

# 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.

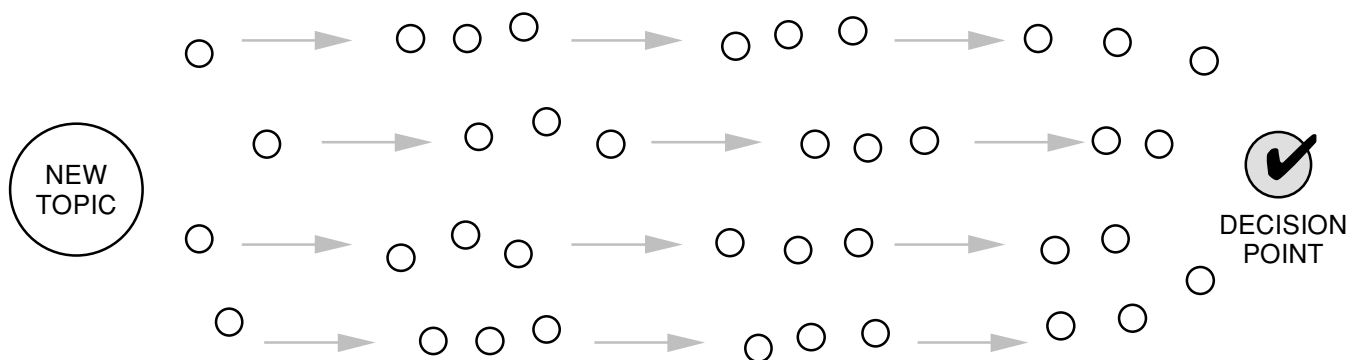
People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.

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.

## 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.

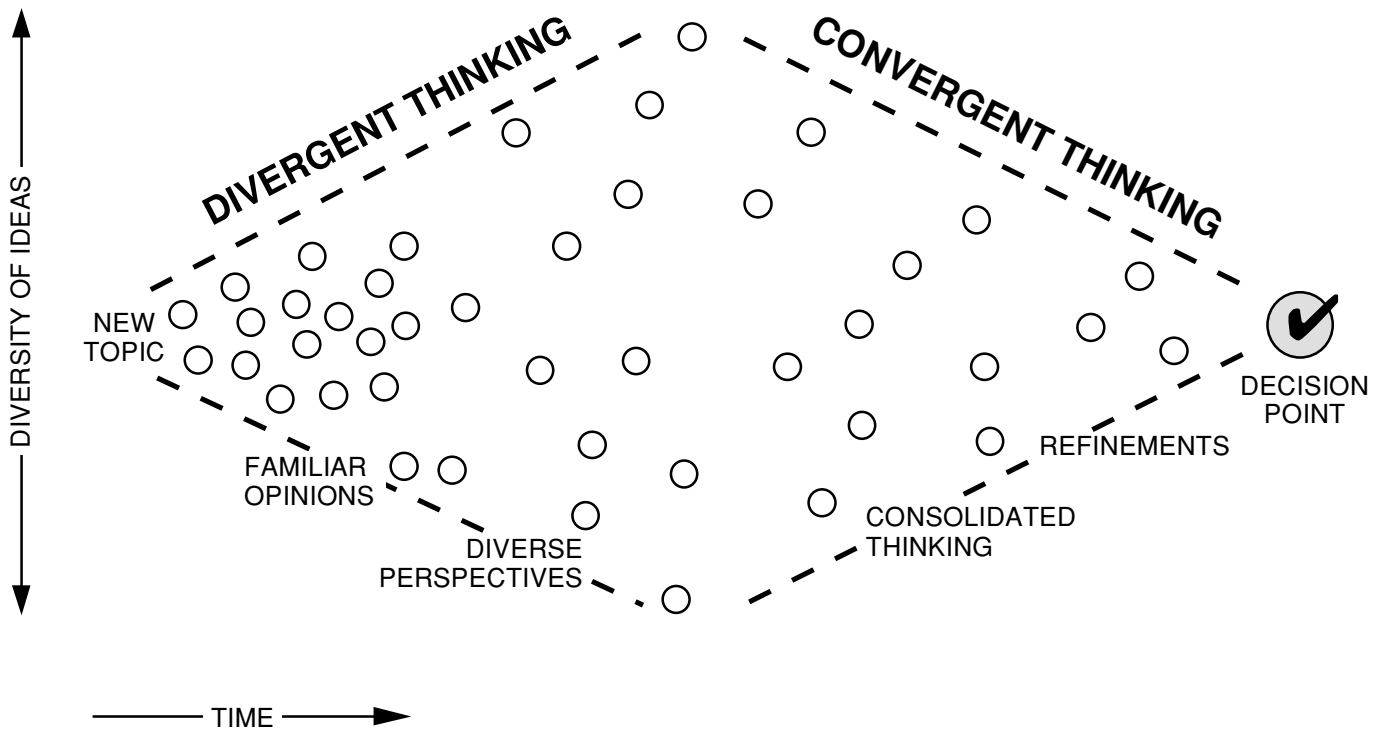
As diagrammed, everyone appears to be tracking each other's ideas, everyone goes at the same pace, and everyone stays on board every step of the way.

