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## **STRIVING FOR UNANIMITY**

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## STRIVING FOR UNANIMITY

### INTRODUCTION

### THE POWER OF UNANIMOUS AGREEMENT

The word *unanimous* comes from two Latin words: *unus*, meaning “one,” and *animus*, meaning “spirit.” A group that reaches unanimous agreement is a group that acts from one spirit. By this understanding, a unanimous agreement can be expected to contain wisdom and soundness of judgment, because it expresses an idea that is felt by each person to be true. As the Quakers say, the decision speaks for everyone.

To reach unanimity, everyone must agree. This means each person has a veto. Thus, anyone can keep the discussion alive for as many hours or weeks or months as it takes to find a solution s/he can believe in. This veto capacity is the crux of the power of unanimous agreement. When a group is committed to reaching unanimous agreement, the members are in effect making a commitment to remain in discussion until they develop an inclusive solution – one that takes everyone’s needs into account.

### UNANIMITY AND CONSENSUS

*Consensus* also has Latin origins. Its root word is *consentire*, which is a combination of two Latin words: *con*, meaning “with” or “together with,” and *sentire*, meaning “to think and feel.” *Consentire* thus translates as “to think and feel together.”

Consensus is *the process*: a participatory process by which a group thinks and feels together, *en route* to their decision. Unanimity, by contrast, is the point at which the group *reaches closure*.

Many groups that practice consensus decision-making *do not use unanimity* as their decision rule for reaching closure. For example, Seva Foundation uses “unanimity minus one.” Some chapters of the Green Party use 80% as the acceptable level of agreement. Yet all such groups see themselves as sincere practitioners of consensus decision-making. While no single member has personal veto power, individual voices wield significant influence – enough to ensure that the group will engage in a genuine process of thinking and feeling together.

## STRIVING FOR UNANIMITY

IDEALISM  
vs REALITY

### A SILENCE IS NOT AN AGREEMENT

Many managers want their teams to be strongly aligned on the high-stake, high-impact issues that most affect their work. When tackling such issues, these managers come to meetings with statements like, “I need everyone’s buy-in today.” Clearly, these managers *want* their groups to find unanimity.

Yet if we look at how such meetings play out, what actually happens? The discussion may go well for a time, but once the group becomes mired in the *Groan Zone*, the person-in-charge often feels pressure to bring the discussion to closure and make a decision.

To close discussion, it’s common for a person-in-charge to summarize a key line of thought and say something like, “It sounds like people want to do such-and-such.” Then s/he will follow with, “Does everyone agree with this proposal?” Typically, after a few seconds of silence, this person will say, “All right, we’re agreed. That’s what we’ll do. Now let’s move on.”

Is this actually a unanimous agreement? Not really. The manager has no idea, really, what the people who didn’t respond were thinking.

### THE PROBLEM WITH YES AND NO

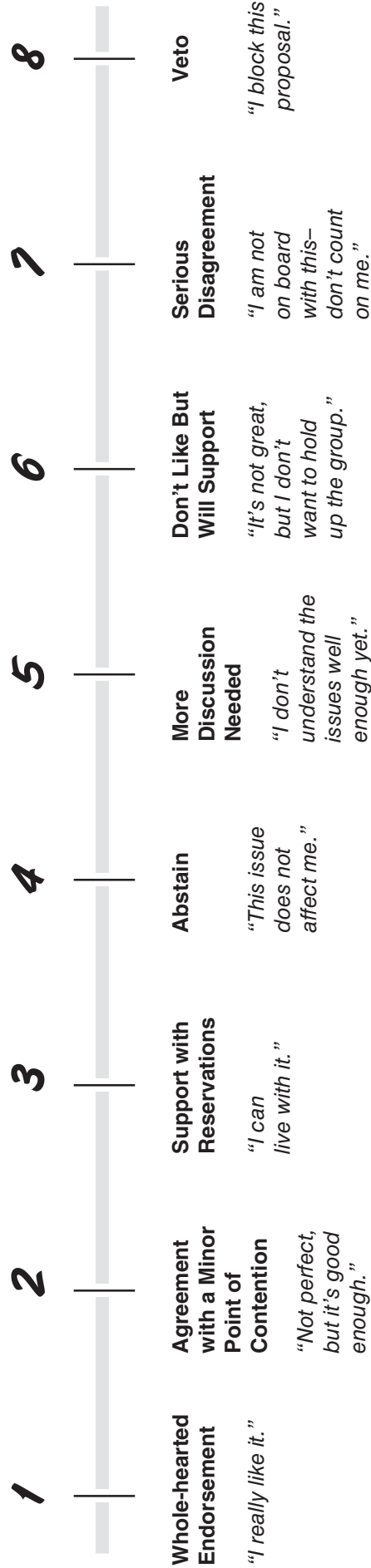
*Unanimity* means that every person has said “yes.” But “yes” does not necessarily mean, “Yes, this is a great idea.” It could also mean, “Yes... well... I have reservations, but I guess I can work them out when we implement it,” or even, “Yes, though actually I don’t much care for this idea, but I’ll go along with the majority. I want to be seen as a team player.”

