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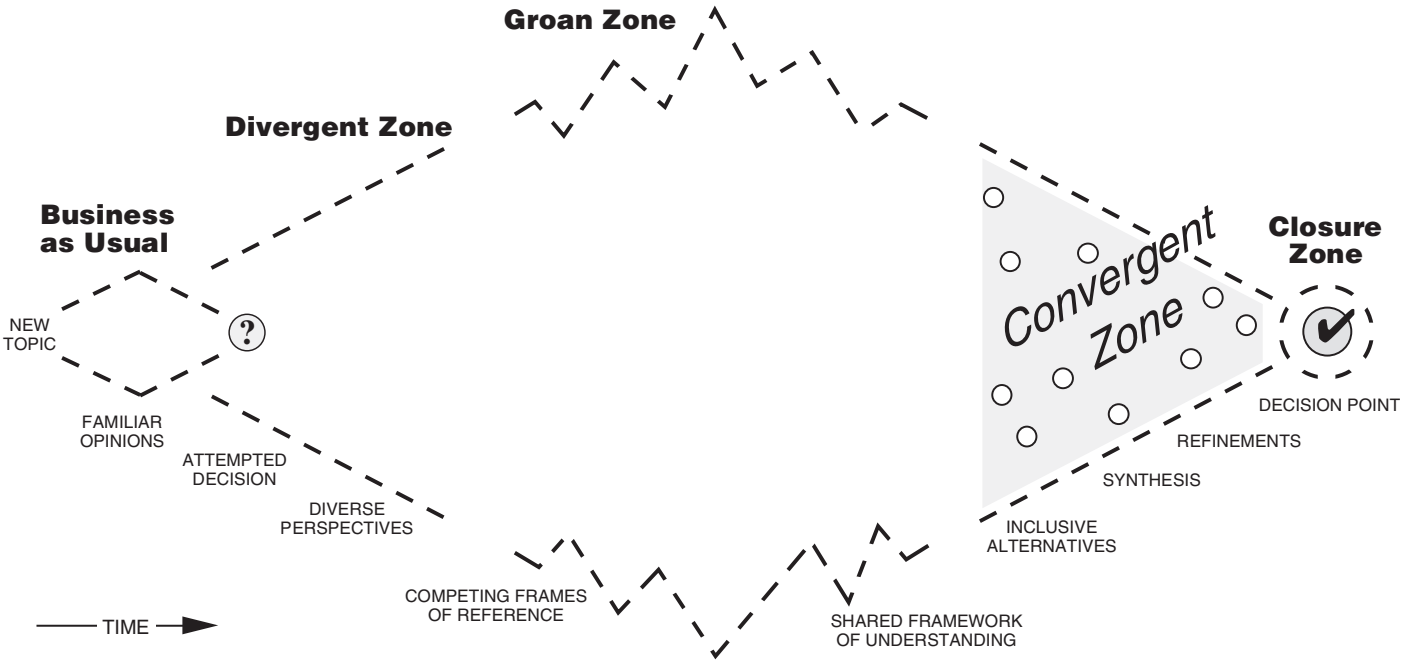
FACILITATING IN THE CONVERGENT ZONE

PRINCIPLES, TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS FOR STRENGTHENING GOOD IDEAS

- Introduction to the Convergent Zone
- Common Facilitation Techniques
- Responding to Challenging Situations
- Structured Activities
- Summary

LIFE IN THE CONVERGENT ZONE



Once a group has developed a shared framework of understanding, everything feels faster, smoother, easier. The pace of discussion accelerates. People say, "Finally, we're getting something done!" Ideas take shape. Vague notions become workable, and goals become detailed plans.

Confidence runs high during this period. People show up on time and stay until the end of the meeting. Between sessions, work that needs to be done gets done.

During this time people engage in problem solving from a place of shared understanding. There isn't nearly as much complexity as in the *Groan Zone*. People are paying attention to each other and the need for facilitation has dwindled. This is a time when people can talk to each other with minimal confusion. They can play with ideas, plan them, and evaluate them.

FACILITATING IN THE CONVERGENT ZONE

FACILITATOR'S OBJECTIVES

In the *Convergent Zone*, the facilitator's objectives are first, to help the group develop inclusive alternatives; second, to synthesize the alternatives into an approach that will work for everyone; third, to strengthen and refine the practical logic of that approach; and fourth, to plan it and bring it to life.