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

IDEALIZED  
PROCESS

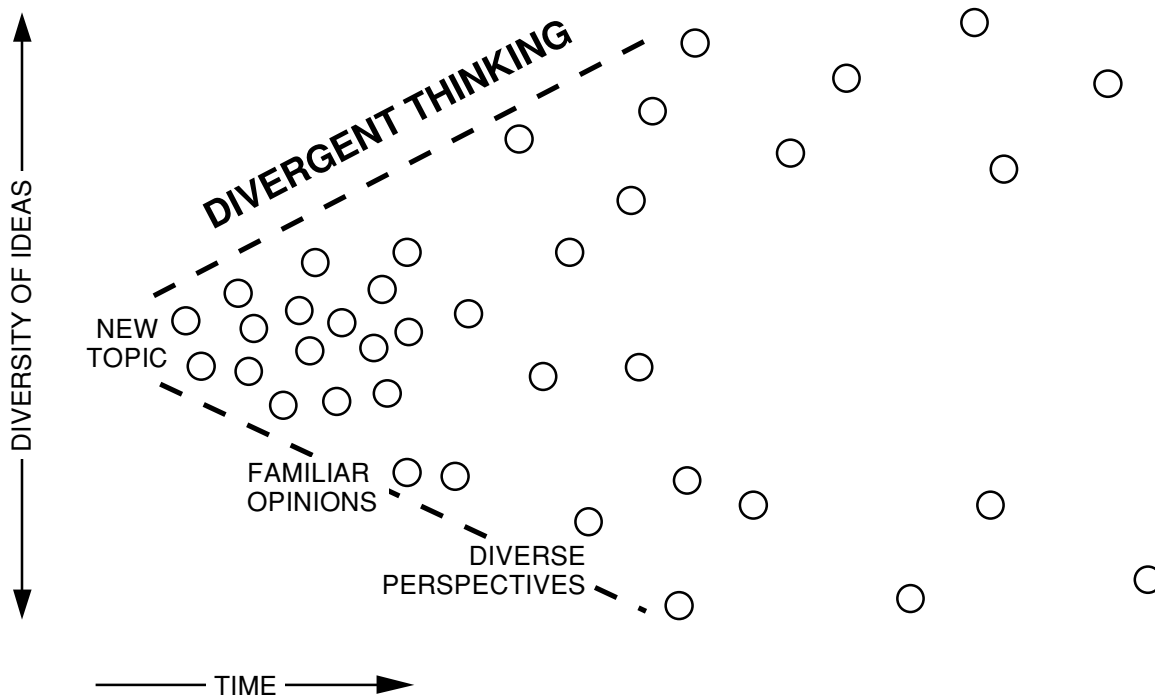


*In theory*, a group that has committed itself to thinking through a difficult problem would move forward in orderly, thoughtful steps. First, the group would generate and explore a diverse set of ideas. Next, they would consolidate the best thinking into a proposal. Then, they'd refine the proposal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