Moreover, someone who says “no” is saying, in effect, “I require the group to spend more time on this discussion.” Most group members are reluctant to be that person. Who wants to be the one dragging things out?

Thus, the “yes-no” language is a fundamental problem. To strive for unanimity, group members need a way to accurately and authentically convey the extent of their support (or non-support) for a proposal.

# GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

BETTER  
VOCABULARY



This is the *Gradients of Agreement Scale*. It eliminates the arbitrary confinement of "yes" and "no." Instead, it allows for many possible nuances of meaning, enabling individuals to express support for a proposal in degrees, along a continuum – in line with the way many people actually think.

The *Gradients of Agreement Scale* was developed in 1987 by Sam Kaner, Duane Berger, and the staff of *Community At Work*. With the passing of time this tool has been translated into numerous languages, and it has been adapted for use in organizations large and small throughout the world.

Community At Work © 2014

Aloha Sam,

Thank you for your "gradients of agreement" work. Introducing this in the context of a faculty retreat enabled the group to make a major breakthrough regarding an issue critical to the program's future. Extreme polarization moved to enthusiastic support as a result of the description and use of the tool. I've always appreciated the efficacy of the tool, but have seldom seen as dramatic a breakthrough in a relatively short period of time.

January, 2014  
 Linda Colburn, President  
 Where Talk Works, Inc.  
 Honolulu, Hawaii

AS TOLD BY LINDA COLBURN, ACCLAIMED CONSULTANT \*

A university faculty member asked for facilitation support to resolve an impasse associated with scenarios for future program development. Results from interviews with individual team members surfaced promising conceptual alignment but also a degradation of trust and an increase in tensions between the parties. The chair invoked involvement of a facilitator to reach an accord the entire team could support.

*A gradients of agreement* template was drawn on a whiteboard along with a preliminary statement describing the most critical issue in dispute. The group modified the statement to better reflect the issue at hand. Each member selected the number on the continuum that best described his / her current thinking about the revised proposition.

Faculty members were permitted to further elaborate on their aspirations, assumptions, and fears regarding the issue at hand. This dialogue afforded them a number of opportunities to seek clarification on key points, supply relevant data, and dispel misunderstandings that had deepened over time.

The faculty were asked to state their position number a second time. Their new positions reflected near unanimous agreement to move forward with the proposed initiative. They volunteered to work on collectively determined tasks, and they mapped out an implementation timetable.

There was a discernible improvement in their interactions as evidenced by a marked reduction in interruptions and challenging

behavior. The engagement level balanced out as group members offered to take on various tasks to move the effort forward.

This process helped the group:

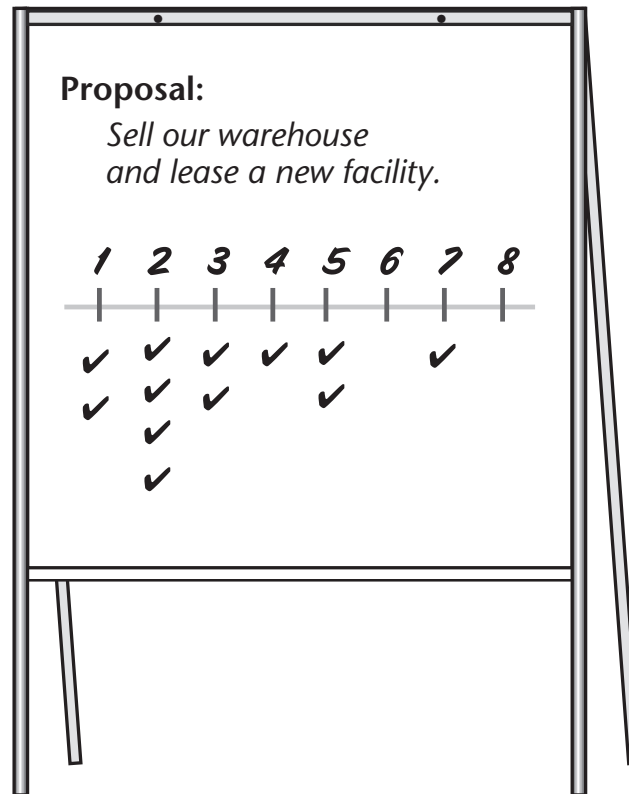
- better understand their colleagues' actual motivations and concerns;
- arrive at shared definitions of key terms;
- realize they were actually more aligned in their thinking than their earlier, polarized positions suggested; and
- move forward collectively as a team with less concern about passive-aggressive resistance or sabotage.

The *Gradients of Agreement* tool provided a face-saving and systematic framework for clarifying a collectively crafted path forward.

\* Linda Colburn has long been regarded as one of Hawaii's leading collaboration specialists. A chapter of *When Talk Works* by Deborah Kolb, (Jossey-Bass 1997) described Linda's practice as a mediator. The book profiles 12 accomplished mediators including Jimmy Carter.

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## HOW TO USE THE GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT SCALE



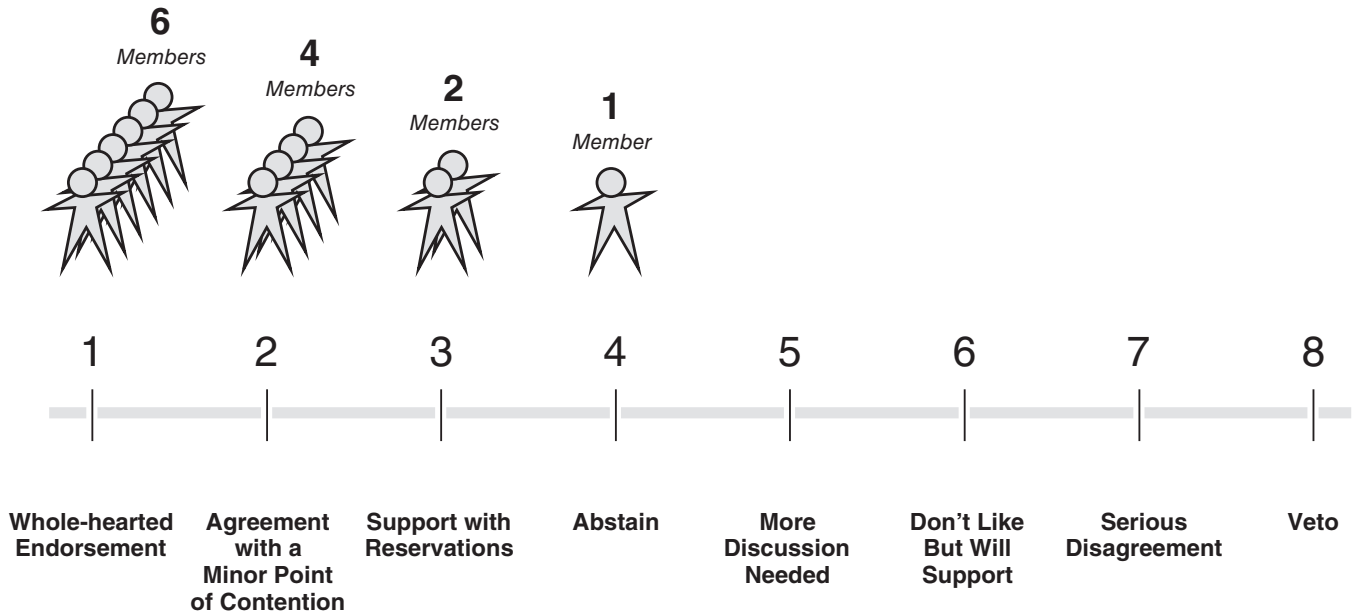
If you prefer, you can show the *Gradients of Agreement* early in a meeting, offering it as a tool that requires endorsement from the group. Or you can wait and introduce it when the time arrives to make a substantive decision.

