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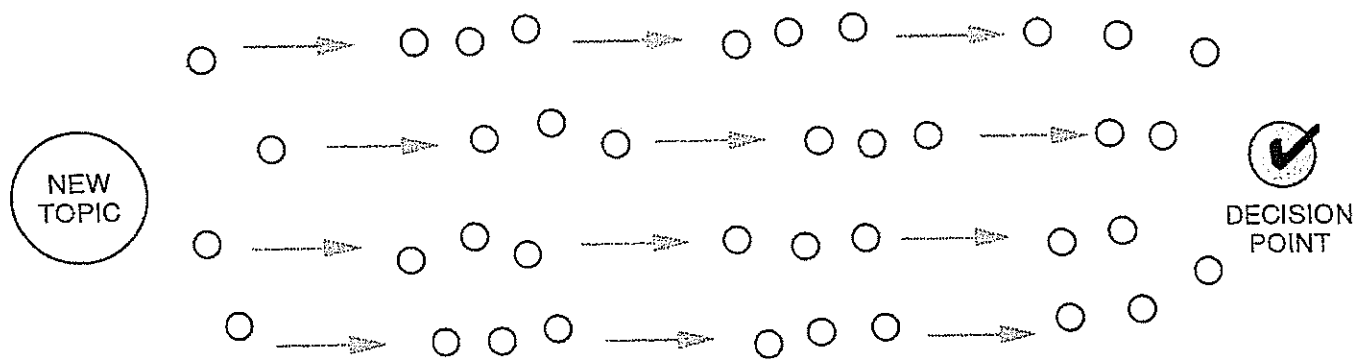
THE DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

IDEALIZED AND REALISTIC MODELS OF
COLLABORATION IN GROUPS

- Misunderstandings about the
  Process of Group Decision-Making

- The Struggle to Integrate Diverse
  Perspectives

- The Diamond of Participatory
  Decision-Making

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

INTRODUCTION

NEW TOPIC

DECISION POINT

This picture portrays a hypothetical problem-solving discussion.

Each circle – O – 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 others' 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 it 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

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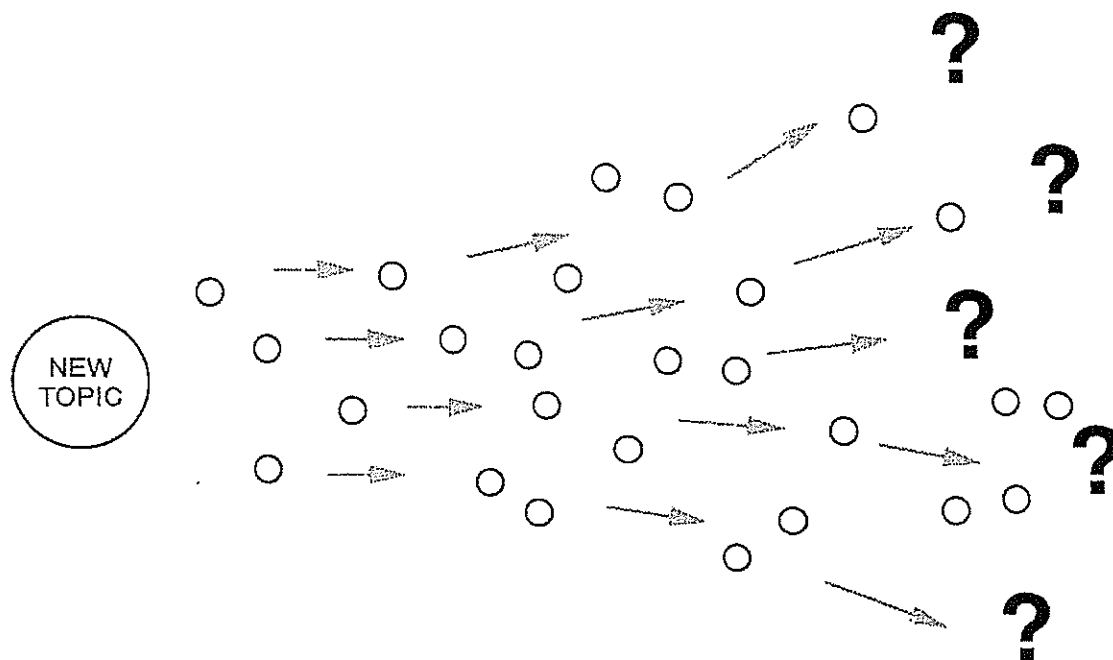
Group members are humans. We *do* go on tangents. We *do* lose track of the central themes of a discussion. We *do* get attached to our ideas. Even when we're all making our best effort to "keep focused" and "stay on track," *we can't change the fact that we are individuals with diverging points of view.*

When confusions like these arise during a discussion, many people see them as indicators 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?

To make the distinction we need an understanding of the dynamics of group decision-making.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

CLOSER TO REALITY

DIVERGENT THINKING

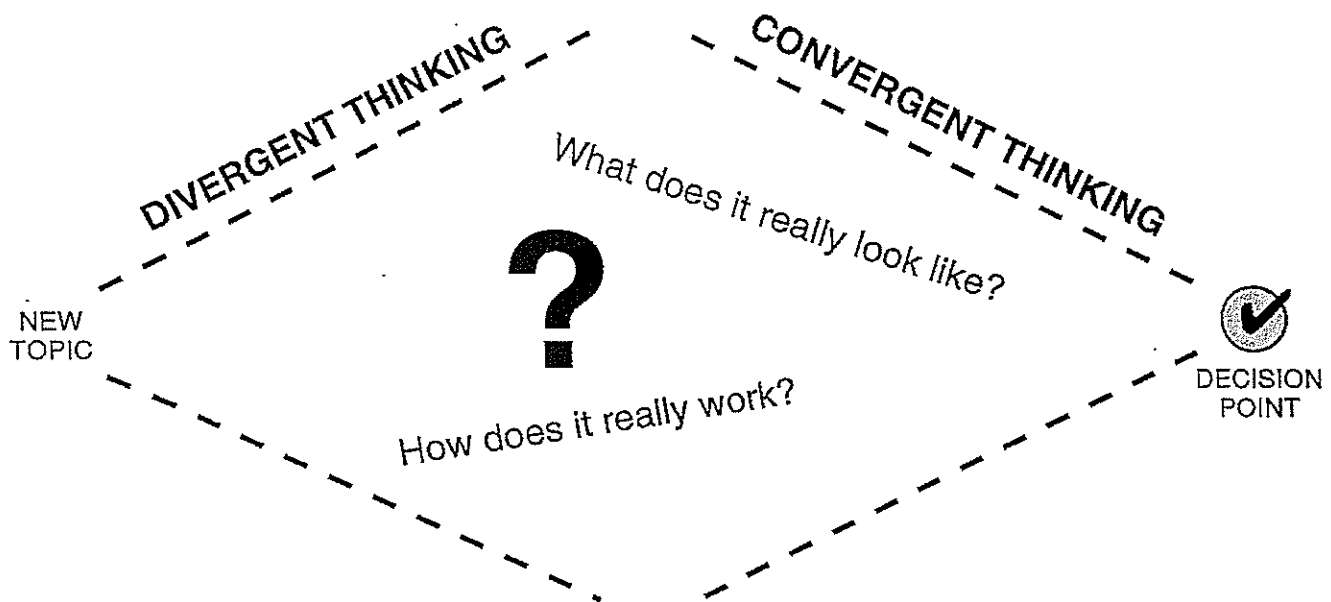CONVERGENT THINKING

NEW TOPIC

DECISION POINT
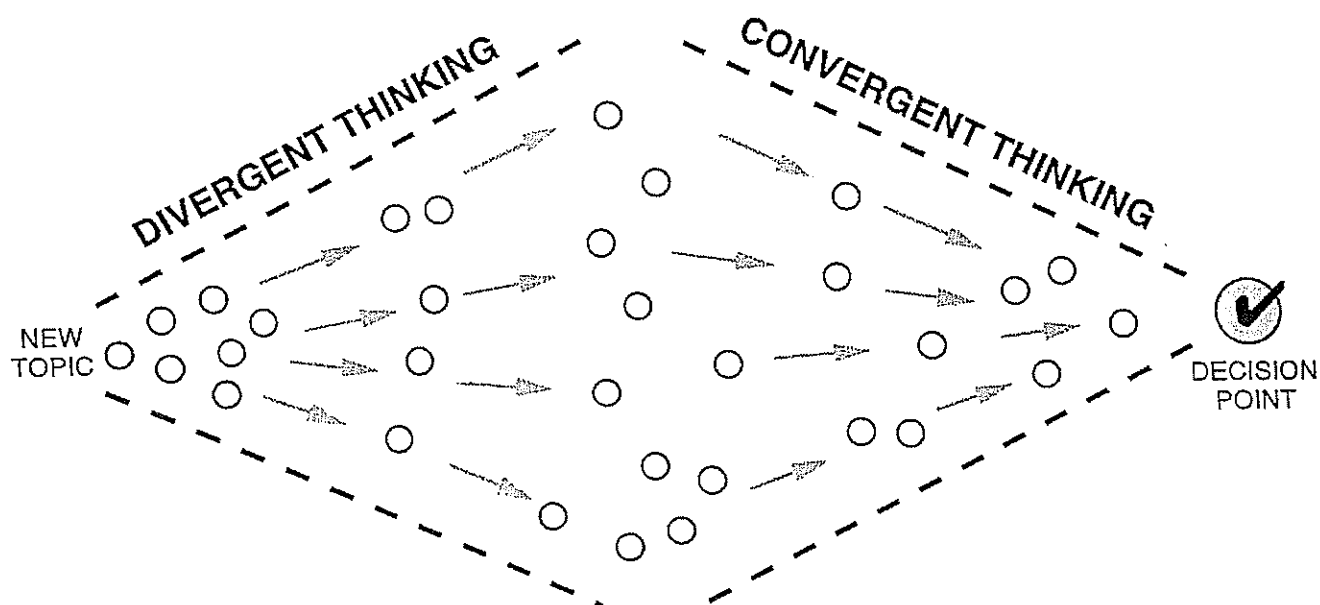
At times the individual members of a group need to express their own points of view. At other times, the same people want to narrow their differences and aim the discussion toward closure. In the following pages, these two sets of processes will be referred to as "divergent thinking" and "convergent thinking."

