

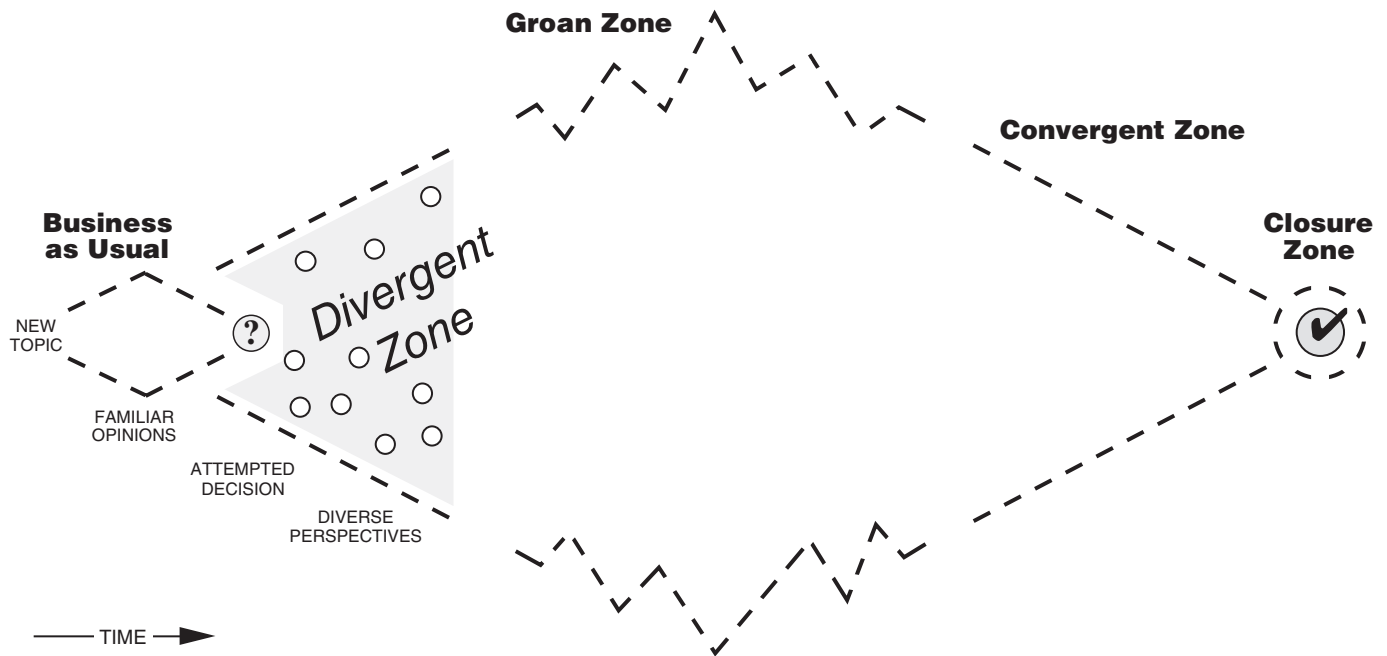
# 18

## **FACILITATING IN THE DIVERGENT ZONE**

PRINCIPLES, TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS  
TO ENCOURAGE FULL PARTICIPATION

- ▶ **Introduction to the Divergent Zone**
- ▶ **Common Facilitation Techniques**
- ▶ **Responding to Challenging Situations**
- ▶ **Structured Activities**
- ▶ **Summary**

## LIFE IN THE DIVERGENT ZONE



When a diverse group begins work on a complex problem, people's views are not unified. Instead, they vary widely across many parameters: goal(s), priorities, problem definition, critical success factors, options for action, resources needed, people who should be at the table, and many more.

To reconcile these differences, the first step is to make them visible. This typically requires a lot of listing and sorting and defining: all the processes that epitomize divergent thinking! In groups whose members are veterans of the *Divergent Zone*, behavior tends to be guided by principles like *suspend judgment* and *accept different perspectives*. In contrast, many people have not experienced full-on divergent thinking. In those groups, behavior tends to be cautious, reserved – even to the point of withholding – yet impatient with thoughts that are different than the majority's view.