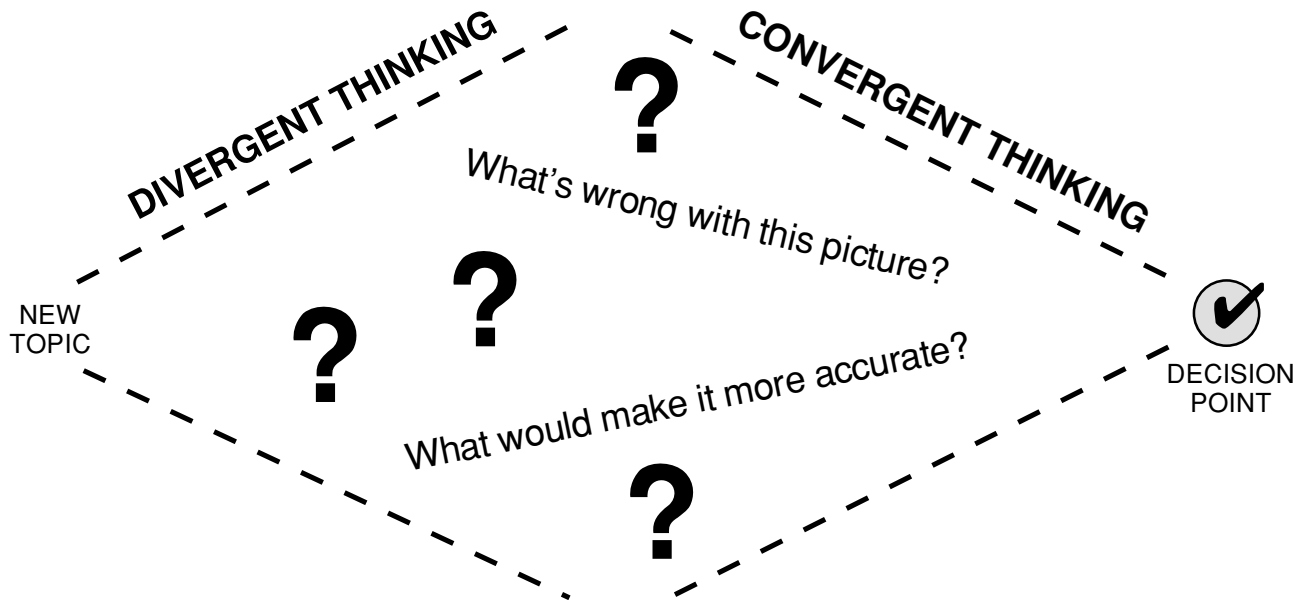


*In practice*, it's hard for people to shift from expressing their own opinions to understanding the opinions of others. And it's particularly challenging to do so when a wide diversity of perspectives are in play. In such cases people can get overloaded, disoriented, annoyed, impatient – or all of the 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

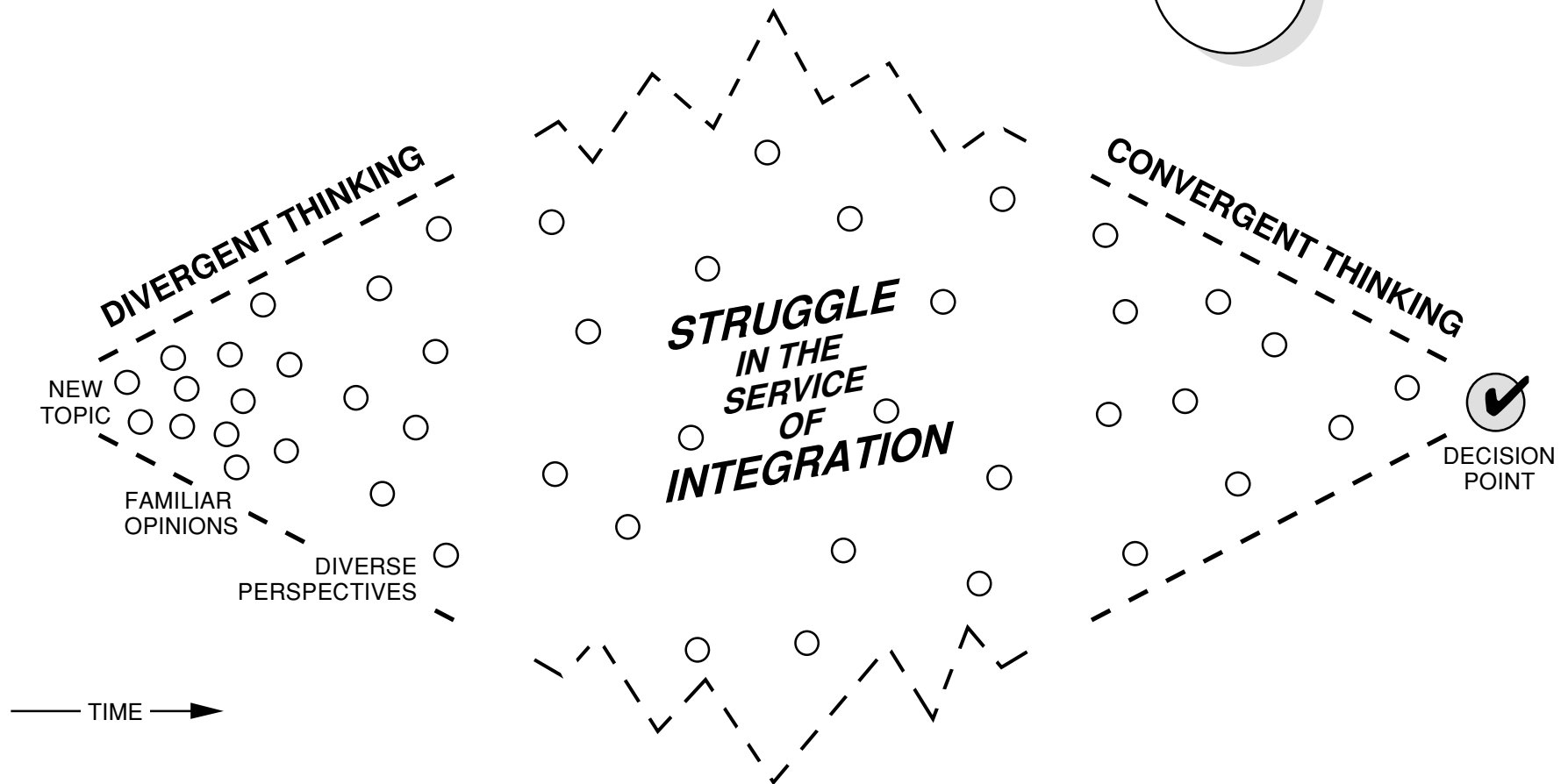
WHAT'S MISSING?