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

DIVERGENT THINKING		CONVERGENT THINKING
Generating alternatives	vs.	Evaluating alternatives
Free-for-all open discussion	vs.	Summarizing key points
Gathering diverse points of view	vs.	Sorting ideas into categories
Unpacking the logic of a problem	vs.	Arriving at a general conclusion

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

DIVERGENT THINKING

CONVERGENT THINKING

What does it really look like?

?

NEW TOPIC

How does it really work?

DECISION POINT

In the early 1980s, a large well known computer manufacturer developed a problem-solving model that was based on the principles of divergent thinking and convergent thinking. It 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.
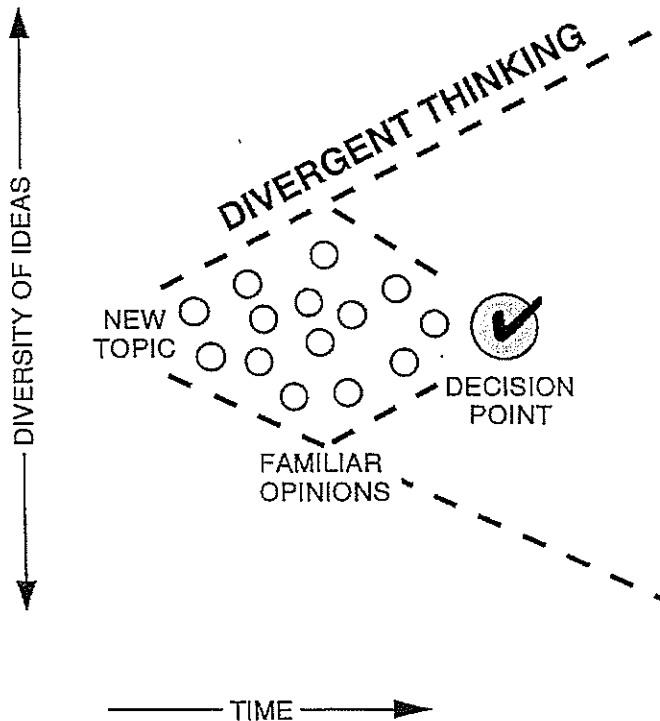
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

DISCUSSION BEGINS

DIVERGENT THINKING

DIVERSITY OF IDEAS

NEW TOPIC

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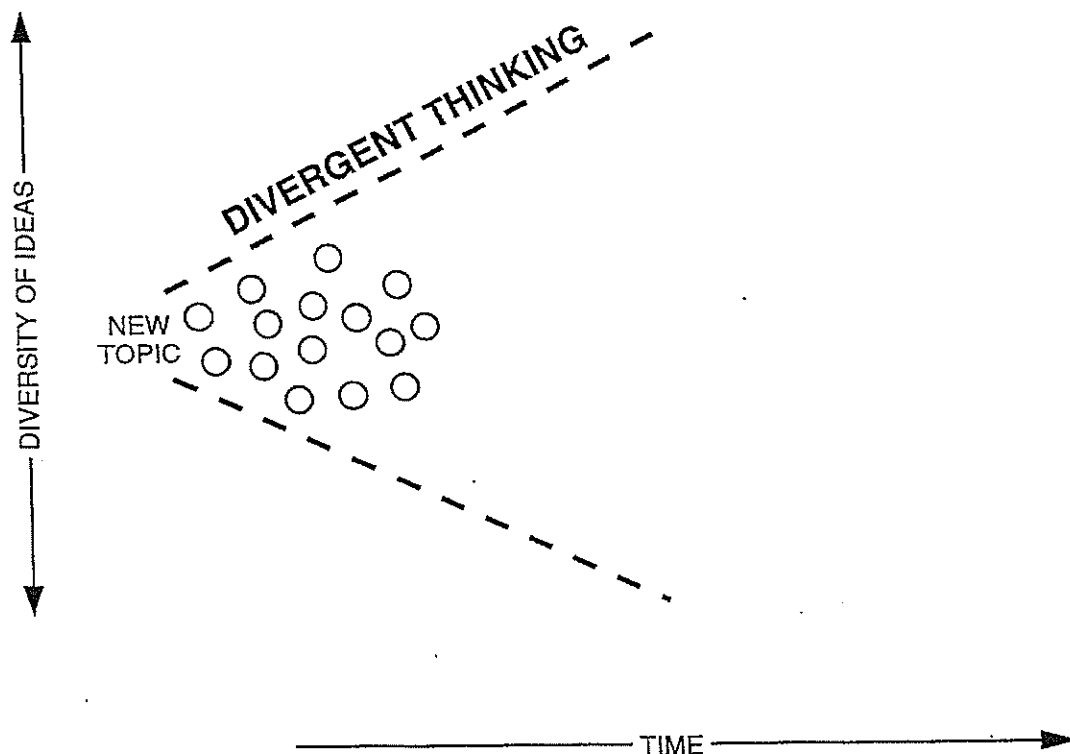
The early rounds of a discussion cover safe, familiar territory. People take positions that reflect conventional wisdom, they rehash well-worn disagreements, and they make proposals for obvious solutions. This is natural – the first ideas we express are the ones we've already thought about.

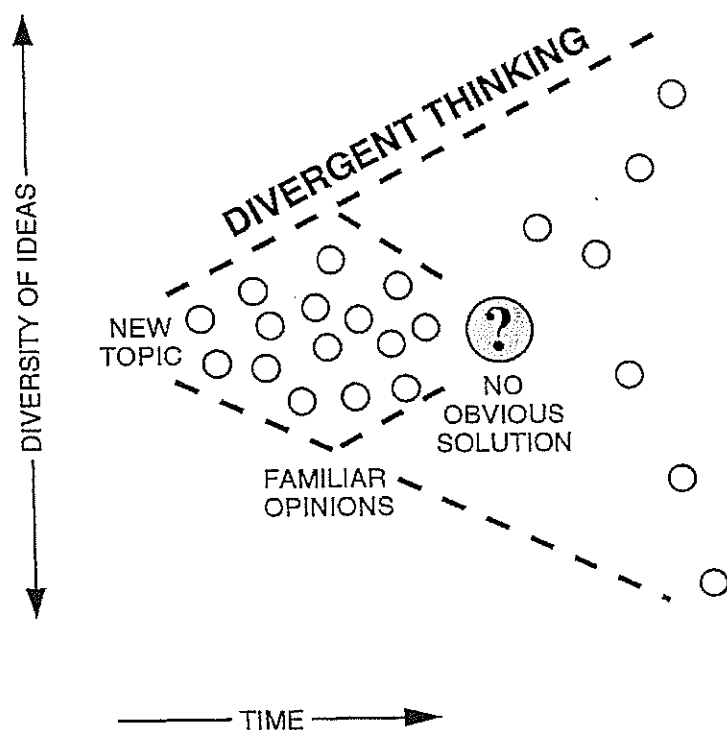# DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

QUICK DECISIONS

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

There's only one little 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? How much should a business do to support 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.
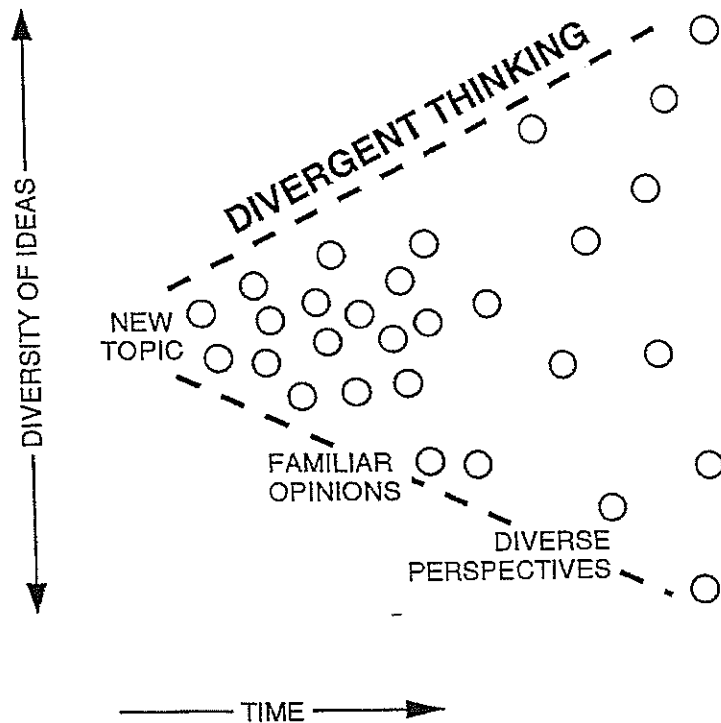
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

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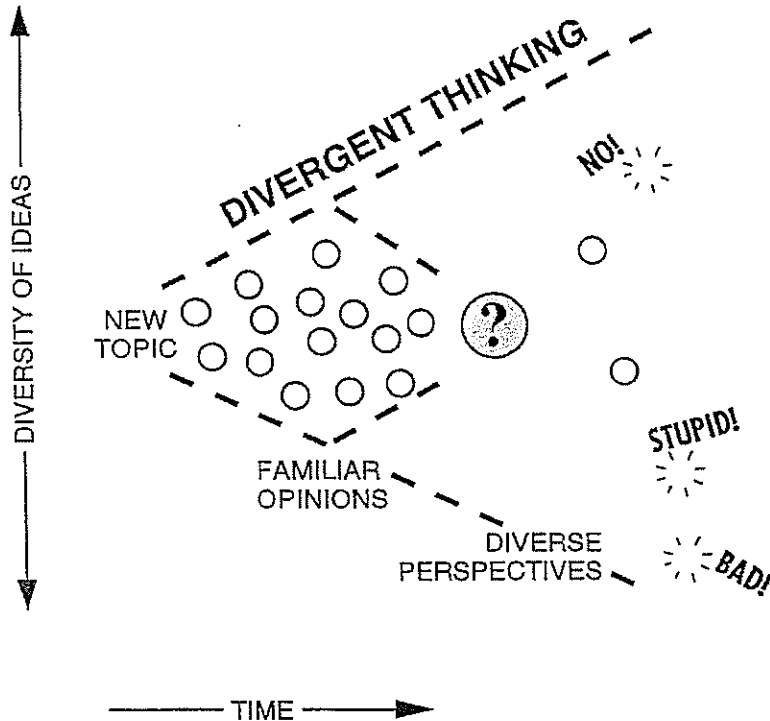
Unfortunately, most groups aren't very good at cultivating unfamiliar or unpopular opinions.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES

