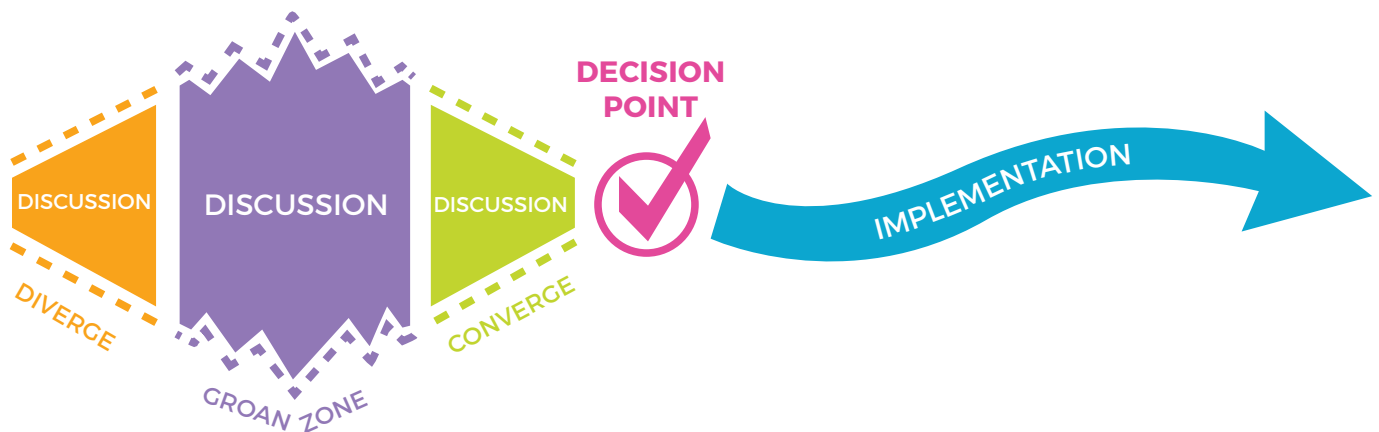


THE DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION MAKING

The best description of group decision-making we have found is the “diamond” as described by Sam Kaner (*A Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, 2005). This diamond describes the process a group goes through to solve a difficult problem.

SAM KANER “FACILITATOR’S GUIDE TO PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING”



- 1** **The first step** is shifting out of 'business as usual' noticing that this topic needs more than our usual approach.
- 2** **DIVERGENCE:** Then a group will move into exploring ideas, building concepts, imagining the possibilities and drawing on different and diverse views.
- 3** **GROAN ZONE:** The middle ground hits when confusion, ambiguity and conflict emerge. This is called the 'Groan Zone'. The 'groan zone' always happens, it is uncomfortable and awkward. Different views start to be heard and opposed by others. Group members can be repetitive, insensitive, defensive and short tempered. This step is a legitimate and necessary part of a good decision-making process as this is when breakthroughs occur and new understanding emerges.
- 4** **CONVERGENCE:** when ideas start to coalesce, and come together. When agreement emerges and/or priorities come to the fore.
- 5** **DECISION POINT:** The point at when you move from discussing into deciding. It is often not clear that this point has been reached. In most cases time will dictate that discussion must end and we now begin to make the recommendations or decisions clear.
- 6** **IMPLEMENTATION:** When decisions are made and moved forward.

THE 'POINT-OF-DECISION'

During discussion, a group is operating in the 'world of ideas'. Brainstorming and building on each other's thinking (divergence), exploring possibilities, developing models and trying them on in their imagination.

But when you shift from discussion to decision, a group enters the 'world of actions'. In this 'world' the group is asked to commit to an idea, make it come true, sign up to a recommendation, and 'make a call'.

Between these two moments in time is the 'point-of-decision'. This is the formal marker that says, "From this moment on we stand by this agreement. This agreed view will be treated as the officially authorised view from this group. Disagreements will no longer be treated as alternative points of view, but rather are considered officially as objections, minority reports or in some cases "out-of-line".

In many decision-making settings, this is definitely NOT what groups do! Group members are often not sure whether a decision has actually been made. If they don't follow through on the supposed 'agreed position' people can be heard to defend themselves ("I didn't know we agreed on that!") or the reverse occurs when people act prematurely - thinking an agreement has already been made ("I was sure we decided to go ahead with that plan?!").

We need an indicator that says "we are now making a decision" and

We need a 'rule' to help us make that decision

WHAT IS A DECISION BASED ON?

In many decision-making processes whether people 'accept' or 'reject' a recommendation is used as the basis for finding agreement. In deliberative processes we look for nuances that help understand people's 'level of agreement' and their reasons why. By doing this we explore reasoning and difference more respectfully and with greater purpose, and enable a fuller conversation about what is possible rather than further polarisation.

DECISION RULES USED IN DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES

When we facilitate deliberative processes, we explain the 'Diamond' of decision making and provide some clear decision-making rules to help signal a 'decision point'. We don't generally build these rules with groups but instead share them and seek acceptance to what we have found are 'tried and true' approaches.

The following decision rules are used:

1

CONSENSUS

Where possible we reach for '**consensus**' or '**unanimous agreement**'. We use various methods for sharing, dialoguing and understanding to help people find where there is already a sense of common ground. In every group we have facilitated, one or more recommendations have received unanimous support (i.e. 100% of the group can 'live with it' or more).

2

80% MAJORITY

Where consensus cannot be reached we look to find where the **vast majority** of participants can **standby** a decision. The **vast majority** is never **the majority**. We do not explore small majorities ala Brexit type 'votes' instead we look to find at least **80%** of the participants able to 'live with' a recommendation for it to be considered the **vast majority**.

3

MINORITY REPORTS

Where there are participants who feel very strongly about a recommendation that **does not reach** the 80% 'live with it' mark, they can **find another couple of people** who share this view and write a short 'minority report' that is included at the back of the group's final report.