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

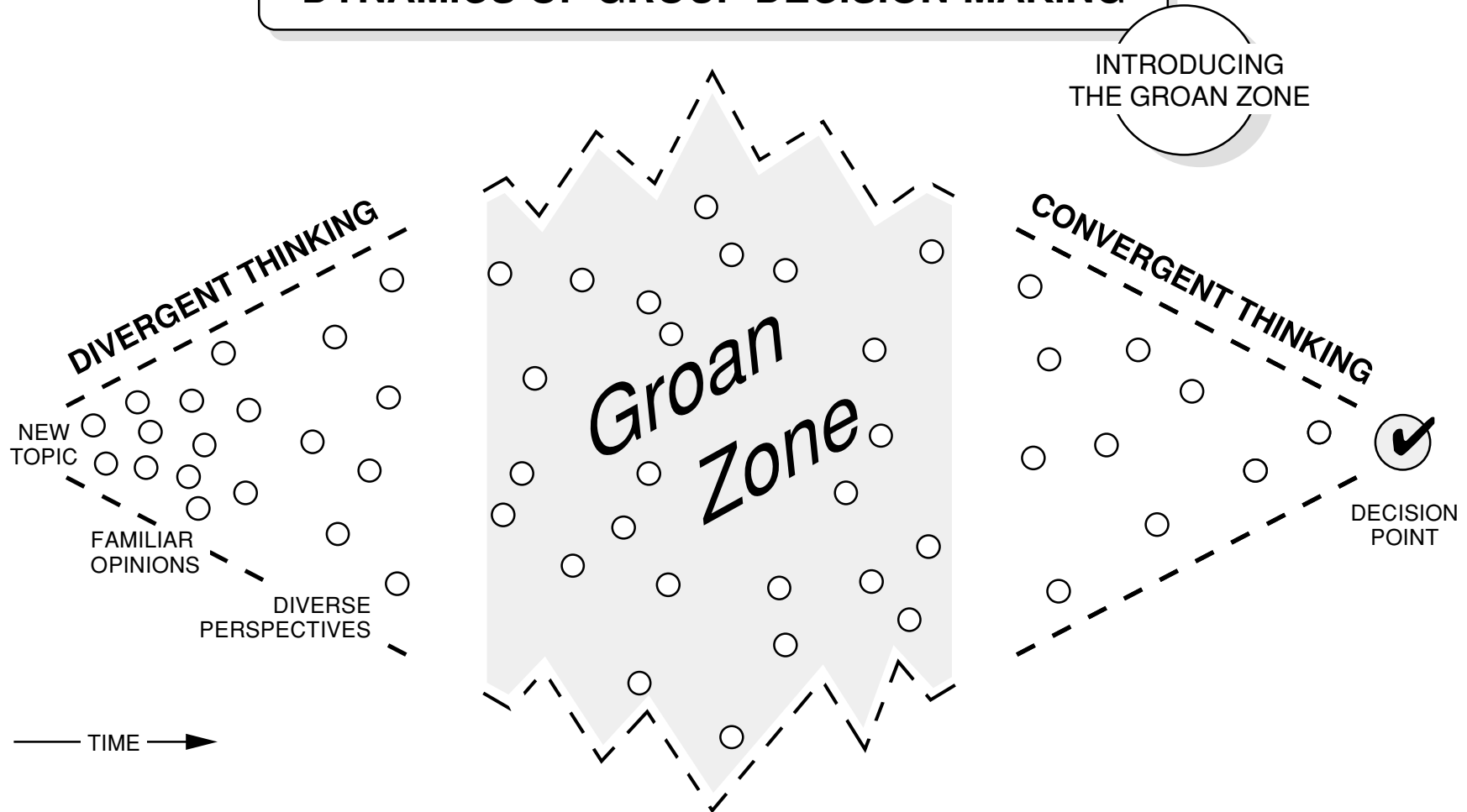
# DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

