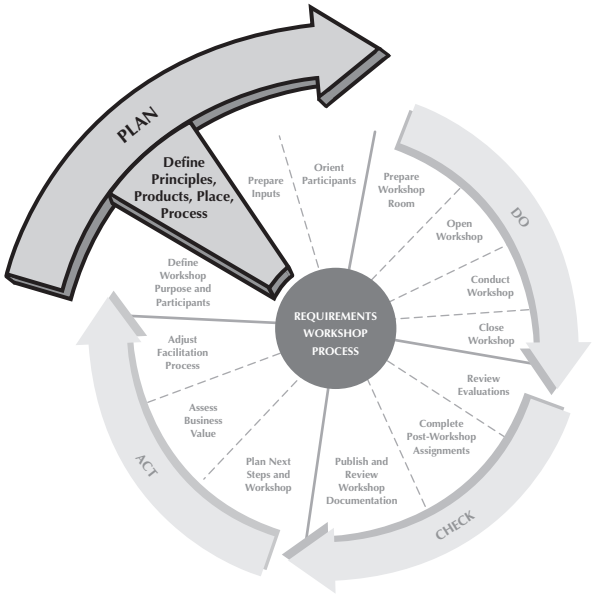
6

Principles: Ground Rules for the Workshop

"Planned participation promotes productivity."
—Lynda Baker

Principles, which I also refer to as *ground rules* in this chapter, are guidelines for group participation. Ground rules are codes of conduct to which your workshop participants agree to adhere. Groups need interaction precepts to maintain socially acceptable behavior (norms) that promote workshop goals: delivering the predefined work products in the allotted time.



Ground rules serve as a process guide for the facilitator and the participants. They serve as a tool for detecting and correcting unhealthy group interactions and evolving toward productive and healthy interactions. Just as significantly, participants learn to check, and reflect on, their experience in comparison to their ground rules; then they adjust their interactions to make their experience a more productive and satisfying one.

FORMING, STORMING, NORMING, AND PERFORMING

Groups invariably develop *norms*, which are standards for interacting. Figure 6-1 illustrates a widely recognized cycle with which norms are associated.

Forming involves groups finding common goals. This process is well served by early identification of your workshop purpose (see Chapter 4). *Storming* involves members openly disagreeing, which under healthy circumstances strengthens the

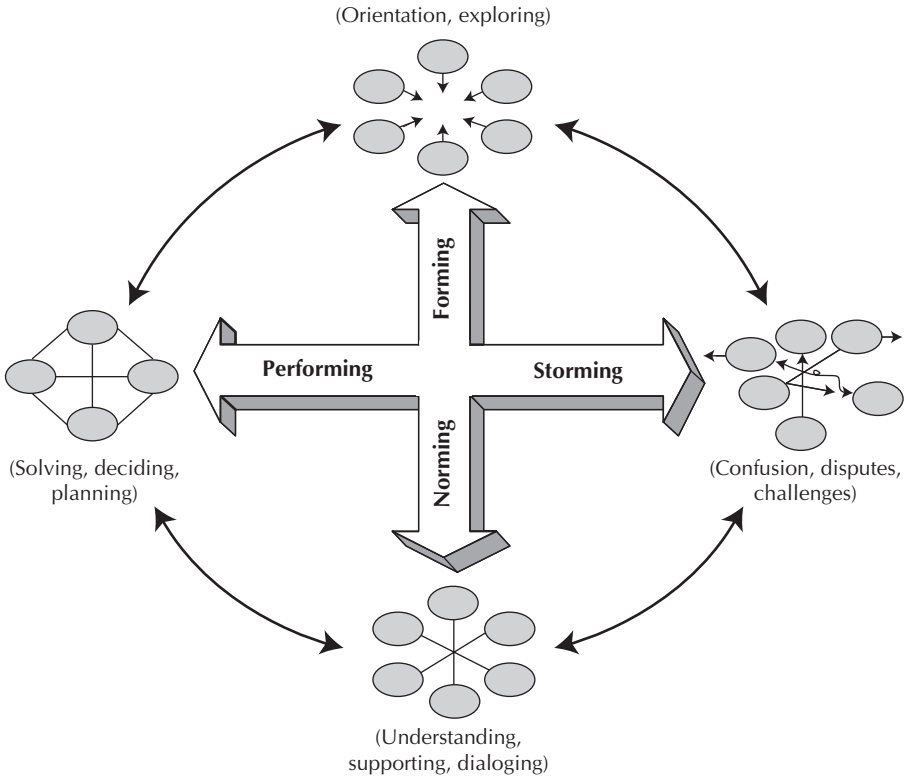


FIGURE 6-1 THE GROUP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

group and promotes deeper understanding and diversity. *Norming* is the process of finding ways, both healthy and unhealthy, to interact. During *performing*, the group is task-oriented and focuses on producing its agreed-upon work products.

Numerous group development experts suggest a final stage, *adjourning*, in which the group acknowledges its work, reflects on its collaboration, and says goodbye. See Chapter 9 for tasks and questions associated with these stages of group development.