When using the scale to take a poll, follow these steps:

- Step 1:* Record the proposal being discussed on a flipchart.
- Step 2:* Check to see that everyone understands the proposal.
- Step 3:* Ask for final revisions in the wording of the proposal.
- Step 4:* Draw a “scorecard” below the proposal, as shown on this page.
- Step 5:* Define the gradients. (For example, “#1” means “I really like it.”)
- Step 6:* Ask the group, “On this proposal, where do each of you stand?”
- Step 7:* Take the poll. Capture everyone’s positions on the scorecard.

Be sure the group understands that this process is not a vote; it’s just a poll. The results show *level of support* for a proposal; no decision has been made.

## GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT IN ACTION: ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT

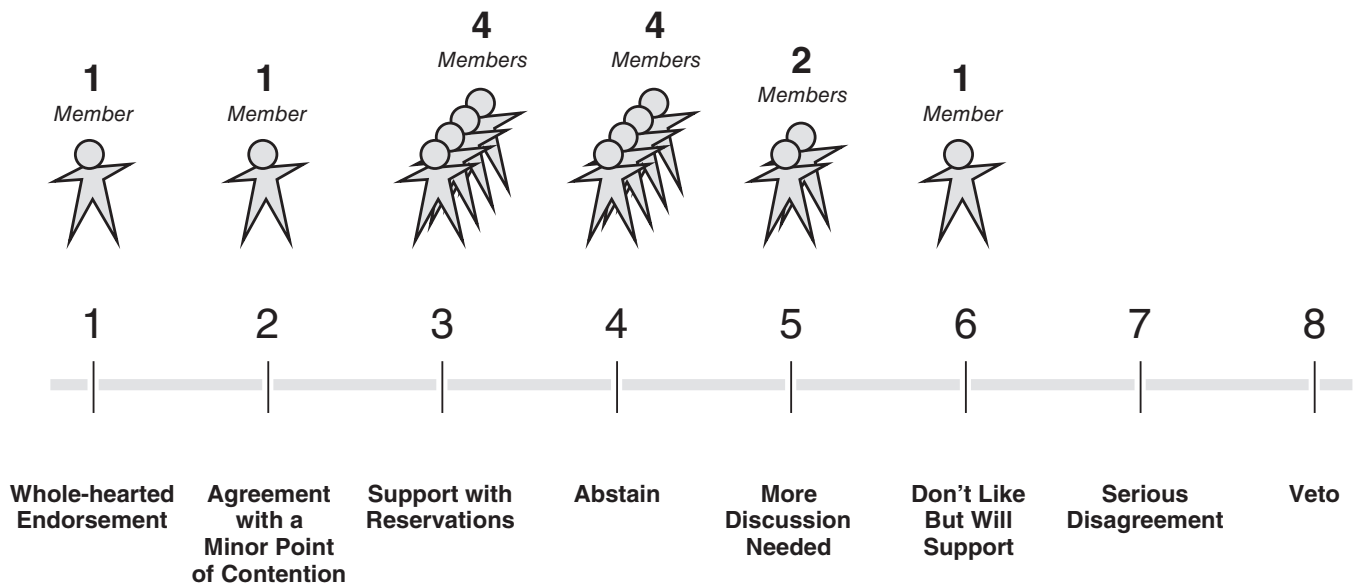


This diagram portrays the result of a hypothetical poll, taken in a group of 13 members. The pattern of responses – also known as “the spread” – indicates a high level of enthusiastic support for the proposal.

An agreement based on this much support will usually produce a successful implementation. After all, six members of the group are whole-hearted in their endorsement, and the others are not too far behind. One could reasonably expect that these participants would care about the results they produce.

Words like *buy-in* and *ownership* carry the same connotation as *enthusiastic support* – they express the depth of enthusiasm and commitment groups experience when they engage in a high-quality thinking process.

## GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT IN ACTION: LUKEWARM SUPPORT



This diagram portrays a different result. Here, the spread indicates significantly less enthusiasm for the proposal. Nonetheless, this spread also indicates unanimous agreement. Not one person would veto this proposal and block it from going forward. In fact, there is no serious disagreement here whatsoever.

For many purposes, lukewarm support is perfectly adequate. For example, when the stakes are low, it is usually not worth pushing for a higher level of support. But in other cases, when achieving a goal will require high motivation and sustained effort, lukewarm support won't get the job done.

