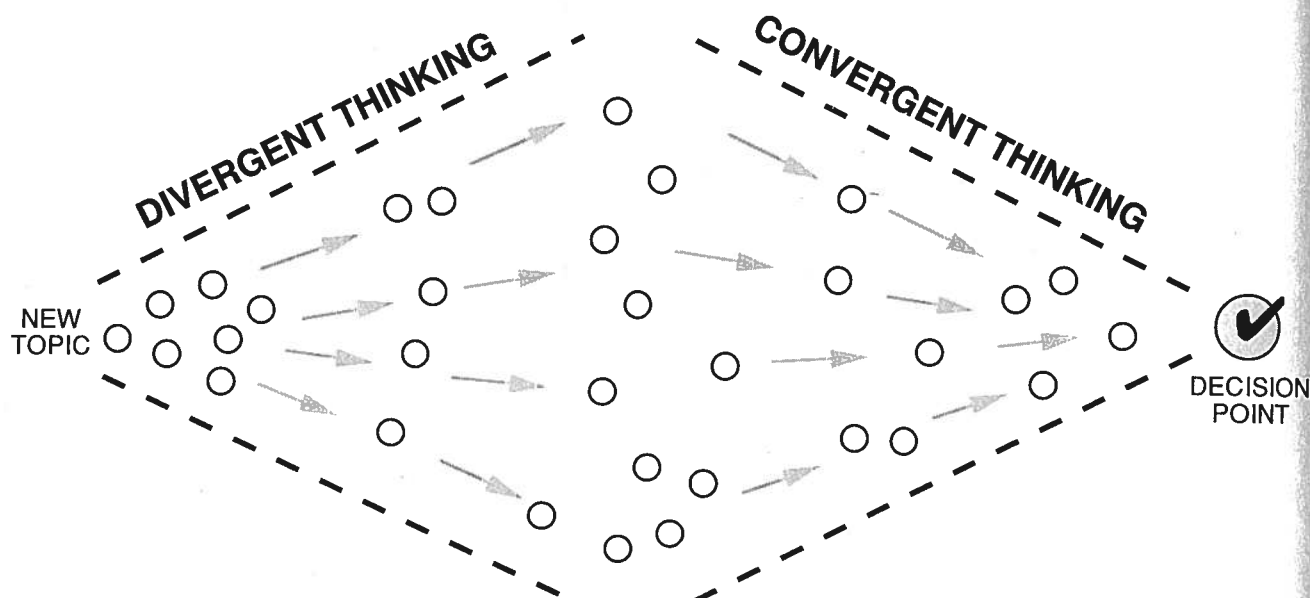
Group members are humans. We *do* go on tangents. We *do* lose track of the central themes of a discussion. We *do* get attached to our ideas. Even when we're all making our best effort to "keep focused" and "stay on track," *we can't change the fact that we are individuals with diverging points of view.*

When a discussion loses focus or becomes confusing, it can appear to many people that the process is heading out of control. Yet this is not necessarily what's really going on. Sometimes what appears to be chaos is actually a prelude to creativity.

But how can we tell which is which? How do we recognize the difference between a degenerative, spinning-our-wheels version of group confusion and the dynamic, diversity-stretches-our-imagination version of group confusion?

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

CLOSER TO
REALITY



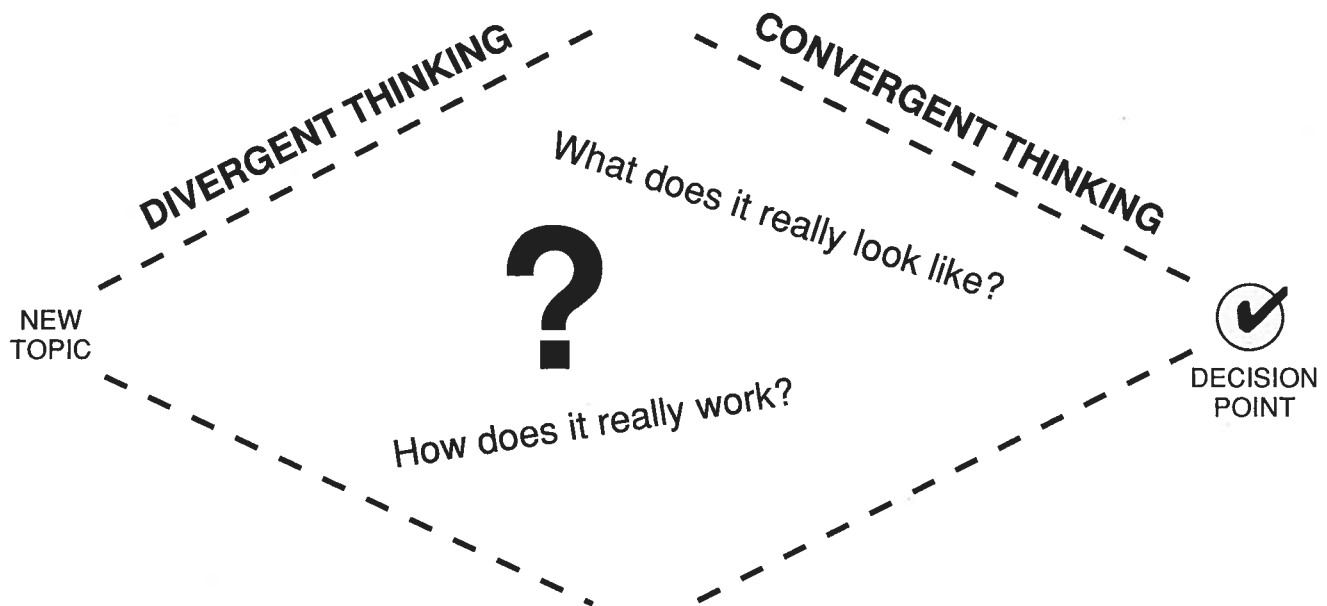
At times the individual members of a group need to express their own points of view. At other times, the same people want to narrow their differences and aim the discussion toward closure. These two sets of processes will be referred to as “divergent thinking” and “convergent thinking.”

Here are four examples of the differences between the two thinking processes:

DIVERGENT THINKING		CONVERGENT THINKING
Generating a list of ideas	vs.	Sorting ideas into categories
Free-flowing open discussion	vs.	Summarizing key points
Seeking diverse points of view	vs.	Coming to agreement
Suspending judgment	vs.	Exercising judgment

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

UNANSWERED
QUESTIONS

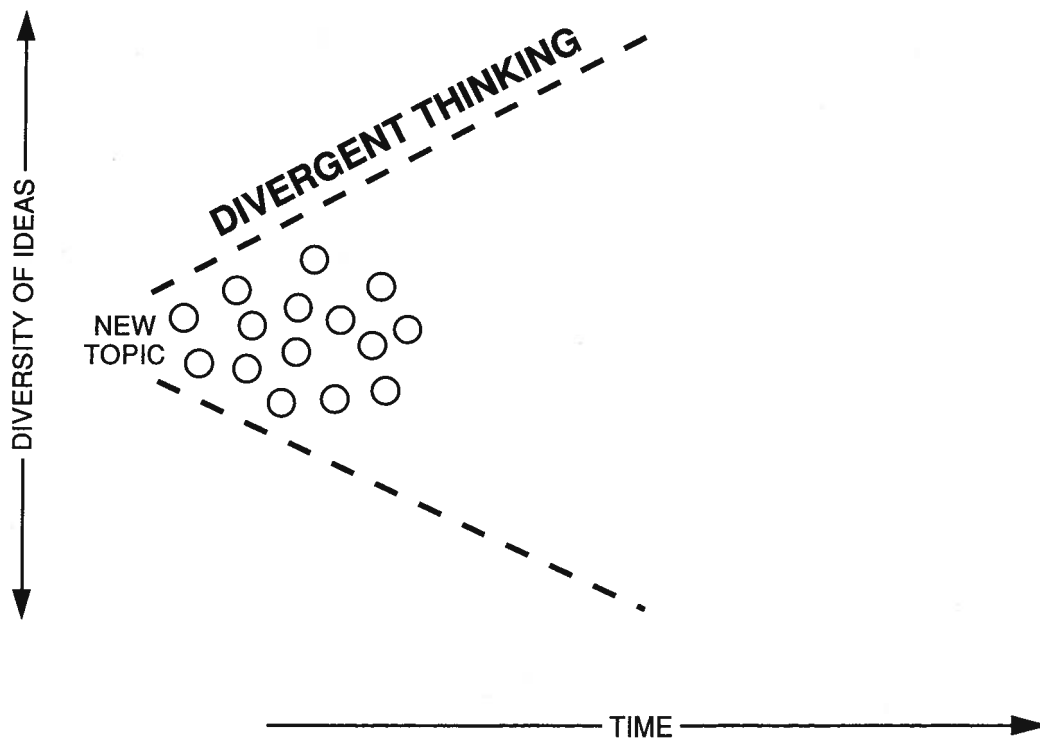


Some years ago, a large, well-known computer manufacturer developed a problem-solving model that was based on the principles of divergent thinking and convergent thinking.

This model was used by managers throughout the company. But it didn't always work so well. One project manager told us that it took their group *two years* to revise the travel expense-reimbursement forms.

Why would that happen? How does group decision-making *really* work?