While much problem-solving may remain to be done, it takes the form of planning, designing, quantifying, evaluating – in other words, rational and logical analysis. The heavy lifting can often be done with formats like *reports & presentations, breakout groups, ask the expert, trade show* and *listing ideas*.

A lot of chartwriting happens in the *Convergent Zone;* seeing one's thinking in print is the easiest way to refine it – and that goes triple for groups! The facilitator's listening becomes focused rather than open-ended, using skills like *listening for the logic* and *summarizing*. Non-directive technique is rarely used, whereas *directive questioning* and *facilitating with a point of view* are common.

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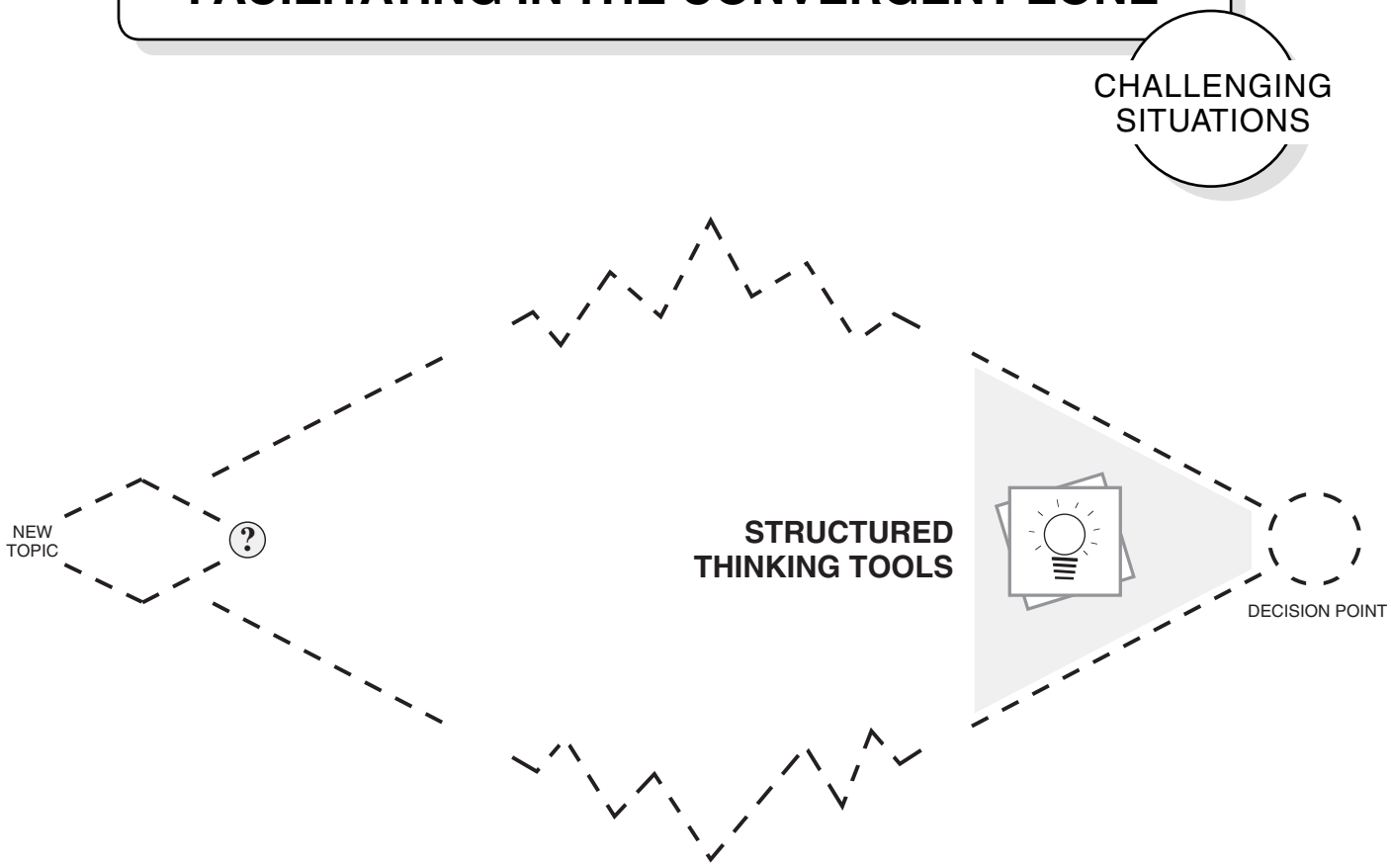


Convergent thinking, by definition, is thinking among people who have developed mutual understanding. Thanks to good communication they can make significant progress with merely the type of support described on the previous page. But communication is not the only variable that plays a critical role in the success of a participatory process. Two others are just as important: the creativity and inclusiveness of the general approach, and the logical and practical strength of the idea as it develops into an action plan.