Now and then, if 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
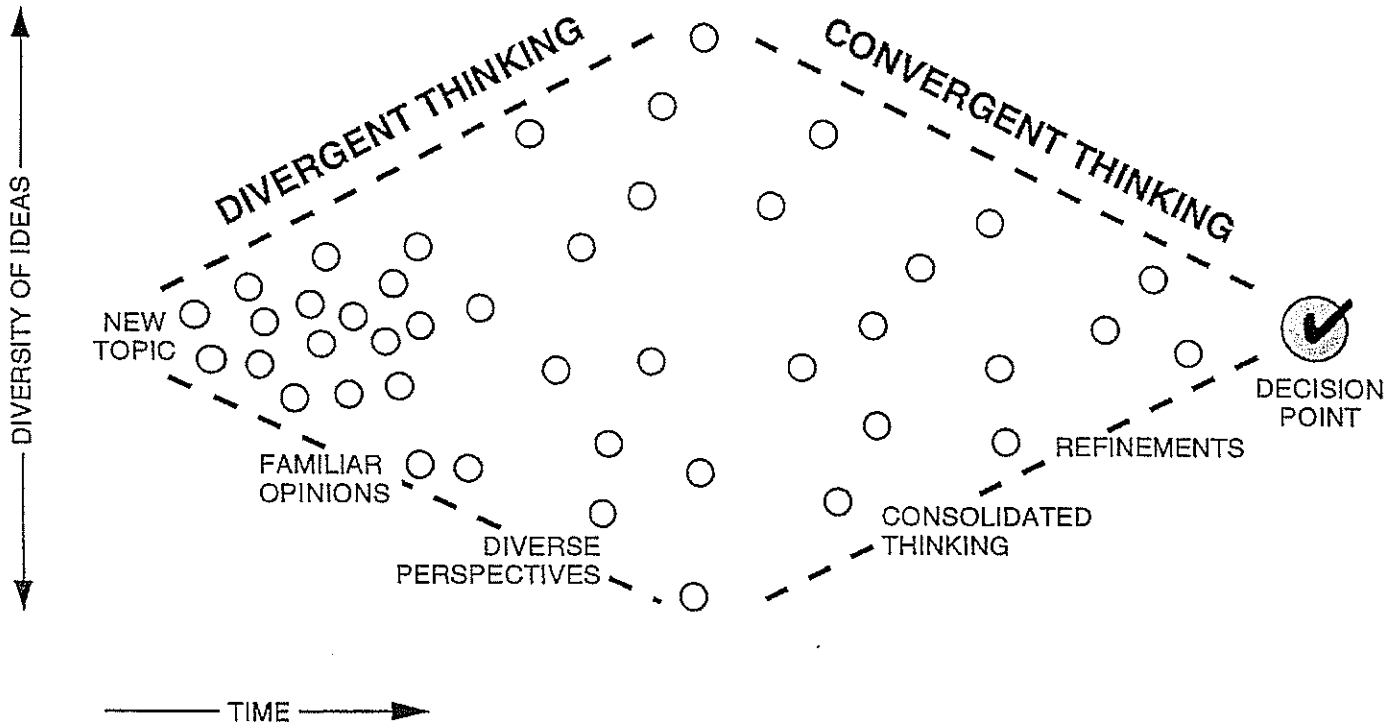
In theory, a group that has committed itself to thinking through a difficult problem would move forward in orderly, thoughtful steps. First, the group would generate and explore a diverse set of ideas. Next, they would consolidate the best thinking into a proposal. Then, they'd refine the proposal until 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
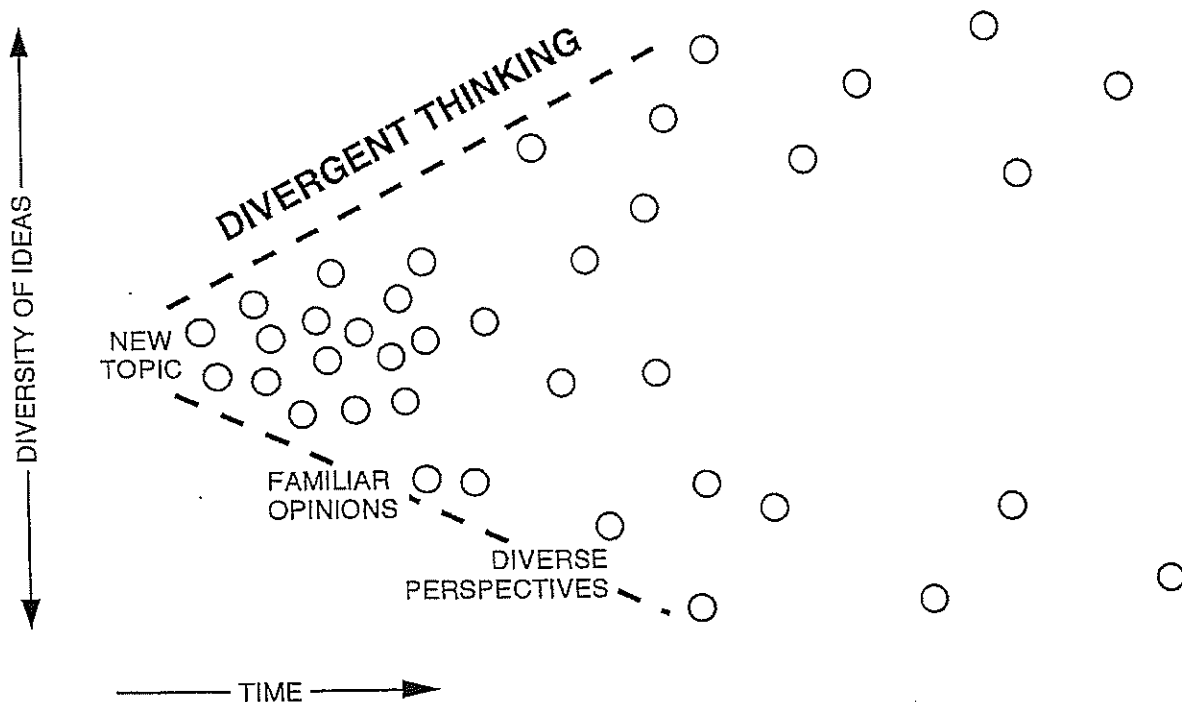
In practice, it's difficult to make the shift from expressing our own opinions to understanding a wide diversity of other people's perspectives. Many people get overloaded, or disoriented, or annoyed, or impatient. (Or all of the above.) Some people feel misunderstood and keep repeating themselves. Others push for closure. Sometimes several subconversations develop, each one occupying the attention of two or three people, and seemingly tangential or irrelevant to everyone else. And so on. Even the most sincere attempts to solve difficult problems often dissipate into confusion.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

ATTEMPTED STEP-BACKS

DIVERGENT THINKING

DIVERSITY OF IDEAS

NEW TOPIC

FAMILIAR OPINIONS

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

We're wasting time . . .

We're stuck . . .
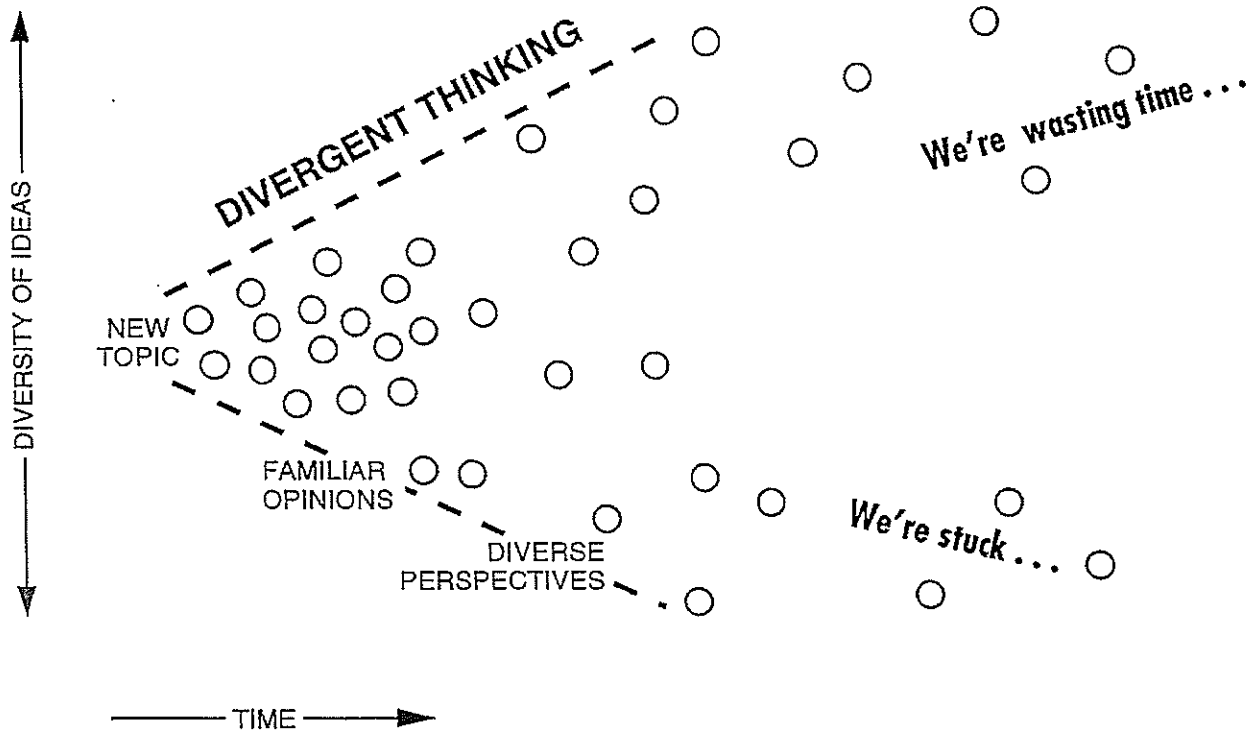
TIME

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?" But rarely does a whole group respond intelligently to this line of thought. Typically, 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