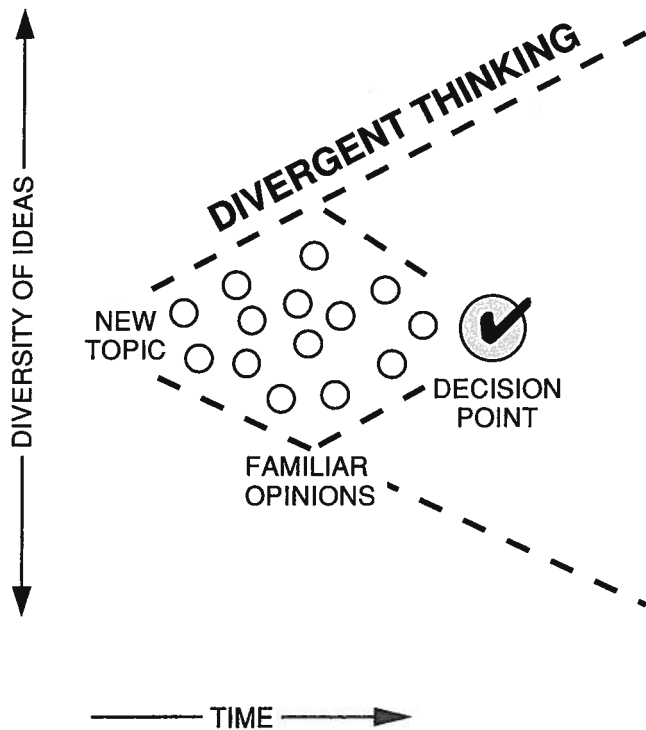
To explore these questions in greater depth, the following pages present a series of stop-action snapshots of the process of group decision-making.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING**DISCUSSION
BEGINS**

The early rounds of a discussion cover safe, familiar territory. People take positions that reflect conventional wisdom. They rehash well-worn disagreements, and they make proposals for obvious solutions. This is natural – the first ideas we express are the ones we've already thought about.

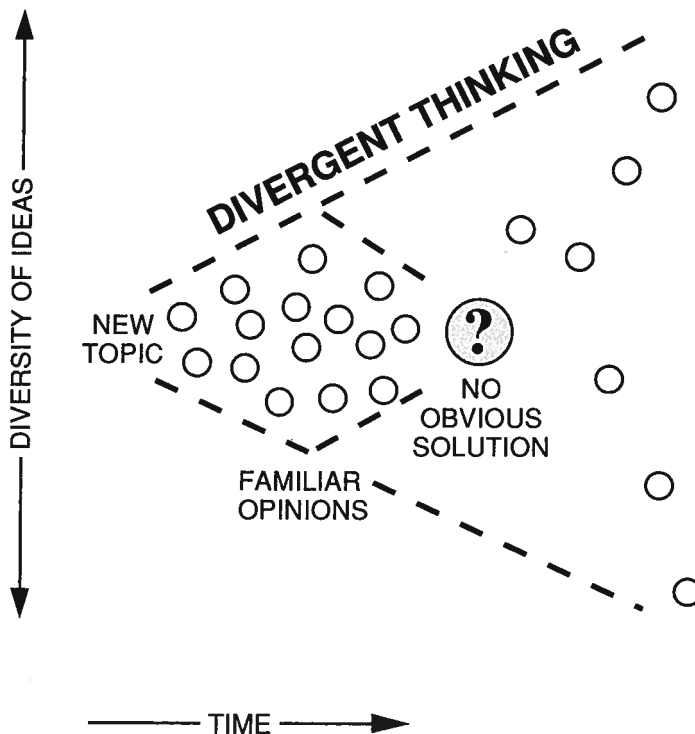
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

QUICK
DECISIONS



When a problem has an obvious solution, it makes sense to close the discussion quickly. Why waste time?

There's only one problem: most groups try to bring *every* discussion to closure this quickly.

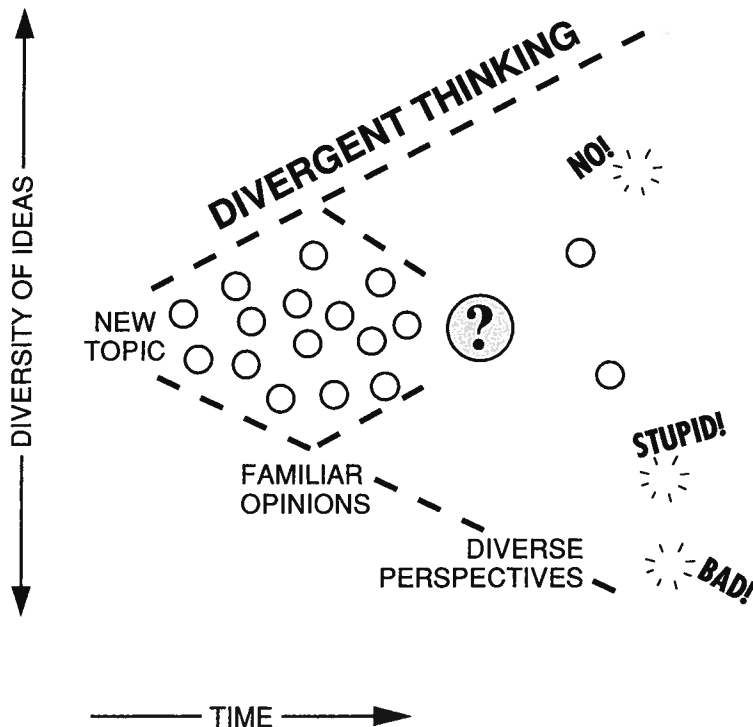
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING**NO OBVIOUS
SOLUTION**

Some problems have *no* easy solutions. For example, how does an inner-city public school prevent campus violence? What steps should a business take to address the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce? Cases like these require a lot of thought; the issues are too complex to be solved with familiar opinions and conventional wisdom.

When a group of decision-makers has to wrestle with a difficult problem, they will not succeed in solving it until they *break out of the narrow band of familiar opinions* and explore a wider range of possibilities.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

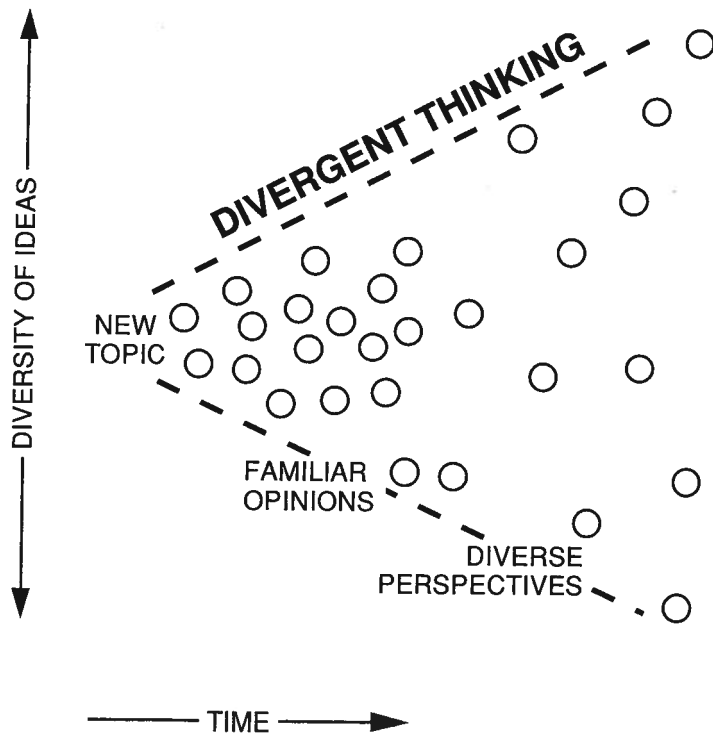
THE CLASSIC
DEAD END



Unfortunately, most groups aren't very good at cultivating unfamiliar or unpopular opinions.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