## FACILITATING IN THE DIVERGENT ZONE

FACILITATOR'S  
OBJECTIVES



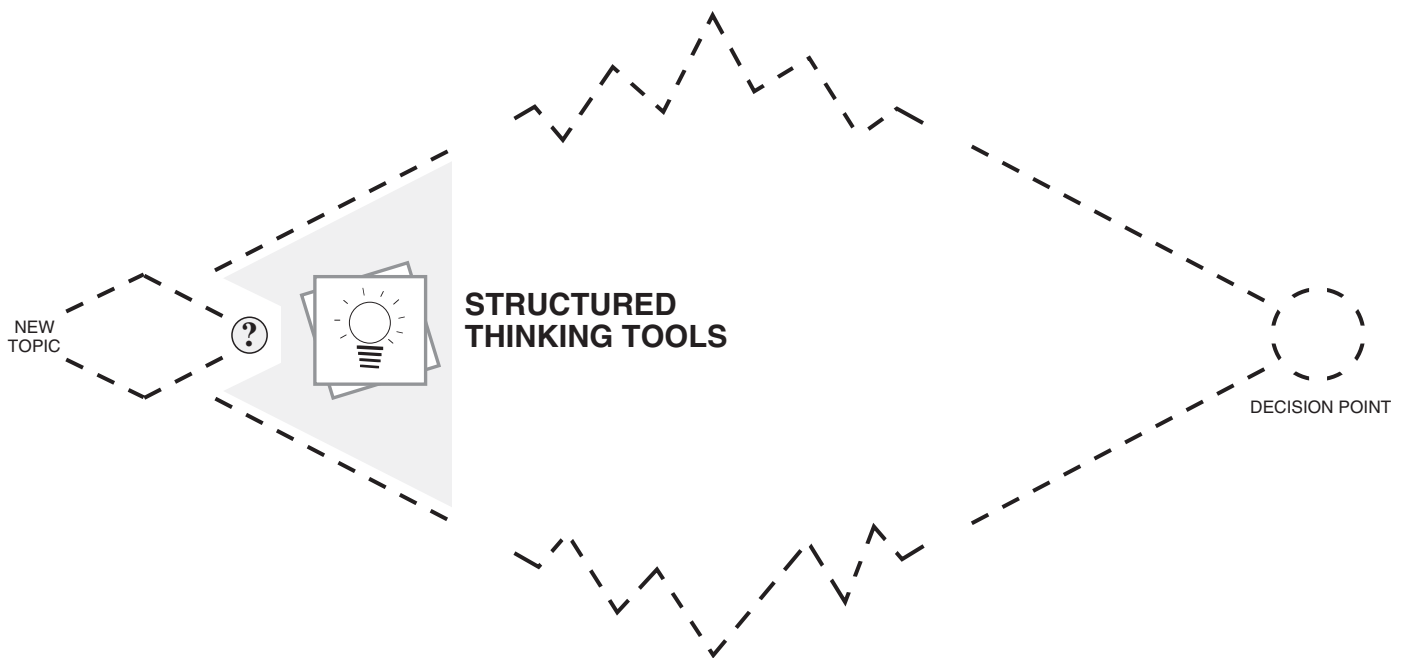
Using a facilitator in the *Divergent Zone* has two purposes: one pertains to the *content* of the issues at hand; the other to *the process of communication*.

Regarding matters of *content*, divergent thinking *expands the range of perspectives and possibilities*. A facilitator can help a group do this by using simple formats and skills like those shown above. Probably the most important of these, for content management, is *chartwriting*. Good recording is the *sine qua non* of effective divergent thinking.

Regarding *the process of communication*, a facilitator is a neutral third party, whose listening skills can make all the difference in building a supportive, respectful atmosphere. Encouraging people, drawing them out, mirroring and validating – these are some of the many basic tools that help people relax, and express what they're really thinking. So do simple formats like small groups, go-arounds, trade show, and a well-managed open discussion.

## FACILITATING IN THE DIVERGENT ZONE

CHALLENGING  
SITUATIONS



The common techniques for facilitating in the *Divergent Zone* (as listed on the preceding page) are adequate for most situations, most of the time. When members feel secure and encouraged to participate, they speak up – especially when they see, via chartwriting, that their own ideas and views are indeed different from those expressed by other group members.

There are occasions, however, when the common facilitation techniques don't have sufficient impact. For example, when there's a wide disparity in education level, subject-matter expertise, or fluency in the dominant language – these and other inequities can influence less privileged members to stay quiet. Similarly, difficult or controversial subjects can be hard to talk about, particularly when taking a position risks offending other participants.