DIVERGENT THINKING

DIVERSITY OF IDEAS

NEW TOPIC

DECISION POINT

FAMILIAR OPINIONS

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

TIME
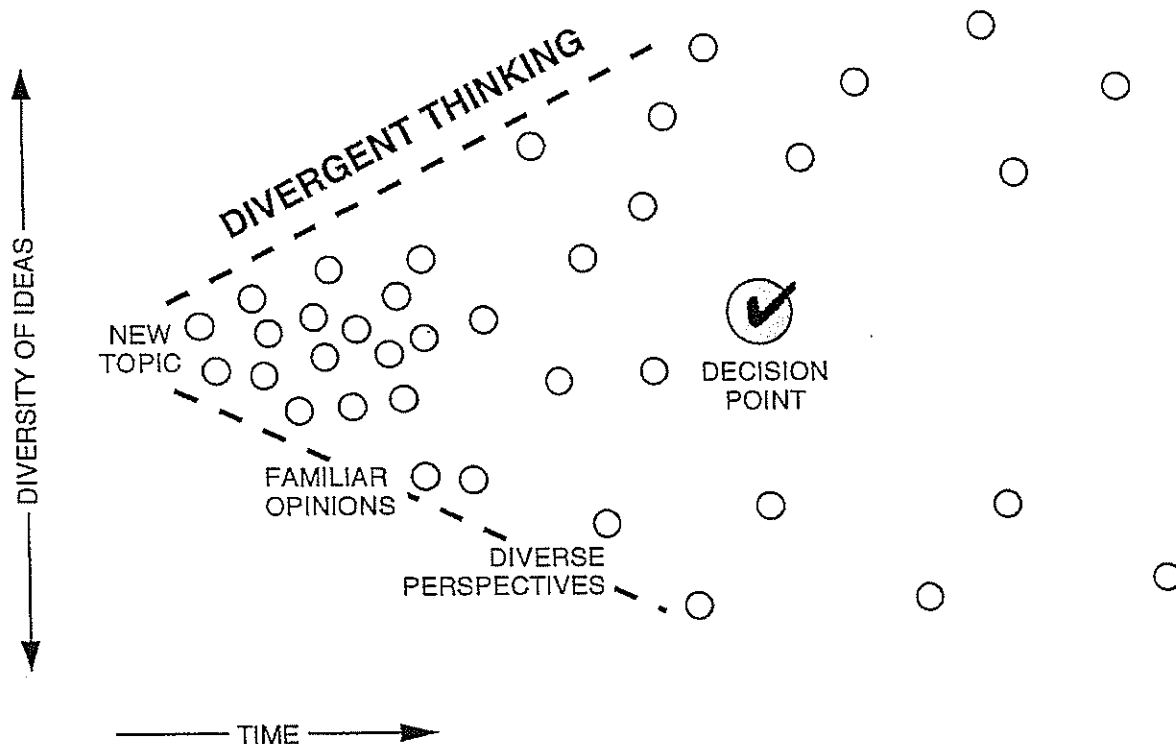
At this stage in a process, the person in charge of a meeting can make the problem worse if s/he tries to resolve the confusion by announcing that s/he has made a decision. This is a common mistake.

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.

Furthermore, 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?

DIVERGENT THINKING

CONVERGENT THINKING

?

What's wrong with this picture?

?

?

NEW TOPIC

?

What would make it more accurate?

?

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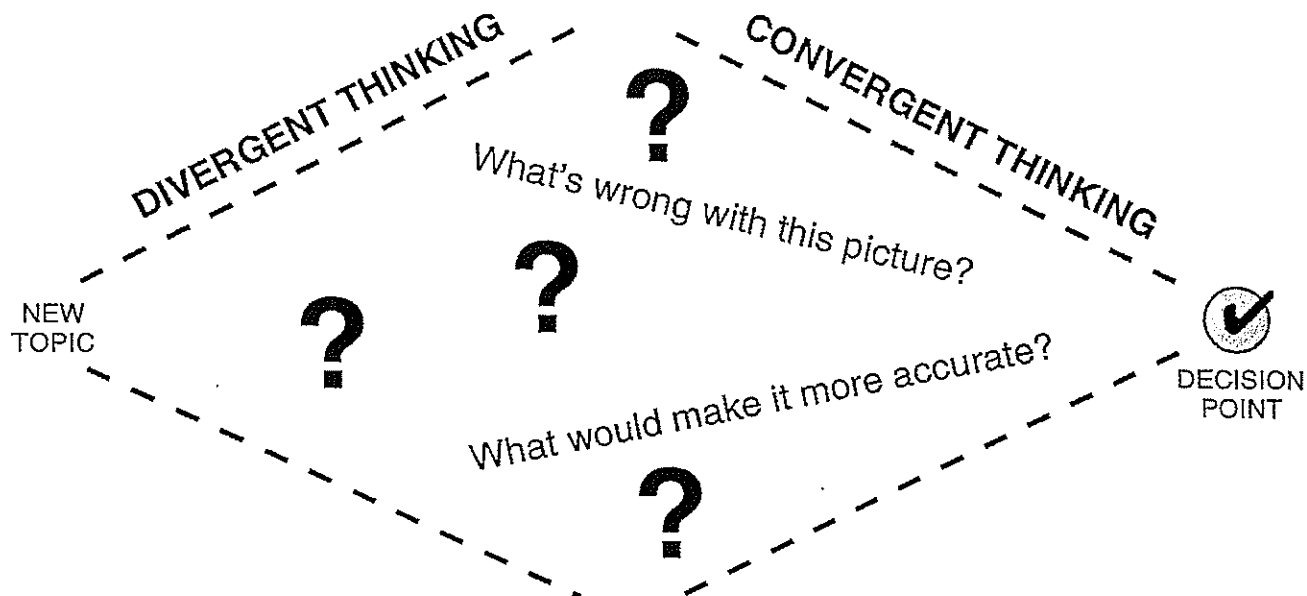
Obviously, there's something wrong with the idealized model. Convergent thinking simply does not follow automatically from a divergent thinking process. What's missing?

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

A REALISTIC MODEL

DIVERGENT THINKING

NEW TOPIC

FAMILIAR OPINIONS

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

STRUGGLE
IN THE
SERVICE
OF
INTEGRATION

CONVERGENT THINKING

DECISION POINT

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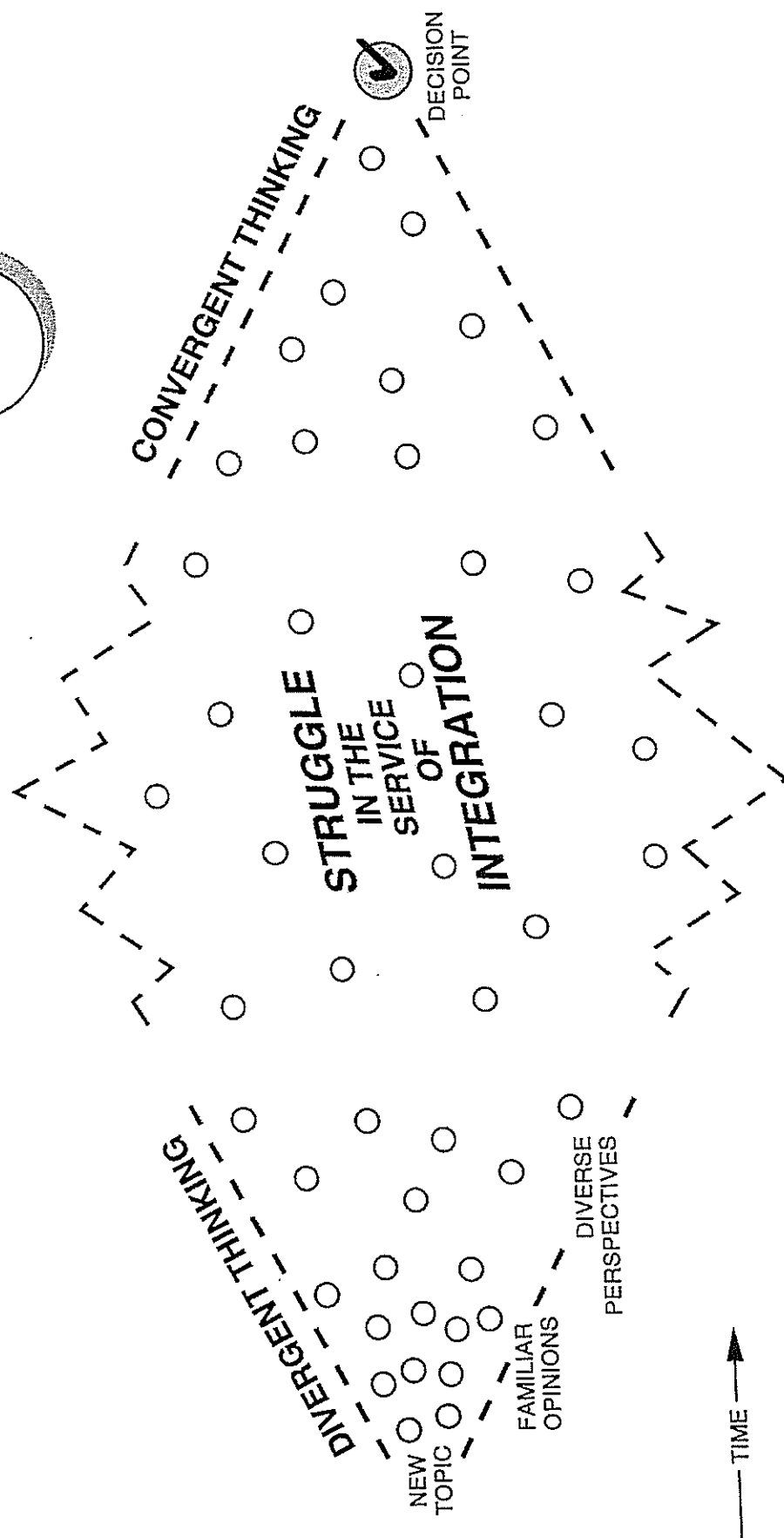
A period of confusion and frustration is a natural part of group decision-making. Once a group crosses the line from airing familiar opinions to exploring diverse perspectives, *group members will have to struggle in order to integrate new and different ways of thinking with their own.*

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DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

