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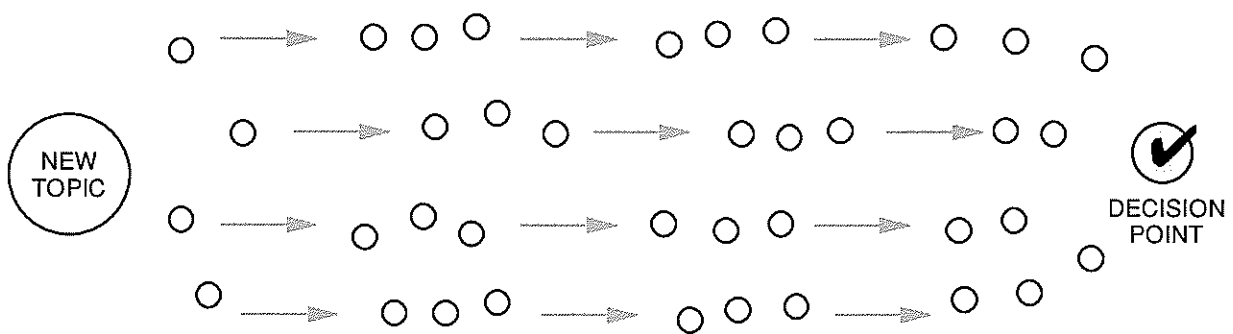
THE DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

IDEALIZED AND REALISTIC MODELS OF
COLLABORATION IN GROUPS

- ▶ **Misunderstandings About the
Process of Group Decision-Making**
- ▶ **The Struggle to Integrate Diverse
Perspectives**
- ▶ **The Diamond of Participatory
Decision-Making**

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.

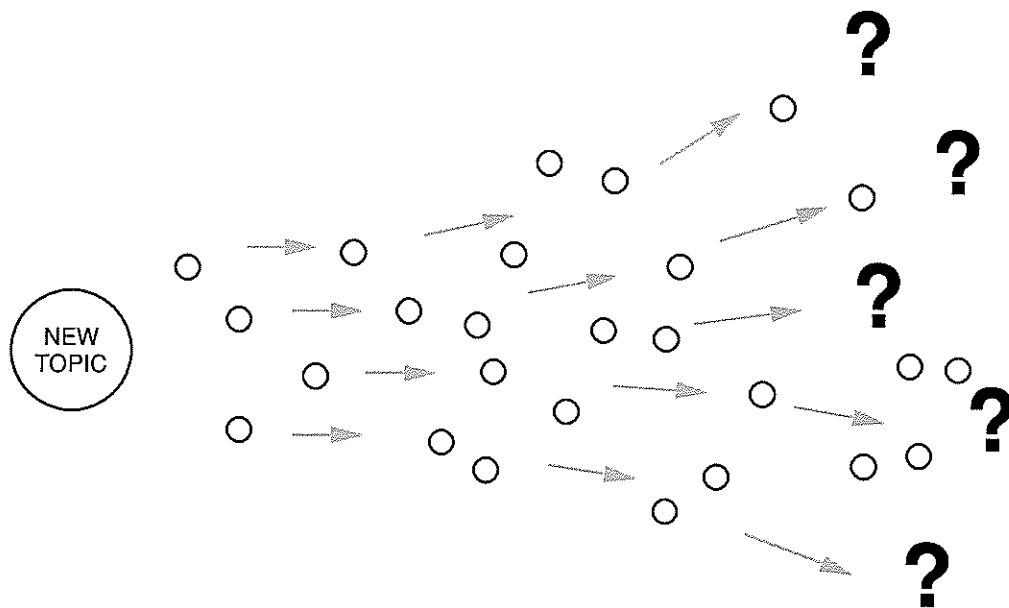
As diagrammed, everyone appears to be tracking each other's ideas, everyone goes at the same pace, and everyone stays on board every step of the way.

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

SAD BUT TRUE



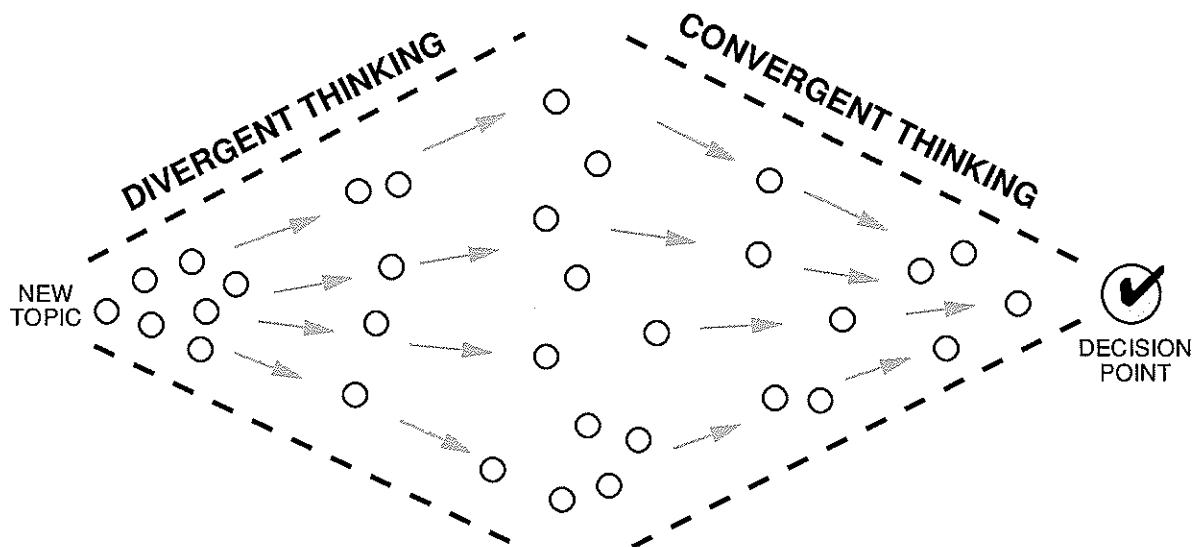
Group members are humans. We *do* go on tangents. We *do* lose track of the central themes of a discussion. We *do* get attached to our ideas. Even when we're all making our best effort to "keep focused" and "stay on track," we *can't* change the fact that we are individuals with diverging points of view.

