

STRIVING FOR UNANIMITY

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF UNANIMOUS AGREEMENT

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

To reach unanimity, everyone must agree. This means that everyone has an individual veto. Thus, anyone who perceives that his/her interests are *not* being taken into account can keep the discussion alive for as many hours or weeks or months as it takes, to find a solution that works for everyone. This veto-capacity is the crux of the power of unanimous agreement. When a group is committed to reaching unanimous agreement, they are in effect making a commitment to remain in discussion until they develop a solution that takes everyone's needs into account.

UNANIMITY AND CONSENSUS

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

Consensus is *the process* – a participatory process by which a group thinks and feels together en route to their decision. Unanimity, by contrast, is the point at which the group *reaches closure*. Many groups that practice consensus decision-making use unanimity as their decision rule for reaching closure – but many groups *do not*. For example, the Seva Foundation uses "unanimity minus one." So does the renowned collective, the Hog Farm. Some chapters of the Green Party use 80% as their acceptable level of agreement. Yet all such groups consider themselves to be sincere adherents of a consensus decision-making process.

In these cases, no single member has personal veto power. Nonetheless, individual voices wield significant influence – enough to ensure that the group will engage in a genuine process of thinking and feeling together.

STRIVING FOR UNANIMITY

IDEALISM
vs REALITY

Unanimous agreement may seem like a wonderful idea – but is it realistic? Most people answer this question with certainty: “No way!” And this includes many of those who have participated in groups that made an effort to strive for unanimity.

It has become increasingly common in recent years to hear a manager say to his or her staff, “I’d like everyone to agree on this issue.” Or, “I want to get everyone’s buy-in today.” Both of these statements mean, “I want us to reach a unanimous agreement.” Yet – as anyone knows who has attended one of those meetings – the ensuing discussion can produce some pretty mediocre results. All too often, a meeting ends with an agreement that never gets implemented. Just because someone declares that s/he wants everyone to agree, that doesn’t mean people *will* agree.

Suppose someone asks the members of a group, “Can everyone agree to this proposal?” Now suppose that everyone answers, “Yes.” At this point, the group has made a decision that, presumably, satisfies everyone. Since the agreement is unanimous, one would expect commitment from everyone to implement the decision, even under pressure. Yet it doesn’t always work this way. Why not? Why is it that so many groups’ attempts at seeking unanimous agreement produce such disappointing results?

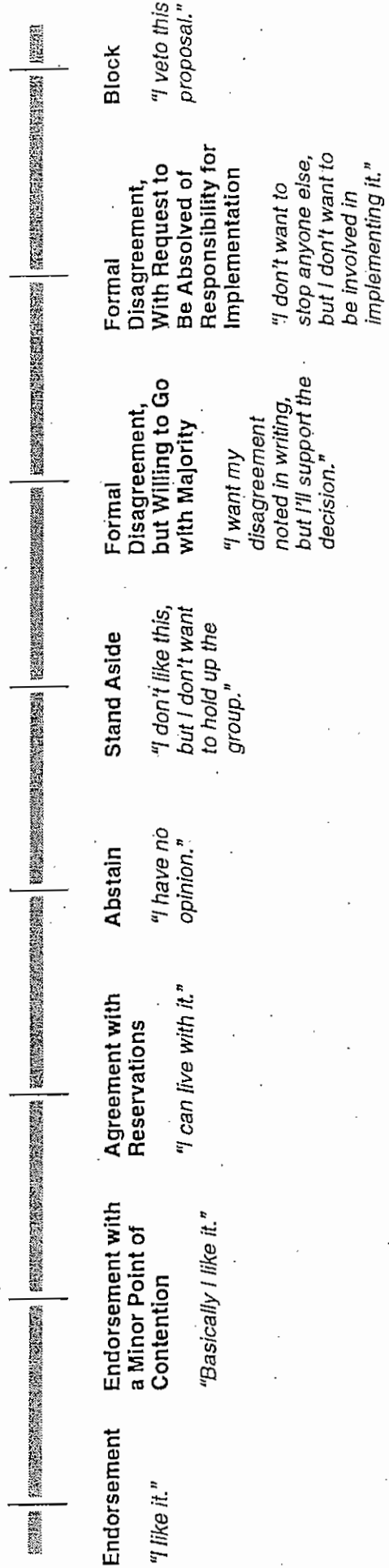
One major reason is that “yes” and “no” can have many different meanings. Someone who says “yes” might mean, “This is one of the best decisions we’ve ever made.” But they might also mean, “I’ll go along with this idea but it doesn’t thrill me.” Similarly, “no” can mean anything from “Hold on, I don’t understand this proposal yet,” to “This offends my deepest values.”