Norms can be healthy or dysfunctional. Examples of healthy norms include waiting for someone to finish speaking before making your own comments, being on time, sharing relevant and necessary information, volunteering to take on a task that you have the skills and knowledge to complete, and respecting confidences shared in the group.

Most of us have experienced dysfunctional group norms. Examples include withholding important information, speaking disrespectfully about others (inside or outside the room), and being unwilling to take on tasks that help the group's goals. Unhealthy norms are unproductive to the group's process, are barriers to delivering quality products, and can make the group experience painful.

Norms emerge spontaneously or explicitly. Under ideal circumstances, healthy norms can emerge spontaneously. When you have less than ideal circumstances, explicitly defining guidelines for participation promotes healthy group dynamics. Without those guidelines, individuals make assumptions about and interpret others' words and behavior, something that results in miscommunication, a poor group process, and low-quality group products.

The solution, as embodied by the collaboration pattern Is There a Norm in the Room? (see the Appendix), is to explicitly establish guidelines for participation—ground rules that are congruent with both individual and group needs.

BASIC GROUND RULES

Ground rules should be specific, visible to everyone (posted in the room), derived with group input and then agreed to by all group members, and malleable (in other words, adaptable as needed throughout the workshop). Ground rules should follow some basic principles regarding their creation and use. To prepare yourself for your role as facilitator, consider devising your own ground rules for your role as facilitator (see "Ground Rules for the Facilitator" in Chapter 12).

Participants can use a list of generic ground rules as the basis for collaborating in a manner that enhances productivity, increases participation, and honors individual contributions, experience, and knowledge. Here are some examples.

- All participants' inputs are equally valued.
- Participants are expected to share all relevant information.
- The sessions will start and end on time and will start on time after breaks.
- Only one conversation will go on at once (unless subgroups are working on a topic).
- The group is responsible for the deliverables.
- Discussions and criticisms will focus on interests and not on people.

Ground rules concerning common courtesy—such as keeping cellular phones in vibrate or display-only mode and not answering the phone while in the workshop—may not be appropriate for all participants. Some participants have work roles for which they're on call, and they must respond to phone calls immediately. Suggest a compromise, such as turning the ringer off or leaving the room to answer the call. Don't spend valuable group time debating the options.

Ground Rules for Ground Rules

Because ground rules are norms about behavior, I offer these rules about your ground rules themselves:

- Co-create ground rules; make them explicit.
- Every workshop should have ground rules.
- Ground rules are monitored by the whole group, for the group. The facilitator is there to guide the process of deriving and checking the group's ground rules.
- Display the ground rules so that they're visible to everyone.
- Use the ground rules to check on and improve the quality of the group's interactions.
- Ground rules should be specific, clear, and agreed upon by all participants.
- Use no more than 10 ground rules.
- Ground rules can be changed at any time as long as you abide by the ground rules listed here.

Your group may wish to include ground rules that use jargon widely used in your company or team culture. For example:

- Speakers should "cut to the chase."
- "Off-target" discussions are limited to five minutes but are recorded as issues.
- "Headline" your comments.

"Cut to the chase" means to speak briefly and directly; "off-target" means topics that aren't relevant to the current activity; and to "headline" is to provide a summarized, short version of a comment. Using such phrases is fine as long as everyone understands their meaning.

Ask questions to uncover potential ground rules. Examples: "What does this mean?" "How can I recognize that we're violating this ground rule?" "Is anyone here unfamiliar with this ground rule?" (For more examples, see "Questions to Ask Stakeholders About Ground Rules" at the end of this chapter.) Make sure that the ground rules are clear to everyone. For example, saying "Be respectful" is vague. In one organization it might mean "Don't interrupt when someone else is talking," whereas in another it might mean "Don't withhold relevant information."

Ground rules essentially communicate the message "Let's work well together." With the help of your planning team and the participants, select five to ten applicable rules, including your decision-making ground rules (see "Decision-Making Ground Rules" later in this chapter). Remembering more than ten rules can be difficult, and they have less impact. (See the Web site for this book for a comprehensive list of possible workshop ground rules.)

You might need to include special ground rules (see the next section) or culturally aware ground rules. When you're planning to work with the same group in another workshop, or if the group will continue to work together on the project, it's especially important to consider integrating some of the values-based ground rules used by developmental facilitators. Both types of special ground rules are discussed in the next section.

SPECIAL GROUND RULES

Project pressures, politics, prior workshop experiences, or group history may make it necessary to include ground rules to address specific circumstances.

Knowing your participants and the history of the project can help you suggest ground rules that can save time and energy by avoiding discussion of topics that are out of scope or irrelevant.

In one workshop I facilitated, the group was delivering a migration strategy for standard business rules. Some members of the group had participated in a prior series of workshops that delivered a logical data model. We added a special ground rule: "We will not review the completed and validated data model from the prior workshop." When questions arose about the data model, I simply walked to the poster where the ground rule was written. One participant, a veteran of the data modeling workshop, volunteered to explain the specific data model question to other interested participants during breaks.

