

Group Decision Making: Practical Approaches to Bring Groups Together

Rural Network Allied Health Training
Program Partnership Meeting

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525 South Lake Avenue, Suite 320 | Duluth, Minnesota 55802

(218) 727-9390 | info@ruralcenter.org

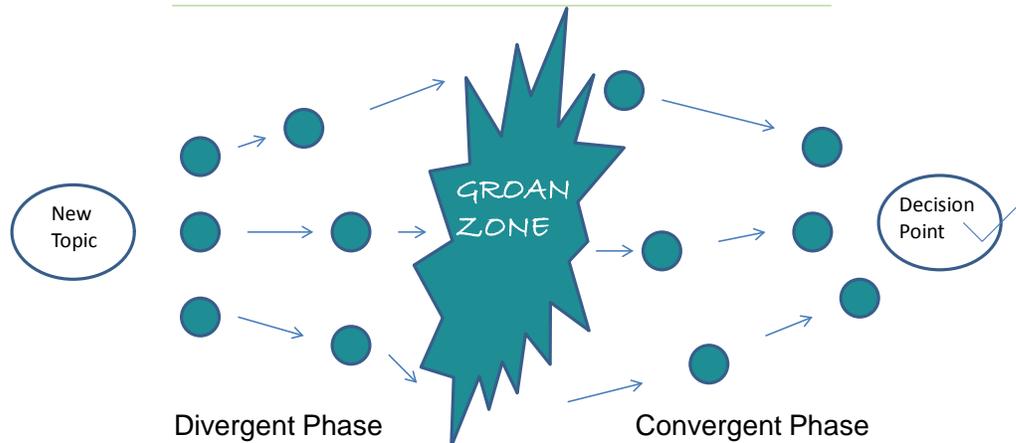
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How Groups (really) Make Decisions



Because groups move through three phases when making decisions, it is critical for a leader to be aware of these phases and to have tools to use for each one to support the group in reaching a decision. Use these tools when a shared decision is desired.

If you simply want to tell a group something; then do that and don't worry about using group decision-making tools. But if you want stakeholders to share in the decision, to be engaged when their perspectives are heard, understood and integrated into solutions, then consider the three phases and choose the tools that will best help you accomplish that.

Your role as a leader is to:

1. Promote mutual understanding between group members
2. Foster inclusivity in solutions selected
3. Structure the discussion to support everyone's best thinking

The Tools Matrix (next page) will help you select the tool that will be most useful at specific stages of group decision-making. Some tools are particularly effective for special circumstances.

Group Decision Making Tools Matrix

Decision Making Stages 1-3	Useful Tools	Recommended Tools for Special Circumstances	
I DIVERGE: The group needs to generate ideas about a topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured go-arounds • Individual work, then group work • Un-represented perspectives • Exaggerations 	A) 1-2 people dominate discussion or a power difference inhibits flow of ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seven words or less • Talking Stick
		B) The topic is especially sensitive or contentious and people are not willing to speak out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undiscussables
II GROAN ZONE: The group has a lot to consider.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sort and categorize ideas • Role storming • Reframing • Focus on what is going well • Strengthening relationships 	C) 1-2 people have strong opinions and 'jump' to a premature solution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing Perspectives
III CONVERGE: The group needs to narrow down the choices and decide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying evaluation criteria • Decision rule • Decision point 	D) Opinions widely differ and agreement is unlikely. E) Lack of response for decision, unclear if decision is made or if there is consensus to proceed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuum of Agreement: Stop Light and Thumbs-up/down/flat

DIVERGING PHASE I:

This phase of group decision-making occurs when problems have no obvious solution. When a problem is difficult or complex, a group needs to break out of its usual thinking and explore wider possibilities. Use the following tools to solicit diverse ideas:

Structured “Go-Arounds”:

- Standard Go-Around – Each person takes a turn, clockwise or counter-clockwise, from whoever speaks first.
- Seven Words or Less - Each person states an opinion or suggestion using seven words or less.
- Talking Stick – Only the person holding a specified physical object (such as a ruler, a bean bag, etc.) may speak. The object is passed among group members.
- Popcorn – Each person takes a turn when they choose, not in any particular order, but only after the preceding person has said, “pass.”

