

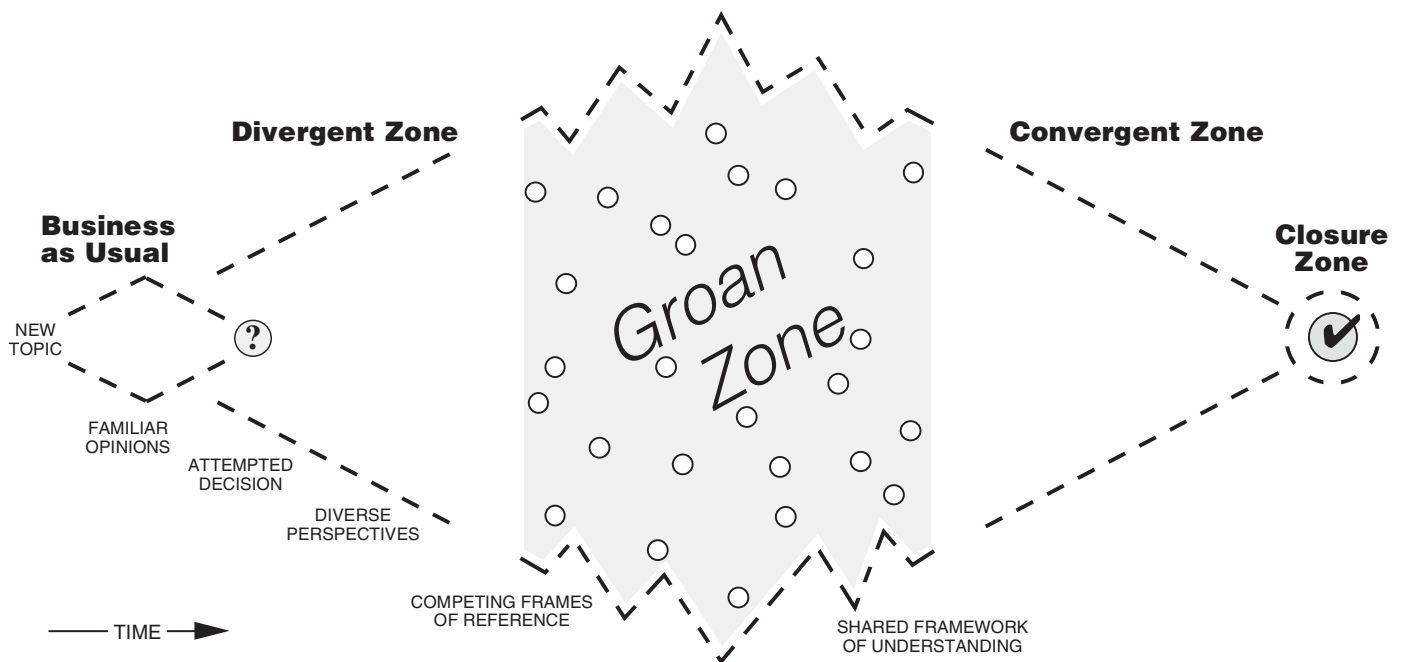
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FACILITATING IN THE GROAN ZONE

PRINCIPLES, TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS
TO BUILD MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

- ◆ **Introduction to the Groan Zone**
- ◆ **Common Facilitation Techniques**
- ◆ **Responding to Challenging Situations**
- ◆ **Structured Activities**
- ◆ **Summary**

LIFE IN THE GROAN ZONE



After a period of divergent thinking, most groups enter a *Groan Zone*. It's almost inevitable. For example, suppose a group has just brainstormed a list. In theory, the next task is simple: sift through the ideas, and pick a few to discuss in depth. But in practice that task can be grueling. Everyone has their own frame of reference. Moreover, when people misunderstand one another, they become more confused, more impatient, more self-centered – more unpleasant all around. People repeat themselves, they interrupt, they dismiss other people's ideas and rudely put each other down.

Behaviors like these usually produce even more behaviors like these; it becomes a vicious cycle. Without a facilitator, the cycle often continues its regressive descent until participants give up altogether. At that point, they will agree to almost anything – any half-baked, unrealistic, mediocre compromise – just as long as it will get them out of the room.