When a discussion loses focus or becomes confusing, it can appear to many people that the process is heading out of control. Yet this is not necessarily what's really going on. Sometimes what appears to be chaos is actually a prelude to creativity.

But how can we tell which is which? How do we recognize the difference between a degenerative, spinning-our-wheels version of group confusion and the dynamic, diversity-stretches-our-imagination version of group confusion?

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

CLOSER TO REALITY



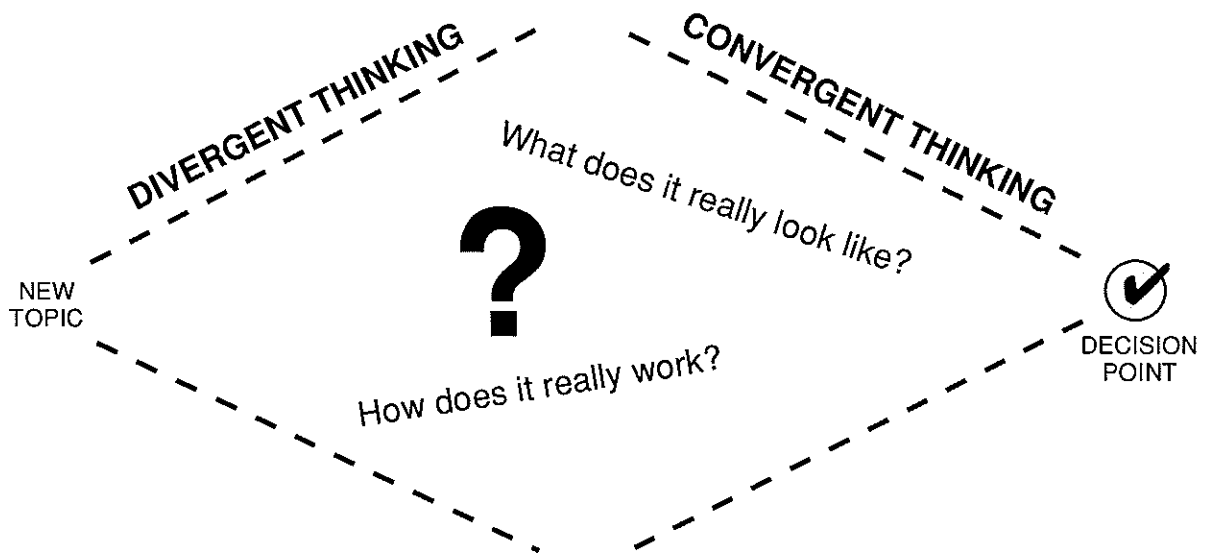
At times the individual members of a group need to express their own points of view. At other times, the same people want to narrow their differences and aim the discussion toward closure. These two sets of processes will be referred to as “divergent thinking” and “convergent thinking.”

Here are four examples of the differences between the two thinking processes:

DIVERGENT THINKING		CONVERGENT THINKING
Generating a list of ideas	vs.	Sorting ideas into categories
Free-flowing open discussion	vs.	Summarizing key points
Seeking diverse points of view	vs.	Coming to agreement
Suspending judgment	vs.	Exercising judgment

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

UNANSWERED
QUESTIONS



Some years ago, a large, well-known computer manufacturer developed a problem-solving model that was based on the principles of divergent thinking and convergent thinking.

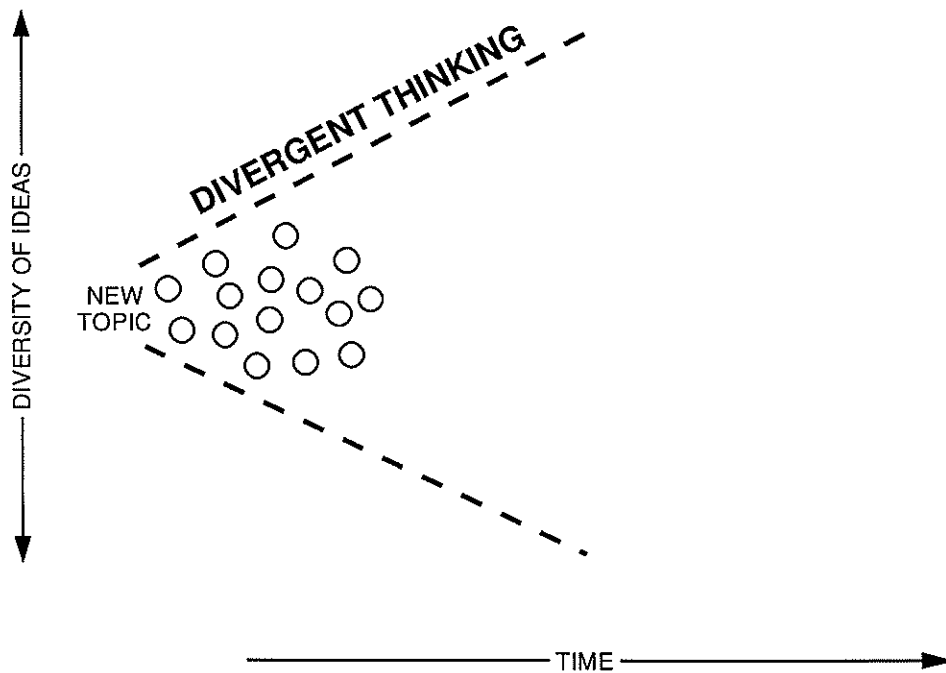
This model was used by managers throughout the company. But it didn't always work so well. One project manager told us that it took their group *two years* to revise the travel expense-reimbursement forms.