In another workshop, I was warned by numerous participants that much debate and energy had been spent to arrive at project scope. We added the ground rule, "We will not discuss or debate scope because it has already been agreed upon." Indeed, at several points on the first morning, I found myself asking, "Is that a project scope issue?" (The answer was "yes" each time.) I pointed out, "Our ground rule tells us that we won't discuss scope any further. Would you like to add a 'parking lot' item about this and move on, or just move on?" (For more on the parking lot, see Chapter 9.)

VALUES-BASED GROUND RULES

If you'd like to explore ground rules in a systemic, and thereby deeper, manner, consider the skilled facilitator approach developed by Roger Schwarz. His work is based on a theory of group facilitation that contains a set of four core values in addition to ground rules. The values are as follows: valid information, free and informed choice, internal commitment, and compassion. The first three come from the work of Chris Argyris, who's known for his work in the areas of organizational learning; Schwarz added the fourth value. These values are the basis of the following 10 ground rules*:

1. Test assumptions and inferences.
2. Share all relevant information.
3. Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.
4. Discuss undiscussable issues.
5. Focus on interests, not positions.

** Used with permission by Roger Schwarz, Roger Schwarz & Associates, http:// www.schwarzassociates.com.*

6. Explain your reasoning and intent.
7. Combine advocacy with inquiry.
8. Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreement.
9. Keep the discussion focused.
10. Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.

Schwarz and many others consider these ground rules to be central to both basic and developmental facilitation. Basic facilitation helps a group to solve a substantive problem (such as defining requirements for software). In developmental facilitation, a group also learns to improve its process.

Unlike behavioral ground rules, such as "start on time" or "one conversation at a time," Schwarz's ground rules help the group identify dysfunctional group behavior, serve as a teaching tool for developing effective group norms, help guide the facilitator, and allow groups to set new expectations for how they will interact with each other.

Culturally Aware Ground Rules

Participants may come from various corporate cultures, work groups, cities, or countries. Each may have different norms for acceptable group behavior. In your pre-workshop interviews, be sure to ask questions to explore these norms. For example, in some cultures, such as in Italy, it's not uncommon for more than one conversation to occur at a time. In Asian cultures, saying "yes" means that you're listening and you understand what's being said, whereas in the United States, it means "I agree."

Nonverbal behaviors can also have cultural significance. For example, failing to make direct eye contact in the United States is often interpreted as a sign of deceit or insecurity; in Asian cultures, silence is an indication of respect, and not, as often in the United States, of agreement. Also be aware of cultural differences in decision making and sharing information. Different cultures have different frames of reference for decision making. For example, people in Latin American cultures prefer making individual decisions, whereas the Japanese commonly use consensus, and many Americans value delegation. You also need to be careful with regard to food (some people don't eat meat or certain types of meat) as well as energizers and other serious play activities.

Also keep in mind that these generalizations may not be valid in your situation just because some of your participants are from a particular culture. When you

have multicultural participants, take extra time before and during the workshop to test your assumptions about these cultural norms and the usefulness and validity of each ground rule. Explore cultural differences and engage participants in a discussion about those differences when you determine ground rules early in the workshop. This approach allows everyone to communicate about communicating.

INTRODUCING AND TESTING GROUND RULES

One of your workshop opening activities is to agree on the ground rules. (See "Opening the Workshop" in Chapter 9 for more on workshop opening.) Prepare participants for this task by providing a draft list of ground rules for them to review before the workshop. For questions you can ask during your pre-workshop interviews, see "Questions to Ask Stakeholders About Ground Rules" at the end of this chapter.

If your planning team is well acquainted with the participants, ask the team to draft a list of recommended ground rules. At a minimum, inform participants that you'll be collaboratively addressing the guidelines they'll use during the workshop. The Web site for this book contains more information about how to elicit ground rules, test them during the workshop, and evaluate them afterward.

It's the participants' responsibility to adhere to and monitor the ground rules, with your guidance. If the ground rules become the facilitator's and not the group's, you've lost an important tool for increasing the participants' ability to interact effectively. Worse, you become an enforcer rather than a guide.

During your workshop's opening activity, ask whether all participants will agree to "call" one another on ground rule violations. Some people might be reluctant, especially if their bosses or a high-level manager is a violator or if their cultural norms conflict with speaking out. Include periodic ground rule checks to promote appropriate process checks on the ground rules. Ask, "What can you do to take ownership of these ground rules?" and "What do you want to do if someone violates a ground rule?" This approach allows the group to reflect on how to self-monitor its behavior.

Seek ways to help workshop participants interact effectively by asking, "What should I do, as the facilitator, to help you honor these ground rules?" and "What role do you want me to play in regard to these rules?" One workshop group asked me to point out violations as they occurred. Another asked me to schedule times during which to review the ground rules.

Once the group has experience with *self-reflection* (examining its own interactions for the purpose of learning and improving), you can ask the participants to consider how they can transform their successes into future work together. This is a good way to conclude the "next steps" portion of your workshop closing activity. (See Chapter 9 for more on workshop closing.) The Self-Reflect collaboration pattern provides the rationale for this technique (see the Appendix).