INTRODUCING THE GROAN ZONE

CONVERGENT THINKING

DECISION POINT

Groan Zone

DIVERGENT THINKING

NEW TOPIC

FAMILIAR OPINIONS

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

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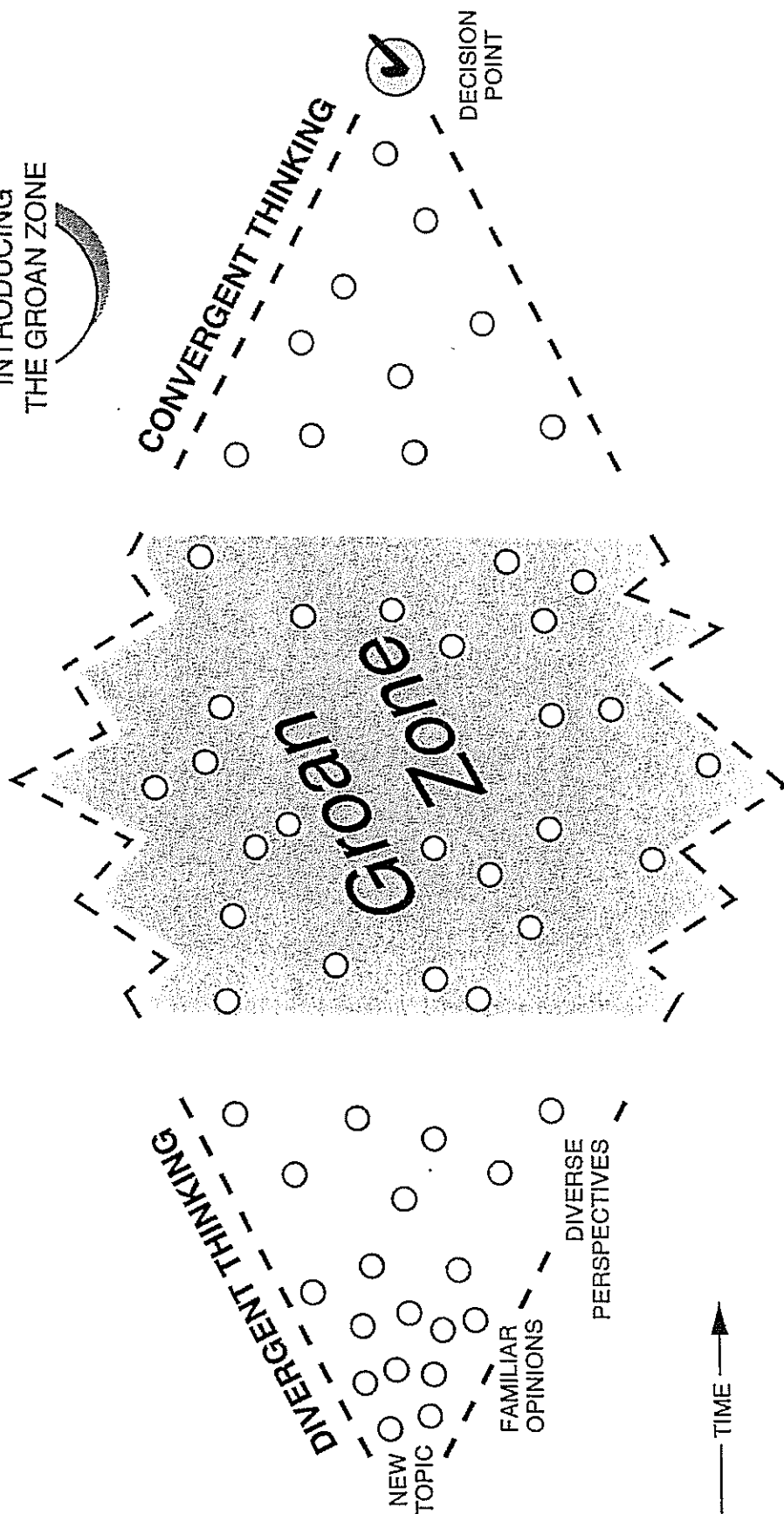
Struggling to understand a wide range of foreign or opposing ideas is not a pleasant experience. Group members can be repetitious, insensitive, defensive, short-tempered. When this occurs, most people don't have the slightest notion of what's happening to them. Sometimes the mere act of acknowledging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

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DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

THE DIAMOND OF
PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

Business as Usual

NEW TOPIC

Divergent Zone

Groan Zone

Convergent Zone

Closure Zone

DECISION POINT

TIME

20
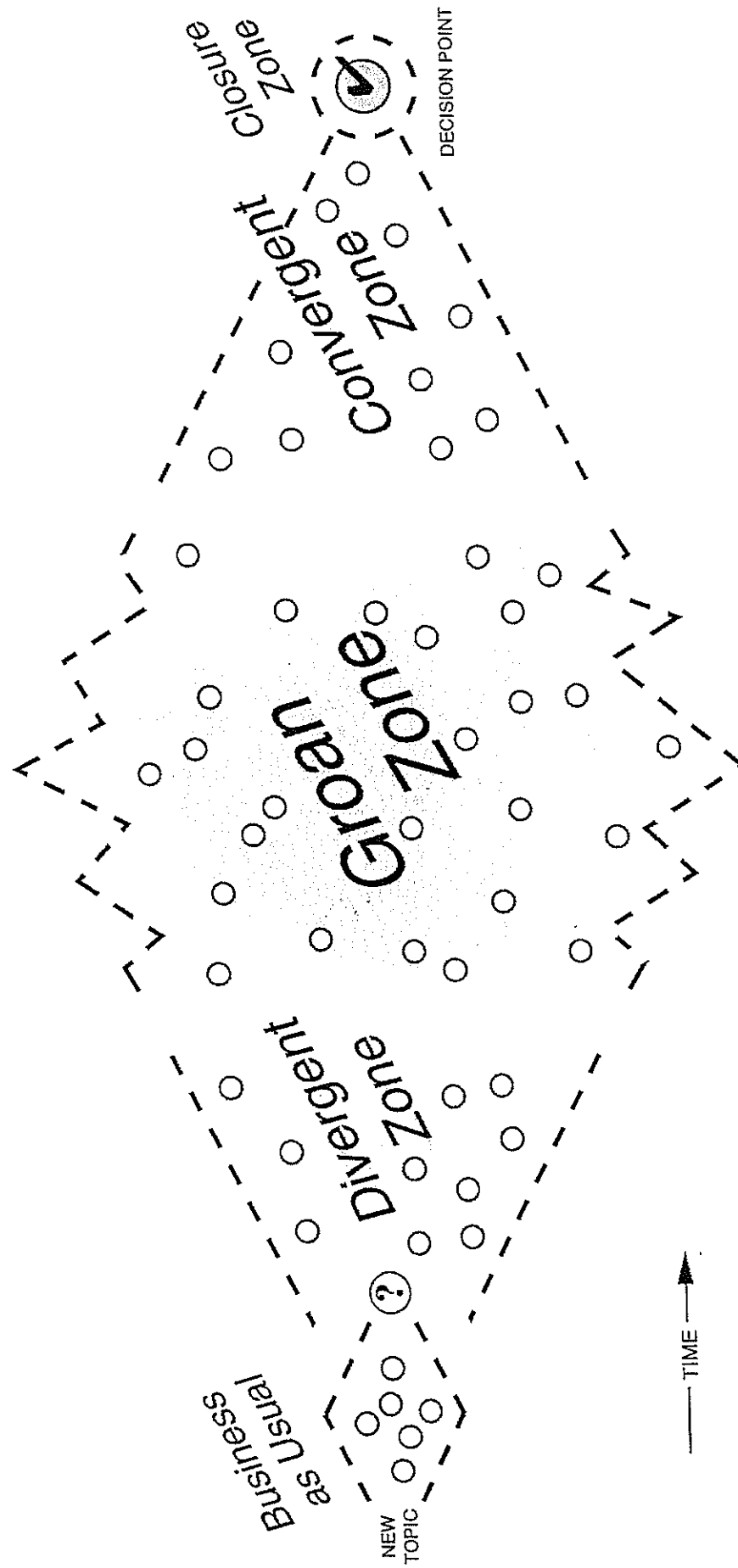
This is the *Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making.* It can be used in several ways. As a descriptive model, it provides groups with common language and shared points of reference. As a framework for intervention, it aids in the selection of appropriate problem solving methods and facilitation tools.

The *Diamond* describes the process a group goes through to solve a difficult problem. The process is neither smooth nor sequential. It is characterised by confusion and misunderstanding. Most people find it hard to tolerate the ambiguity and the conflict that are inherent when people don't have shared frames of reference. Yet a group's most significant breakthroughs are often preceded by a period of struggle.

By legitimizing the awkward, uncomfortable, yet entirely normal dynamics of diversity, the *Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making* helps facilitators give their groups more meaningful support during difficult times. This in turn enables all parties to tap the enormous potential of group decision-making.

PARTICIPATORY VALUES

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

- The Four Participatory Values

- Full Participation

- Mutual Understanding

- Inclusive Solutions

- Shared Responsibility

- How Participatory Values Affect People and Their Work

- Benefits of Participatory Values

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PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING CORE VALUES

FULL PARTICIPATION

In a participatory group, all member 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 their 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 sense of acceptance and understanding is what allows people to develop innovative ideas that incorporate everyone's point of view.

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 is expanded to take advantage of the truth held not only by the quick, the articulate, the most powerful and influential, but also of the truth held by the slower thinkers, the shy, the disenfranchised and the weak. As the Quakers say, "Everybody has a piece of the truth."

