

Collaborative Problem Solving Handbook



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Norms of Collaboration

1. Pausing

Pausing before responding or asking a question allows time for thinking and enhances dialogue, discussion, and decision-making.

2. Paraphrasing

Using a paraphrase starter that is comfortable for you – “So...” or “As you are...” or “You’re thinking...” – and following the starter with an efficient paraphrase assists members of the group in hearing and understanding one another as they converse and make decisions.

3. Posing Questions

Two intentions of posing questions are to explore and to specify thinking. Questions may be posed to explore perceptions, assumptions, and interpretations, and to invite others to inquire into their thinking. For example, “What might be some conjectures you are exploring?” Use focusing questions such as, “Which students, specifically?” or “What might be an example of that?” to increase the clarity and precision of group members’ thinking. Inquire into others’ ideas before advocating one’s own.

4. Putting Ideas on the Table

Ideas are the heart of meaningful dialogue and discussion. Label the intention of your comments. For example: “Here is one idea...” or “One thought I have is...” or “Here is a possible approach...” or “Another consideration might be...”.

5. Providing Data

Providing data, both qualitative and quantitative, in a variety of forms supports group members in constructing shared understanding from their work. Data have no meaning beyond that which we make of them; shared meaning develops from collaboratively exploring, analyzing, and interpreting data.

6. Paying Attention to Self and Others

Meaningful dialogue and discussion are facilitated when each group member is conscious of self and of others, and is aware of what (s)he is saying and how it is said as well as how others are responding. This includes paying attention to learning styles when planning, facilitating, and participating in group meetings and conversations.

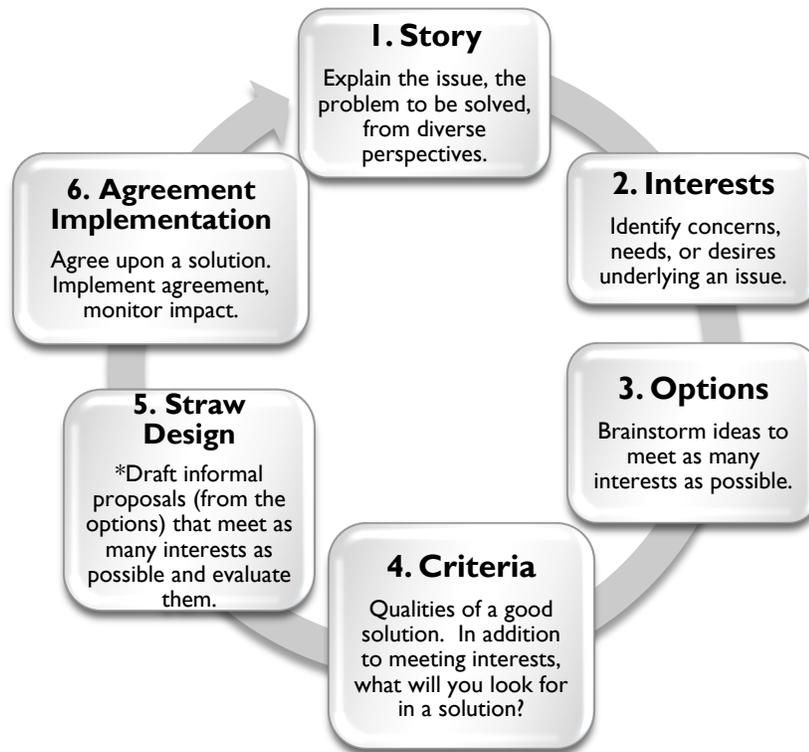
7. Presuming Positive Intentions

Assuming that others’ intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and discussion, and prevents unintentional put-downs. Using positive intentions in speech is one manifestation of this norm.

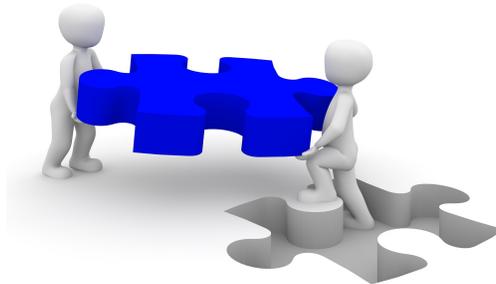
Collaborative Problem Solving Cycle

The team will address each issue brought to the table using the process outlined below. Depending on the number of issues, this may not always follow a perfectly linear order. In some cases, multiple issues will be taken through the first three phases to allow for taskforces to convene.

In addition, the straw design phase may need multiple iterations before the group is able to reach agreement. During these iterations, it is important to look back to the interests and options as a source of ideas.