Note about virtual meeting Go-Arounds –*Technology enables simultaneous input by participants, and simultaneous responses. Determine the need or capacity for anonymous contributions.*

Individual Work, then Group Work:

Ask participants to forward their input about the topics so it can be collected before the meeting. Or, ask them to come to the meeting ready to discuss their perspectives. This prepares introverts and ensures you will hear all perspectives. Using structured discussion and pre-work reduces the domination of only one or two strongly stated positions.

Unrepresented Perspectives:

Ask, “Is there any other stakeholder group, not represented here, whose perspective should be considered?”

Un-Discussibles:

There may be some topics that are too sensitive for people to feel safe to say what they think or feel. If you think this may be the case, say, *“There may be things we need to discuss as a group. They are hard topics to bring up, yet doing so will help us get at better solutions.”*

Pass out index cards and invite participants to jot down what their topics, opinions or ideas might be and then collect cards. View the cards briefly, look for topic themes, and introduce the topics or opinions one by one. Anyone can comment on the topic, whether or not they were the person who wrote it on the card.

Exaggerations:

If a group becomes stalled in its usual thinking, try exaggerating the issue to gain new perspectives. Examples: If you need to cut a budget by 10%, try generating solutions for cutting a budget by 70%. If you need to have a result in nine months, try generating solutions for getting a result in two months. Treat it humorously and gather all ideas. One seemingly unrealistic thought can lead to others that are very workable.

GROAN ZONE II

When diverse opinions have been presented yet no obvious solution is in sight, a group must further strengthen its ability to think together. This rather uncomfortable stage is often characterized by a sense of confusion, frustration, potential misunderstandings, and feeling stuck. However, sticking with it can get a group beyond familiar thinking to breakthrough solutions.

Sorting and Categorizing:

Once ideas have been contributed, begin to sort or categorize them. Use open discussion, if appropriate, or one of the following ideas:

- Distribute an equal number of “sticky dots” to each participant. Ask participants to place their dots next to the ideas they feel should be prioritized for further consideration. Using several colors of dots, you can ask participants to place one color for priorities, and the other for ideas that do not need further consideration.
- Using pre-determined or co-created categories, place ideas into the appropriate category.

Changing Perspectives:

Try viewing the problem through various perspectives, such as:

- **Positive:** What if everything possible went right? How good could this be?
- **Caution:** What if everything possible went wrong? How could we prevent this?
- **Logical:** What are the facts in the situation?
- **Emotional:** How do we feel about this?
- **Creative:** What other ways could we approach this issue?

Perspectives can be considered one at a time in succession or simultaneously with each member wearing a different “hat”.

For more information about a particular color-code method called “*Six Thinking Hats*”, see: http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php

Role-Storming:

Suggest each participant view the issue from an assigned role. Examples of roles would be patients/customers, great leaders, fictional characters, or unrepresented stakeholders. What insights does this add?

Reframing:

Try stating the problem in a different way. For example, re-define the goal, or start thinking of milestones toward the goal. Or ask, “What is unchangeable about this?” Test assumptions.

Focus on what is Going Well:

Take a step back. Shift your focus away from eliminating problems and toward learning more about what is going well. Ask, “Is there a place in our network where an approach to this issue is working?” “Have there been any successful pilot tests? What made them successful?” For further explanation of this approach called “*Appreciative Inquiry*”, see: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_85.htm

Strengthen Relationships:

This is a long-term approach for a group that will make multiple decisions over time. Abraham Lincoln stated, "I don't like that man. I need to get to know him better." Use formal and informal opportunities to enable people to learn about each other. A simple way to do this in meetings is with *"Good and New"*. To start the meeting, each person briefly states what is "good and new" for her/him, personally or professionally.