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In participatory groups, members feel a strong sense of responsibility for creating and developing sustainable agreements. They 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. 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
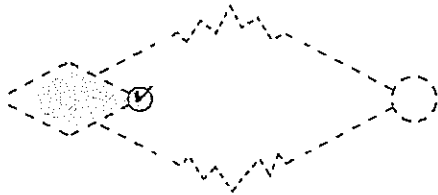
FULL PARTICIPATION DURING
A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

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 which 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.
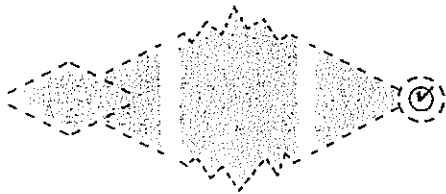
FULL PARTICIPATION DURING
A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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 making off-the-wall suggestions that stimulate their peers to think new thoughts. 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. 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
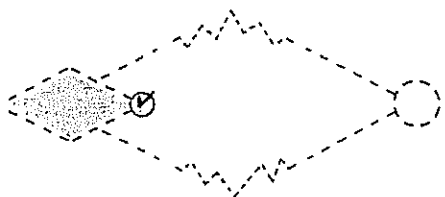
MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING DURING
A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

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.
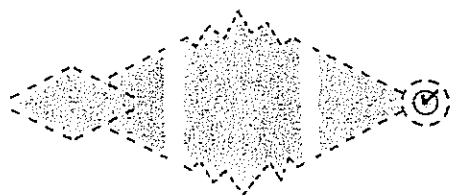
MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING DURING
A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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
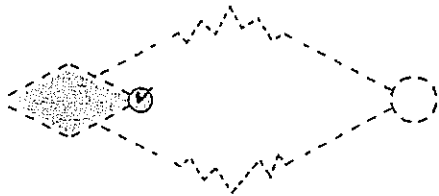
SOLUTIONS RESULTING FROM A
BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

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. Disagreements, 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 just the same. In either case, the final decision often excludes the views, needs and goals of the minority.
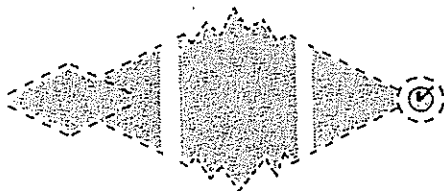
SOLUTIONS RESULTING FROM A
PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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 15. 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
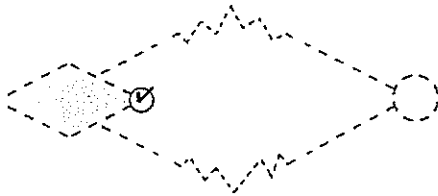
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY DURING
A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DISCUSSION

The operational value in a business-as-usual discussion is dependency on leadership, not shared responsibility. The person-in-charge is expected to run the meeting, monitor the progress of each topic, referee disputes, set ground rules, enforce time boundaries, and generally take full responsibility for all aspects of process management. To bring a discussion to closure, someone puts forward a proposal and says, "Is this okay with everyone?" or "Does anyone have any serious objections?" After a silence of about three seconds, the person-in-charge says, "Okay, it's decided." In this context, shared responsibility means being a (so-called) team-player. In other words, everyone is now expected to put aside their questions or doubts, and pull together to implement the decision.
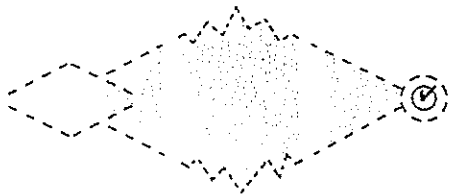
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY DURING
A PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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 the group, in other words, recognizes that s/he is an owner of the outcome. Thus, members voice objections even when doing so will 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.

THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY VALUES

Full Participation

Mutual Understanding

Inclusive Solutions

Shared Responsibility

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

Effective 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

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

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.

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3

INTRODUCTION TO THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

THE EXPERTISE THAT SUPPORTS A GROUP TO DO ITS BEST THINKING

- ▶ When is a Facilitator Needed?

- ▶ First Function:
  Encourage Full Participation

- ▶ Second Function:
  Promote Mutual Understanding

- ▶ Third Function:
  Foster Inclusive Solutions

- ▶ Fourth Function:
  Teach New Thinking Skills

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

WHAT IS A FACILITATOR AND WHY HAVE ONE?

The facilitator's job is to *support everyone to do their best thinking.* To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. By supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements.

How much value does this have to a group? The answer depends on the group's goals. Suppose a group holds meetings specifically for the purpose of trading information through announcements and reports. Do the members of that group need much help to do their best thinking? Not really. Likewise, suppose another group has monthly business-as-usual meetings to make routine decisions about standard problems, like task assignments or scheduling. Those kinds of issues could be handled for years without any facilitation whatsoever.

But what about more difficult challenges? For example, suppose a group's goal is to reduce violence on a high school campus. The participants are parents, teachers, administrators, church leaders and union officials. This group will quickly find out how difficult it is to conduct a sustained, thoughtful discussion. Despite a common goal, their frames of reference are very different. What seems to a parent like an obvious solution may seem simple-minded to an administrator. What seems reasonable to an administrator may seem cowardly to a teacher. What seems responsible to a teacher may place too many demands on a parent. What is the chance that this group will survive the Groan Zone?

Groups face difficult challenges all the time. Long-term planning is hard for an organization to do well. So is restructuring or reengineering. Here are some other tough issues groups face: clarifying roles and responsibilities for projects that have not been done before, resolving high-stakes conflicts or introducing new technology into a workplace. In situations like these, a group is likely to make wiser, more lasting decisions if they join forces with someone who knows how to support them to do their best thinking.

Most groups *do not know how* to solve tough problems on their own. They do not know how to build a shared framework of understanding – they seldom even recognize its significance. They dread conflict and discomfort and they try hard to avoid it. Yet, by avoiding the struggle to integrate one another's perspectives, the members of such a group greatly diminish their own potential to be effective. They *need* a facilitator.

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

FIRST FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR ENCOURAGES FULL PARTICIPATION

A Fundamental Problem: Self-Censorship

Inherent in group decision-making is the basic problem that people don't say what they are really thinking. It's hard to take risks, and it's particularly hard to do so when the group's response is likely to be hostile or dismissive. Yet in so many groups, the norms are oppressive. Consider these comments:

- "Haven't we already covered that point?"
- "Let's keep it simple, please."
- "Hurry up – we're running out of time."
- "What does *that* have to do with anything?"
- "Impossible. Won't work. No way."

Statements like these are injunctions against thinking out loud in a group. They discourage people from saying what they're thinking. The message is: if you want to speak, be simple and polished, and be able to say something familiar enough or entertaining enough for the group to accept.

The injunctions against thinking in public run like an underground stream below the surface of a group's discussion. Without realizing it, most people constantly edit their thinking before they speak. Who wants his/her ideas criticised before they are fully formed? Who wants to be told, "We've already answered that question." Who wants to make an effort to express a complex thought while others in the room are doodling or whispering? This type of treatment leaves many people feeling embarrassed or inadequate. *To protect themselves, people censor themselves.*

The Facilitator's Contribution

Imagine now that someone in the group understands this inherent difficulty, and that s/he has taken responsibility for helping people overcome it. Imagine that this person has the skills and the temperament to draw people out and help everyone feel heard. Imagine s/he knows how to make room for quiet members; how to reduce the incidence of premature criticism; how to support everyone to keep thinking instead of shutting down. If such a person is actually permitted to perform this role in a group, the quality of the group's participation will vastly improve.

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

SECOND FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR PROMOTES MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A Fundamental Problem: Fixed Positions

A group cannot do its best thinking if the members don't understand one another. But most people find it quite difficult to detach from their fixed positions. Instead, they get caught up in amplifying and defending their own perspectives.

Here's an example. A group of friends began exploring the possibility of forming a new business together. When the topic of money came up, biases emerged. One person wanted the profits divided equally. Another thought everyone should be paid on the basis of how much revenue they would generate. A third person believed the two visionaries should be paid more, to make sure they would not leave. And so on. None of them could change their minds easily. Nor would it have been realistic to expect them to do so – their opinions had been forming and developing for years.

And it gets worse! When people try to discuss their differences, they often misunderstand one another. Each person's life experiences are so individual, so singular; everyone has remarkably different views of the world. What people expect, what they assume, how they use language and how they behave – all these are likely sources of mutual misunderstanding. What's more, when people attempt to clear up a misunderstanding, they usually want their *own* ideas understood *first.* They may not say so directly, but their behavior indicates, "I can't really focus on what you are saying until I feel that you have understood *my* point of view." This easily becomes a vicious cycle. No wonder it's hard for people to let go of fixed positions!

The Facilitator's Contribution

A facilitator helps the group realize that sustainable agreements are built on a foundation of mutual understanding. S/he helps members see that thinking from each other's points of view is invaluable.

Moreover, the facilitator accepts the *inevitability of misunderstanding.* S/he recognizes that misunderstandings are stressful for everyone involved. The facilitator knows that people in distress need support; they need to be treated respectfully. S/he knows it is essential to stay impartial, to honor all points of view and to keep listening, so that each and every group member has confidence that *someone* understands them.

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

THIRD FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR FOSTERS INCLUSIVE SOLUTIONS

A Fundamental Problem: The Win/Lose Mentality

It's hard for most people to imagine that stakeholders with apparently irreconcilable differences might actually reach an agreement that benefits all parties. Most people are entrenched in a conventional mindset for solving problems and resolving conflicts – namely: "It's either my way or your way." As a result, most problem-solving discussions degenerate into critiques, rationalizations and sales jobs, as participants remain attached to their fixed positions and work to defend their own interests.

The Facilitator's Contribution

An experienced facilitator knows how to help a group search for innovative ideas that incorporate everyone's points of view. This can be a challenging task – the facilitator is often the only person in the room who has even considered the possibility that inclusive alternatives may exist.

To accomplish this goal, a facilitator draws from the knowledge s/he has acquired by studying the theory and practice of collaborative problem solving. Thus s/he knows the steps it takes to build sustainable agreements.

- S/he knows how to help a groups break free from restrictive business-as-usual discussions and engage in divergent thinking (see chapter 13).

- S/he can help a group survive the Groan Zone as the members struggle to build a shared framework of understanding (see chapter 14).

- S/he knows how to help a group formulate creative proposals that reflect the weaving-together of several perspectives (see chapter 15).

- S/he knows how to bring agreements to closure (see chapters 16 – 17).

In short, s/he understands the mechanics of group decision-making.

When a facilitator introduces a group to the values and methods that foster inclusive solutions, the impact is profound. Many people scoff at the very suggestion that a group can find meaningful solutions to difficult problems. As they discover the validity of this new way of thinking, they may reassess their entire outlook on the potential of groups.

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

FOURTH FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR TEACHES NEW THINKING SKILLS

A Fundamental Problem: Inept Meeting Management

Why are most meetings run so poorly? Many people would answer, "It's my boss. S/he doesn't know what s/he is doing." But this is a misattribution – blaming an individual for what is actually a culture-wide problem. The fact is that neither leaders nor group members are skilled in collaborative methods. Very *few* people understand the mechanics of group decision-making well enough to organize a group of people into a productive team of thinkers.

The Facilitator's Contribution

A facilitator has both the opportunity and the responsibility to teach group members how to design and manage an effective decision-making process. Here are four sets of skills a group can learn from a competent facilitator:

Principles for Finding Inclusive Solutions Most people are entrenched in a conventional mindset for solving problems and resolving conflicts – namely: "It's either my way or your way." A facilitator can teach a group how to develop innovative ideas that take everyone's interests into account.

Well-Designed Procedures for Running Meetings Clear, explicit procedures are among the most important thinking skills a group can learn. For example, consider the impact of a badly designed agenda: how can a group be effective when people don't know what they're trying to accomplish? A facilitator can teach an array of procedures for running successful meetings.