Experienced facilitators can respond to such challenges by complementing their repertoire of fundamental skills with structured activities that are designed specifically to elicit divergent thinking in situations that are challenging. Many such tools are provided in this chapter.



## SPEAK FROM YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

### WHY

This is a basic, straightforward activity that encourages participants to offer their own points of view on the topic at hand.

The purpose of this activity is to enable members to quickly gain a picture of the breadth of the group's thinking. By seeing all the parts, the group gains a sense of the whole.

Another purpose of the activity is to legitimize and validate every perspective. By allowing the group to hear each person's contribution, this activity sends the message that "Everyone has something to offer."

### HOW

1. Pose an open-ended question such as:
  - How would you describe what's going on?
  - How does this problem affect you?
  - What is your position on this matter?
  - Why, in your opinion, is this happening?
2. Ask each person to answer the question without commenting on each other's ideas.
3. Optional Step:  
When everyone has had a chance to express their views, ask, "Is there anyone absent today who might have a significantly different perspective? What might that person tell us?"
4. Debrief by asking participants for reactions, insights and learnings.



## WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW?

### WHY

When solving problems in groups, people come to the table with *very different questions* based on their individual perspectives. Everyone wants their own questions answered, which prevents them from seeing that others' questions need to be answered, too. This element of divergent thinking is one of the most difficult aspects of group decision-making.

At a recent meeting, for example, one person who was mystified by the budgeting process requested clarifications and explanations repeatedly. Another asked several questions about why certain people had been invited to the meeting while others had not. A third person appeared to understand everything but one little detail, about which he kept asking questions. Each was focused on his or her own questions and could not see that others were struggling with entirely different questions.

This activity supports a group to identify *the whole range of questions* before they get too focused on wrestling with any single question.

### HOW

1. Hang five sheets of paper titled respectively, "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" and "How?"
2. Start by naming the general topic. For example, "We're now going to start planning the annual staff retreat."
3. On the "Who?" page, brainstorm a list of questions that begin with "Who?" For example, "Who will set the agenda?" "Who knows someone who can rent us a conference room?" "Who should be invited?" "Who said we can't spend more than \$500?"
4. Repeat Step 3 for each of the other sheets.
5. When all five lists are complete, identify the easy questions and answer them. Then make a plan to answer the rest.

This tool was inspired by an exercise called "Five W's and H" in A. B. VanGundy, Jr., *Techniques of Structured Problem Solving*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1988), p. 46.



## SPECIFYING REQUIREMENTS

### WHY

To be sustainable, the solution to a difficult problem must reflect the requirements of every stakeholder – which often are quite diverse. As an example, take the case of a meeting held by an appliance manufacturer to discuss the development of a new, low-energy light bulb. The purchasing department wanted the bulb to be built from parts and materials that were readily available. The marketing department wanted the shape of the bulb to fit standard packaging. The engineering department wanted precise timetables from research and development in order to schedule their staff efficiently. And the company president wanted assurance that the new product would be a salable commodity.

For groups like these, the challenge is to take stock of *all* requirements before getting bogged down in specifics. This activity helps a group to gain a preliminary understanding of everyone's conditions for success.

### HOW

1. Hang two sheets of chart paper, one titled "Requirements and Necessary Conditions" and the other "Topics for Further Discussion."
2. Break the group into pairs. Ask each person to take a turn describing his or her own requirements and necessary conditions for success.
3. Reconvene everyone. Give each person three minutes to state his or her conditions and five to take questions. Record each requirement on a chart. Also record questions requiring further discussion.
4. After repeating Step 3 for each person, have the group examine the lists and decide how to organize the subsequent discussion.



## MIND MAPPING

### WHY

A simple example of a *Mind Map* is described in “Step 1” below.

*Mind mapping* supports four different types of thinking: generative, logical, associative, and classifying. Generative thinking is the act of calling out any items while suspending judgment. Logical thinking is the art of reasoning. Associative thinking is a particular type of generative thinking, in which one thought inspires a second thought even though the two are not linked logically. Classifying involves putting items into categories and sub-categories. *Mind mapping* enables a group to do all of them at once.