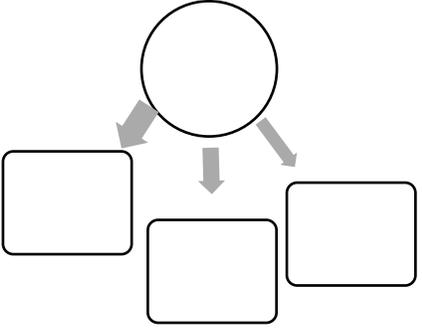
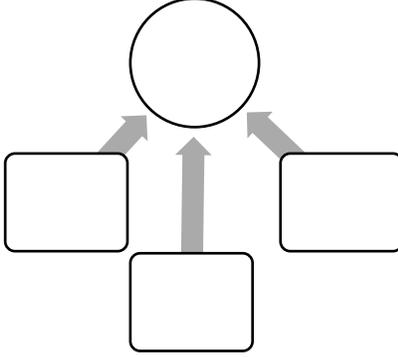
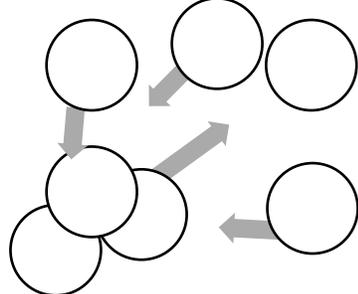
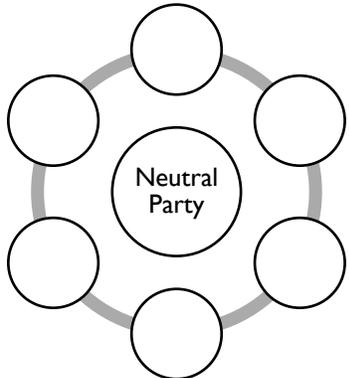
* The team (or small taskforces) work collectively to draft initial proposals for the larger group to review. In this phase, taskforce works creatively solve the problem in a way that meets as many interests as possible.



Phases of Collaborative Problem Solving in Detail:

	Explained	Central Questions	Key Skills
Story	<p>Share history and content of the issue, the problem to be solved.</p> <p>This includes background information, multiple perspectives and diverse understanding of the issue.</p>	<p>What?</p> <p>What happened?</p> <p>When?</p> <p>Who is involved?</p> <p>How does this affect people?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek out and honor different perceptions. • Describe without blame. • Clarify and seek understanding. • Record for group memory.
Interest	<p>Identify concerns, needs, and desires underlying an issue.</p> <p>Could be one person's or mutual interests.</p>	<p>Why?</p> <p>What's most important to us in solving this issue?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate interests (underlying needs and motivations) from options (solutions). • Record and note mutual interests.
Options	<p>Brainstorm ideas to meet as many interests as possible.</p> <p>Don't fall in love with (or dismiss) any one idea at this phase.</p>	<p>How?</p> <p>What are all the ways we might solve this problem (or aspects of it)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid judgment and screening of ideas. Do not discuss. • Aim for quantity. • Imagine creative opportunities. • Build off of one another's' ideas. • Record for group memory.
Criteria & Evaluation	<p>Identify qualities of a solution.</p> <p>What will you look for in an end solution?</p> <p>What will help you narrow the options for value and appropriateness?</p>	<p>In addition to our interests, what else is important to us in this decision?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify the meaning of each criteria. • Begin to evaluate the options against the interests and criteria. • Amend, combine, eliminate or develop new options.
Straw Design	<p>Draft proposals that meet the identified criteria and as many interests as possible.</p> <p>Recognize limitations and shortcomings.</p> <p>Build on the best available options.</p>	<p>Could this work?</p> <p>What do we like? How could it be improved?</p> <p>Does this meet our criteria and as many interests as possible?</p> <p>What else could we add or take away to improve on the idea?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen, pay attention, and encourage participation. • Treat differences as strengths. • Avoid arguing blindly. Offer constructive feedback to improve. • Seek mutual gains and work towards consensus.
Agreement	<p>Document the end agreement (when the group agrees the solution is as good as it can be given current realities).</p> <p>Make a plan to implement and monitor the impact of the decision.</p>	<p>Who, what, when, where, etc. documented in clear language.</p> <p>How will we know if it's working?</p> <p>When can we convene again to reevaluate and revise if necessary?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write down the specifics of the agreement and actions needed from participants.