Most groups need the boost of one or more structured activities to stretch and reach for an *inclusive solution*. Chapter 16 describes and demonstrates how case studies can be utilized in just that way. Likewise, Chapter 17 provides many structured activities that employ *creative reframing* to support convergent thinking to be more innovative and more inspired.

As for logical and practical effectiveness, a valuable collection of structured tools for strengthening good ideas are provided on the following pages.

DEFINING STEPS AND MILESTONES

WHY

Thinking into the future is one of the hardest challenges for any group. We don't have good points of reference to distinguish between a large-scale goal and a small-scale goal. Yet every complex project contains many levels of goals-within-goals.

For example, consider a project with the overall goal of restoring the vitality of an impoverished neighborhood. That goal would no doubt contain many stages and milestones (such as attracting new business to the area). Furthermore, each stage would contain various steps that must be taken before the milestones at the end of that stage could be attained.

Since we lack good points of reference to make the distinctions described above, most groups find it difficult to engage in a planning process that requires them to set overall goals and define stages and milestones.

HOW

1. Hang a long sheet of paper across the front of the room. At the far right-hand end of the paper, write the group's goal – for example, "Goal: Open a new office in Denver."

2. Ask the group to generate four or five milestones that must be completed in order to reach the goal – for example, "Complete our financial projections."

3. Write the milestones from left to right across the long sheet of paper. Leave as much space as possible between milestones.

4. Break into small groups, and assign one milestone to each group. Each group identifies and lists each step it would take to attain that milestone. Have them write each step on a sticky note.

5. Have someone from each group put the sticky notes on the wall, left to right, in the space provided for their milestone. Others can read what's being posted, and add any missing steps.

CLARIFYING SELECTION CRITERIA

WHY

How should a group choose one proposal over another? One way is to agree on the criteria to use in evaluating each proposal. For example, suppose a group agreed that its most important criteria were "easy to do" and "inexpensive." These criteria could help them reject a proposal that would be expensive or difficult, even if the project seemed interesting.

This activity helps groups discuss and agree on a list of five or fewer criteria, by defining them *before* specific proposals are considered.

HOW

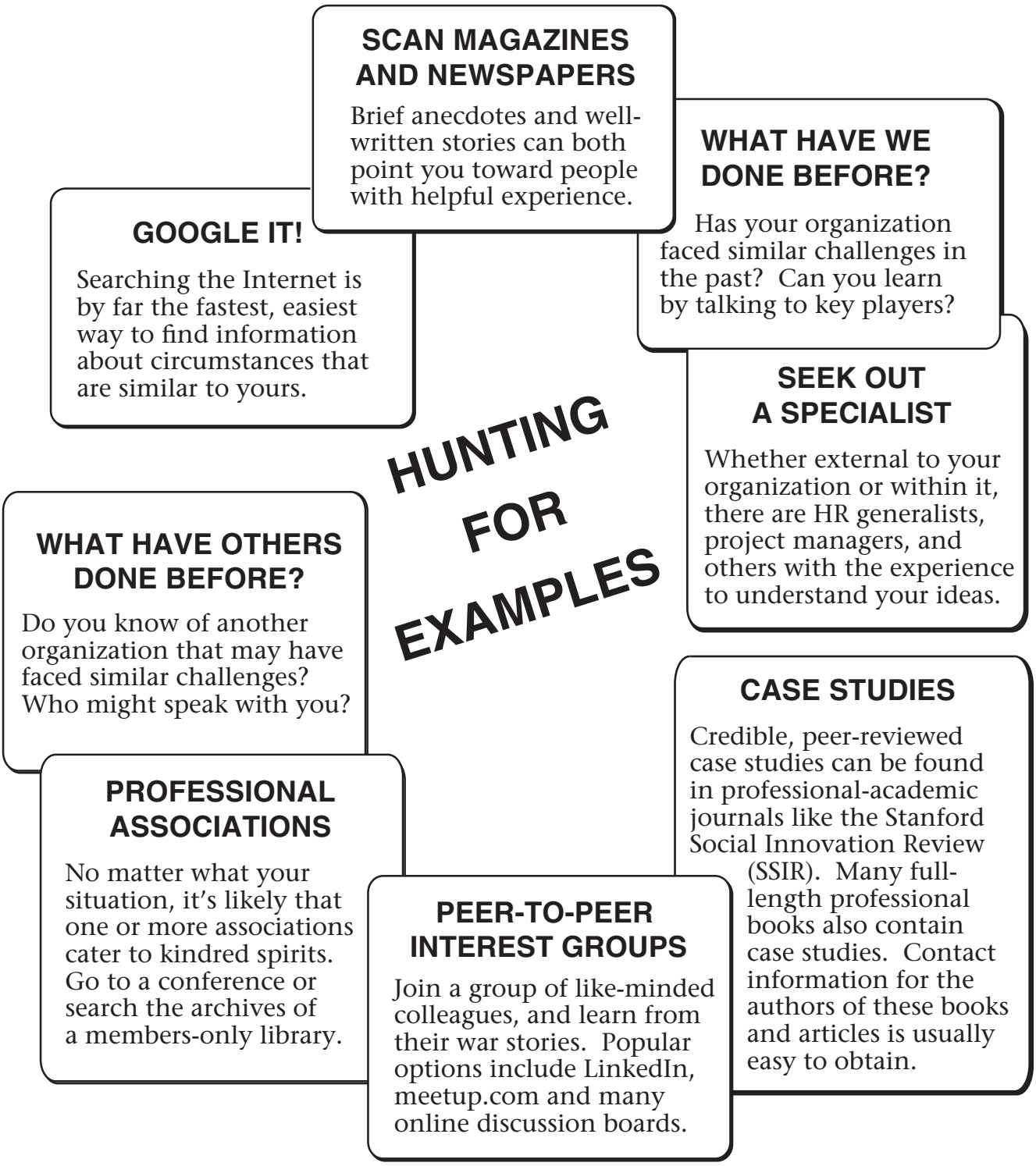
1. Have the group brainstorm a list of answers to this question: "By doing this project (or solving this problem, or developing this plan, for example), what are we trying to accomplish?"