If participants have had difficulty working together in the past or if emotions are running high around the topic of requirements and their priorities, you'll need to invest more than 10 minutes to arrive at your ground rules during your workshop opening. Unless people are comfortable with sharing information and feeling safe with one another, your entire workshop plan, no matter how great it might be, will not be effective. By surfacing hidden agendas, discussed next, you should know about these kinds of issues ahead of time.

HIDDEN AGENDAS

Hidden agendas are needs, wants, or motivations closely held by one or more participants. A hidden agenda can have a healing nature or a harmful nature. Healing ones arise from hopes and wishes that are restorative, as exemplified by the following people I've worked with:

- The project sponsor who wanted all the participants to leave the workshop enthusiastic about the project
- The project leader who wanted the business sponsor to understand that real users should be involved in the detailed requirements definition
- The tester who hoped that others would be respectful of his contributions to the project
- The business analyst who hoped that other business participants would be willing to stay involved during acceptance testing

When you learn about healing hidden agendas, consider sharing them as intangible workshop products (see Chapter 7). Build activities into your agenda, such as energizers or brief team-building activities, to promote them.

Energizers are ways for participants to share their personal backgrounds, interests, or hobbies. For example, in one group in which several participants shared their healthy hidden agenda of "more teamwork," I included a short activity in which they lined up in birth order (month and day, not year!). Then they shared

with one another "the riskiest thing I've ever done in my life." In another group, several participants wanted others to leave the workshop more willing to take on project tasks in the future. I included several short, fun energizers getting them to interact on a more personal level, laugh, and find out more about one another's special talents.

Harmful hidden agendas arise when people withhold information, are vying for power, or feel isolated—they believe their contributions, skills, and opinions aren't valued by others. A hidden agenda is often unspoken but still known to one or more people. This agenda is usually *undiscussable*, which means that everyone knows it, but it seems too dangerous for them to talk about it openly. Examples include "Our boss doesn't tell us anything" (I wish she would), "Our customers don't want to take ownership" (I want them to), and "This system could make my job obsolete" (and "they" are hiding this information from me).

Harmful hidden agendas can disrupt or interrupt the credibility of the workshop process—let alone the project—and can prevent individuals from freely partici-

HIDDEN AGENDAS CAN BE HEALING OR HARMFUL.

pating in the workshop. You must uncover hidden agendas by directly asking stakeholders and participants about them during interviews. Any hidden agendas that aren't surfaced ahead of time will emerge during the workshop. If you're prepared for them, you can reduce their harm and handle them more easily during the session.

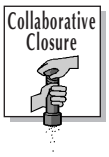
Be sure not to inject your own hidden agendas. For example, a pet peeve of mine are meetings, workshops, or seminars that don't start on time. I believe that the ground rule "start on time" is an important way to communicate mutual respect for people's time and also to lend a sense of urgency and order to a workshop. However, I must get agreement on that ground rule from the participants. I ask participants or the planning team whether that ground rule is acceptable in their culture. If some people violate it by norm but there's agreement that this ground rule will be helpful to the group, I ask the workshop sponsor or project sponsor to tell people that the workshop will start on time. (Having the sponsor also inform participants that she will be there for the workshop kickoff—discussed in Chapter 9—helps to drive the message home, too.)

Numerous seminar and conference attendees have shared with me their experiences of having a leader with a hidden agenda attempt to use a workshop to get a group to agree with a decision that he has already made. You can discover this by skillful interviewing. Explore the decisions that need to be made during a workshop and advise the decision leader (see "Decision Rules" later in this chapter) to choose a decision-making rule that promotes participation and commitment.

Decision-Making Ground Rules

A critical success factor for your requirements workshop is the ability to reach closure on the requirements you are creating.

Closure means locking down a deliverable and knowing it's "done." This means making real-time collaborative decisions during workshops. For the most part, you strive to reach closure. At times, however, issues and new understanding arise in a requirements workshop and result in a lack of closure. That is especially true when you discover missing requirements and don't have the right people or resources in the room to get the answers you need. In those cases, during your workshop closing be sure to specify who needs to do what to reach closure (for more on the workshop closing, see Chapter 9).



Doneness tests (see "Define Doneness Tests" in Chapter 7) provide guidance to a group for making a decision, but they are not a substitute for a lucid, well-understood decision-making process. To implement decisions successfully, people need to be truly committed. When groups collaborate effectively, they establish norms for decision making; these norms become part of the workshop ground rules.

Decision making in the business world is often complex and fraught with dangers. It's complicated by factors such as these:

- How quickly the decision must be made
- Individual hidden agendas
- Group history and culture
- Groupthink (group members think it's more important to agree than to state their areas of disagreement)
- Knowledge held by the decision maker
- Fear of retribution for making a "wrong" decision
- Insufficient or incorrect information

The decisions involved in a software project affect the professional lives of numerous stakeholders: users, designers, builders, testers, managers, marketers, customers, and others. Software projects aren't immune to the risk that decision makers don't involve the stakeholders impacted by the decision or that they make decisions based on insufficient information. Requirements workshops provide an early quality gate for making sound decisions that can have enormous downstream effects on a software project. Defining decision-making ground rules before the workshop helps to crystallize workshop products, promote appropriate participation, and accelerate the requirements process itself.