FACILITATING IN THE GROAN ZONE

FACILITATOR'S
OBJECTIVES



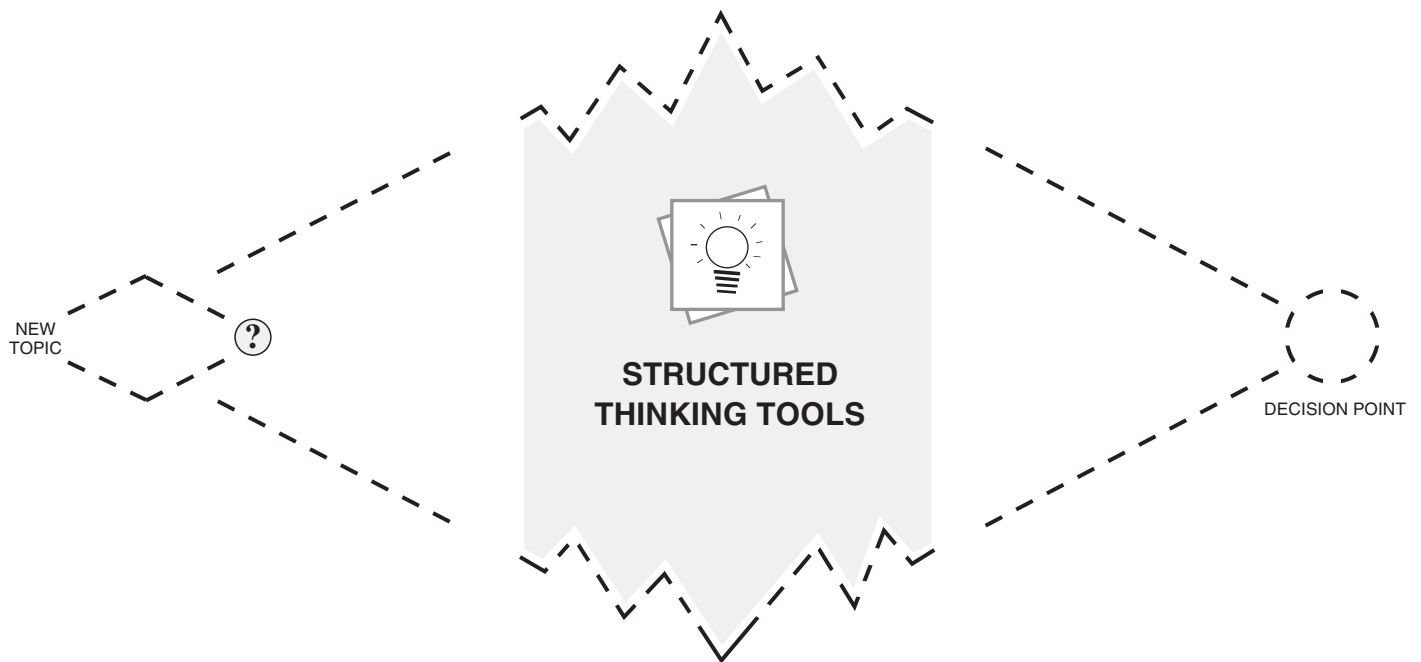
The facilitator's main objective in the *Groan Zone* is to help the group develop a shared framework of understanding. This is anything but easy.

Whether the facilitator is helping one person stand up to pressure from others, or helping two people clear up a misunderstanding between them, it takes a lot of careful, responsive listening. At times, the facilitator may be the *only* person in the room who is listening at all. The classic listening skills – paraphrasing and drawing people out – are indispensable now. So are empathizing, validating differences, helping people listen to one another, linking, and listening for common ground (all described in Chapter 4).

Furthermore, energy management is a critical success factor for facilitating in the *Groan Zone*. To prevent exasperated participants from shutting down, switch participation formats frequently, as discussed in Chapter 9. All the formats shown above are designed to promote mutual understanding.

FACILITATING IN THE GROAN ZONE

CHALLENGING
SITUATIONS



The simplest way to help group members gain a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives is to encourage them to ask direct questions of one another, and listen carefully to the answers. This common-sense approach would be enhanced by using any and all of the standard facilitation techniques listed on the previous page.

But some participants fear that asking questions might seem confrontational or rude, especially when a speaker's statement is difficult to comprehend. Also, many people simply can't sit with the ambiguity of unstructured inquiry and dialogue for very long, whether or not a facilitator is refereeing the process. And most of all, it's hard for everyone – participant and facilitator alike – to tolerate the poor behaviors and emotional turmoil that surface when people feel misunderstood. Under any of these challenging conditions, structured activities provide the added firmness, the safe container, that many participants require in order to settle down and keep working in a *Groan Zone*. Many such activities are presented in this chapter.