Why would that happen? How does group decision-making *really* work?

To explore these questions in greater depth, the following pages present a series of stop-action snapshots of the process of group decision-making.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

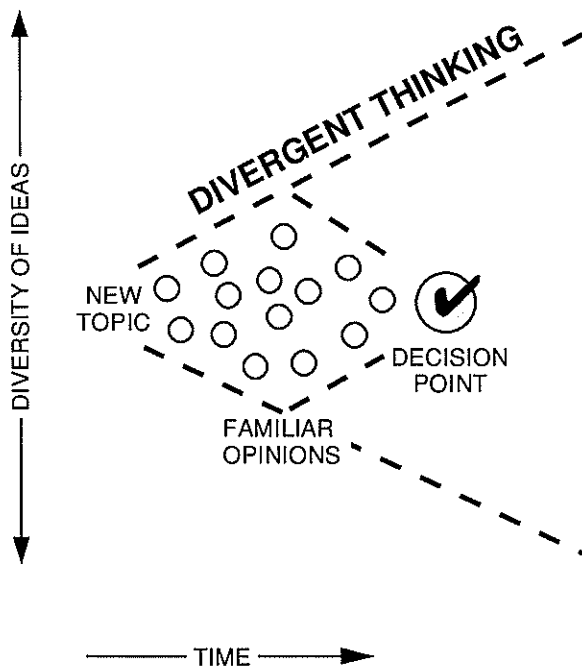
DISCUSSION
BEGINS



The early rounds of a discussion cover safe, familiar territory. People take positions that reflect conventional wisdom. They rehash well-worn disagreements, and they make proposals for obvious solutions. This is natural – the first ideas we express are the ones we've already thought about.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

QUICK
DECISIONS

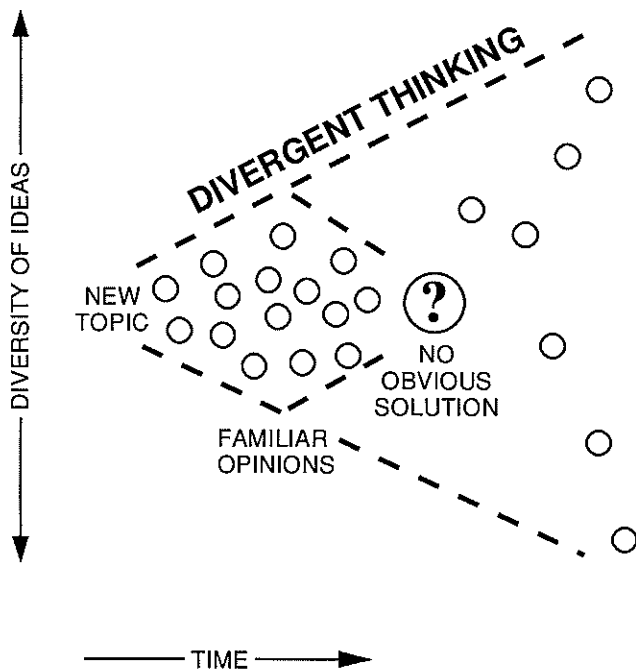


When a problem has an obvious solution, it makes sense to close the discussion quickly. Why waste time?

There's only one problem: most groups try to bring *every* discussion to closure this quickly.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

NO OBVIOUS SOLUTION

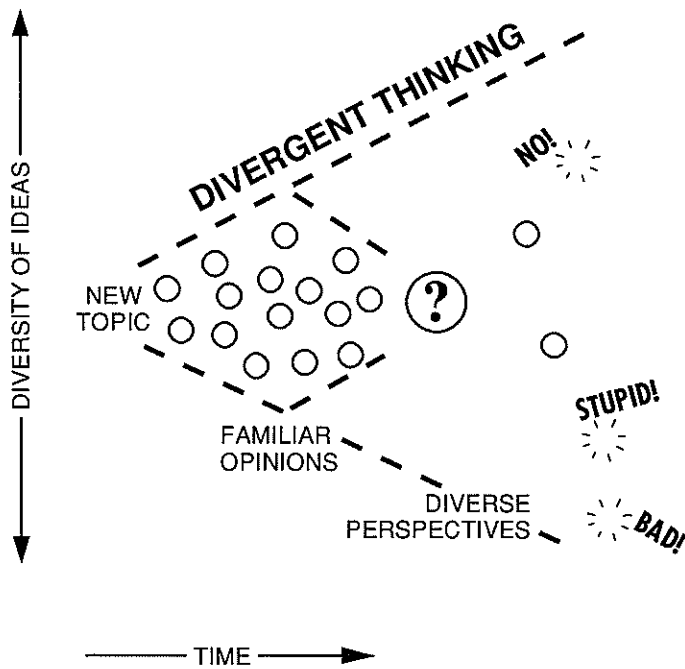


Some problems have *no* easy solutions. For example, how does an inner-city public school prevent campus violence? What steps should a business take to address the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce? Cases like these require a lot of thought; the issues are too complex to be solved with familiar opinions and conventional wisdom.