PRODUCT AND PROCESS DECISIONS

Decisions in your workshop are both product- and process-related. Product-related decisions are about the deliverables of the workshop, and they involve the specific requirements the participants create together. The work products vary according to your workshop design strategy (see Chapter 10). For example, if you're using a vertical, who-first workshop design strategy, the decisions will be about closure on the actors, events, use cases, business rules, and parts of a logical data model or class model created in the workshop. Process-related deci-

sions define who will do what by when, and how the results of that work will be communicated to the group. These decisions are most often decided during the workshop closing (see "Closing the Workshop" in Chapter 9).

In a requirements workshop in which sound decision making is used, participants leave the room with an agreement about the requirements they worked on. For example, each might say, "We decided to accept use cases 5 and 10, but we didn't close on use cases 9 and 11 because we didn't have correct business rules for them. Also, we agreed to accept use cases 3, 6, and 7 with revisions that we made during the workshop." Process decisions are reflected in comments such as "Jim and Ava are going to research business rules for use cases 9 and 11, and Jim's going to send us all an e-mail by Friday with a list of business rules in template format for those use cases. We'll meet on Monday at 9:00 A.M. to review them and attempt to reach closure on them." To achieve this degree of clarity after a workshop, you must use sound, collaborative decision-making ground rules.

Collaborative Decision Making

In requirements workshops, users, customers, and suppliers all hold stakes in the decisions about the requirements deliverables they're defining:

- The stakes of direct users or external customers (such as buyers of shrink-wrap or packaged software) involve having the requirements represent their real needs. In this way, they can feel confident that their software development partners understand what the software should do to solve their business problems.
- The stakes of the internal customers or buyers of software development services involve defining requirements that satisfy cost and schedule constraints.
- The stakes of the builders, such as developers and testers, involve obtaining requirements that are good enough, respectively, for use in designing and prototyping and in building test scripts and test cases.

Group decisions are generally superior to those of even the smartest individual. When people participate in decisions in which they have a stake, commitment tends to be higher and the decision is generally more successful. Because the requirements you deliver from your workshop have important consequences, and because they require support by all team members, the best course is to use a collaborative decision-making process.

The characteristics of a *collaborative decision* include the following:

- The stakeholders participate in the decision-making process in a way that meets the needs of the individuals and the group.
- The decision includes the diverse views of all stakeholders.
- The decision enhances the group's ability to continue to work together effectively.

Collaborative decisions address all the *legitimate concerns* of participants: concerns that have possible consequences "that might adversely affect the organization or common good or that are in conflict with the purpose and values of the group" (Saint and Lawson, 1994).

With a *noncollaborative* decision, stakeholders aren't consulted, or their input is obtained without inquiry into the reasoning behind their thinking. To avoid this, stakeholders who will use, design, test, and implement the requirements should be present at the workshop and involved in making decisions about the requirements. As you plan your workshop and define its decisions and decision-making process, ensure that your list of participants includes the people who must implement the decisions. For example, if your workshop is delivering use cases, business rules, and a data model, you'll want to have people who work with the products downstream—such as architects, developers, testers, data administrators, quality analysts, and database administrators—present as observers.

When you make important decisions about requirements in a noncollaborative manner, you risk making poor decisions that are difficult to sustain. And without a *decision rule*—an agreed-upon way of making decisions—people are vague about when, and even whether, a decision has been made; they delay taking action, and that results in the waste of valuable time and money.

Decision Rules

The first step in collaborative decision making is for the decision leader to determine the rule by which you will make the decision—the *decision rule* (Kaner et al., 1996). The *decision leader* is the person who has the authority to implement the decision or to obtain resources to implement it, and the responsibility to ensure that the decision is supported in the organization. This person should reside as high as necessary, but as low as possible, in the organization chart.

In scope-level requirements workshops, the decision leader is often the business sponsor or business project manager. In high-level and detailed-level workshops, the decision leader is often the business project manager or leader who is close to the content and can balance known project constraints.

The decision leader needs the input of other stakeholders who can provide informed and valid inputs about any requirements decision. In making a decision, the decision leader must account for the fact that the people who must implement the decision should be consulted. For example, although a business subject matter expert might be the decision leader for the use cases, business rules, and data model, to reach closure that person will want to be sure that the data administrator agrees to the data model under consideration. The use of decision rules and an explicit decision-making process clarifies this process. I describe this process in the collaboration pattern Decide How to Decide (see the Appendix).

Various kinds of decision rules exist; Figure 6-2 shows some examples.