LEARNING MORE ABOUT EACH OTHER'S PERSPECTIVES

WHY

The most basic method for promoting mutual understanding is to ask questions. Sometimes, however, people hesitate to ask questions about each other's perspectives because questioning is so often perceived as criticism. By providing structure, this activity helps people understand that the questions are not intended as attacks. Using this simple tool builds trust and patience, and it greatly improves mutual understanding.

Some facilitators may hesitate to use this tool, feeling that it burns up precious time. But the alternative – proceeding in the absence of mutual understanding – ends up consuming much more time, with worse results.

HOW

1. Ask for a volunteer to be the “focal person.” S/he begins by saying, “Here’s the point I want to make.” S/he has three minutes to talk.
2. When s/he is done, invite anyone to ask the speaker a question, such as, “What do you mean by . . . ?” or, “Can you say more about . . . ?”
3. The focal person then answers the first question.
4. Turn to the questioner, and ask, “Is this clear to you now?” If so, continue to Step 5. If not, ask the questioner to state, first, what s/he believes the focal person has said, and then what s/he still finds unclear. For example, someone might say, “I hear the focal person saying that we should all share the cleanup chores equally. But I still don’t understand why he feels so strongly about it.”
5. When both the questioner and the focal person feel understood, ask for another questioner to take a turn.
6. After three or four people have had a chance to ask questions, ask for another person to volunteer to be the new focal person.

The goal of this activity is to promote understanding, not to resolve differences. This should be emphasized beforehand and, if necessary, throughout the activity.



IF I WERE YOU

WHY

Another straightforward way to promote mutual understanding is to have people look at the world through each other's eyes.

Exploring someone else's perspective helps people to suspend their own points of view. This activity thus provides some participants with insights they may not have acquired through conventional discussion.

Furthermore, the process supports participants to feel understood and "seen." If necessary, it allows them the opportunity to correct any misperceptions.

HOW

1. Have the group choose a statement to work with. The statement should begin with the words, "If I were you . . ." For example, two common choices are, "If I were you, a main concern of mine would be . . ." or "If I were you, one of my goals would be . . ."
2. Write each member's name on two separate slips of paper, and put them into a hat.
3. Have each person draw out two slips, so that each person has the names of two different people. (If a person pulls his or her own name, s/he puts it back or trades with someone.)
4. Give everyone a turn being the focal person. The two people who have that person's name say to him or her, "If I were you . . ."
5. After listening to both people, the focal person may respond.
6. When everyone has had a turn, ask the group members to reflect on the activity and share any new insights they have gained.



MEANINGFUL THEMES

WHY

Each participant comes to a meeting with his or her own unique set of interests and concerns. And in many cases, the participant wants to find out where others stand on the area of his or her special concern. For example, one person may need to know whether other members are committed to remaining in the group. Someone else may need to discuss the group's track record on diversity issues. Another member may want to know people's attitudes about retaining a consultant.

Often, however, it is not clear how or when to raise those issues for discussion. Any of these themes might be very meaningful to a few people, yet not particularly important to others. This creates a dilemma. How can a group devote sufficient time to such concerns – enough to prevent individual participants from becoming impatient or withdrawn – yet not so much time that the agenda becomes derailed by topics that seem tangential to other members? This activity offers a method for balancing the two concerns, by enabling members to make a *preliminary assessment* of the attitudes pertaining to their area of interest.

HOW

1. Begin by having each group member write down one or two questions that, if everyone's answer were known, would enable that group member to participate more effectively. For example, "Do others think we should be prepared to spend a lot of money on this project?"
2. Collect one question from each person and put them in a hat.
3. Draw one sheet of paper out of the hat, read that question, and ask the person who wrote that question to explain, in two minutes or less, why s/he wants to understand everyone's position on that question.
4. Ask for brief responses from everyone: "I feel this way because . . ." When everyone has spoken, draw another question. If time is short, the remaining questions can be carried over to the next meeting.



KEY WORDS

WHY

Everyone makes assumptions. People often think that everyone else shares the same assumptions about such things as a word's meaning, an event's likelihood, or someone's motives for their actions – to name just a few. When groups are unaware of their differences in assumptions, they may find it difficult to understand each other's thinking or behavior.