### HOW

1. First create a simple *Mind Map* to show the group how it works.
  - Choose a topic everyone can relate to, such as, “Improving our workplace.” Write those words in the center of a big sheet of chart-paper.
  - Ask the group for subtopics that connect with the main topic.
  - As people call them out, draw branches from the center and label each branch. (For example “Parts we enjoy” could be a branch).
  - Continue a few more times, adding subtopics to the branch as they arise. (For example, “Water cooler chats.”)
  - Soon someone will call out an *association* – an idea that is a different branch altogether, such as, “We need a better printer.” Draw a new branch for each new association.
  - After a few more subtopics and associations, end the demonstration.
2. Encourage questions about the method.
3. Begin working on the group’s actual subject. Allow 15-25 minutes.
4. When the activity is done, encourage discussion of key insights.

Mind Mapping was first developed by the great English psychologist Tony Buzan in 1960. See *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*, Plume, 1996.





## STARTING POSITIONS

### WHY

This activity is a perfect way to begin dealing with a contentious issue – especially when the conflict is fueled by many opposing perspectives.

When people are brought together to resolve a dispute, many participants arrive with strong opinions and well-rehearsed arguments. They need to be given a chance to express their opinions fully, so they can let everyone else see where they stand.

When people aren't able to speak without being interrupted or discounted, it is predictable that they will insert their positions into the discussion at every opportunity. Conversely, when people *are* supported to state their positions fully, they frequently become more able to listen to one another. This often leads to better mutual understanding, which is a precondition for finding creative solutions to difficult problems.

### HOW

1. Introduce the activity by indicating that there may be several diverse perspectives in the room. Encourage everyone to give each other the time and the attention each person needs to express his or her views.
2. Using a go-around format, ask each speaker to take a turn answering the following questions from his or her individual perspective:
  - What is the problem and what solution is s/he advocating?
  - What are his or her reasons for taking this particular position?

Note: This step is often done by having each speaker come up to the front of the room and present his or her ideas standing up.

3. When each person has had a turn, ask the group to reflect aloud on what they're learning.



## HOW HAS THIS AFFECTED ME?

### WHY

This activity gives people permission to express their fears, confusions, hurts, or resentments openly. This supports people to become more aware of what they're feeling so they can discuss the situation in more depth.

Also, this activity enables people to step back from their own individual perspective and see a bigger picture. It is frequently surprising and highly informative for them to hear what other people are feeling.

### HOW

1. Ask people to reflect on the following questions:
  - “How do I feel about this situation?”
  - “How has it affected me so far?”
2. Ask each person to take a turn sharing his or her reflections and feelings with the whole group. A go-around format works best for this activity because it discourages back-and-forth discussion.
3. When everyone has spoken, ask the whole group, “Now that you have heard from everyone else, what reactions are you having?”
4. If responses indicate that this activity has surfaced a lot of emotion, encourage the group to do a second go-around. Say something like, “Use this time to let the rest of us know whatever is on your mind.”
5. End by summarizing the main themes. Validating everyone's self-disclosure helps provide people with a temporary sense of completion, even when the source problems remain obviously unresolved.



## THREE COMPLAINTS

### WHY

Inviting people to complain about their situation gives them the chance to say things that are normally unacceptable. This can be powerful, as often useful information is revealed that would otherwise remain hidden.

Furthermore, when people have a chance to vent their negative feelings instead of stewing in them, they are more able to move forward on a task.

After an activity like this one, it is common for people to make significant progress on the topic under discussion.

### HOW

1. Give the group an overview of the upcoming steps. Then have each individual write on a separate slip of paper three complaints about the situation under discussion.
2. Have everyone throw the slips of paper into a hat.
3. Pull out one note, read it aloud, and ask for comments. The author may or may not wish to identify himself or herself.
4. After three or four comments, pull out another complaint and repeat the process.
5. After 10 or 15 minutes, ask the group how much longer they would like this activity to continue.
6. When time runs out, ask people to close by saying what the experience was like for them.



## UNREPRESENTED PERSPECTIVES

### WHY

People in a group often share so many assumptions in common that they may not recognize their own blind spots. Yet omitting a key perspective can ruin the outcome of an otherwise participatory process.

For example, in the 1980s, urban-based environmental organizations, in collaboration with state and federal agencies, drew up many unpopular and ultimately unacceptable proposals for rural conservation. These plans were rarely supported by the loggers or miners whose livelihoods were being threatened. In many cases, the plans were unworkable because they had been designed without adequate understanding of the needs and goals of the working people in the affected communities.