- *Majority Vote* involves the group in making decisions by counting the number of votes for two or more options. The option with the highest number "wins." This rule enables fast decisions, and it's efficient when large groups are involved. On the other hand, some people will always lose (something that can create an adversarial atmosphere), choices may not be based on valid information, and the quality of the decisions is often not high. It's best to use this rule when the decisions are trivial, the stakes are low, and the options are clear.
- *Delegation* involves the appointment of one person to make decisions. This rule also enables fast decisions, and the accountability is clear. On the other hand, the appointee may not have the necessary expertise, there may be insufficient buy-in and commitment from the other participants, or the resulting decision can undermine the authority of the person in charge. It's best to use this rule when you need to make decisions quickly, the delegate actually holds the authority, or the decisions aren't very important.
- *Negotiation* involves compromise on a middle position that incorporates the most important positions of all sides. This rule requires a lot of discussion, which tends to increase the thoroughness of the decision making. On the other hand, everyone loses something along the way, and it can increase the adversarial nature of an already polarized group. In addition, the quality of decisions is often not high. It's best to use this rule when there aren't any viable alternatives because of the contentiousness within the group.

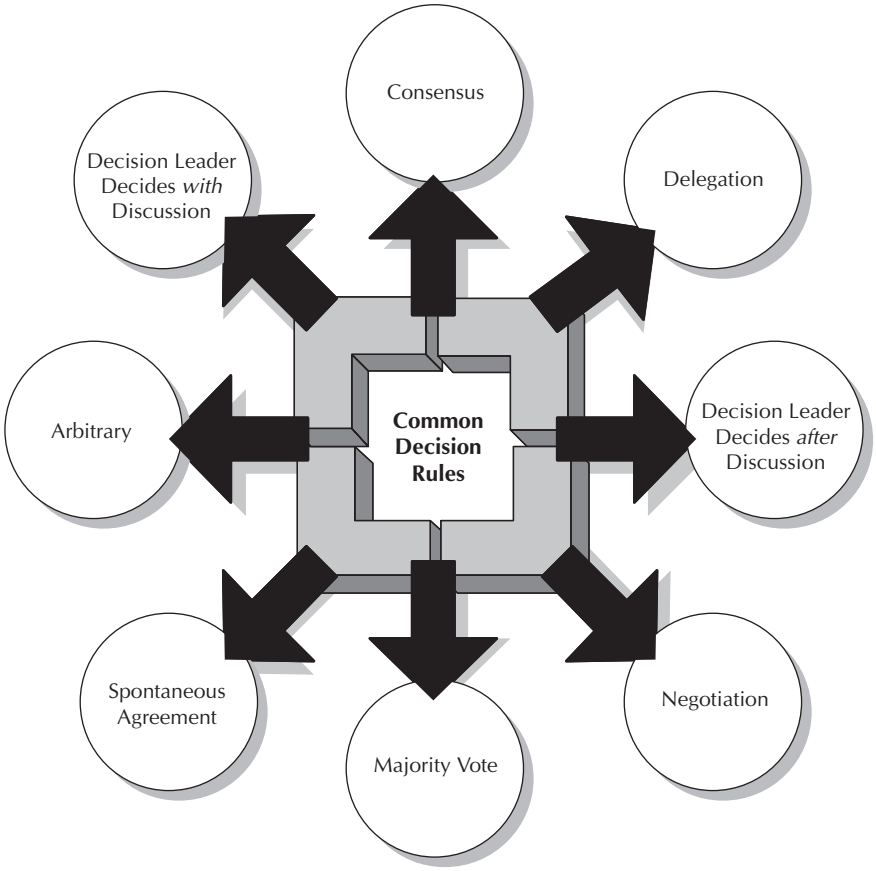


FIGURE 6-2 COMMON DECISION RULES

(Used with permission. Adapted from Sam Kaner, *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making,* 1996, New Society Publishers, www.newsociety.com)

- *Spontaneous Agreement* occurs when participants quickly and spontaneously arrive at a decision without considering the decision factors. This rule results in quick and easy decisions. On the other hand, there's no discussion about possible consequences and impacts, and there's a risk of groupthink, which occurs when people feel pressured to agree (see "Group Dysfunction" in Chapter 9). It's best to use this rule when the decision has minimal consequences and needs to be made quickly or when discussion and sharing of preferences aren't important to the quality of the decision.

- The *Arbitrary* decision rule involves making decisions by some arbitrary means, such as flipping a coin. This rule provides for fast and efficient low-stakes decisions. On the other hand, it devalues the importance of the decisions. It's best to use this rule when the decisions are unimportant, they don't have long-term consequences to participants, and they must be made quickly.
- *Decision Leader Decides* without *Discussion* involves the decision leader making a decision without consulting any of the other stakeholders. This rule provides for fast decisions while clarifying who's in charge. On the other hand, the quality of the decision may be compromised if the leader doesn't know about possible consequences, and she misses an opportunity to learn about surrounding issues. There's also a risk of insufficient buy-in and commitment from those affected by the decision. It's best to use this rule when decisions must be made in the face of a crisis and they're being made by a competent, knowledgeable leader whom the other stakeholders trust.
- *Decision Leader Decides* after *Discussion* involves the decision leader making a decision after consulting with the other stakeholders. This rule enables those stakeholders to provide input, and that promotes commitment on their part while also clarifying who's in charge. On the other hand, not all stakeholders share responsibility for the decisions. It's best to use this rule when the leader has knowledge and expertise about the topics of the decisions, he wants to make the decisions collaboratively, and there's a need to balance decision quality with speed.
- *Consensus* involves "a state of mutual agreement among members of a group where all legitimate concerns of individuals have been addressed to the satisfaction of the group" (Saint and Lawson, 1994). Using this rule builds trust, creates high levels of support for and commitment to the decision, considers the impact of the decision, enables more sustainable decisions, and promotes learning because it requires deep listening and inquiry. On the other hand, it generally takes longer than other rules, it requires stakeholder knowledge and expertise, and the quality of the decisions can be low if the participants don't have all the relevant information. It's best to use this rule when the decisions are important and they require the commitment of all stakeholders.