Rules for Decision-Making: Benefits, Disadvantages, and Effects

	<p>Person-in-Charge Decides <i>Without</i> Group Discussion This rule gets group members in the habit of doing what they're told. At meetings, they mostly listen passively to the person talking.</p> <p>This rule is useful when a decision needs to be made quickly, when the person in charge has the necessary expertise and authority to make the decision alone.</p>
	<p>Person-in-Charge Decides <i>AFTER</i> group Discussion The person in charge solicits feedback but remains control as the final decision-maker. Participants see the decision-maker as the person who needs to be convinced. Participants direct comments to the person in charge.</p> <p>This rule is useful when there is some, but not a lot of time to make a decision. It can help inform the person-in-charge and may build some buy-in from the group members. Participants may feel some sense of control. They may also feel frustrated if they have made a suggestion that is not ultimately reflected in the decision.</p>
	<p>Majority Vote With this rule, the goal is to obtain 51% agreement. Participants work to convince one another, it is essentially a battle for the undecided center. Once a majority has been established, the opinions of the minority can be disregarded.</p> <p>This rule is a familiar procedure that is applied to many situations. It gives people and some opportunity to be heard although they may or may not listen deeply to one another. Can be polarizing.</p>
	<p>Consensus (or Unanimous Agreement) The group works to build understanding and a mutually agreeable solution. Depending on the group, every member (or nearly every member) must be able to support a decision. Since everyone has some power to "block" a decision, each participant can expect his or her perspective to be taken into account. This puts pressure on members to work towards mutual understanding. This rule creates shared ownership and responsibility for solutions and implementation.</p> <p>This rule works when participants are mutually interdependent and where minority views matter for the wellbeing of the whole. It can take longer and is more difficult than the other rules. A neutral party can help facilitate for efficiency and fairness.</p>

Adapted from Sam Kaner's Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, 2007

Reaching a Decision By Consensus:

Susan Sparks Many, Organizing for Success: Negotiation Handbook

Consensus Means:

- All participants contribute resources including time, ideas, and information and encourage use of one another's resources and opinions.
- The team has considered a variety of perspectives and views these differences as helpful rather than as a hindrance.
- Everyone has a shared understanding of the issue these from multiple perspectives.
- Everyone has a chance to describe the way the issue impacts him/her.
- In a potential solution, those who disagree propose acceptable modifications with which they would agree. Those who disagree can ask the group for help in making possible modifications.
- Those who continue to disagree see the will of the group and indicate that they are willing to go along for a try for a prescribed period of time. Consider balanced ways to monitor the impact of the decision if implemented and revise the solution later using this data.
- **All share in the final decision and recommendation. The group can agree that the solution is the result of their best, creative problem solving even if the end result is still imperfect.**

Values and Behaviors For Reaching Consensus

- We balance power and create shared ownership by providing time and opportunity for investigation, reflection and dialogue
- We value clarity and explicit communication
- We use interactive processes to support our effectiveness.
- We share how to arrive at decisions with the entire staff and describe when and how we will make decisions.

Consensus Doesn't Mean:

- Everyone thinks the end idea is perfect.
- Simply giving in. Reservations and concerns need to be voiced so the group can consider creative alternatives.



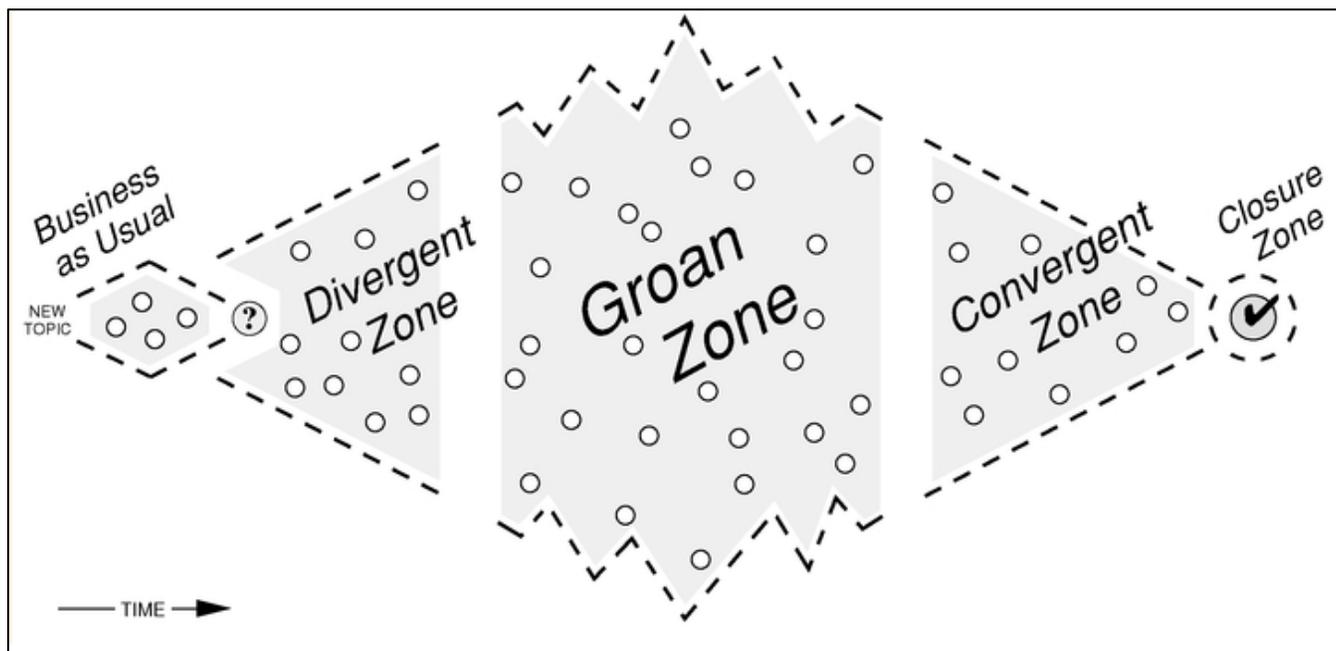
Tools for “temperature checks” for consensus around idea- “Testing the Will of the Group”