For example, the director of a city agency asked her staff for input on a proposed reorganization. A few people took her request seriously, but many others treated it lightly. This caused turmoil at staff meetings until the explanation was found. Several people had heard a rumor that the director was leaving; they doubted the reorganization would ever occur. The few who worked hard to give input were those who had not heard the rumor. These differences in assumptions were never mentioned, but they influenced everyone's commitment to the task.

Key Words helps people explore the meaning of the statements they make to one another. By discussing the meanings of key words, people can identify unspoken assumptions that are causing miscommunication.

HOW

1. Have the group compose a problem statement. For example, "New computers are too expensive to purchase." Write it on a flipchart.
2. Ask group members to identify the key words in the statement. Underline all key words. For example, "New computers are too expensive to purchase."
3. Have the group identify which word to focus on first. Then ask, "What questions does this word raise?" Record all responses. Then ask, "Does this word suggest any assumptions that can be challenged? For example, is 'purchase' the only way to obtain new computers?"
4. Repeat Step 3 for each key word. Encourage discussion throughout.

This tool was inspired by an exercise called "Lasso" in M. Doyle and D. Straus, *How to Make Meetings Work* (New York: Jove Books, 1982).



FACTS AND OPINIONS

WHY

This activity enables a group to trade a lot of information without getting bogged down in a discussion of who is right or what is true.

For example, suppose a group needed to begin thinking about next year's budget. *Facts and Opinions* would help them to generate statistics ("last year we spent \$4,000 on legal fees") and speculation ("we might want to initiate two new lawsuits next year") both within a short period of time.

Note that in this example, *Facts and Opinions* postpones the debate over the budget. Instead, the thrust of the exercise is to gather a lot of material on many different subjects. Once group members see the big picture, they can decide which topics to discuss and in what order.

HOW

1. Hang two large pieces of paper on a wall. Title one "Facts" and the other "Opinions." Also, make available sticky notes in two colors, with enough for every member to receive at least ten of each color.
2. Ask the group members, "What do you know about this topic?" Have each group member write his or her answers on the sticky notes, using one color for "Facts" and the other color for "Opinions." (If asked how to know whether something is a fact or an opinion, answer, "Please decide for yourself. If you're not sure, write it both ways.")
3. Have each person post his or her sticky notes on the wall. The notes should be posted as soon as they are written, so everyone can read the posted notes whenever they like. Reading often prompts new thinking. Participants can continue posting ideas until time is up.
4. After all data have been collected, ask for observations and reflections.



HOW WILL THIS PROPOSAL AFFECT OUR JOBS?

WHY

Sometimes a participant is clearly unhappy with a proposal but s/he is having trouble finding words to express his or her concerns effectively. The difficulty may be rooted in the fact that most proposals affect different roles in different ways. When participants do not understand the nuances of one another's roles – a common state of affairs – they may have trouble understanding one another's concerns.

This activity helps the group focus their whole attention on how a proposal will affect each participant. As a result, many confusions and misunderstandings clear up as people gain insight into the subtle realities of each other's situations.

HOW

1. Identify which members are likely to be affected by the proposal on the floor. Ask for a volunteer to become the focal person.
2. Have a 3–5 minute brainstorm session to list answers to the question: "If we implement our proposal, how will it affect this person's role?" While the brainstorm is in effect, no disagreements are allowed.
3. When time is up, ask the focal person to come to the front of the room. S/he educates the group by elaborating on the items s/he thinks are important for everyone to understand. Encourage participants to ask questions.
4. Have the group choose a second focal person. Repeat Steps 2 and 3.



TAKING TANGENTS SERIOUSLY

WHY

Tangents are a major cause of the frustration and confusion of the *Groan Zone*. When someone raises an issue that seems peripheral to the discussion, other participants often become nervous. They don't want the speaker to derail the conversation and take the group off track. But the speaker may believe that s/he has identified a crucial "side problem" that the group must face before the "main problem" can be resolved.

This dilemma comes up regularly. Because everyone has a unique perspective, it's not unusual for one person to spot a hidden problem that no one else has noticed. Group members may think that the speaker is wasting their time on a tangent, when in fact the speaker might be *ahead* of the group in articulating hidden complexities. And when that happens, the group is plunged into the *Groan Zone*.