When a group of decision-makers has to wrestle with a difficult problem, they will not succeed in solving it until they *break out of the narrow band of familiar opinions* and explore a wider range of possibilities.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

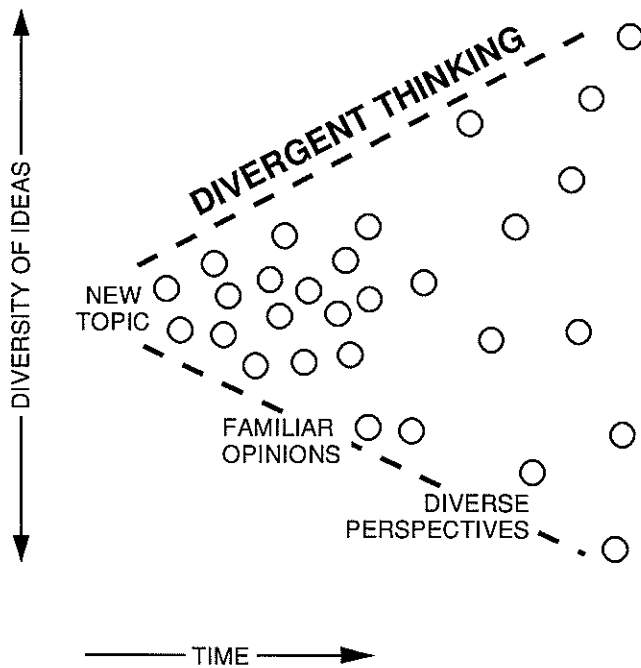
THE CLASSIC DEAD END



Unfortunately, most groups aren't very good at cultivating unfamiliar or unpopular opinions.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

EXPLORING
POSSIBILITIES

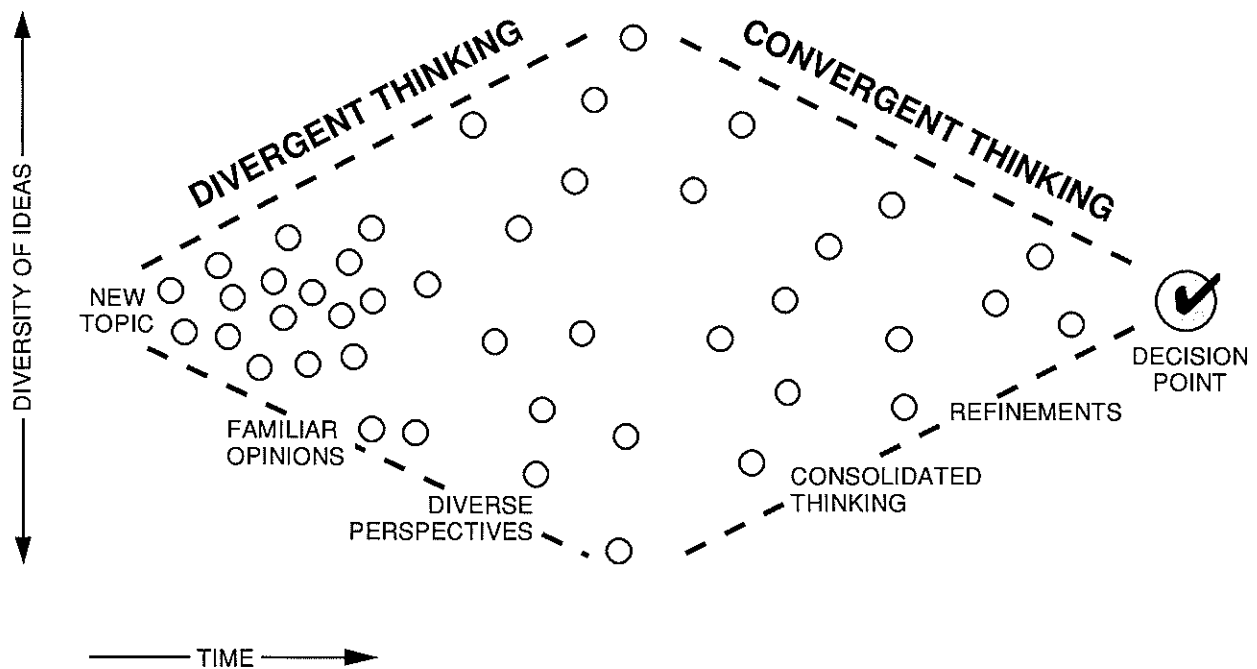


Now and then, when the stakes are sufficiently high and the stars are in proper alignment, a group can manage to overcome the tendency to criticize and inhibit its members. On such occasions, people tentatively begin to consider new perspectives. Some participants might take a risk and express controversial opinions. Others might offer ideas that aren't fully developed.

Since the goal is to find a new way of thinking about the problem, variety is obviously desirable . . . but the spread of opinions can become cumbersome and difficult to manage. Then what?