 YES	 SO-SO	 NO
<p>Although this may not be my first choice I support it. This solution meets our criteria and satisfies as many interests as possible at this time.</p>	<p>I have some reservations or would like more discussion and/or minor adjustments. I will not block this decision if it's the will of the group.</p>	<p>I'm struggling. I need to talk about this more before I can consider supporting it.</p>

Possible “Thresholds” for Consensus Based Decision-Making

1. Unanimous agreement- 100% of the team says “yes” (green).
2. Agreement- The vast majority of the group is in support. A small portion (1-3 members) feel “so-so” (yellow) about the solution but are willing to support the will of the group.
3. Sufficient Agreement- May vary by group. Must be defined before seeking agreement on substantive issues. Possible models include:
 - a. 85% or more of the group supports the idea. 15% of the group may feel “so-so” (yellow) or oppose (red) the solution. The group cannot come up with any acceptable modifications to improve the solution.
 - b. 66% or more of the group supports the idea. 33% of the group may feel “so-so” (yellow) or oppose (red) the solution. The group cannot come up with any acceptable modifications to improve the solution.
 - c. A smaller, representative committee (representatives identified before the need arises) convenes to continue to work the issue. If this group can reach consensus, the larger group agrees to support the will of the small committee.

Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making: AKA, Why making decisions in a group is so darn difficult.



*Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger.
The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, 2011*

Phase	Characteristics	Needs
Business As Usual	People propose “obvious” solutions to obvious problems. Tone of the conversation is often friendly but superficial. Some needs may be overlooked in quick solutions.	Test for agreement. If the solution actually does work for everyone, great! If not, probe to understand the situation more deeply and explore other options.
Divergent Zone	Curiosity and discovery. Exploration of perspectives and experiences.	Deep listening and suspended judgment. To really understand a topic, people have to be able to speak freely and feel heard.
Groan Zone	Competing frames of reference. Individuals have to wrestle with foreign concepts. Frustration, confusion, anxiety, and exasperation, are common.	Patience, perseverance, tolerance. Stay open to different perspectives and creative solutions. The wisdom to solve the problem will emerge from the group!
Convergent Zone	People understand each other and find inclusive alternatives. Ideas can be synthesized and refined. The team feels a shared sense of imagination, focus, eagerness, and clarity.	Creativity and inclusive thinking help the group early on. As the team gets closer to a decision point, it will need increasing clarity.
Closure	Team experiences high levels of suspense, alertness, satisfaction, and completion.	Clear decision-making rules.

Communication Skills for Collaboration

“Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change – personal change, community, and organizational change.” Margaret Wheatley (2002)

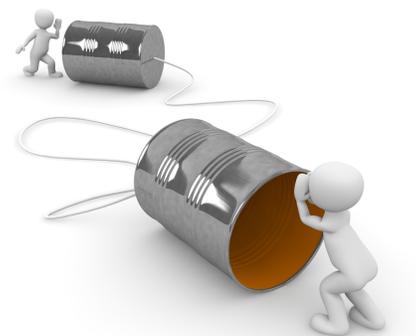
Listening

What does an effective listener say and do?

Paraphrasing

From the Greek *para*, (beyond) + *phrazein*, (to tell) = to tell beyond.