Using unanimity means that every person has veto over every decision. Thus, every time someone says “no” they are saying, “I require the group to spend more time on this discussion.” This causes some group members to be very hesitant to say “no.” They do not want to feel responsible for dragging out a discussion. In such cases, “yes” does not really mean “I agree.” It means, “I don’t really like this, but I don’t want to hold us back.”

On the other hand, many groups have members who will not say “yes” until every concern, big or small, has been thoroughly digested. They might say “No, I won’t agree,” when what they *mean* is “Wait, I have a question. There’s something I don’t understand.”

GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

BETTER VOCABULARY

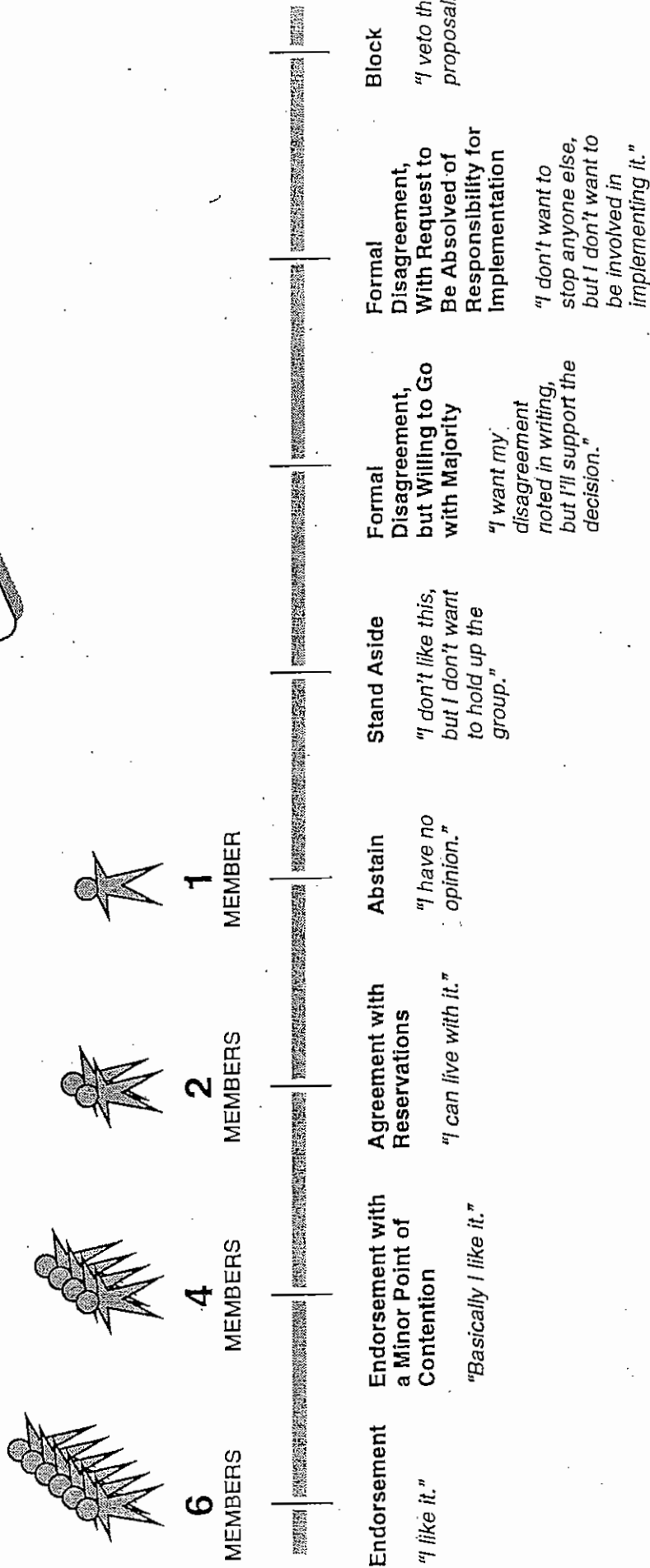