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

IDEALIZED
PROCESS

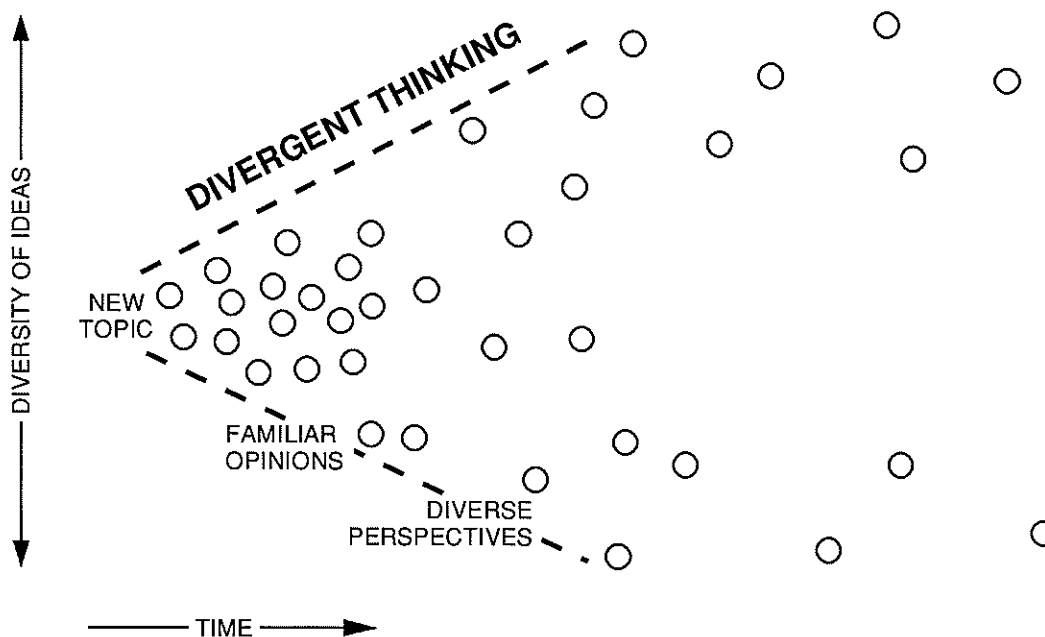


In theory, a group that has committed itself to thinking through a difficult problem would move forward in orderly, thoughtful steps. First, the group would generate and explore a diverse set of ideas. Next, they would consolidate the best thinking into a proposal. Then, they'd refine the proposal until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

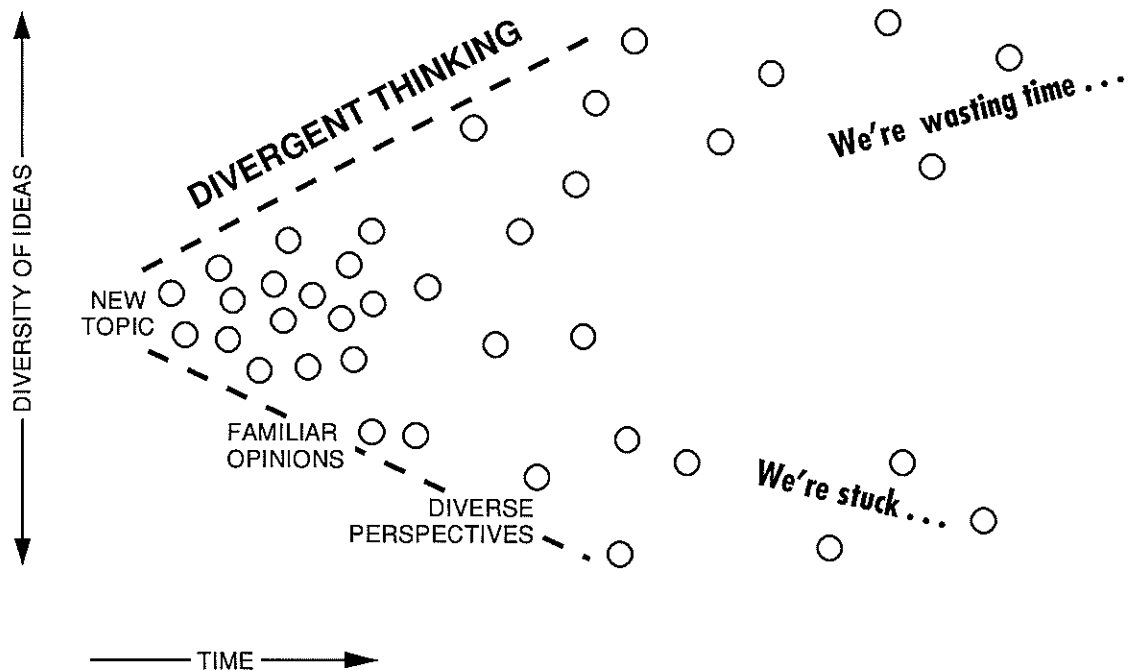


In practice, it's hard for people to shift from expressing their own opinions to understanding the opinions of others. And it's particularly challenging to do so when a wide diversity of perspectives are in play. In such cases people can get overloaded, disoriented, annoyed, impatient – or all of the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