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## WHEN TO SEEK ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT

### OVERALL IMPORTANCE

Enthusiastic support is desirable whenever the stakes are so high that the consequences of failure would be severe. By contrast, when the stakes are lower, a group may not wish to invest the time and energy it takes to develop enthusiastic support.

### DURATION OF IMPACT

Some decisions are not easily reversible – for example, the decision to relocate headquarters to a new city. Decisions like these are worth spending whatever time it takes to get them right. But other decisions – such as the question of how to staff a project during an employee's two-week vacation – have a short life-span. To get such a decision perfectly right might take longer than the entire lifetime of the decision.

### DIFFICULTY

The chief factors that make problems hard to solve are complexity, ambiguity, and the severity of conflict.\* The tougher the problem is, the more time and effort a group should expect to expend. Routine problems, by contrast, don't require long-drawn-out discussions.

### STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

When many people have a stake in the outcome of the decision, it is more likely to be worth the effort to include everyone's thinking in the development of that decision. When the decision affects only a few people, the process need not be as inclusive.

### EMPOWERMENT OF GROUP MEMBERS

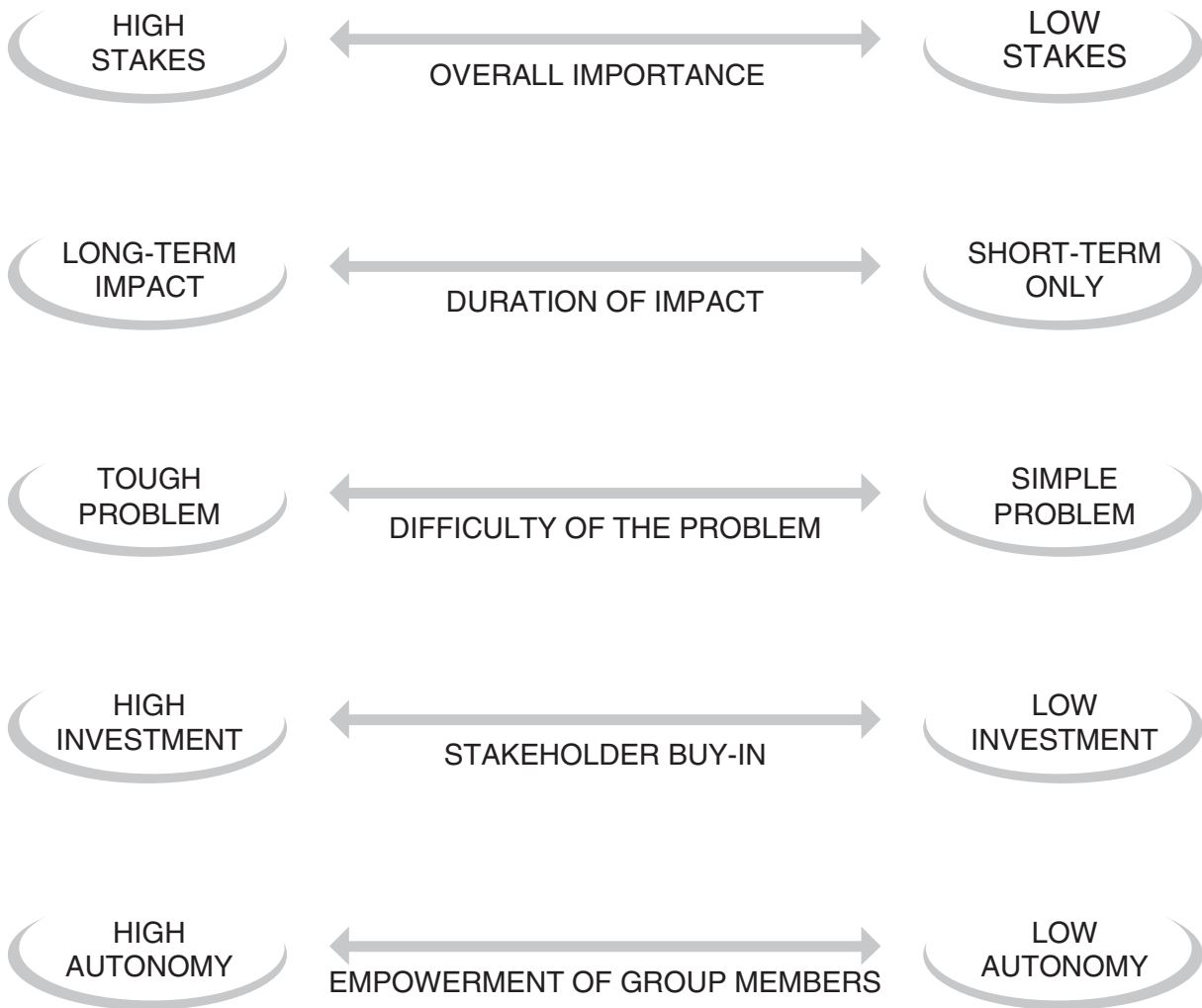
The more likely it is that members will be expected to use their own judgment and creativity to implement a decision, the more they will need to understand the reasoning behind that decision. The process of seeking enthusiastic support pushes people to think through the logic of the issues at hand.