Structured Thinking Activities Sometimes a group needs help focusing on the same thing at the same time. At those times, a structured thinking activity – *formal brainstorming*, for example – can be very helpful. Seasoned facilitators develop a repertoire of structured thinking activities that can be offered to groups at appropriate times.

Clear Language to Describe Group Dynamics When a facilitator teaches a model like the Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making, s/he provides group members with shared points of reference and shared language. This enables a group to step back from the *content* of their discussion and talk about their *process*, so they can improve the dynamics of their meeting.

FACILITATOR SKILLS
FOR PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING

Encourage
Full Participation

Promote
Mutual Understanding

Foster
Inclusive Solutions

Teach
New Thinking Skills

Personal
Learning

Effective
Groups

Sustainable
Agreements

The facilitator's mission is to support everyone to do their best thinking.
Participatory values support intelligent thinking – serious, creative thinking by engaged, committed individuals who can work together to make wise decisions.

For the first three chapters of this book, the focus has been on the *what* and the *why* of supporting groups to do their best thinking. The *how* has not been discussed. Beginning with the next chapter, the focus shifts to methods, skills and tools.

Facilitation skills can be grouped into two sets: those which are useful in virtually every stage of a thinking process, and those which are useful primarily at a specific stage. This distinction is the key to the organization of the rest of the book.

The skills that are useful *throughout* a process are presented in the next eight chapters, which comprise *Part Two: Facilitator Fundamentals.* The skills that are useful primarily in a specific stage are presented in the final eight chapters, *Part Three: Building Sustainable Agreements.*

4

FACILITATIVE LISTENING SKILLS

TECHNIQUES FOR HONORING
ALL POINTS OF VIEW

- Diverse Communication Styles
- Paraphrasing
- Drawing People Out
- Mirroring
- Gathering Ideas
- Stacking
- Tracking
- Encouraging
- Balancing
- Making Space
- Intentional Silence
- Listening for Common Ground

THE CALCULUS OF DIVERSITY

THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE

**Ideas Expressed
in Acceptable
Communication Styles**

**Ideas Expressed
in Unacceptable
Communication Styles**
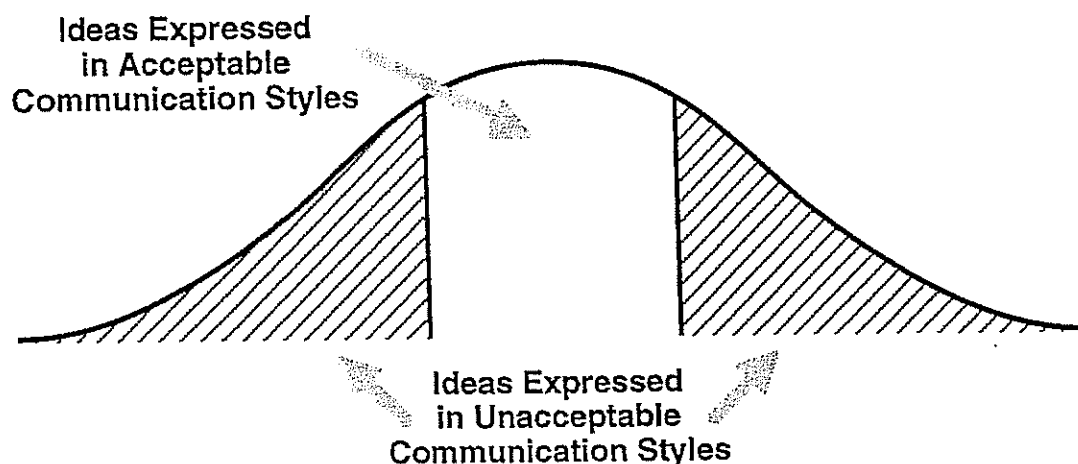
Of all the ideas that are put forth in the course of a meeting, some gain quite a bit of attention while others disappear from awareness as if they had never been spoken. One of the major reasons for this phenomenon is explained by the diagram. Here is the principle: an idea that is expressed in an acceptable communication style will be taken more seriously by more people. Conversely, ideas that are presented poorly or offensively are harder for people to hear.

For example, many people want everyone's statements to be succinct, not repetitious. Others can be impatient with shy or nervous members who speak in broken sentences. Others may not want to listen to exaggerations, distortions, or unfounded pronouncements. Some people refuse to respond to someone who interrupts a discussion in order to raise a completely different subject. And some people are profoundly uncomfortable with anyone who shows too much feeling. In any of these cases, some listeners will probably ignore the substance of the ideas being expressed, no matter how valuable those ideas might be.

There are a great many groups whose members genuinely want each other to voice their opinions, share their insights, and come up with interesting new ideas. But the range and the richness of their discussion will be limited by the degree to which they can tolerate diverse communication styles.

THE CALCULUS OF DIVERSITY

STRETCHING THE LIMITS

Ideas Expressed
in Acceptable
Communication Styles

Ideas Expressed
in Unacceptable
Communication Styles
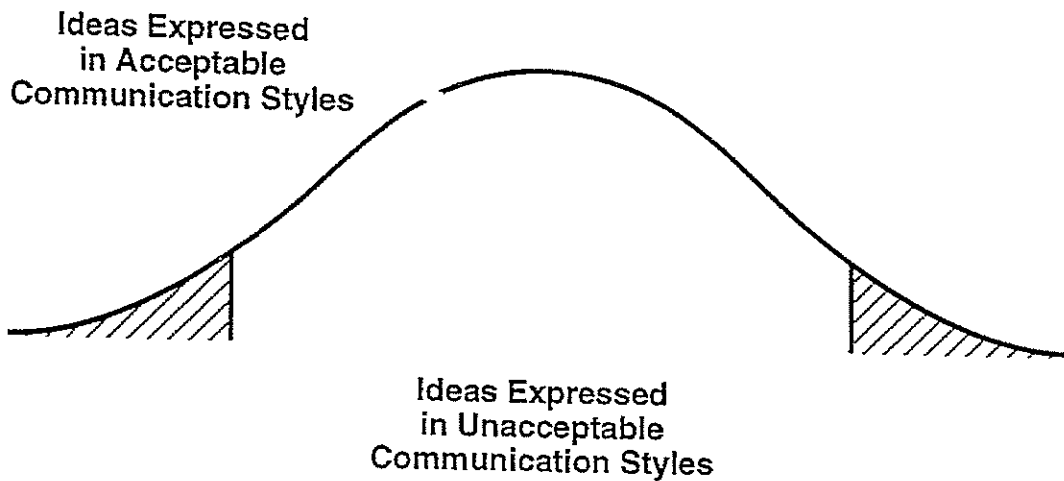
This diagram shows the range of ideas available to groups that make the effort to tolerate diverse communication styles. By using good listening skills, a facilitator can be an excellent support to such groups. For example:

- When someone is being repetitious, a facilitator can use paraphrasing to help that person summarize his/her thinking.

- A facilitator can help those who speak in awkward, broken sentences by slowing them down and drawing them out.

- Similarly, a facilitator can validate the central point of an exaggeration or distortion without quarreling over its accuracy.

- A facilitator can treat interruptions firmly yet respectfully, by assuring the speaker that when the current discussion ends, the facilitator will ask the group what to do with the new topic.

- When someone expresses him/herself with intense feeling, a facilitator can acknowledge the emotion, then make sure the speaker's point does not get lost.

These situations demonstrate how important it is for a facilitator to listen skillfully and respectfully to *everyone*.

PARAPHRASING

WHY:

- *Paraphrasing* is a fundamental listening skill. It is the foundation for many other facilitative listening skills, including *mirroring, gathering,* and *drawing people out.*

- *Paraphrasing* has both a calming effect and a clarifying effect. It reassures the speaker that his or her ideas are worth listening to. And it provides the speaker with a chance to hear how his/her ideas are being heard by others.

- *Paraphrasing* is especially useful on occasions when a speaker's statements are convoluted or confusing. At such times, the paraphrase will help the speaker gauge how well his/her ideas are getting across.

- In sum, *paraphrasing* is the tool of choice for supporting people to think out loud.

HOW:

- Use your own words to say what you think the speaker said.

- If the speaker's statement is one or two sentences, use roughly the same number of words when you paraphrase it.

- If the speaker's statement is many sentences long, summarize it.

- Preface your paraphrase with a comment like one of these:
  "It sounds like what you're saying is . . ."
  "This is what I'm hearing you say . . ."
  "Let me see if I'm understanding . . ."

- When you have completed the paraphrase, look for the speaker's reaction. Say something like, "Did I get it?" Verbally or nonverbally, s/he will indicate whether or not s/he feels understood. If not, *keep asking for clarification until you understand what s/he meant.*

DRAWING PEOPLE OUT

WHY:

- *Drawing people out* is a way of supporting people to take the next step in clarifying and refining their ideas. It sends the speaker this message, "I'm with you; I understand you so far. Now tell me a little more."

- *Drawing people out* is particularly useful in two circumstances: 1) when someone is having difficulty clarifying an idea; 2) when someone thinks s/he is being clear, but the thought is actually vague or confusing to the listener.

- *Drawing people out* sends the message, "Take your time and get your idea *all the way out.*"

- When deciding whether to draw someone out, ask yourself this question: "Do I think I understand the core of what s/he is trying to say?" If the answer is "no," then draw the speaker out.

HOW:

- *Drawing people out* is most effectively used *along with paraphrasing, not instead of paraphrasing.*
  Example: The speaker says, "I think it's really fair to say that most people are pretty uncomfortable with change." The listener paraphrases by saying, "So it sounds like you're saying most people are uneasy with change." Then the listener asks, "Can you give me an example of what you mean?"

- The most basic technique of *drawing people out* is to paraphrase the speaker's statement, then ask open-ended, nondirective questions.
  Examples: "Can you say more about that?" or "What do you mean by . . .?" or "How so?"

- Here is a less common method that also works well. First, paraphrase the speaker's statement, then use *connectors* such as, "So . . ." or "And . . ."
  Example: "You're saying to wait six more weeks before we sign the contract, because . . ."

MIRRORING

WHY:

- *Mirroring* captures people's exact words. It is a highly formal version of *paraphrasing,* in which the facilitator repeats the speaker's exact words. Some people need this degree of . precision in order to feel that they are truly being heard.

- Newly-formed groups, and groups unfamiliar with using a facilitator, often benefit from the trust-building effects of *mirroring.*

- In general, the more a facilitator feels the need to establish his/her neutrality, the more frequently s/he should *mirror* rather than paraphrase.