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ATTEMPTED
STEP-BACKS

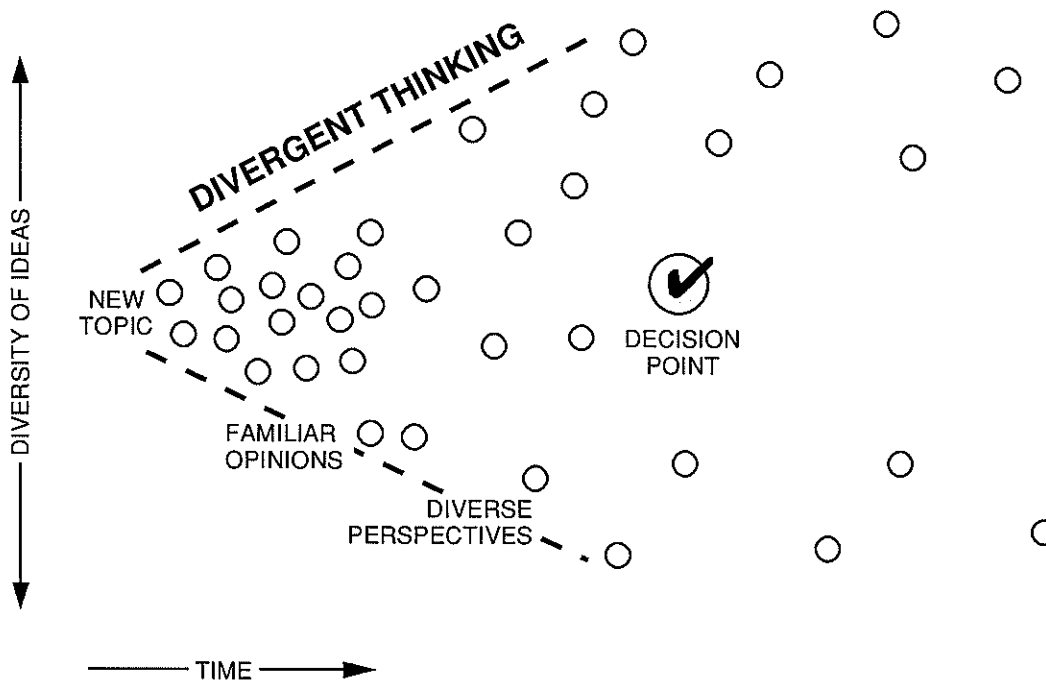


Sometimes one or more participants will attempt to step back from the content of the discussion and talk about the process. They might say things like, "I thought we all agreed to stick to the topic," or "We need better ground rules," or "Does anyone understand what's going on here?"

Groups rarely respond intelligently to this line of thought. More commonly, a process comment becomes merely one more voice in the wilderness – yet another poorly understood perspective that gets absorbed into the general confusion.

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

POOR TIMING



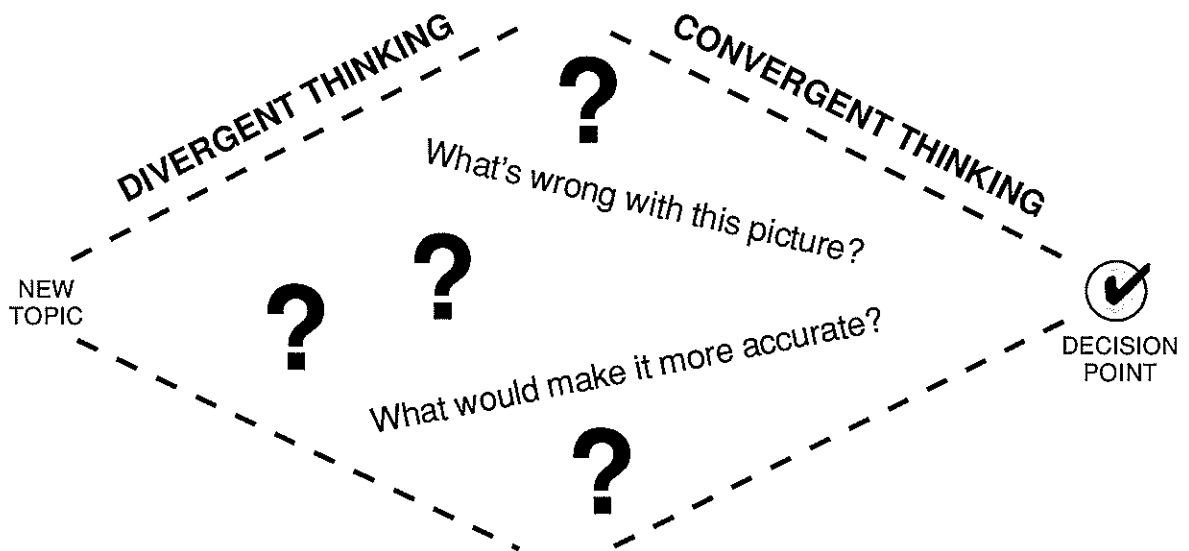
At this point in a process, the person in charge of a meeting can make the problem worse, if he or she attempts to alleviate frustration by announcing that s/he has made a decision. This is a common mistake.

The person-in-charge may believe that s/he has found a perfectly logical answer to the problem at hand, but this doesn't mean that everyone else will telepathically grasp the reasoning behind the decision. Some people may still be thinking along entirely different lines.

This is the exact situation in which the person-in-charge *appears* to have made the decision before the meeting began. This leads many people to feel deep distrust. *"Why did s/he tell me I'd have a say in this decision when s/he already knew what the outcome would be?"*