CONVERGING PHASE II

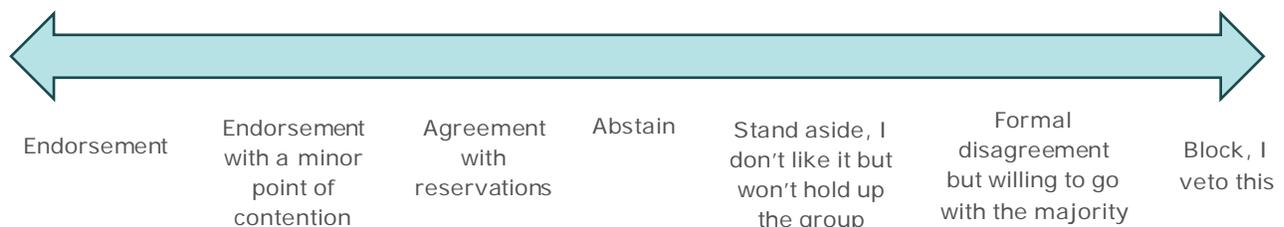
During this phase, group members consider alternatives and synthesize them into a solution that will work, and come to a decision. If they have built a shared understanding of perspectives during prior phases, this might move quickly with minimal intervention. Many times, however, additional structure is helpful to narrow down options in coming to a point of decision.

Clarify Evaluation Criteria:

Before specific proposals are raised for consideration, determine criteria by which you will choose a solution. Criteria examples include: *"Ease of Implementation"*, *"Finances Required"* or *"Time to Implementation"*.

Continuum of Agreement:

One definition of *"Consensus"* is when everyone feels, *"I can live with that"*, however, this may not mean there is a unanimous opinion. Provide group with a *Continuum of Agreement* and then poll them about potential solutions and their stand on each. Do this visibly (show of hands, for example) or through non-visible methods (secret ballots, for example).



There are several simplified versions of the *Continuum of Agreement*:

- Stop Light: Each participant has a red, yellow, and green slip of paper. As you ask a relevant question about options, group members hold up the paper that represents their current opinion. Green signifies, "Yes, I am ready to agree and move on." Yellow signifies, "I could support this, but I have additional input or questions that need to be resolved." Red signifies "No, I can't support this." Persons using the red card should be prepared to offer an alternative solution or explain their objections.
- Thumbs-Up, Flat Hand, or Thumbs down has the same continuum as Stop Light.

Decision Rule:

This step answers the questions, "How do we know when we've reached a decision?" and "Who will make the decision?" The best choice for this is influenced by whether it's a high stakes or low stakes decision. Be clear about which one of the following options will be used: unanimous agreement, majority rule, or person-in-charge decides with or without further discussion.

Decision Point: Each of the following steps are important:

- End the discussion
- Clarify the proposed solution
- Poll group members
- Use the group's decision rule to reach a final decision

TIP: Consider using a professional facilitator if you have any combination of the following:

- When it's more important you are seen as a participator in the decision, rather than a lead.
- When there are especially difficult dynamics or contentious parties with strong opinions.
- When decision(s) are high stakes and group needs to make long-lasting, sustainable agreements.

To find a professional facilitator, contact The Center for references or contact your local professional associations, colleges, or non-profits.

Additional References:

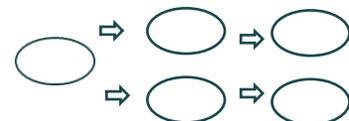
- The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace, R. Brian Stanfield, General Editor, New Society Publishers, Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs, Technology of Participation, 2000.
- Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, Sam Kaner, Jossey-Bass Business & Management

Layout Examples for Recording Ideas:

	Pros	Cons
Idea A		
Idea B		

Bullet List

- Idea
- Idea
- Idea



Tips:

- Invite participants to proofread your documents of ideas
- Be sure to title every page if writing on paper
- If useful, color code ideas several different makers