An effective decision-making ground rule takes into account the need for participation and balances that with the need to reach closure in a timely manner. The two decision rules that work best for making medium- to high-stakes decisions, such as those you make about requirements during workshops, are Consensus and Decision Leader Decides after Discussion.

REACHING CLOSURE

To be effective, the two collaborative decision rules called out in the preceding section need a mechanism that tests the degree of agreement among the group members. This mechanism must be understood and accepted by everyone. To make this happen in my workshops, I use a four-point degree of agreement scale, shown in Figure 6-3, based on Kaner's original six-point scale (Kaner et al., 1996).

By polling all the participants, you can find out where each one falls on the degree scale in terms of indicating how strongly he or she agrees with the proposed decision. For example, someone might make the proposal, "Accept this use case as is." To have consensus, everyone participating in the decision must be in the "zone of agreement," which means 1 or 2. All those who designate themselves as 2s must share their concerns. Further discussion may result in modifications to the proposed decision.

To achieve consensus, the group must continue to work on the proposed decision if there are any 3s or 4s. However, if the decision rule is Decision Leader Decides after Discussion, the decision leader can choose to make the decision at this point or ask for more discussion. In requirements workshops in which you're making decisions, use this scale to check for the degree of agreement. Start by identifying the decisions to be made in the workshop. The easiest way to start is by listing the specific requirements models you plan to deliver and assuming that each of these will require at least one decision. You might bundle logical groupings of requirements for a single decision; for example, you should make a decision for a use case along with its related business rules, data attributes, and draft prototype screens.

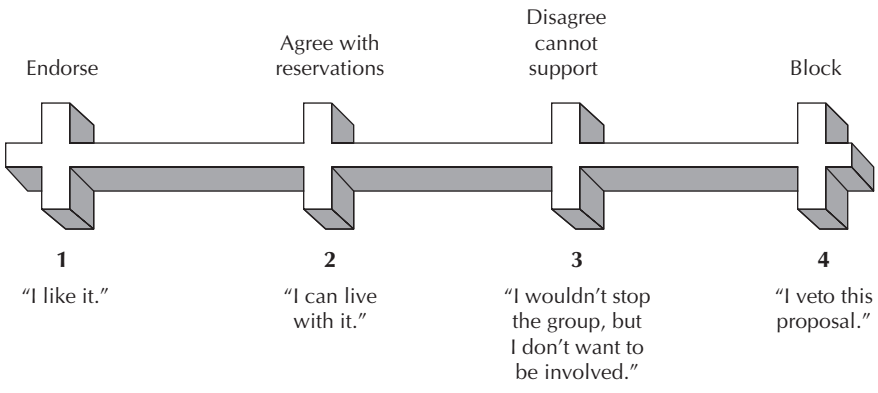


FIGURE 6-3 DEGREE OF AGREEMENT SCALE (BASED ON KANER ET AL., 1996)

When your group is ready to consider a specific proposal during the workshop, clarify the proposal. Next, poll each person. The process you should use depends on how controversial the proposed decision appears to be. For example, you might poll the group anonymously if the decision is controversial; if it isn't, you can ask everyone to hold up an index card labeled 1, 2, 3, or 4. If you think participants would benefit from hearing a final comment on the proposal, ask them to explain their reasoning in one minute or less.

Workshop participants repeat this process for each decision, taking one minute or less for each round. If there are any 2s, ask those individuals to share their reservations. This process creates a group norm for decision making.

Steps for Collaborative Decision Making

1. Before the workshop,
   - Identify each decision to be made.
   - Identify the decision leader for each decision.
   - Have the decision leader pick the decision rule.
2. During the workshop opening activity, have the group practice the decision-making process (steps 3–6) and then decide whether you will use this process during the workshop.
3. Close discussion around a requirements model or a set of related models.
4. Clarify the proposed decisions.
5. Poll the group using the degree of agreement scale.
6. If the decision rule is Consensus, participants will need to vote 1s and 2s; for any 2, ask the participant to state his or her concerns. If the Decision Leader Decides after Discussion rule is in effect, ask the decision leader whether he is ready to make a decision. If not, find out what he needs to make the decision, and facilitate a process to get to that point.