EXPLORING
POSSIBILITIES

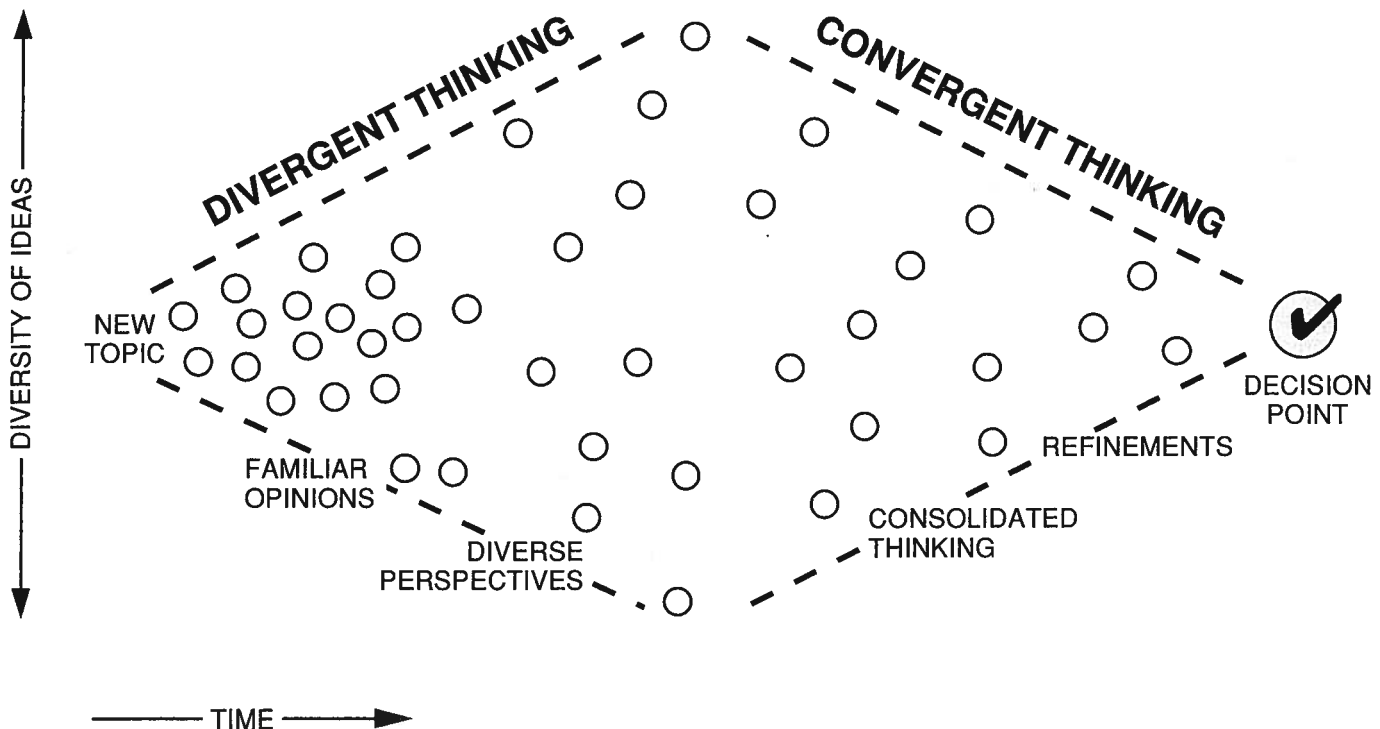


Now and then, when the stakes are sufficiently high and the stars are in proper alignment, a group can manage to overcome the tendency to criticize and inhibit its members. On such occasions, people tentatively begin to consider new perspectives. Some participants might take a risk and express controversial opinions. Others might offer ideas that aren't fully developed.

Since the goal is to find a new way of thinking about the problem, variety is obviously desirable . . . but the spread of opinions can become cumbersome and difficult to manage. Then what?

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

IDEALIZED
PROCESS

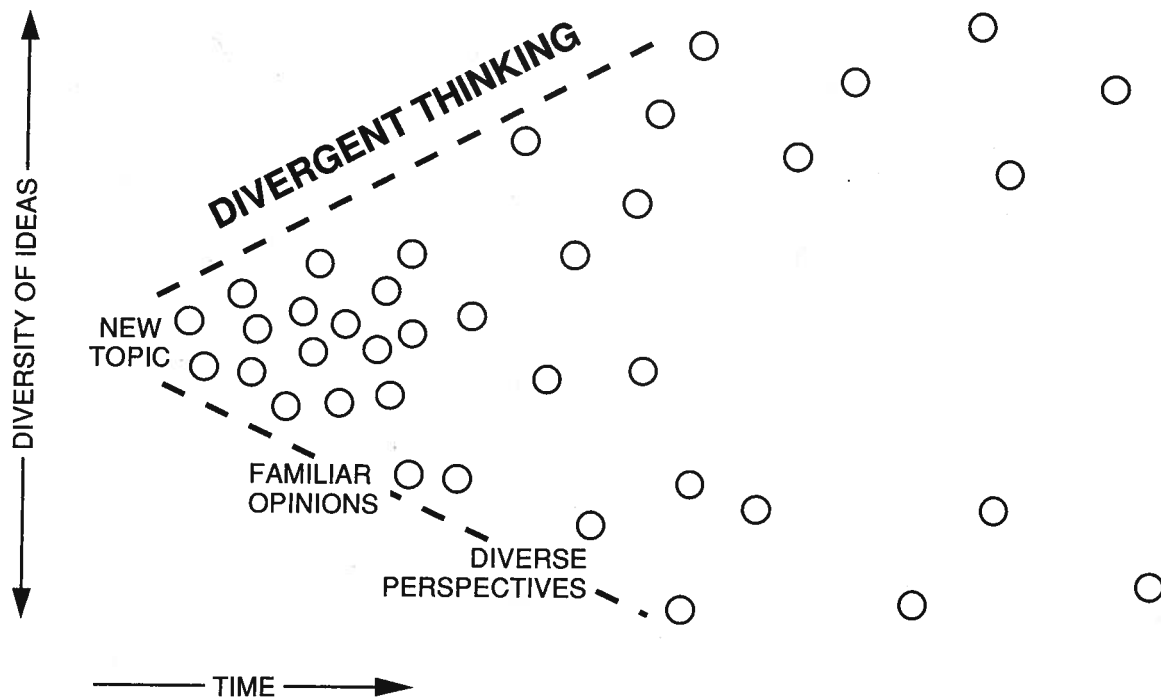


In theory, a group that has committed itself to thinking through a difficult problem would move forward in orderly, thoughtful steps. First, the group would generate and explore a diverse set of ideas. Next, they would consolidate the best thinking into a proposal. Then, they'd refine the proposal until they arrived at a final decision that nicely incorporated the breadth of their thinking.

Ah yes . . . if only *real life* worked that way.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

TYPICAL
PROCESS

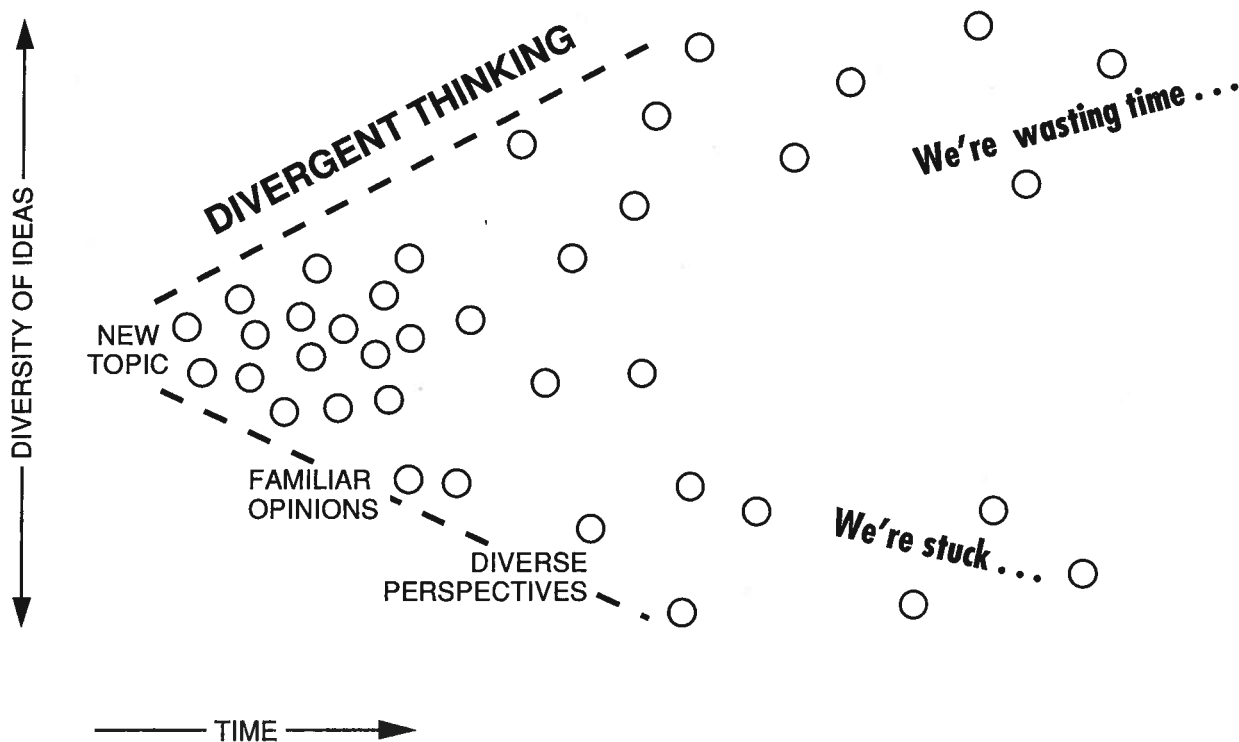


In practice, it's hard for people to shift from expressing their own opinions to understanding the opinions of others. And it's particularly challenging to do so when a wide diversity of perspectives are in play. In such cases people can get overloaded, disoriented, annoyed, impatient – or all of the above. Some people feel misunderstood and keep repeating themselves. Others push for closure. Sometimes several conversations develop; each occupies the attention of a few people but seems tangential or irrelevant to everyone else.