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.*

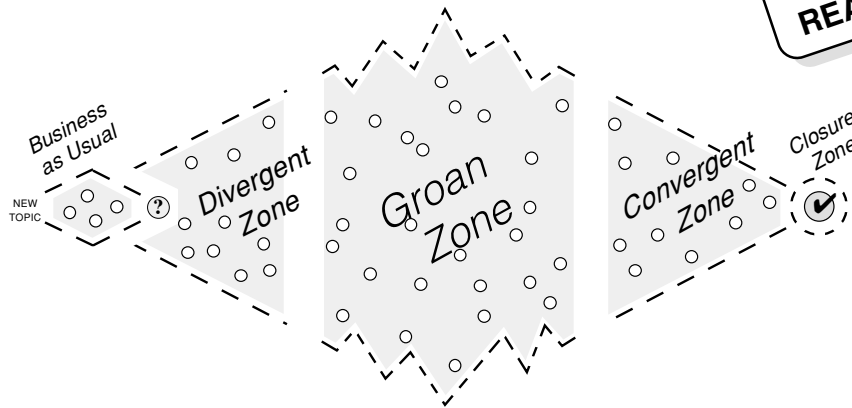
## DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING



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 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 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

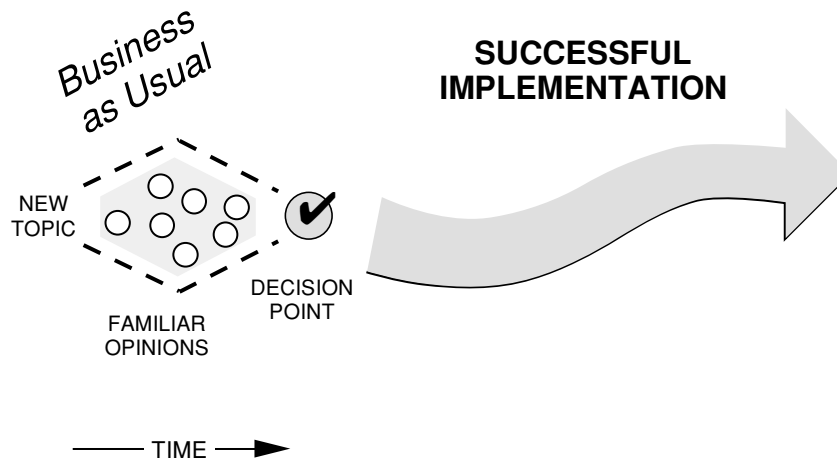
Inclusive solutions are wise solutions. Their wisdom emerges from the integration of everybody's perspectives and needs. These are solutions whose range and vision are expanded to take advantage of the truth held not only by the quick, the articulate, the influential, and the powerful, but also of the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

# WHAT MAKES AN AGREEMENT SUSTAINABLE ?

IDEALIZED SEQUENCE



The diagram shown above represents an idealized sequence of the relationship between the discussion that precedes a decision, and the implementation that follows a decision. The discussion is quick and direct, and the implementation is straightforward.