2. Start a new chart titled "Selection Criteria." Facilitate the group to reword each item on the first list as a possible selection criterion. For example, if an item from the brainstorm list is, "We're trying to get two opposing factions to work together," the rewording might be, "It lets both factions work together" or "It appeals to both factions."

3. Explain that the list will soon be reduced to no more than five items. To prepare members for that judgment, have people break into small groups and discuss which criteria seem most important, and why.

4. Reconvene the large group. Have people select items from the list of criteria, and ask them to advocate for retaining those items on a final list of five or fewer criteria.

5. Give everyone five votes. Tally the results, and eliminate all but the top five vote-getters. This may not be a final decision on criteria. It will provide the membership with a sense of what people value most.



There is often a wide gap between the discovery of a great idea and the successful implementation of that idea. One effective way to mitigate risk and tilt the odds toward positive outcomes is to study and learn from other people's experiences of success or failure in similar circumstances. Examples are abundantly available, as noted above, to anyone willing to make a modest effort to seek them out.

PAYOFFS AND RISKS

WHY

This activity improves the viability of a proposal by reducing the costs and risks that are associated with it.

For example, a big city mayor recently received several million dollars to improve public transportation. The public favored spending the money on new bus routes. But the mayor was committed to a previously announced hiring freeze: no new city employees could be hired until the budget was balanced. On one hand, without new bus drivers, no routes could be added. On the other hand, if new bus drivers were hired, other government agencies would lobby for exemptions for *their* programs.

Payoffs And Risks helped the mayor's planning staff explore in detail the risks they would face if they went ahead with a route expansion. Through the analysis, they discovered a way to reduce their risk. They enlisted the local newspapers in an editorial campaign to build political support for this exception to the hiring freeze. It was successful, and they were able to add three new bus routes without opposition.

HOW

1. Hang three sheets of flipchart paper. Title the first page "Payoffs" and the second page "Risks." Leave the third page untitled.
2. On page one, list the payoffs associated with the proposal.
3. On page two, list the risks associated with the same proposal.
4. Now title page three "Ways to Reduce Risk." For each risk listed on the "Risks" page, discuss options for reducing the costs and the extent of the risk. Record the discussion on page three.
5. After the options for cost-reduction are better understood, ask for new proposals that retain the payoffs of the original proposal, while incorporating the insights gained through this activity.

WORK-FLOW PLANNING TOOLS

PERT Chart

This tool analyzes and maps a project's deadlines and other time requirements by representing them visually.