\*Source: Paul C. Nutt, *Solving Tough Problems* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989).

**WHAT LEVEL OF SUPPORT IS OPTIMAL?**

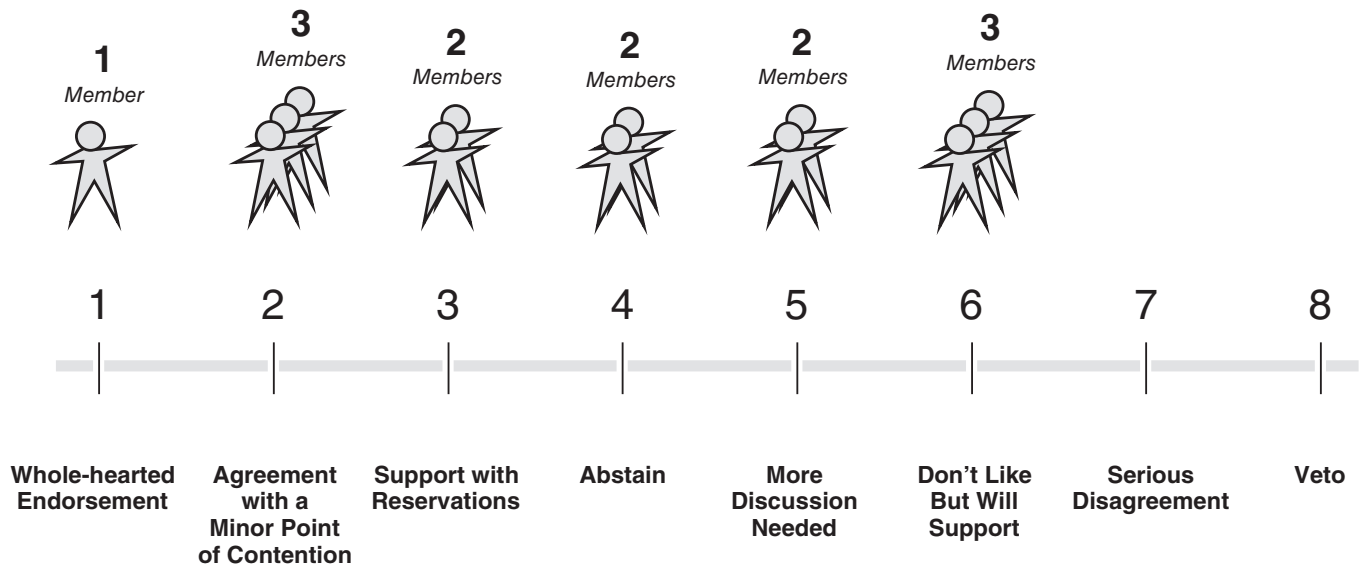
**Enthusiastic Support is necessary when the issue involves:**

**Lukewarm Support is good enough when the issue involves:**



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## GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT IN ACTION: AMBIGUOUS SUPPORT