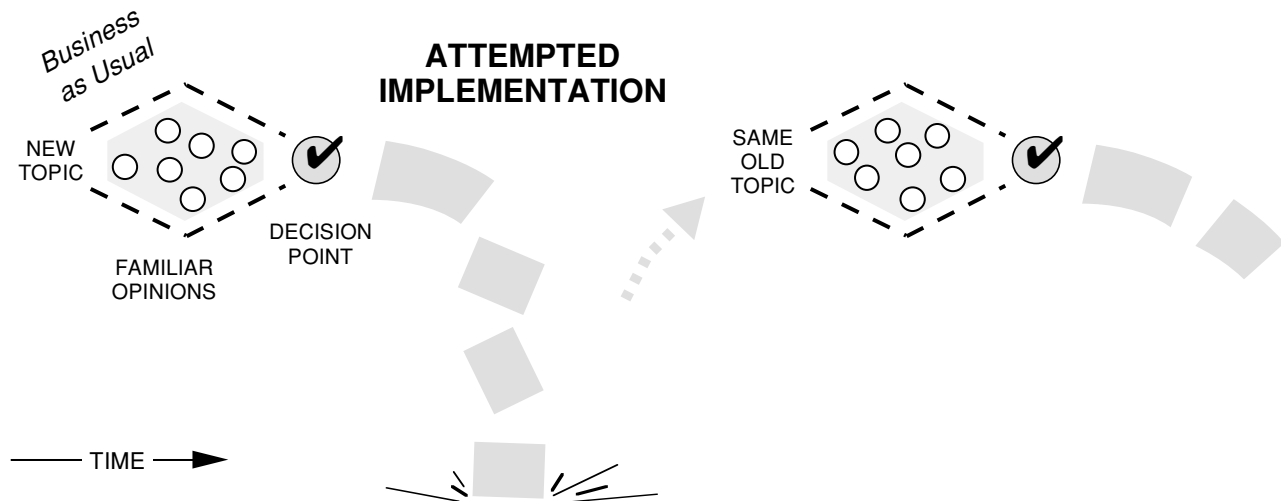
Many people – perhaps most people – really do believe in this model. No struggle. No *Groan Zone*. No problems. Just a clean, linear, predictable forward movement from the inception of an idea to the end of its implementation.

And the reason the model is so widely credible is simple: *most of the time, it works!* In other words, most of the decisions a group makes *are* routine. The issues are familiar, the solutions are obvious, and the implementation can be accomplished with a bare minimum of planning and organizing.

Not all problems are routine, though. And what most people don't realize is that *this model does not work when the problem is a difficult one.*

## WHAT MAKES AN AGREEMENT SUSTAINABLE ?

TOUGH PROBLEMS  
DON'T SOLVE EASILY



When a group attempts to solve a *difficult* problem as though it were a routine problem, they will very likely make a decision that simply does not work. The implementation will break down, and the group will find itself, sooner or later, back where it began.