Thus, even the most sincere attempts to solve difficult problems can – and often do – dissipate into confusion.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

ATTEMPTED
STEP-BACKS

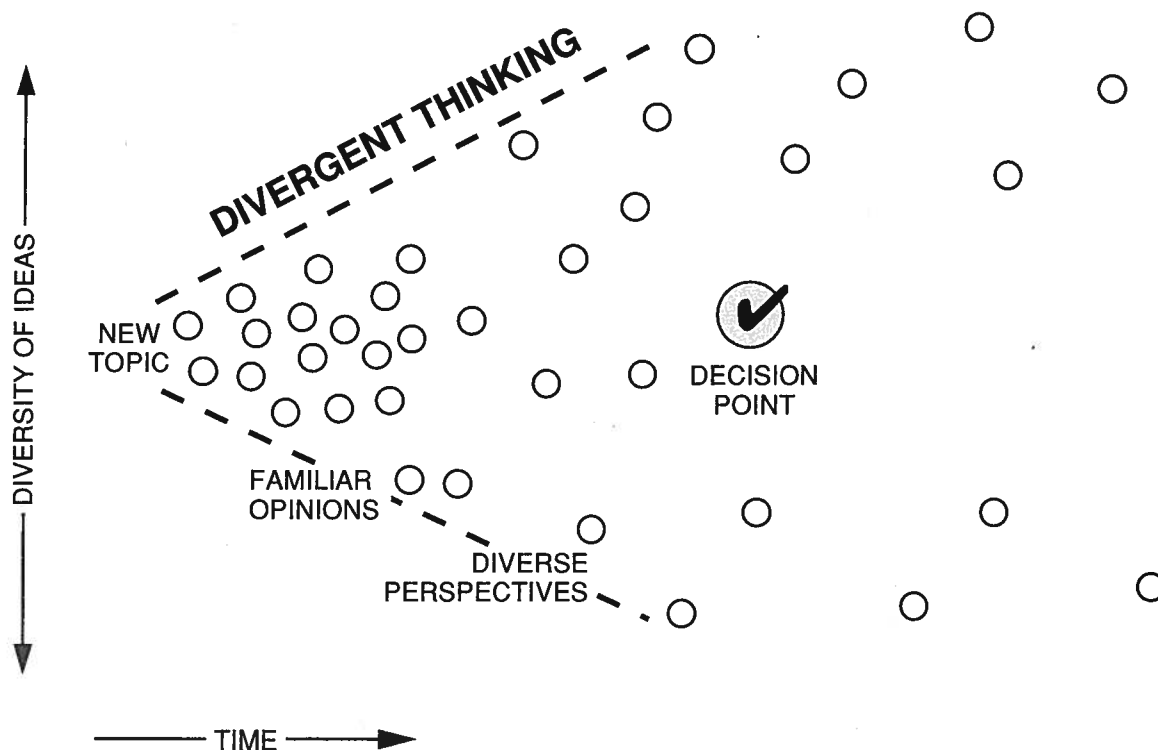


Sometimes one or more participants will attempt to step back from the content of the discussion and talk about the process. They might say things like, "I thought we all agreed to stick to the topic," or "We need better ground rules," or "Does anyone understand what's going on here?"

Groups rarely respond intelligently to this line of thought. More commonly, a process comment becomes merely one more voice in the wilderness – yet another poorly understood perspective that gets absorbed into the general confusion.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

POOR TIMING



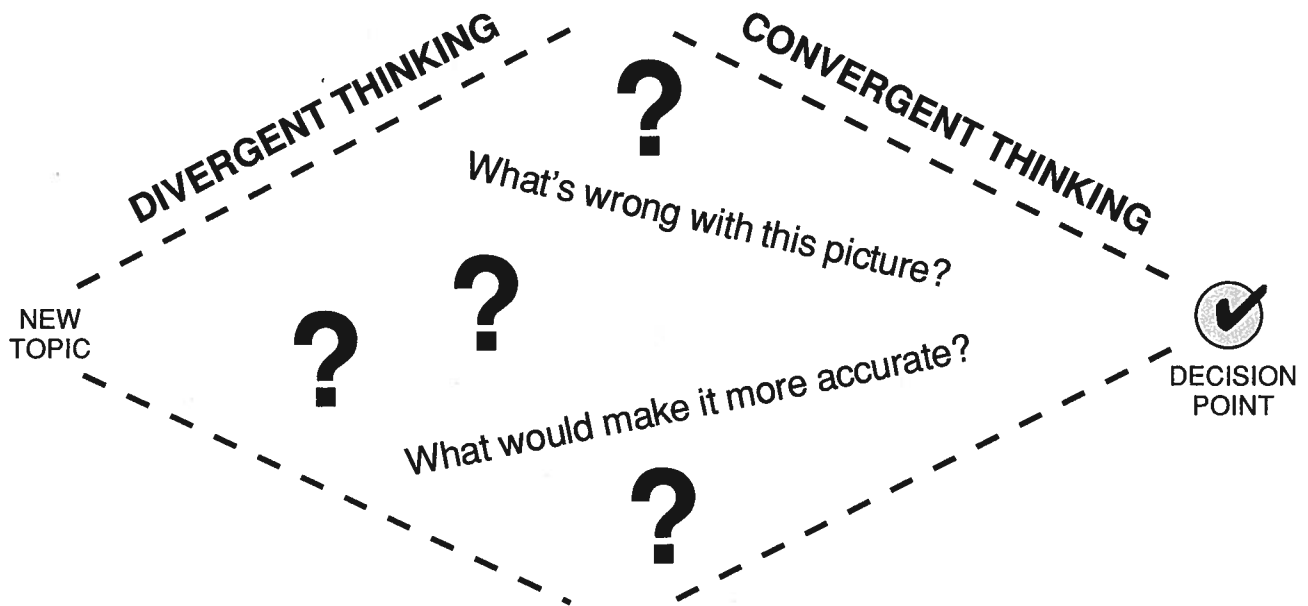
At this point in a process, the person in charge of a meeting can make the problem worse, if he or she attempts to alleviate frustration by announcing that s/he has made a decision. This is a common mistake.

The person-in-charge may believe that s/he has found a perfectly logical answer to the problem at hand, but this doesn't mean that everyone else will telepathically grasp the reasoning behind the decision. Some people may still be thinking along entirely different lines.

This is the exact situation in which the person-in-charge *appears* to have made the decision before the meeting began. This leads many people to feel deep distrust. *"Why did s/he tell me I'd have a say in this decision when s/he already knew what the outcome would be?"*

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

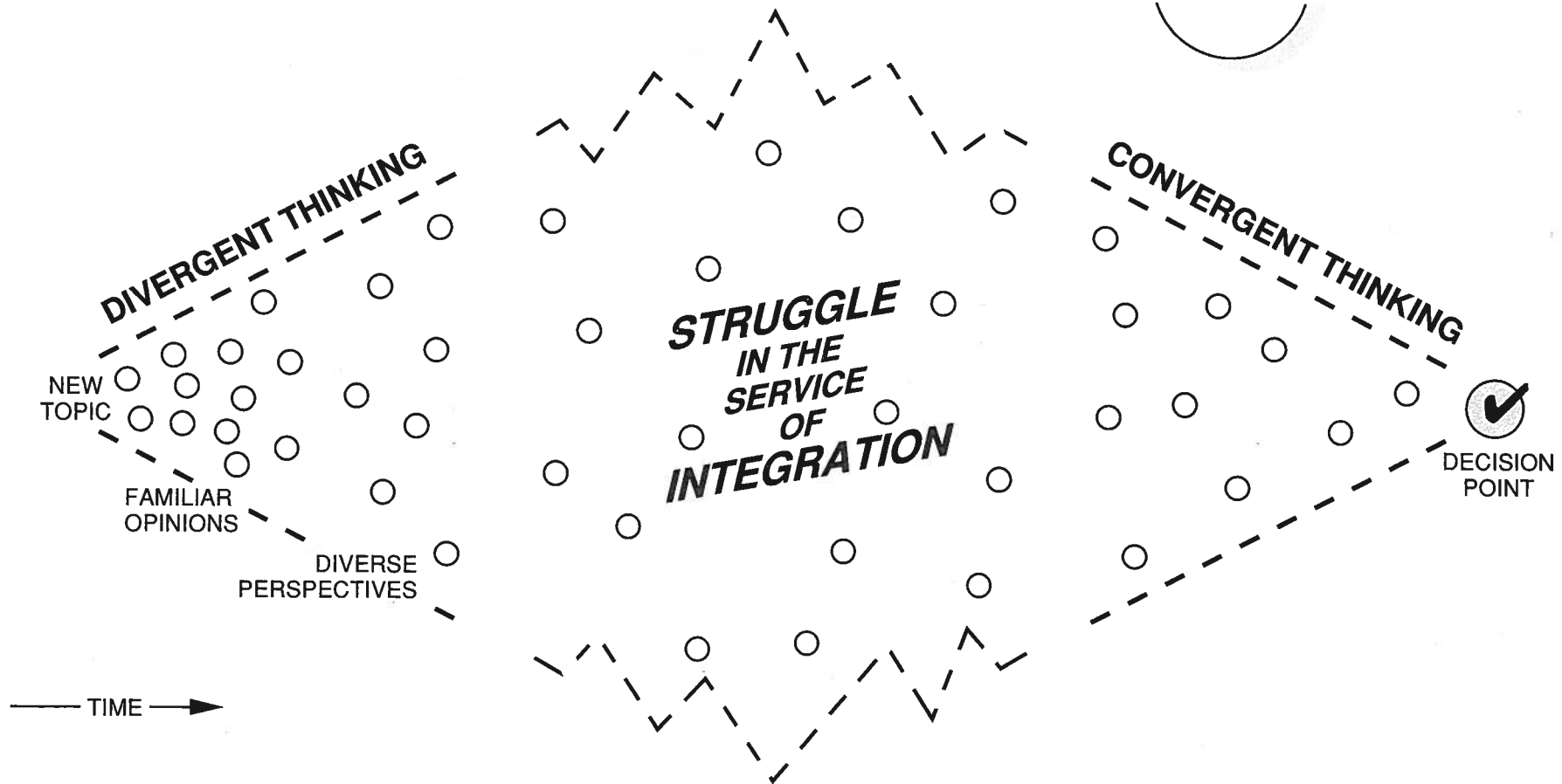
WHAT'S
MISSING?



Obviously, there's something wrong with the idealized model. Convergent thinking simply does not follow automatically from a divergent thinking process. What's missing?