Taking Tangents Seriously mitigates misunderstanding by supporting the group to gain a deeper appreciation of each person's perspective.

HOW

1. At the beginning of a discussion, or when the first tangential issue arises, post a blank sheet and title it "Side Issues." Add to it as tangents are identified.
2. At every meeting, ask the group to choose one topic from the list and discuss it for 15 minutes.
3. After 15 minutes ask, "Are we done, or would you prefer to extend the time?"
4. When time is up, finish with a quick summary. Ask, "What have you learned? Are there any next steps you should take?"
5. Repeat Steps 2 to 4 at subsequent meetings.



IS THIS WHAT YOU MEAN? NO, THAT'S NOT IT!

WHY

Anyone whose job involves serious writing knows that clarifying an important thought often takes several drafts. The same is true for ideas that are being birthed in group conversation, rather than in private writing. However, when a group is the medium for doing rough-draft thinking, the potential for misunderstandings and frustration is high.

If group members become impatient, the person trying to express the idea usually just gives up, even when the idea could be very important. This activity counters that tendency, by reversing it. Here, the person taking the risk of looking clumsy (or worse) is permitted to express frustration non-verbally, just as long as his/her energy is not aimed directly at anyone in particular.

HOW

1. When someone is having trouble consolidating a thought, ask if s/he would like some support from the group.
2. Explain that this activity involves two roles: the *idea-drafter* – the person trying to articulate an idea s/he feels might be important – and the *assistants* – anyone willing to follow the ground rules. (See below.)
3. Ask the *idea-drafter* to tell everyone what s/he is thinking.
4. Next have the *assistants* tell the *drafter* what they understand him/her to be saying (“So is this what you mean . . . ?”)
5. Early attempts by the *assistants* will probably miss the mark. The *drafter* can say, “No, that’s not it!” (. . . or words to that effect.) The *drafter* has permission to use tone of voice and/or nonverbal gestures to vent exasperation at feeling misunderstood. (In order for this activity to work, everyone must acknowledge that the *drafter* can scowl, etc., without fear of being spurned for rudeness.)
6. In a few rounds, you’ll see the idea’s depth and insightfulness emerge.



COUPLES COUNSELING

WHY

Incessant bickering between two people can be quite disruptive to a group. For any pair caught in this dynamic, their quarreling *might* be rooted in a deep subject-matter disagreement. But it's just as likely that the source of the problem is in their relationship. This activity helps the two parties step back and give each other feedback about the ways they're interacting.

Note that this activity is best done with a well-formed group, not with people who are only together for a few meetings. Note too that the activity can also be done "offline" – in private, between the two parties and a facilitator, without involvement by the other group members.

HOW

1. Explain that this activity is for only two people at a time. Other group members can expect to sit in respectful silence for the 10-20 minutes this normally requires. A few minutes of debriefing may follow.
2. Have the two participants move their chairs to face each other. Guide them to speak to each other – not to the facilitator. Explain that one person will offer feedback while the other listens, after which they will reverse roles. When one person speaks, the other must not interrupt.
3. Decide who speaks first and who listens first, then invite the speaker to begin. (Note: The first time through, you may need to stop the listener from interrupting.)
4. When the speaker finishes, ask the listener to paraphrase what s/he heard. Then ask the speaker if the listener "got it right." If not, ask the speaker to restate key points. Then ask the listener to paraphrase again.
5. Continue the cycle described in step 4 as many times as necessary, until the speaker feels understood. Then have them switch roles and repeat.
6. Continue switching roles until both people feel complete – or until time runs out. Then offer the larger group an opportunity to debrief.



IS THERE ANYTHING I'M NOT SAYING?

WHY

People often refrain from saying what they're really thinking. Sometimes they hold back because the risk is too great. But some people stay silent when they aren't sure if their ideas are worth saying; or when they can't turn the kernels of their ideas into fully formed presentations. In other words, there are many times when group members – if they were given a little support, a little permission, a little nudge – might go ahead and say what's on their mind. Yet without support, they often remain quiet.