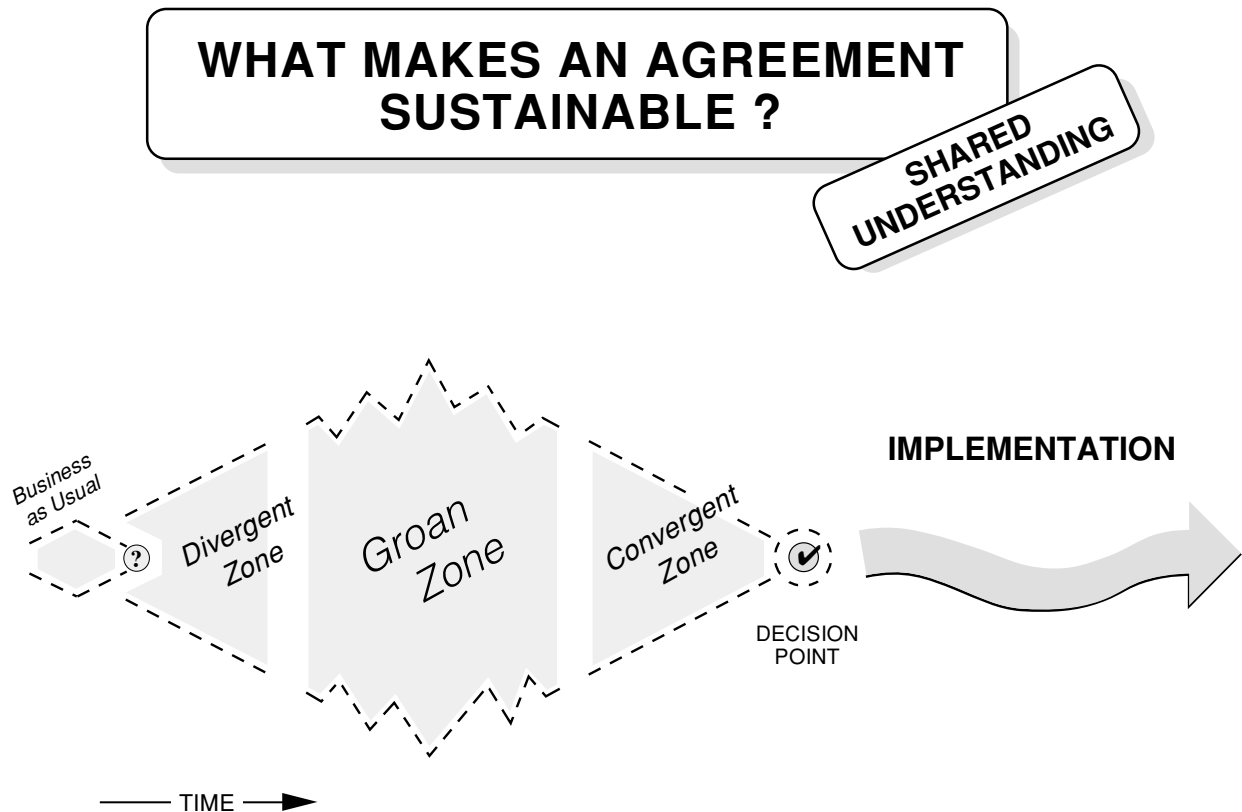
Groups that pressure themselves to solve a tough problem with a conventional business-as-usual discussion frequently produce “pseudo-solutions” – ideas that sound good at the time, but are ridiculous in retrospect. Here are some common pseudo-solutions:

- Agree on the top 20 priorities
- Delegate a job to someone who is already too overworked to do it
- Establish a policy that has no accountability built into it
- Create a committee to do the same work all over again
- Create a program and don't fund it
- Make an agreement that will be vetoed by someone who is not present
- Agree to “try harder” from now on

Pseudo-solutions don't solve anything; they merely provide participants with an illusory feeling of closure, so people can believe they accomplished something without having to go through the *Groan Zone*.

## TWO MIND-SETS FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS

	<b>EITHER / OR</b>	<b>BOTH / AND</b>
VALUE SYSTEM	Competitive	Collaborative
TYPE OF OUTCOME EXPECTED	Win / Lose	Win / Win
ATTITUDE TOWARD "WINNING"	To the victor goes the spoils.	Your success is my success.
ATTITUDE TOWARD "LOSING"	Someone has to lose.	If someone loses, everyone loses.
ATTITUDE TOWARD MINORITY OPINIONS	Get with the program.	Everyone has a piece of the truth.
WHY EXPLORE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMPETING POSITIONS?	To search for bargaining chips, in preparation for horse trading and compromise.	To build a shared framework of understanding, in preparation for mutual creative thinking.
ESSENTIAL MENTAL ACTIVITY	Analyze: break wholes into parts.	Synthesize: integrate parts into wholes.
HOW LONG IT TAKES	It's usually faster in the short run.	It's usually faster in the long run.
WHEN TO USE IT	When expedience is more important than durability, <i>Either/Or thinking</i> will usually produce satisfactory results.	When all parties have the power to block any decision, and the issue is for high stakes, <i>Both/And thinking</i> is usually the only hope for resolution.
UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY	Survival of the fittest.	Interdependence of all things.



This diagram represents the process of building sustainable agreements. Up to the point of decision, progress is slow – much slower than anyone expects – as the members of the group struggle to develop a shared framework of understanding. The implementation, on the other hand, is often interesting, exciting, and challenging – rather than painful. Bringing a sustainable agreement to fruition is like swimming with the tide instead of against it. People feel confident that their efforts are headed toward results.

What is it that makes a sustainable agreement sustainable? The answer is that the agreement is based on a solution that incorporates everyone's point of view. Participants would say, "Yes, this works! From my perspective, this proposal actually does solve the problem."

How does a group achieve this? By patient, persistent effort. People keep working to understand one another's goals and needs and fears and frames of reference. They face conflicts and overcome them; they explore possibilities by putting themselves in each other's shoes; they challenge their underlying assumptions; they search for imaginative solutions. And they share responsibility for reaching a result that works for everyone.