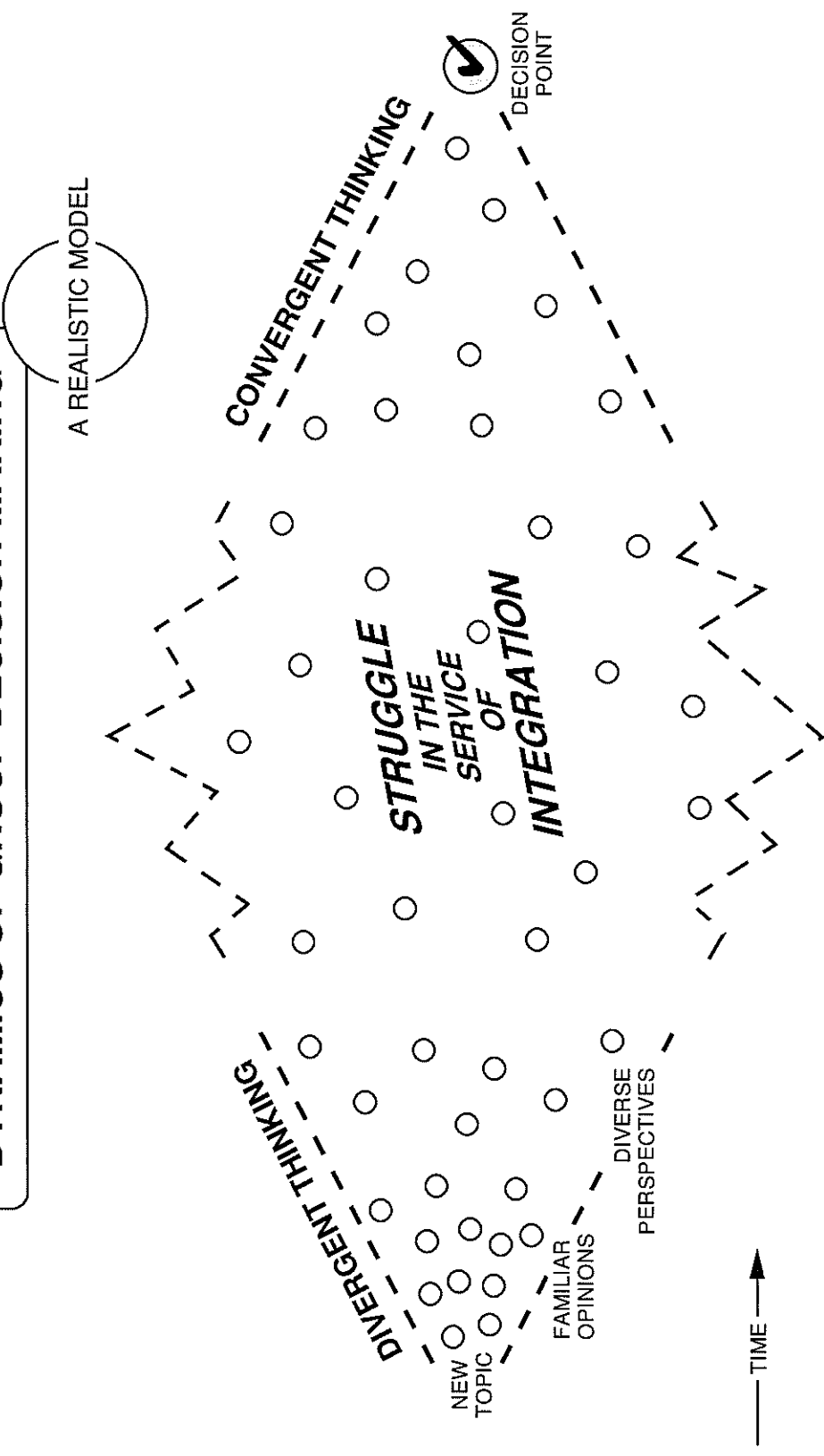
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

WHAT'S MISSING?



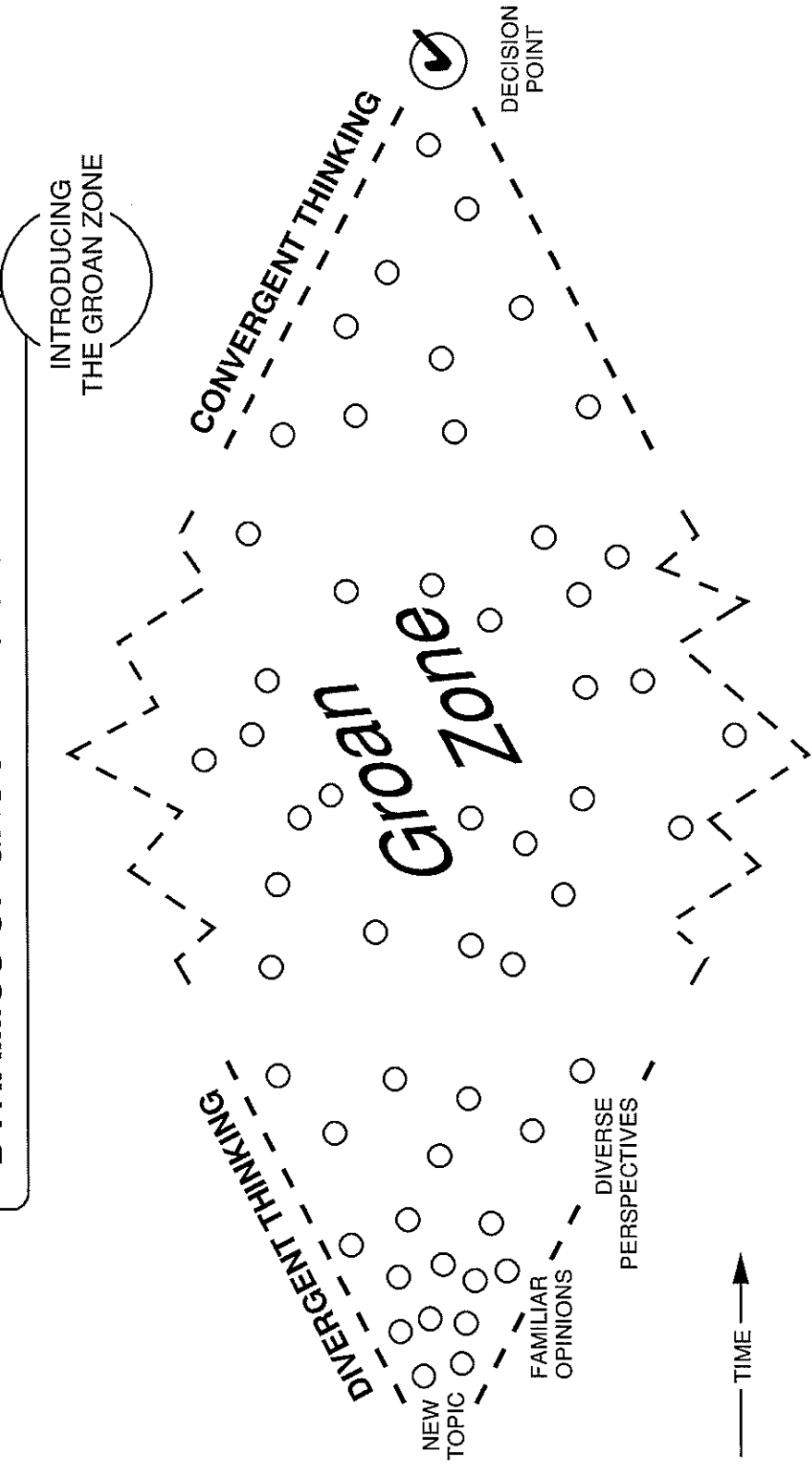
Obviously, there's something wrong with the idealized model. Convergent thinking simply does not follow automatically from a divergent thinking process. What's missing?