This is the Community At Work GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT SCALE.

The scale makes it easier for participants to be honest. Using it, members can register less-than-whole-hearted support without fearing that their statement will be interpreted as a veto.

GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

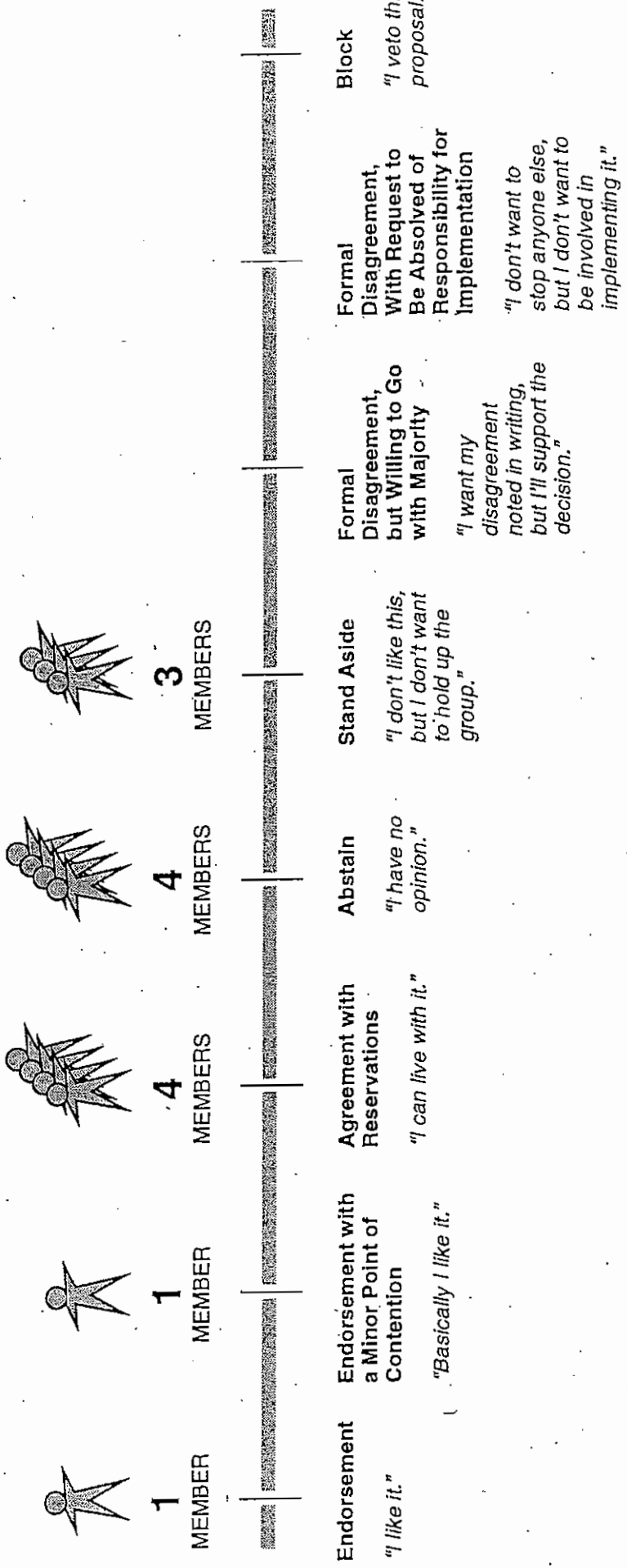
ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT



This diagram portrays the results of a hypothetical poll taken in a group of 13 members. It indicates a high level of enthusiastic support for the proposal. People often think that their group should always strive to attain this level of agreement. But few realize how much work it takes to find a line of thought that incorporates all points of view. More often than not, enthusiastic support is hard to obtain.