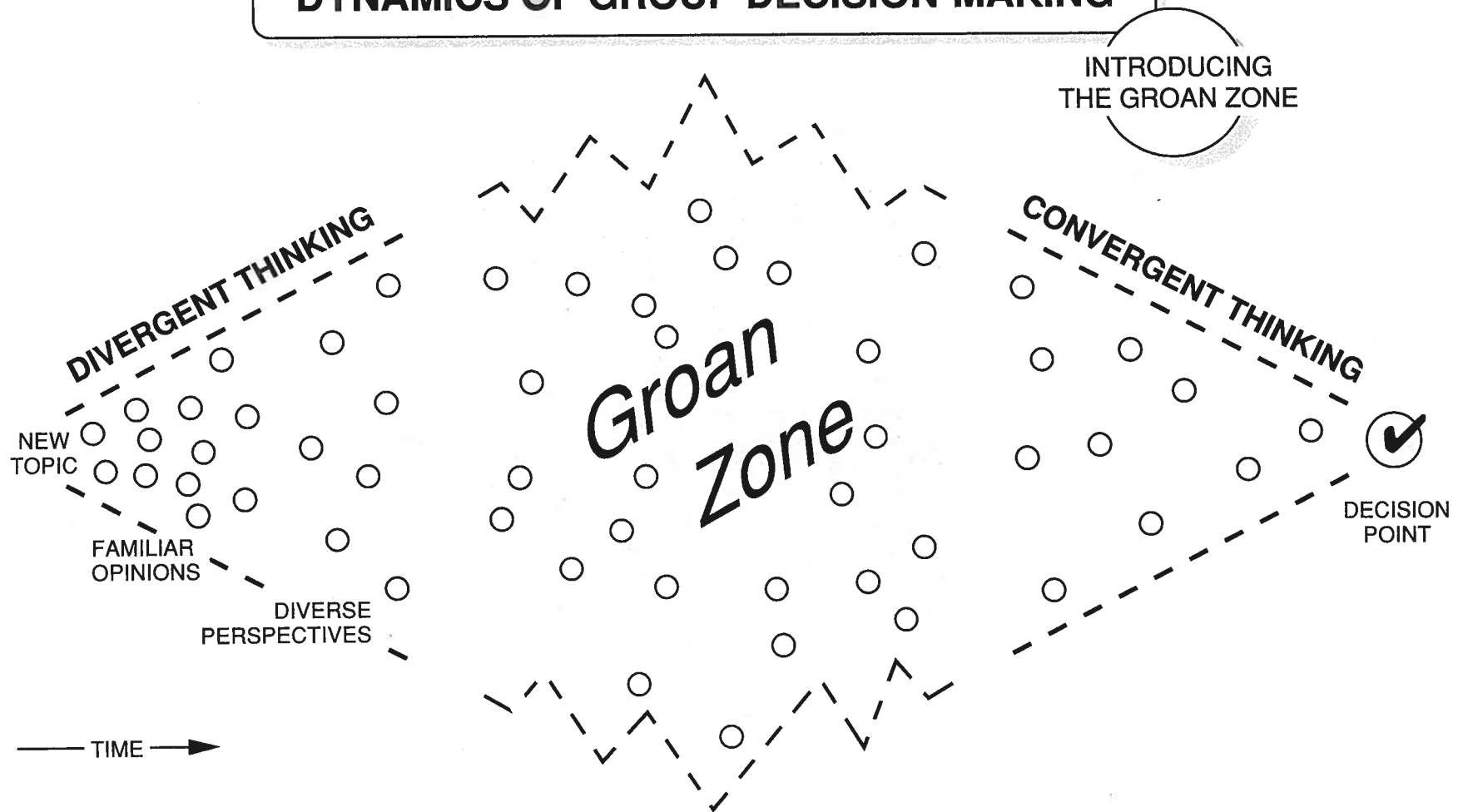
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

A REALISTIC MODEL



A period of confusion and frustration is a natural part of group decision-making. Once a group crosses the line from airing familiar opinions to exploring diverse perspectives, group members have to struggle in order to integrate new and different ways of thinking with their own.

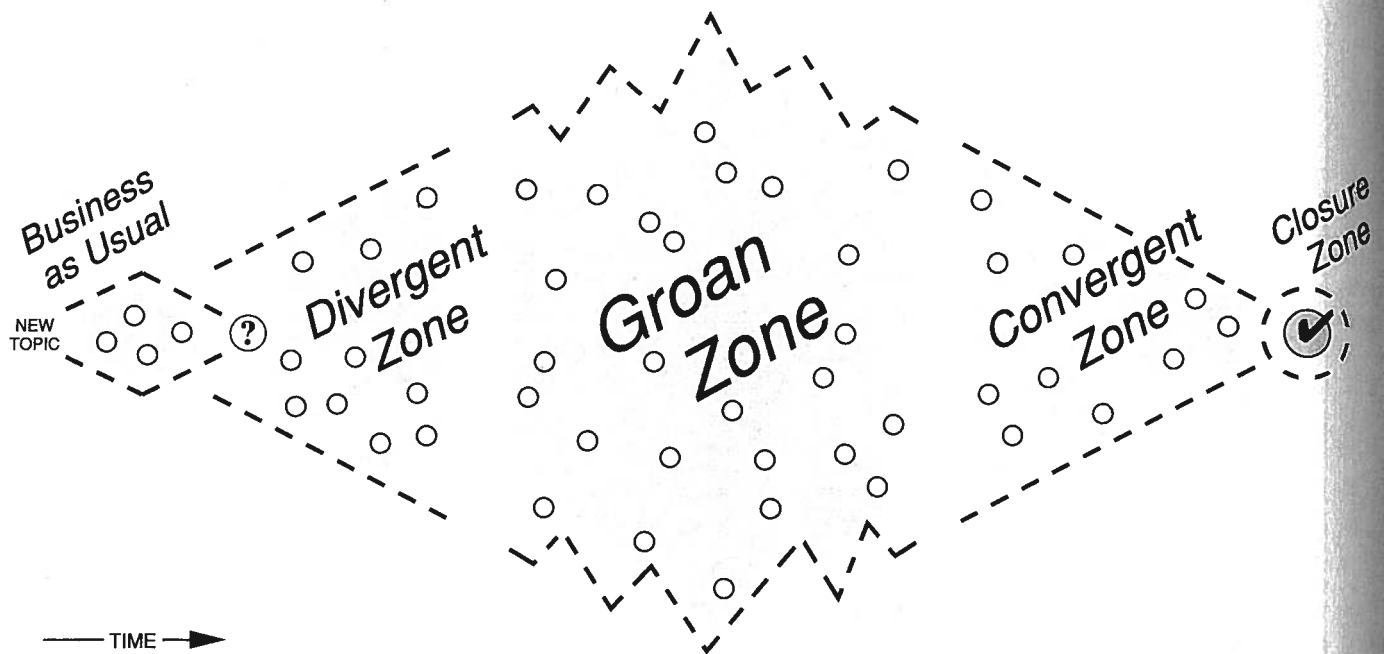
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING



Struggling to understand a wide range of foreign or opposing ideas is not a pleasant experience. Group members can be repetitious, insensitive, defensive, short-tempered – and more! At such times most people don't have the slightest notion of what's happening. Sometimes the mere act of acknowledging the existence of the *Groan Zone* can be a significant step for a group to take.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

THE DIAMOND OF
PARTICIPATORY
DECISION-MAKING

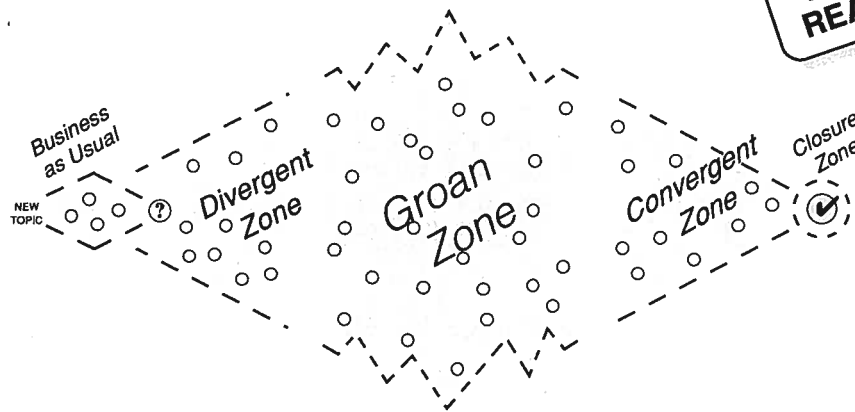


This is the *Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making*. It was developed by Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger. Facilitators can use this model in many ways: as a diagnostic tool, a road map, or a teaching tool to provide their groups with shared language and shared points of reference.

Fundamentally, though, it was created to validate and legitimize the hidden aspects of everyday life in groups.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

THE POWER OF A
REALISTIC MODEL



When people experience discomfort in the midst of a group decision-making process, they often take it as evidence that their group is dysfunctional. As their impatience increases, so does their disillusion with the process.

Many projects are abandoned prematurely for exactly this reason. In such cases, it's not that the goals were ill conceived; it's that the *Groan Zone* was perceived as an insurmountable impediment rather than as a normal part of the process.

This is truly a shame. Too many high-minded and well-funded efforts to resolve the world's toughest problems have foundered on the shoals of group dynamics.

So let's be clear-headed about this: misunderstanding and miscommunication are normal, natural aspects of participatory decision-making. The *Groan Zone* is a direct, inevitable consequence of the diversity that exists in any group.

Not only that, but the act of working through these misunderstandings is part of what must be done to lay the foundation for sustainable agreements. Without shared understanding, meaningful collaboration is impossible.

It is supremely important for people who work in groups to recognize this. Groups that can tolerate the stress of the *Groan Zone* are far more likely to discover common ground. And common ground, in turn, is the precondition for insightful, innovative co-thinking.