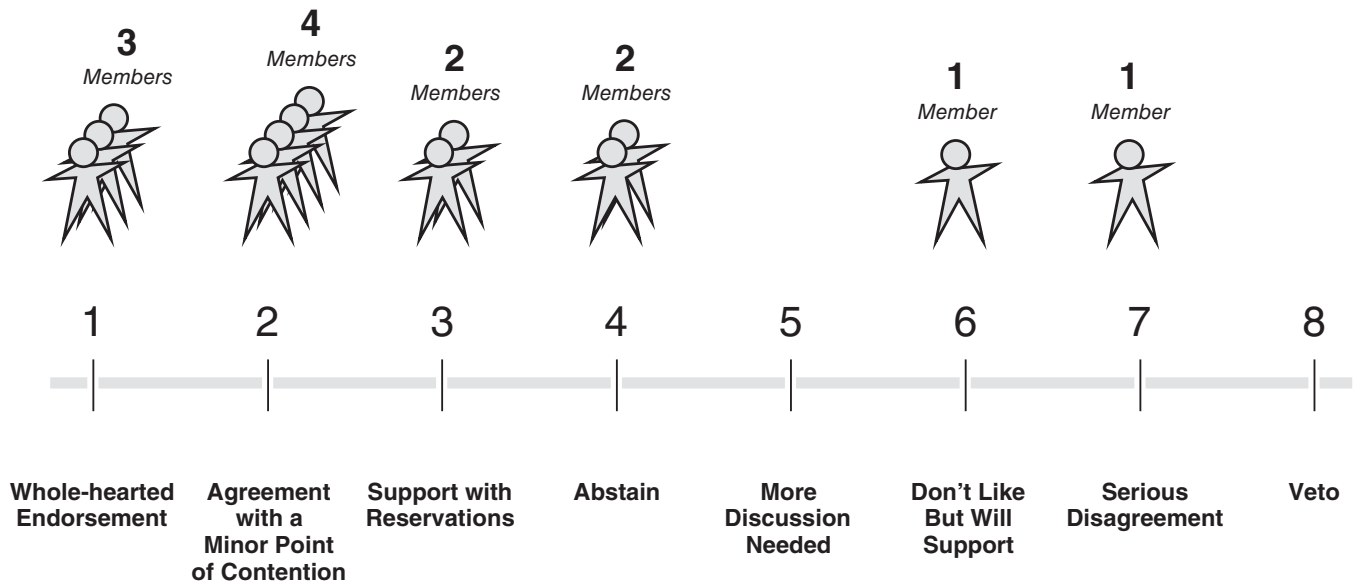
This diagram portrays a group of people who are all over the map in their response to the proposal. The group would surely benefit from more discussion.

Ambiguous results frequently indicate that the original problem has not been defined effectively. As Michael Doyle and David Straus have stated, "You can't agree on the solution if you don't agree on the problem."\*

\* Source: M. Doyle and D. Straus, *Making Meetings Work* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1993).

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## GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT IN ACTION: MAJORITY SUPPORT WITH OUTLIERS



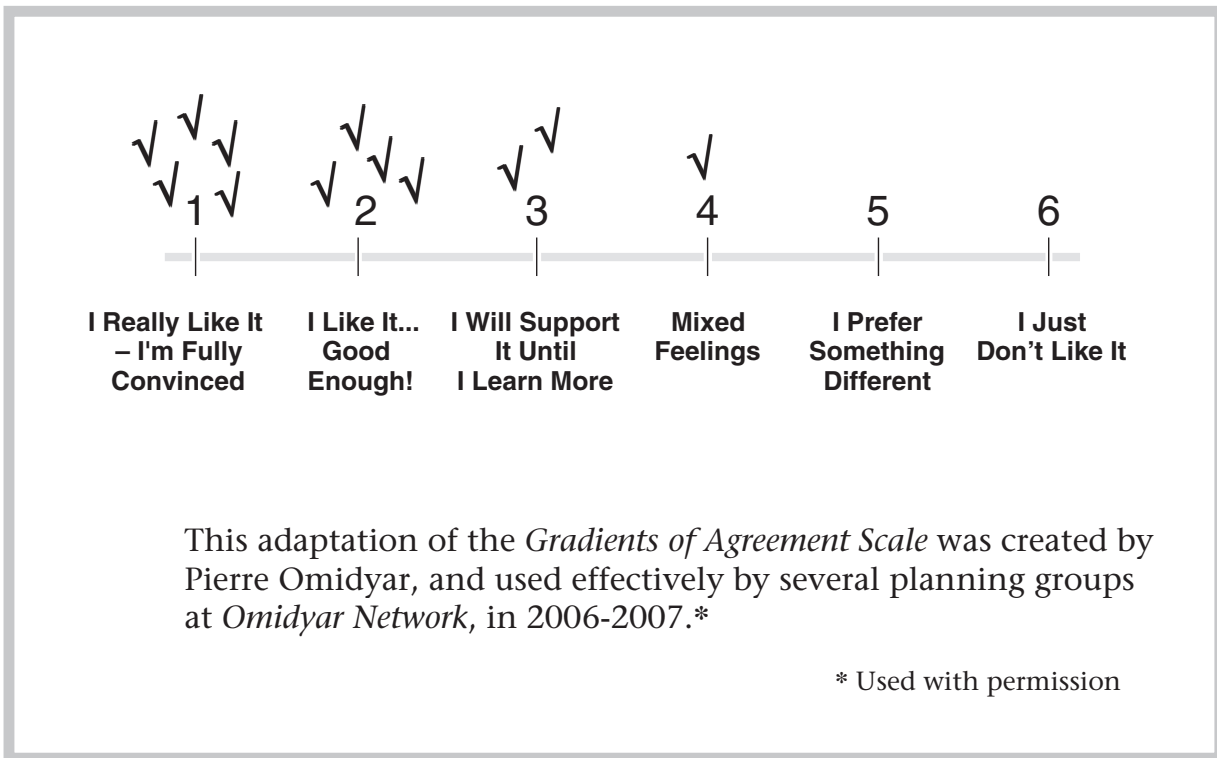
This spread is surprisingly common. When it occurs, the question arises as to whether the group should disregard the objections of the outliers or whether the group should keep making efforts to resolve those objections.