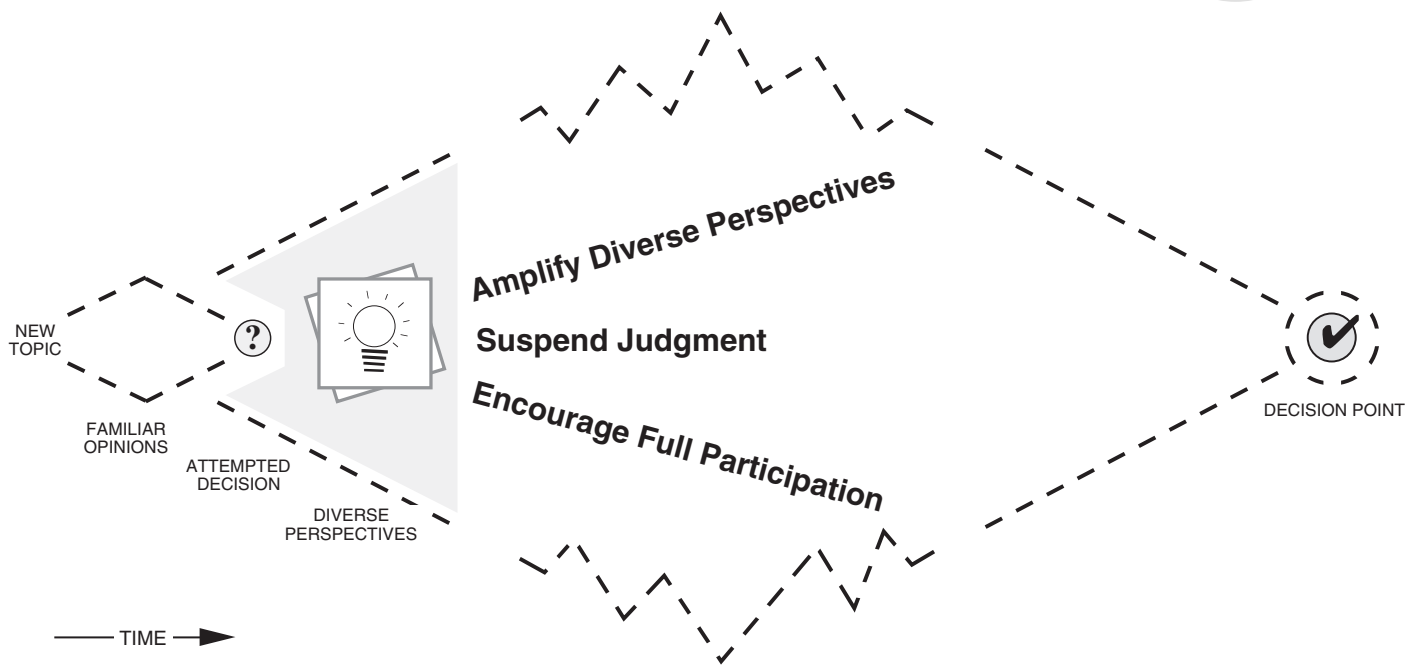
This activity assists a group to determine whether there are stakeholders whose perspective should be better represented at future meetings.

### HOW

1. List every group of stakeholders that might be affected by this problem. Don't forget to include less-than-obvious stakeholders. For example, does your issue affect trainees? Suppliers? Neighbors? Does it affect the families of employees? For this activity, every affected stakeholder group matters.
2. One by one, go down the list considering each group in the following way: "How does the situation at hand affect this stakeholder group?" Example: "How does our project expansion for next year affect our trainees?"
3. When the list is complete ask, "Has anyone spotted a problem that wasn't previously identified?" and "Is there someone missing from these meetings who should be included from now on?"

## FACILITATING IN THE DIVERGENT ZONE

SUMMARY



Most groups will go along with almost anything a facilitator suggests in the *Divergent Zone*. For one thing, people generally appreciate the chance to talk. For another, most members are reluctant (at this stage) to challenge the facilitator. However, this compliance can be deceptive. Superficial or pat activities may get everyone talking – but most people will know, when the exercise is done, that they’ve just had a “fast food experience.”

Structured activities are strong and effective for the purposes described in this chapter. But they shouldn’t be overused. They’re directive and pre-packaged. Often people just want to have a conversation, or call out ideas to a silent chartwriter. Identifying differences doesn’t always require a production!

Facilitators can keep it simple with low-key formats like go-arounds or pairs. And they can use non-directive listening skills like paraphrasing, drawing people out, mirroring, encouraging, stacking, validating, and making space. This approach is usually more than adequate to encourage full participation.