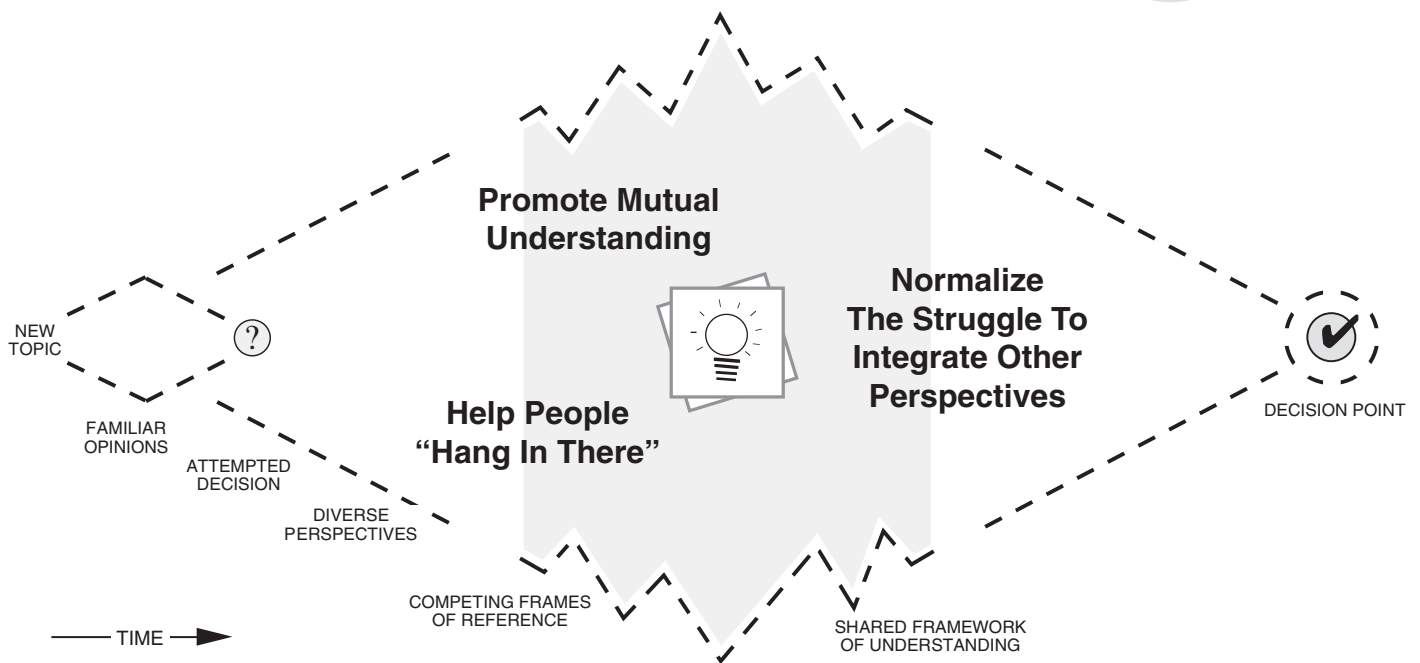
This activity helps group members take a look at the thoughts they've been having (but not speaking) during a discussion. It also gives members an opportunity to reflect on whether the group would be served if a person did open up and share his or her perspective.

HOW

1. Describe this activity. Explain why people can benefit from structured activities that give them permission to speak up. Obtain agreement from the group to proceed.
2. Break the group into pairs. Ask all to answer this question: "During this discussion, have I had any thoughts I haven't said aloud?" Assure people that no one is required to say anything they don't want to say.
3. Next, ask everyone (still in pairs) to answer this question: "Would the group benefit from hearing your partner's thinking?"
4. Return to the large group. Ask for volunteers to share any of their own thoughts that might be useful for others to hear.

FACILITATING IN THE GROAN ZONE

SUMMARY



Structured activities are directive, they're designed to let people follow clear procedures, and they pull for sincerity, earnestness and relationship building. All these characteristics can ground a group whose communication is poor.

Those qualities can calm a troubled group and keep it focused – but getting agreement to *do* the activity is another matter. In the *Groan Zone*, when trust is low and tensions run high, everyone's ideas are easily misinterpreted – and yours will be too. You might be seen as pushing the group into feelings they don't want to share. Or as manipulating the group in the direction of your own secret biases. Or someone may simply think you're a control freak.

So if you propose a structured activity in the *Groan Zone*, keep in mind that your role is to help, not to be “right.” Be patient, be tolerant, be flexible; don't be attached to what you suggest. *Honor objections, and ask for suggestions* – that's how to install a structured activity in this phase of work.