Webster: A rewording of the thought or meaning expressed in something that has been said or written.



Principles of Paraphrasing

- Attend fully.
- Listen with the intention to understand.
- Capture the essence of the message.
- Reflect the essence of voice, tone, and gestures.
- Make the paraphrase shorter than the original statement.
- Paraphrase before asking a question.
- Use the pronoun “you,” instead of “I.”

Listen for Their Yes

- In conflict, people tend to push hard against the things they don’t want which can quickly escalate a conflict. They are likely to use “loaded language” which will be hard for others to hear without getting defensive or combative.
- When this happens, unload the loaded language with a calm paraphrase.
- In al of the bluster and NO, find what the person is saying YES to. What’s really important to this person that the group needs to honor?

Adapted from: Garmston & Wellman. (1999). The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups (www.adaptiveschools.com)

Inquiry and Advocacy

Inquiry

Inquire into others' ideas, listen, request more information.

Advocacy

Verbal statement for a cause or position, promote

The Structure of Inquiry

- Ask others to make their thinking visible
- Use non aggressive language and approachable voice
- Use pattern of pause, paraphrase, pause and probe
- Use exploratory language
- Inquire about values, beliefs, assumptions
- Explain your reason for inquiring
- Invite introspection

The Structure of Advocacy

- Make your thinking and reasoning visible
- State your assumptions
- Describe your reasoning
- Describe your feelings
- Distinguish data from interpretation
- Reveal your perspective
- Frame the wider context that surrounds the issue
- Give concrete examples

Graceful transitions from Inquiry into Advocacy

- Here is a related thought...
- I hold it another way...
- Hmmm, from another perspective...
- An additional idea might be... An assumption I am exploring is...



Adapted from Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups, Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc. Norwood, MA. 2009.

Norms for Dealing with Conflict:

- Breathe deeply. Conflict is a natural outcome of working together.
- Stay focused on one issue at a time.
- One person speaks at a time. Don't interrupt. Create space for understanding.
- Listen to understand. Use paraphrasing, pausing, and probing. Take time to really hear (and demonstrate your understanding of) the other side's perspective before stating your own.
- All voices are respected and heard. Remember that each person's perspective is that person's truth.
- Notice your own behaviors of advocating or inquiring.
- Pay attention to and listen for interests. Ask, "What's the interest behind this idea?" to help uncover potential common ground. Listen for a person's "yes" behind their no.
- Be hard on problems but easy on the people. Focus on issues, not personalities.
- Call for a time-out if needed. Don't continue the conversation at the break.
- Maintain norms of confidentiality. What is said in the room stays in the room.
- Look for common ground and possible areas of agreement.



Recommended Reading

1. [*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making*](#), Sam Kaner
2. [*Getting to Yes*](#), Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton

Quotes to ponder...

“In one of our concert grand pianos, 243 taut strings exert a pull of 40,000 pounds on an iron frame. It is proof that out of great tension may come great harmony.” -- Theodore E. Steinway

“Conflict isn't negative, it just is.” -- Thomas Crum

“Under normal conditions, most people tend to see what they want to see, hear what they want to hear, and do what they want to do; in conflicts, their positions become even more rigid and fixed.” – Marc Robert

“Embracing conflict can become a joy when we know that irritation and frustration can lead to growth and fascination.” -- Thomas Crum

“It is hard to change our point of view in a conflict. Most often, it is because we are not nearly as interested in resolving the conflict and possibly creating a new ‘pearl’ as we are in being right.” -- Thomas Crum

“In a conflict, being willing to change allows you to move from a point of view to a viewing point – a higher, more expansive place, from which you can see both sides.” -- Thomas Crum

“Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.” -- Max Lucade

“Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.” – John Dewey

“You can't shake hands with a clenched fist.” -- Indira Gandhi

“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict -- alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.” -- Dorothy Thompson

“It is not necessary to understand things in order to argue about them.” -- Pierre Beaumarchais

“Beautiful light is born of darkness, so the faith that springs from conflict is often the strongest and the best.” -- R. Turnbull

“Conflict can be seen as a gift of energy, in which neither side loses and a new dance is created.” -- Thomas Crum

“Through conflict we get to unity.” -- Dean Tjosvold

“Our lives are not dependent on whether or not we have conflict. It is what we do with conflict that makes the difference.” -- Thomas Crum

To be of use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Marge Piercy from *Circles on the Water*

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the mentors and colleagues who have established and refined best practices for collaborative problem solving. Beyond their contributions to the best practices in this handbook, they have mentored and guided me in my own journey to implement them and continue to innovate for improvement.

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