Often the person-in-charge of the group will try for a compromise, asking those with objections if they can suggest remedies that would increase their level of support. Sometimes this works.

But not always. It depends on whether or not there is a benefit in obtaining enthusiastic support for the eventual decision. When everyone's strong support is needed, lukewarm compromises will not do. In those cases, the group must continue searching for a genuinely inclusive solution.

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## ADAPTING THE GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT SCALE

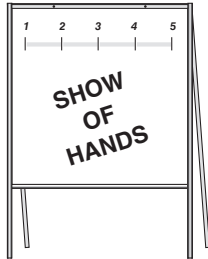


Many group leaders prefer to create their own set of gradients, whether to suit their leadership style or to fit the group's culture. To assist in this effort:

1. Explain the benefits of using *Gradients of Agreement*.
2. Show the "generic scale" – the one used throughout this chapter.
3. Ask whether s/he would like to customize the scale.
4. Once the person-in-charge has revised the scale, have him or her present the scale to the group, soliciting further revisions if desired.

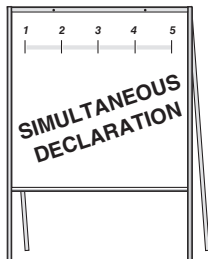
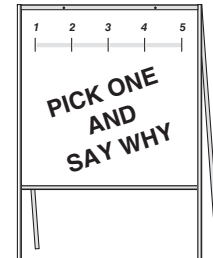
Even when a group uses the generic scale for the first few decisions, it is entirely fine for the leader (or the participants) to propose modifications at a later time.

# METHODS OF POLLING THE GROUP



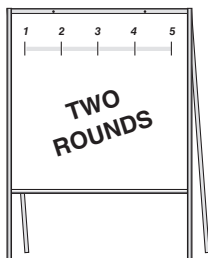
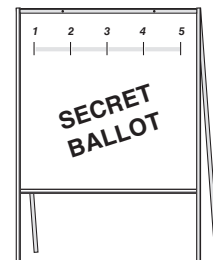
Say, "Please raise your hands if you are a '1'." Record the data on a flipchart. Now say, "Please raise your hands if you are a '2'." Repeat for all gradients.

Go around the room and ask each person to state which gradient s/he prefers and why. No discussion is allowed. Record each preference on a flipchart.



Have each person write his or her preference on a sheet of paper. On cue, have everyone hold up his or her card. Record the totals on a flipchart.

Have each person write his or her preference on a slip of paper. When everyone is done, collect the ballots and tally results. Post totals on a flipchart.



Before beginning, explain that there will be a preliminary poll followed by a brief discussion and then a final poll. Gather the first poll's data in any of the ways listed above. After a brief, time-limited discussion, poll again. This method lets people see where others stand before stating final preferences.