Understanding group dynamics is an indispensable core competency for anyone, whether facilitator, leader, or group member, who wants to help their group tap the enormous potential of participatory decision-making.

PARTICIPATORY VALUES

HOW FULL PARTICIPATION STRENGTHENS
INDIVIDUALS, DEVELOPS GROUPS AND
FOSTERS SUSTAINABLE AGREEMENTS

- ◆ **The Four Participatory Values**
- ◆ **How Participatory Values Affect
People and Their Work**
- ◆ **Full Participation**
- ◆ **Mutual Understanding**
- ◆ **Inclusive Solutions**
- ◆ **Shared Responsibility**
- ◆ **Benefits of Participatory Values**

PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING CORE VALUES

FULL PARTICIPATION

In a participatory group, all members are encouraged to speak up and say what's on their minds. This strengthens a group in several ways. Members become more courageous in raising difficult issues. They learn how to share their "first-draft" ideas. And they become more adept at discovering and acknowledging the diversity of opinions and backgrounds inherent in any group.

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

In order for a group to reach a sustainable agreement, the members need to understand and accept the legitimacy of one another's needs and goals. This basic recognition is what allows people to think from each other's point of view, which is the catalyst for developing innovative ideas that serve the interests of all parties.

INCLUSIVE SOLUTIONS

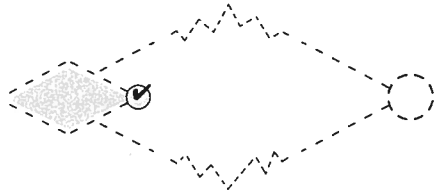
Inclusive solutions are wise solutions. Their wisdom emerges from the integration of everybody's perspectives and needs. These are solutions whose range and vision are expanded to take advantage of the truth held not only by the quick, the articulate, the influential, and the powerful, but also of the truth held by those who are shy or disenfranchised or who think at a slower place. As the Quakers say, "Everybody has a piece of the truth."

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In participatory groups, members recognize that they must be willing and able to implement the proposals they endorse, so they make every effort to give and receive input before final decisions are made. They also assume responsibility for designing and managing the thinking process that will result in a good decision. This contrasts sharply with the conventional assumption that everyone will be held accountable for the consequences of decisions made by a few key people.

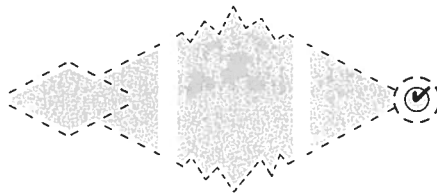
HOW PARTICIPATORY VALUES CAN AFFECT GROUP DECISION-MAKING

**FULL
PARTICIPATION**



QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF PARTICIPATION DURING A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

In a typical business-as-usual discussion, self-expression is highly constrained. People tend to keep risky opinions to themselves. The most highly regarded comments are those that are the clearest, the smartest, the most well polished. In business-as-usual discussions, thinking out loud is treated with impatience; people get annoyed if the speaker's remarks are vague or poorly stated. This induces self-censorship, and reduces the quantity and quality of participation overall. A few people end up doing almost all the talking – and in many groups, those few people just keep repeating themselves and repeating themselves.

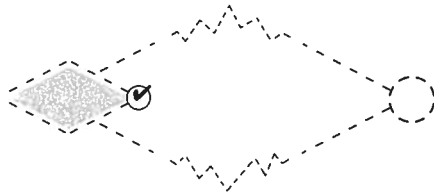


FULL PARTICIPATION DURING A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Participatory decision-making groups go through a business-as-usual phase too. If familiar opinions lead to a workable solution, then the group can reach a decision quickly. But when a business-as-usual discussion does *not* produce a workable solution, a participatory group will open up the process and encourage more divergent thinking. What does this look like in action? It looks like people permitting themselves to state half-formed thoughts that express unconventional – but perhaps valuable – perspectives. It looks like people taking risks to surface controversial issues. It looks like people making suggestions “from left field” that stimulate their peers to think new thoughts. And it also looks like a roomful of people *encouraging each other* to do all these things.

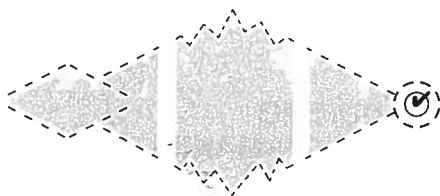
HOW PARTICIPATORY VALUES CAN AFFECT GROUP DECISION-MAKING

MUTUAL
UNDERSTANDING



EXTENT OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING DURING A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

In a business-as-usual discussion, persuasion is much more common than mutual understanding. The views of the "other side" are dissected point by point for the purpose of refuting them. Little effort, if any, is put into discovering the deeper reasons people believe what they do. Even when it appears unlikely that persuasion will change anyone's mind, participants continue to press home their points – making it appear as though the pleasures of rhetoric were the true purpose of continuing the discussion. Most participants tend to stop listening to each other, except to prepare for a rebuttal.

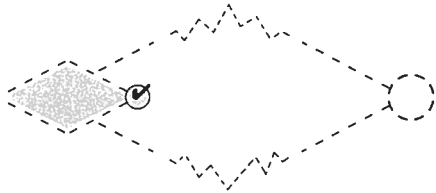


EXTENT OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING DURING A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Building a shared framework of understanding means taking the time to understand everyone's perspective in order to find the best idea. To build that framework, participants spend time and effort questioning each other, getting to know one another, learning from each other. They put themselves in each other's shoes. The process is laced with intermittent discomfort: some periods are tense, some are stifling. But participants keep plugging away. Over time, many people gain insight into their own positions. They may discover that their own thinking is out-of-date or misinformed or driven by inaccurate stereotypes. And by struggling to acquire such insights, members may discover something else about one another: that they truly do care about achieving a mutual goal.

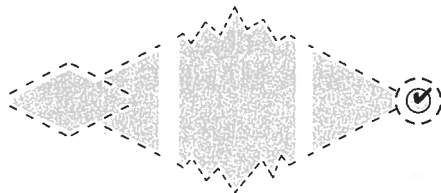
HOW PARTICIPATORY VALUES CAN AFFECT GROUP DECISION-MAKING

**INCLUSIVE
SOLUTIONS**



SOLUTIONS RESULTING FROM A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

Business-as-usual discussions seldom result in inclusive solutions. More commonly, people quickly form opinions and take sides. Everyone expects that one side will get what they want and the other side won't. Disputes, they assume, will be resolved by the person who has the most authority. Some groups settle their differences by majority vote, but the effect is the same. Expediency rather than innovation or sustainability is the driver of such solutions. When the implementation is easy, or when the stakes are low, expedient solutions are perfectly good – but not when the stakes are high, or creativity is required, or broad-based commitment is needed.

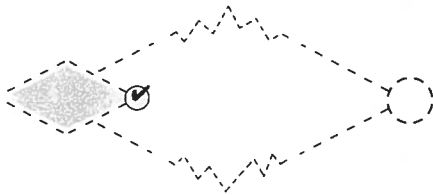


SOLUTIONS RESULTING FROM A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Inclusive solutions are not compromises; they work for everyone who holds a stake in the outcome. Typically, an inclusive solution involves the discovery of an entirely new option. For instance, an unexpected partnership might be forged between former competitors. Or a group may invent a nontraditional alternative to a procedure that had previously "always been done that way." Several real-life case examples of inclusive solutions are presented in Chapter 16. Inclusive solutions are usually not obvious – they *emerge* in the course of the group's persistence. As participants learn more about each other's perspectives, they become progressively more able to integrate their own goals and needs with those of the other participants. This leads to innovative, original thinking.

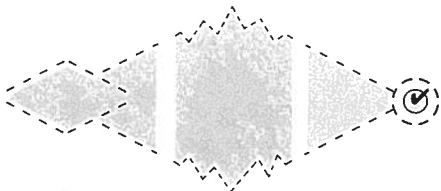
HOW PARTICIPATORY VALUES CAN AFFECT GROUP DECISION-MAKING

**SHARED
RESPONSIBILITY**



THE ENACTMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY DURING A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

In business-as-usual-discussions, groups rely on the authority of their leaders and their experts. The person-in-charge assumes responsibility for defining goals, setting priorities, defining problems, establishing success criteria, and arriving at conclusions. Participants with the most expertise are expected to distill relevant data, provide analysis, and make recommendations. Furthermore, the person-in-charge is expected to run the meeting, monitor the progress of each topic, enforce time boundaries, referee disputes, and generally take responsibility for all aspects of process management.



SHARED RESPONSIBILITY DURING A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

In order for an agreement to be sustainable, it needs everyone's support. Understanding this principle leads everyone to take personal responsibility for making sure they are satisfied with the proposed course of action. Every member of a group, in other words, recognizes that he or she is an owner of the outcome. Thus, people raise whatever issues they consider to be important. And everyone is expected to voice concerns if they have them, even when doing so could delay the group from reaching a decision. Moreover, the commitment to share responsibility is evident throughout the process: in the design of the agenda, in the willingness to discuss and co-create the procedures they will follow and in the overall expectation that everyone will accept and take responsibility for making their meetings work. In summary, participants are expected to take responsibility for both the content and the process of making decisions together.

THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY VALUES

Full Participation

Mutual Understanding

Inclusive Solutions

Shared Responsibility

The participatory values discussed in this chapter provide the members of a group with a set of grounding principles for conducting their meetings. Adherence to these values produces significant results: stronger individuals, stronger groups, and stronger agreements.