Test the decision rule process at the beginning of the workshop. The next section describes a real-world example.

Defining your decision-making ground rules promotes effective team collaboration. The team tends to make timely, high-quality decisions and to successfully follow up on them. Participants learn from divergent perspectives, listen to one another's interests, make reasonable choices, and come to closure. Good

decision-making groups seek inclusive decisions that merge the best of all available options.

Perhaps just as important, if the decision turns out not to be the best one, these teams have the ability to recognize it and recover. They've learned how to balance the content of the decision with the process of arriving at it.

A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

I facilitated a two-day requirements workshop involving a purchasing application for a global consumer products company. The application was being designed for use by some 120 users in 60 countries. The participants were the software and business teams responsible for delivering the system.

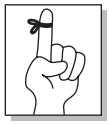
I interviewed the potential participants to gauge their needs and perspectives and to define the workshop's purpose. I also inspected the work products: drafts of 12 use cases representing user requirements. For each use case to be modeled in the workshop, the group had to decide its disposition: We had to be able to answer, at the end of the workshop, "What's the disposition of this use case?" The team also needed more requirements models to supplement the use cases, so we added business rules, prototype screens, scenarios, and a high-level data model to the list of workshop products.

After I determined the workshop's purpose, my next step was to work with the decision leader to select the decision rule. Pamela, the business project manager, was responsible for representing the needs of this customer base. She and her two business analysts would test and support the application and train users after it went live in seven months. Pamela "owned" the requirements; she had obtained the funding and would continue to play this role. It was Pamela's responsibility to make the decision rule.

Pamela initially selected the Consensus decision rule, which meant she was seeking agreement among her analysts. Because the software participants didn't have the content knowledge or authority to fully contribute to this decision, choosing this rule made sense; but I was concerned about the time needed to achieve consensus. I knew there was a risk that we wouldn't cover all the use cases in a single workshop. Offsetting that concern was the fact that Pamela was a subject matter expert. After she went through the modeling and reviewing activities and received input from her team, she would likely be able to make good decisions.

I told Pamela about my concerns with regard to time. She reconsidered and chose Decision Leader Decides after Discussion. She realized that polling her team members for their degrees of agreement would give her sufficient data for making a decision.

At the beginning of the session, I explained the decision rule choice and the process, and I also polled the group to check their degrees of agreement on using it for this workshop. The participants all specified 1s, so we proceeded to use this decision rule for each use case. In the end, using that rule accelerated the flow of the session. Although Pamela didn't accept all the use cases, it was clear which ones she did, what modifications were needed, and who had to do what in order to reach closure. Within a few days, that same group reached closure on the requirements and proceeded with design and development.



TIPS

- Solicit ground rules before the workshop.
- Get agreement on the ground rules at the beginning of the session.
- Ask questions to uncover hidden agendas.
- Be sensitive to the need to define culturally diverse ground rules.
- Define decisions to be made in the workshop.
- Use a collaborative decision rule and decision-making process.
- Be sure that all stakeholders in decisions, or their representatives, are involved during or after the workshop.
- Continually check on the validity and utility of the ground rules during the workshop.

QUESTIONS TO ASK STAKEHOLDERS ABOUT GROUND RULES

The following questions can help you to determine workshop ground rules. You can preface these questions by saying, "The next set of questions will help us determine what guidelines for participation, or 'ground rules,' will help us interact effectively during the workshop."

- How would you describe the group atmosphere?
- Are any topics off-limits?

- Are there any skeletons in the closet?
- What has been tried that failed?
- Do you have any hidden agendas for this workshop? Do you believe that others have any hidden agendas for this workshop?
- Are there any questions about ground rules that I should be asking but haven't yet asked?

See the Web site for this book for more questions about ground rules.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Bens (2000) is a practitioner's guidebook loaded with techniques, tips, and tools. Chapter 6 provides a discussion of effective decision making; it addresses the pros and cons of various options.

Fisher and Ury (1981), a best-selling book about negotiation, has useful guidance about how to help people focus on interests, not positions, and how to use objective criteria to evaluate and invent options.

Kaner et al. (1996) provides practical, high-level guidance useful to both new and experienced facilitators. Chapter 16 outlines the degrees of agreement (there are eight in all); Chapter 17 provides a solid discussion of how to reach closure in groups.

Nutt (1998) describes the author's research into business decisions, many of which were made by software organizations. He found that the most successful decisions are those in which a decision leader gathers sufficient information and then enables the stakeholders in the decision to make the decision, rather than trying to persuade them or issue edicts.

Schwarz (1994) is an in-depth work on values-based facilitation; based on Argyris's work, it brings together theory and practice. Although Schwarz's approach is aimed at developmental facilitation, which focuses on helping group process, the rich information in this book is valuable to all professional facilitators.

Strachan (2001) offers an excellent discussion of core values for the facilitator: integrity, mutual respect, and authenticity.

Saint and Lawson (1994) presents a concise yet comprehensive guide to consensus. The authors' definition of consensus is the best I've found. They present useful options for closing decisions and tips for the facilitator.