- *Mirroring* speeds up the tempo of a slow-moving discussion. Thus it is the *tool of choice* when facilitating a brainstorming process.

HOW:

- If the speaker has said a single sentence, repeat it back verbatim.

- If the speaker has said more than one sentence, repeat back key words or phrases.

- In either case, *use their words not your words.*

- Mirroring the speaker's words and mirroring the speaker's tone of voice are *two different things.* You want your tone of voice to remain warm and accepting, regardless of what the speaker's voice sounds like.

- Be yourself with your gestures and tone of voice; don't be wooden or phony. Remember, a key purpose of *mirroring* is building trust.

GATHERING IDEAS

WHY:

- To help a group build a list of ideas at a fast moving pace, you want to *gather* ideas, *not discuss* them.

- *Gathering* is a skill that combines *mirroring* and *paraphrasing* with physical gestures. Listening skills acknowledge people's thoughts and reduce their inclination to defend their ideas. Physical gestures – waving an arm or walking around – serve as "energy boosters" that keep people feeling involved.

- In order to set a fast, lively pace, use *mirroring* more than *paraphrasing*. When you repeat their exact words, many participants get into the groove of expressing their ideas in short phrases – typically three to five words. These are much easier to record on flipcharts than long sentences.

HOW:

- Effective *gathering* starts with a concise description of the task. For example, "For the next ten minutes, please evaluate this proposal by calling out 'pros' and 'cons.' First I'll ask for someone to call out a 'pro' reaction. Then I'll ask for a 'con,' and so on. We'll build both lists at the same time."

- If it's the group's first time listing ideas, spend a little time teaching them *suspended judgment*. Example: "For this next activity, I'd like everyone to feel free to express their ideas, even the off-beat or unpopular ones. So please let this be a time for generating ideas, not judging them. The discussion can come as soon as you finish making the list."

- Now have the group begin. As members call out their items, mirror or paraphrase whatever is said.

- Honor all points of view. If someone says something that sounds "off the wall," just mirror it and keep moving.

STACKING

WHY:

- *Stacking* is a procedure for helping people take turns when several people want to speak at once.

- *Stacking* lets everyone know that they are, in fact, going to have their turn to speak. So instead of competing for air time, people are free to listen without distraction.

- In contrast, when people don't know when or even whether their turn will come, they can't help but vie for position. This leads to various expressions of impatience and disrespect – especially interruptions.

- When a facilitator does not stack, s/he has to privately keep track of who has spoken and who is waiting to speak. *Stacking* relieves the facilitator of this responsibility; everyone knows when his/her turn is coming.

HOW:

- *Stacking* is a four-step procedure. First, the facilitator asks those who want to speak to raise their hands. Then s/he creates a speaking order by assigning a number to each person. Third, s/he calls on people when their turn to speak arrives. Then, when the last person has spoken, the facilitator checks to see if anyone else wants to speak. If so, the facilitator does another round of *stacking*. Here's an example of each step:

- Step 1. "Would all those who want to speak, please raise your hands."

- Step 2. "Susan, you're first. Deb, you're second. Bill, you're third."

- Step 3. [*When Susan has finished*] "Who was second? Was it you Deb? OK, go ahead."

- Step 4. [*After the last person has spoken*] "Does anyone else have something to say?"

TRACKING

WHY:

- *Tracking* means keeping track of the various lines of thought that are going on simultaneously within a single discussion. For example, suppose a group is discussing a plan to hire a new employee. Two people are talking about roles and responsibilities. Two others are discussing financial implications, and another two are reviewing their experiences with the previous employee. In such cases, people need help keeping track of all that's going on, because they are focused primarily on clarifying their own ideas.

- People often act as though the particular issue that interests *them* is the one that *everyone* should focus on. *Tracking* lets the group see that several elements of the topic are being discussed, and treats all as equally valid.

- *Tracking* relieves the anxiety felt by someone who wonders why the group isn't responding to his/her ideas.

HOW:

- *Tracking* is a three-step process. First, the facilitator indicates that s/he is going to step back from the conversation and *summarize* it. Then s/he names the different conversations that have been in play. Last, s/he checks for accuracy with the group. Here's an example of each step:

- Step 1. "It sounds like there are three conversations going on right now. I want to make sure I'm tracking them."

- Step 2. "It sounds like one conversation is about roles and responsibilities. Another is about finances. And a third is about what you've learned by working with the last person who held this job."

- Step 3. "Am I getting it right?"

- People generally respond well to these questions. If someone tries to clarify what was important about *their* issue, be supportive. But don't play favorites – ask for clarifications from others too.

ENCOURAGING

WHY:

- *Encouraging* is the art of creating an opening for people to participate, without putting any one individual on the spot.

- There are times in a meeting when someone may appear to be "sitting back and letting others do all the work." This doesn't necessarily mean that they are lazy or irresponsible. Instead, it may be that they are not feeling engaged by the discussion. With a little encouragement to participate, they often discover an aspect of the topic that holds meaning for them.

- *Encouraging* is especially helpful during the *early stage of a discussion*, while members are still warming up. As people get more engaged, they don't need as much encouragement to participate.

HOW:

Here are some examples of the technique of *encouraging:*

- "Who else has an idea?"

- "Is there a student's perspective on this issue?"

- "Does anyone have a 'war story' you're willing to share?"

- "A lot of women have been talking. Let's hear from the men."

- "Jim just offered us an idea that he called a 'general principle.' Can anyone give us an example of this principle in action?"

- "What was said at table two?"

- "Is this discussion raising questions for anyone?"

- "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken for awhile."

BALANCING

WHY:

- The direction of a discussion often follows the lead set by the first few people who speak on that topic. Using *balancing*, a facilitator helps a group round out its discussion by asking for other views that may be present but unexpressed.

- *Balancing* undercuts the common myth that "silence means consent." In doing so, it provides welcome assistance to individuals who don't feel safe enough to express views that they perceive as minority positions.

- *Balancing* not only assists individual members who need a little support at that moment; it *also* has strong positive effects on the norms of the group as a whole. It sends the message, "It is acceptable here for people to speak their mind, no matter what opinions they hold."

HOW:

Here are some examples of *balancing:*

- "Okay, now we know where three people stand; does anyone else have a different position?"

- "Are there other ways of looking at this?"

- "What do others think?"

- "Does everyone else agree with this?"

- "So, we've heard the 'x' point of view, and the 'y' point of view. Is there a third way of looking at this?"

- "Let's see how many people stand on each side of this issue. We're not making a decision, and I'm not asking you to vote. This is just an 'opinion poll' to find out how much controversy we've got in the room. Ready? How many people think it would be good if . . .?"

MAKING SPACE

WHY:

- *Making space* sends the quiet person this message: "If you don't wish to talk now, that's fine. But if you *would* like to speak, here's an opportunity."

- Every group has some members who are highly verbal and other members who speak less frequently. When a group has a fast-paced discussion style, quiet members and slower thinkers may have trouble getting a word in edgewise.

- Some people habitually keep out of the limelight because they are afraid of being perceived as rude or competitive. Others might hold back when they're new to a group and unsure of what's acceptable and what's not. Still others keep their thoughts to themselves because they're convinced their ideas aren't "as good as" those of others. In all of these cases, people benefit from a facilitator who makes space for them to participate.

HOW:

- Keep an eye on the quiet members. Be on the lookout for body language or facial expressions that may indicate their desire to speak.

- Invite them to speak. For example, "Was there a thought you wanted to express?" or "Did you want to add anything?" or "You look like you might be about to say something . . ."

- If they decline, be gracious and move on. No one likes being put on the spot and everyone is entitled to make his/her own choice about whether and when to participate.

- If necessary, hold others off. For example, if a quiet member makes a move to speak but someone jumps in ahead say, "Let's go one at a time. Rita, why don't you go first?"

- Note: if participation is *very* uneven, suggest a structured go-around to give each person a chance to speak.

INTENTIONAL SILENCE

WHY:

- *Intentional silence* is highly underrated. It consists of a pause, usually lasting no more than a few seconds, and it is done to give the speaker that brief extra "quiet time" to discover what they want to say.

- Some people need the momentary silence because they are not fully in touch with what they're thinking or feeling. Others need it because they are wrestling over whether or not to say something that might be risky. Still others need the silence to organize their thoughts into a coherent communication.

- *Intentional silence* is also powerful when a group member's remark seems too pat, too easy. The facilitator's silent attention allows that person to reflect on what s/he just said, and express his/her thoughts in more depth.

HOW:

- Five seconds of silence can seem a lot longer than it really is. Thus, the ability to tolerate the awkwardness most people feel during silence is the most important element of this listening skill. If the facilitator can survive it, everyone else will too.

- With eye contact and body language, stay focused on the speaker.

- Say nothing, not even "hmm" or "uh huh." Do not even nod or shake your head. Just stay relaxed and pay attention.

- If necessary, hold up a hand to keep others from breaking the silence.

- Sometimes everyone in the group is confused or agitated or having trouble focusing. At such times, silence may be very helpful. Say, "Let's take a minute of silence to think what this means to each of us."

LISTENING FOR COMMON GROUND

WHY:

- *Listening for common ground* is a powerful intervention when group members are polarized. It validates the group's areas of disagreement and focuses the group on their areas of agreement.

- Many disputes contain elements of agreement. For example, civil rights activists often argue vehemently over priorities and tactics, even while they agree on broad goals. When disagreements cause the members of a group to take polarized positions, it becomes hard for people to recognize that they have *anything* in common. This isolation can sometimes be overcome when the facilitator validates *both* the differences in the group *and* the areas of common ground.

- *Listening for common ground* is also a tool for instilling hope. People who believe they are opposed on every front may discover that they share a value, a belief or a goal.

HOW:

- *Listening for common ground* is a four-step process. First, indicate that you are going to *summarize the group's differences and similarities*. Second, summarize the differences. Third, note areas of common ground. Last, check for accuracy.

- Step 1. "Let me summarize what I'm hearing from each of you – I'm hearing a lot of differences but also some similarities."

- Step 2. "It sounds like one group wants to leave work early during the holiday season, and the other group would prefer to take a few days of vacation."

- Step 3. "Even so, you all seem to agree that you want *some* time off before New Year's."

- Step 4. "Have I got it right?"

- A variation is to *highlight an area of likely agreement*. "Several of you say this plan would cost too much. Do others think so?" Look around the room for nods of confirmation. "Well, *there's* something you all agree on."