Stronger Individuals

- Improved leadership skills
- Stronger powers of reasoning
- More confidence
- More commitment
- Better communication skills
- Greater ability to assume broader and more difficult responsibilities

Stronger Groups

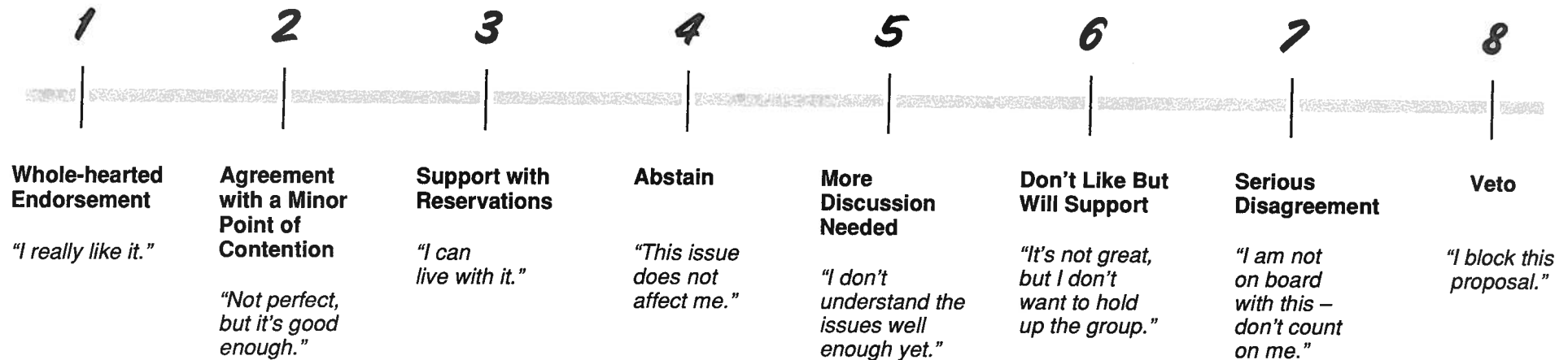
- Greater ability to utilize multiple talents
- Access to more types of information
- Development of a respectful, supportive atmosphere
- Clear procedures for handling group dynamics
- Increased capacity for tackling difficult problems

Stronger Agreements

- More ideas
- Higher-quality ideas
- Solutions that integrate everyone's goals
- Wiser decisions
- More reliable follow-through

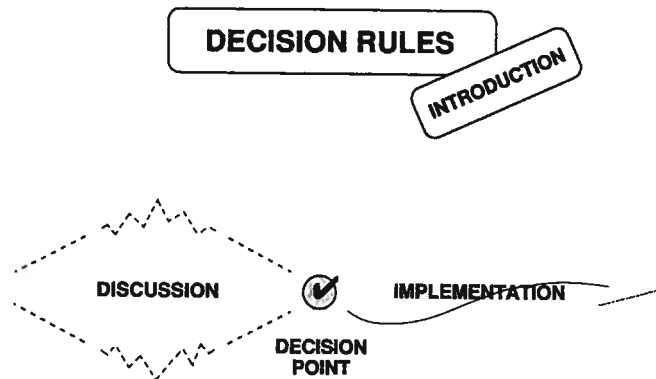
GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

BETTER
VOCABULARY



This is the *Gradients of Agreement Scale*. It enables members of a group to express their support for a proposal in degrees, along a continuum. Using this tool, group members are no longer trapped into expressing support in terms of "yes" and "no."

The *Gradients of Agreement Scale* was developed in 1987 by Sam Kaner, Duane Berger, and the staff of Community At Work. It has been translated into Spanish, French, Russian, Mandarin, Arabic and Swahili, and it has been used in organizations large and small throughout the world.



This diagram depicts two entirely different domains of group behavior: the period of discussion and the period of implementation. During a discussion, people think. They discuss. They consider their options. During the implementation, people act on what they've decided. Thus, for example, during a discussion, participants might *figure out the budget* for a project; in the implementation of that project, *people spend the money*.

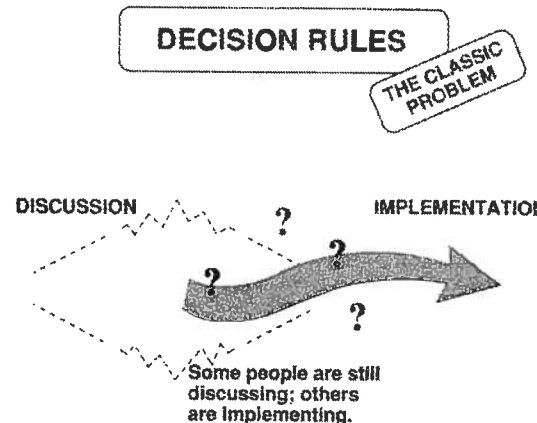
During the discussion, in other words, a group operates in *the world of ideas*; after the decision has been made, that group shifts into *the world of action*.

In the world of ideas, people explore possibilities; they develop models and try them on in their imagination. They hypothesize. They extrapolate. They evaluate alternatives and develop plans. In the world of action, the group has made a commitment to take an idea and make it come true. Contracts are signed. People are hired. Departments are restructured, and offices are relocated.

The *Decision Point* is the point at which a decision is made. *It is the point that separates thinking from action.* It is the point of authorization for the actions that follow. Discussion occurs *before* the point of decision; implementation happens *after* the point of decision.

The *Decision Point* is the formal marker that says, "From this moment on, our agreement will be treated as the officially authorized reality. Disagreements will no longer be treated as alternative points of view. From now on, objections are officially out of line."

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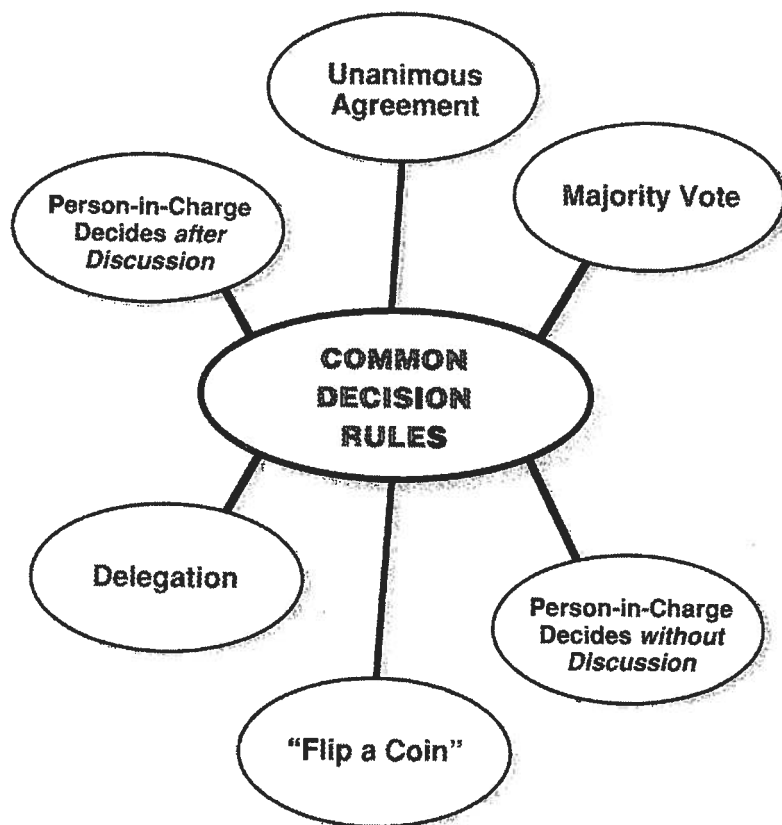
In practice, however, group members are often not sure whether a decision has actually been made.

This can produce much confusion. Someone who thinks a decision has been made will feel empowered to take action in line with that decision. But if others think the decision has not yet been made, they will view the person who took the action as "impulsive" or "having their own agenda" or "not a team player." In such cases, however, the person accused of acting prematurely will frequently justify his or her action by saying, "I was sure we decided to go ahead with that plan."