Milosevic, Dragan Z.
Project Management ToolBox: Tools and Techniques for the Practicing Project Manager.
Wiley, 2003.

Flow Chart

This tool uses everyday symbols – like circles, squares and arrows – to analyze the logic of a sequence of goals and the steps needed to reach each one. *Go / no-go* decision points can also be mapped.

Damelio, R.
The Basics of Process Mapping, 2nd Ed.
Productivity Press, 2012.

Gantt Chart

This tool keeps track of the progress toward completion of various sub-tasks within one or more stages of work in a complex project.

Kerzner, H.R.
Project Management.
Wiley, 2013.

Critical Path Method

This tool organizes and illustrates dependencies among different elements of a complex project. It shows which tasks must be finished before others can be started.

Klastorin, T.
Project Management: Tools and Trade-offs, 3rd Ed.
Wiley, 2003.

WBS Chart

A *Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)* chart is a tool for dividing a project into manageable chunks of work. Assigning responsibility for handling each chunk is also done by the *WBS*.

Haugan, G.T.
Effective Work Breakdown Structures,
Management Concepts, 2001.

Implementing any great idea requires quite a bit of planning. Elements like time, money, roles and communication are among many variables that must be defined, monitored and controlled. The tools on this page help planners think through the logic of the tasks to be done, in what order, by whom, and by when. The citations will lead you to write-ups that offer practical guidance for using each related tool.

RESOURCE ANALYSIS: CAN WE REALLY MAKE THIS WORK?

WHY

Sometimes groups agree to proposals that sound good but have not been thought through. This is usually not a problem, because issues dealt with in this way are usually insignificant. But occasionally, a group will agree to a huge undertaking with absolutely no sense of what they're in for.

For example, eight nurses decided to organize a major conference that would bring together representatives from over one hundred agencies. Their aim was to build a coalition that could influence state and county funding policies. The organizers did not have the slightest grasp of the effort it would take them, yet they publicized the conference and kept taking on new responsibilities as they came up. Eventually one person lost her job, and another got very sick. The conference itself was poorly attended, disorganized and ultimately inconsequential. In hindsight the nurses said, "We should have been more realistic to begin with."

HOW

1. Ask the group to list the major tasks that must be achieved if the proposal under consideration is to be implemented.
2. Assign two or three people to think about each task. Have them choose a record keeper and a spokesperson.
3. Say to each group: "For 10 minutes, think about the steps necessary to complete your assigned task. Break it down to doable action steps."
4. When time is up, reconvene the large group and ask the spokesperson from each group to report on his or her group's work.
5. After all committees have reported, ask everyone to discuss whether the overall proposal is adequate or requires modification.

WHO DOES WHAT BY WHEN?

WHY

Group decision-making is often viewed as an exercise in futility. In the experience of many, agreements reached during meetings are likely to be implemented poorly, if at all.

The odds of successful implementation increase when a group takes the time to spell out specifically what needs to be done, who will do it, by when, and with what resources. But often this step does not occur. Instead, people act as if they assumed that once an agreement has been reached, the follow-through will happen magically. "Someone else" will tend to the details later.

When a group stays fuzzy about the specifics of implementing an agreement, two or three people will probably wind up with all of the tasks – often without adequate resources. Alternatively, no one takes responsibility, and nothing happens.

This activity supports a group to consider in advance who will do each task, and when. As a consequence, responsibilities are often distributed more evenly, and more effectively.

HOW

1. Draw a matrix with four vertical columns. Title the columns: "Tasks," "Who," "By When," and "Resources Needed."

2. Under the first heading, "Tasks," list all tasks that need to be done. If additional tasks are identified later, add them to the list.

3. Number each task listed. Then discuss: *"Who will do this? By when? What resources are needed?"* This thinking can done in open discussion format, with no prescribed sequence for answering the questions.

4. As specific agreements are made, write them on the chart.

WHO ELSE NEEDS TO EVALUATE THIS PROPOSAL?

WHY

Most decisions do not just affect the people who make them. Obviously, not everyone who will be affected can participate in making a decision and planning its implementation. Nonetheless, it can be very, very costly to overlook the perspectives of those who did not participate in developing the reasoning that led to the decision.

This activity helps a group to think proactively about the question, "Who else needs to be consulted?" *It usually takes a group two or three hours – sometimes longer – to go through the steps*. Taking this time at the start of a planning process might be the difference between success and disaster.