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING



A 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.

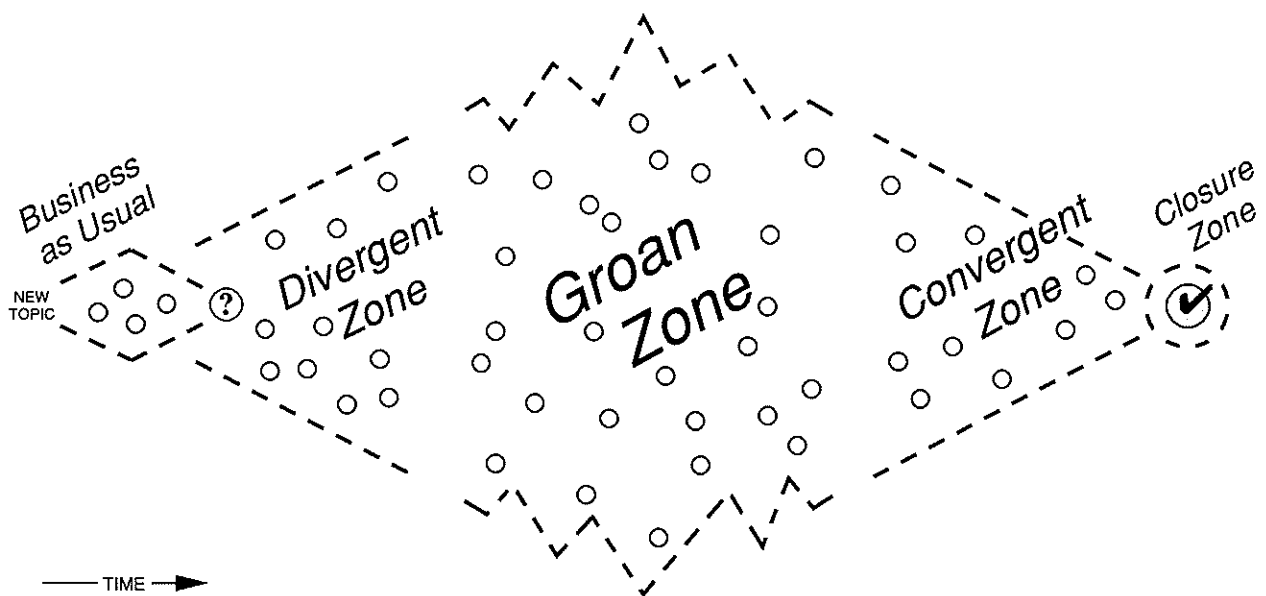
DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING



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 DIAMOND OF PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

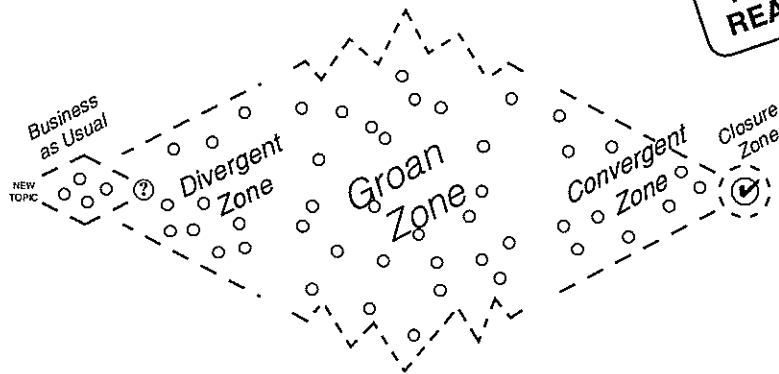


This is the *Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making*. It was developed by Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger. Facilitators can use this model in many ways: as a diagnostic tool, a road map, or a teaching tool to provide their groups with shared language and shared points of reference.

Fundamentally, though, it was created to validate and legitimize the hidden aspects of everyday life in groups.

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.