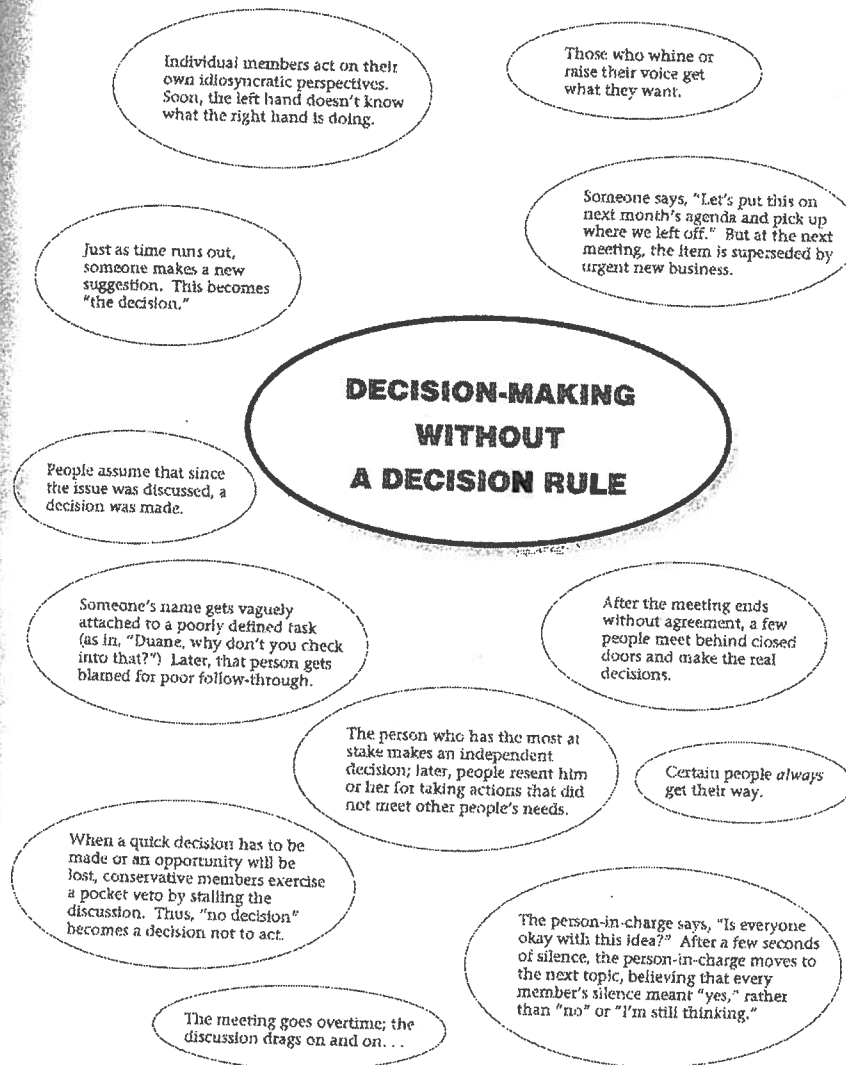
The same is true in reverse. Inaction after the point of decision is often perceived as "insubordinate" or "passive-aggressive" or "disloyal." In such cases, it is common to hear people defend themselves by saying, "I don't recall us making an actual decision about that" or "I never agreed to this!"

These examples remind us that people need a clear, explicit indicator that a decision has been made. Some groups *can* clearly tell when a decision has or has not been made. For instance, groups that make decisions by majority rule know they are still in the discussion phase until they vote and tally the results. But most groups are fuzzy about how they make decisions. *They lack clear rules for bringing their discussion to closure.*

This chapter describes the six most common *decision rules* and explores the implications of each one.



A decision rule is a mechanism that answers the question, "How do we know when we've made a decision?" Each of the six rules shown above performs this basic function.



MAJOR DECISION RULES: USES AND IMPLICATIONS

» UNANIMOUS AGREEMENT

High-Stakes Decisions

In groups that decide by *unanimous agreement*, members must keep working to understand one another's perspectives until they integrate those perspectives into a shared framework of understanding. Once people are sufficiently familiar with each other's views, they become capable of advancing innovative proposals that are acceptable to everyone. It takes a lot of effort, but this is precisely why the unanimous agreement decision rule has the best chance of producing sustainable agreements when the stakes are high.

The difficulty with using unanimous agreement as the decision rule is that most people don't know how to search for Both/And solutions. Instead, people pressure each other to live with decisions that they don't truly support. And the group often ends up with a watered-down compromise.

This problem is a function of the general tendency of groups to push for a fast decision: "We need unanimous agreement because we want everyone's buy-in, but we also want to reach a decision as quickly as possible." This mentality undermines the whole point of using unanimous agreement. Its purpose is to channel the tension of diversity, in service of creative thinking – to invent brand-new ideas that really do work for everyone. This takes time. In order to realize the potentials of unanimous agreement, members should be encouraged to keep working toward mutual understanding until they develop a proposal that will receive enthusiastic support from a broad base of participants.

Low-Stakes Decisions

With low-stakes issues, unanimous agreements are usually comparable in quality to decisions reached by other decision rules. Participants learn to go along with proposals they can tolerate, rather than hold out for an innovative solution that would take a lot of time and effort to develop.

One benefit of using the unanimous agreement rule to make low-stakes decisions is that it prevents a group from making a decision that is abhorrent to a small minority. Other decision rules can lead to outcomes that are intolerable to one or two members, but are adopted because they are popular with a majority. By definition, such a decision will not be made by unanimous agreement.

MAJOR DECISION RULES: USES AND IMPLICATIONS

» MAJORITY VOTE

High-Stakes Decisions

Majority vote produces a win/lose solution through an adversarial process. The traditional justification for using this rule when stakes are high is that the competition of ideas creates pressure. Thus, the quality of everyone's reasoning theoretically gets better and better as the debate ensues.

The problem with this reasoning is that people don't always vote based on the logic of the arguments. People often "horse-trade" their votes or vote against opponents for political reasons. To increase the odds that people will vote on the merits of a high-stakes proposal, the use of secret ballots is worth considering.

Low-Stakes Decisions

When expedience is more important than quality, majority vote strikes a useful balance between the lengthy discussion that is a characteristic of unanimous agreement, and the lack of deliberation that is a danger of the other extreme. Group members can be encouraged to call for a quick round of pros and cons and get on with the vote.

» "FLIP A COIN"

High-Stakes Decisions

"Flip a coin" refers to any arbitrary, random method of making a decision, including common practices like drawing straws, picking numbers from a hat or "eeny-meeny-miney-moe." Who in their right mind would consider using this decision rule to make a high-stakes decision?

Low-Stakes Decisions

Knowing the decision will be made arbitrarily, most members stop participating. Their comments won't have any impact on the actual result. However, this is not necessarily bad. For example, how much discussion is needed to decide whether a lunch break should be 45 minutes or an hour?

MAJOR DECISION RULES: USES AND IMPLICATIONS

» PERSON-IN-CHARGE DECIDES AFTER DISCUSSION

High-Stakes Decisions

There is strong justification for using this decision rule when the stakes are high. The person-in-charge, after all, is the one with the access, resources, authority, and credibility to act on the decision. Seeking counsel from group members, rather than deciding without discussion, allows the person-in-charge to expand his or her understanding of the issues and form a wiser opinion about the best course of action.

Unfortunately, some group members give false advice and say what they think their boss wants to hear rather than express their true opinions.*

To overcome this problem, group members can design a formal procedure to ensure or include "devil's advocate" thinking, thus allowing people to debate the merits of an idea without the pressure of worrying whether they're blocking the group's momentum. Or group members can schedule a formal discussion without the person-in-charge. They can then bring their best thinking back to a meeting with him or her to discuss it further.

Low-Stakes Decisions

There are three decision rules that encourage group discussion: unanimous agreement, majority rule, and person-in-charge decides after discussion. With low-stakes issues, all three decision rules produce results that are roughly equivalent in quality.

Low-stakes issues provide a group with the opportunity to practice giving honest, direct advice to the person-in-charge. When the stakes are low, the person-in-charge is less likely to feel pressured to "get it right," and is therefore less defensive and more open-minded. Similarly, group members are less afraid of being punished for taking risks.

* Irving Janis, in his ground-breaking classic on the group dynamics of conformity, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), describes many case studies demonstrating this problem. For more suggestions on ways to overcome this problem, see pages 207-224.

MAJOR DECISION RULES: USES AND IMPLICATIONS

» PERSON-IN-CHARGE DECIDES WITHOUT DISCUSSION

High-Stakes Decisions

When a person-in-charge makes a decision without discussion, s/he assumes full responsibility for analyzing the situation and coming up with a course of action. Proponents argue that this decision rule firmly clarifies the link between authority, responsibility, and accountability. Detractors argue that this decision rule creates a high potential for blind spots and irrationality.

The most appropriate time for a person-in-charge to make high-stakes decisions without discussion is in the midst of a crisis, when the absence of a clear decision would be catastrophic. In general, though, the higher the stakes, the riskier it is for anyone to make decisions without group discussion.

How will group members behave in the face of this decision rule? The answer depends on one's values. Some people believe that good team players are loyal, disciplined subordinates who have the duty to play their roles and carry out orders. Other people argue that group members who must contend with this decision rule should develop a formal mechanism, like a union, for making sure their points of view are taken into account.

The fundamental point is that whenever one person is solely responsible for analyzing a problem and solving it, the decision-maker may lack essential information. Or those responsible for implementation might sabotage the decision because they disagree with it or because they don't understand it. The more the person-in-charge understands the dangers of deciding without group discussion, the more capable s/he is of evaluating in each situation whether the stakes are too high to take the risks.

Low-Stakes Decisions

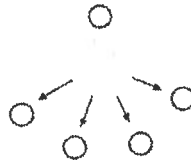
Not all decisions made this way turn out badly. In fact, many turn out just fine. And when the stakes are low, even bad decisions can usually be undone or compensated for.

THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT DECISION RULES ON PARTICIPATION

Person-in-Charge Decides *Without* Group Discussion

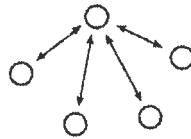
This decision rule gets group members in the habit of "doing what they are told."

At meetings, they listen passively to the person-in-charge, who talks and talks without being challenged.



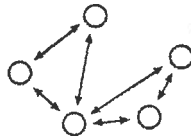
Person-in-Charge Decides *After* Group Discussion

When the person-in-charge is the final decision-maker, s/he is the main person who needs to be convinced. Everyone tends to direct their comments to the person-in-charge.



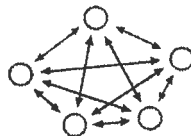
Majority Vote

Since the goal is to obtain 51% agreement, the influence process is a battle for the undecided center. Once a majority is established, the opinions of the minority can be disregarded.



Unanimous Agreement

When everyone has the power to block a decision, each participant has the right to expect his or her perspective to be taken into account. This puts pressure on members to work toward mutual understanding.



Each decision rule has a different effect on group behavior. Individual group members adjust the quantity and quality of their participation depending on how they think their behavior will influence the decision.