HOW

1. Have group members generate lists of people who:
   - Will be directly affected by this decision.
   - Have final sign-off authority.
   - Have to implement the decision.
   - Could sabotage the process.
2. Take a few moments to examine the list. Discuss the following questions: "What's the likelihood that any of these stakeholders would disagree with our ultimate decision? If any of them did not support the decision, how might that affect our ability to implement?"
3. Next consider each person or group on the list. Who needs to be consulted before the final decision is made?
4. For each person or group who will be consulted, choose a consultation method. Some options are interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and an invitation to a core group meeting.

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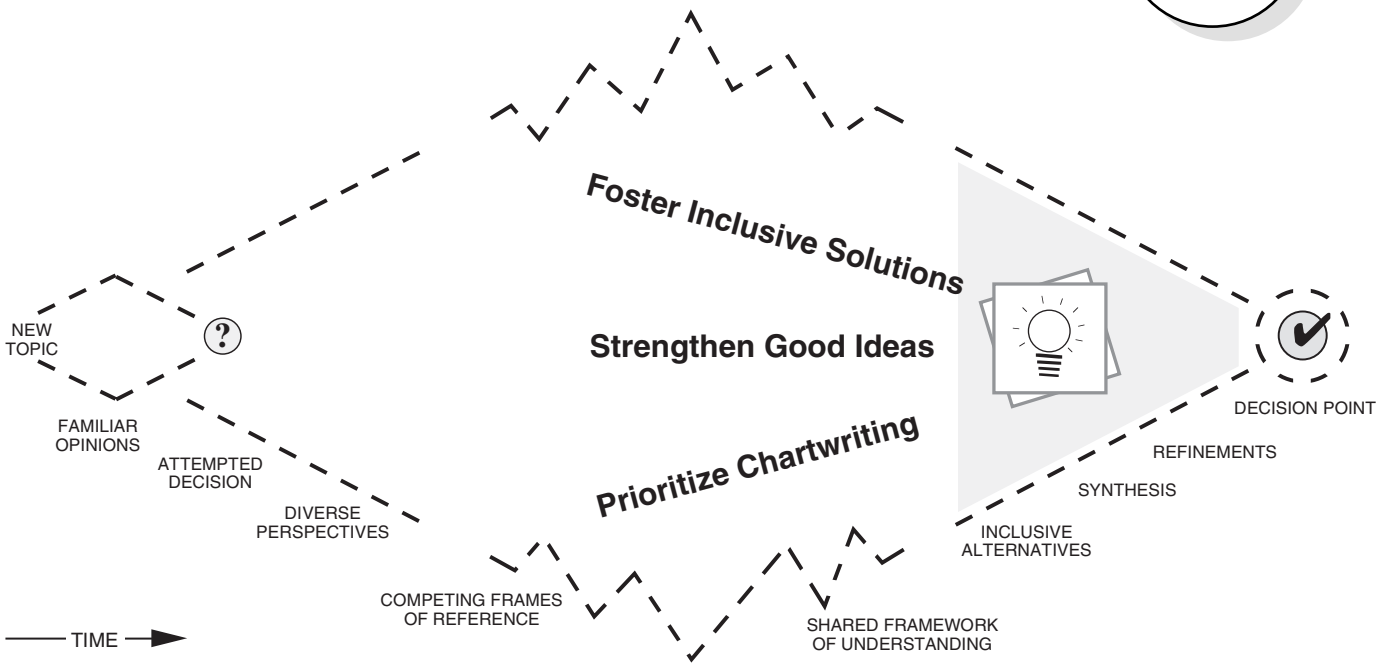
SUMMARY



Sustainable agreements require well-thought-out ideas that incorporate everyone's needs and goals. If the struggle of the *Groan Zone* is the heart of a sustainable agreement, the ingenuity of the *Convergent Zone* is the brain.

Structured thinking activities can be quite useful when a group seems trapped in an *either/or* mentality. Groups in this condition need inspiration and stimulation – which members are unlikely to provide to one another, when they're focused on their own positions. Chapter 16 *(Inclusive Solutions)* and chapter 17 *(Creative Reframing)* are helpful for this purpose.

Structured activities will also support groups to be more disciplined at refining the logic of their ideas, and at planning the nitty-gritty work that will enable their ideas to be implemented.

But it would be misleading to imply that groups in the *Convergent Zone* spend much time engaged in structured thinking. The truth is the opposite. Convergent discussions are largely self-managing. For many facilitators, the hardest part of working in the *Convergent Zone* is learning to pick up the markers, face the flipchart, and otherwise stay out of the group's way!