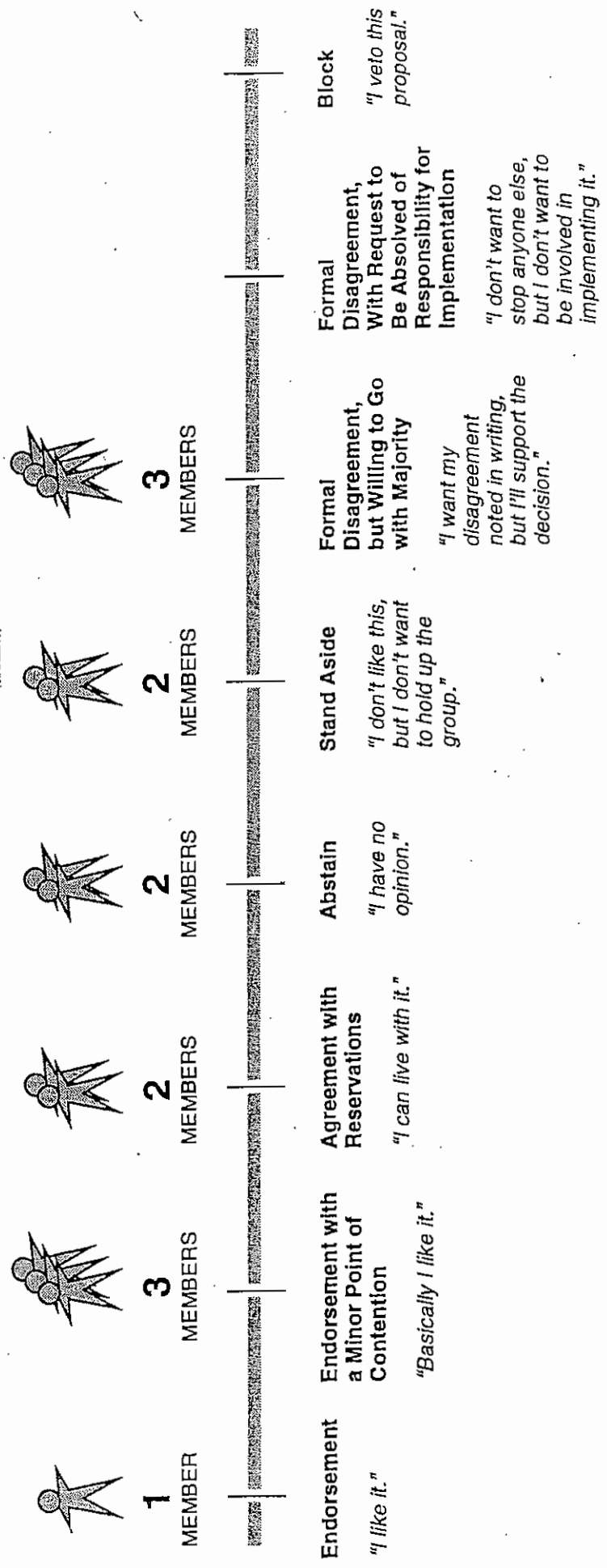
GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

LUKEWARM SUPPORT



In this diagram, the results of the poll indicate a lower level of enthusiasm for the proposal. An agreement based on this poll would still be unanimous. The group would see, however, that their overall level of support for the proposal is lukewarm, not enthusiastic. In many cases lukewarm support is perfectly adequate – for example, when the decision only affects a few people or when the stakes are low.

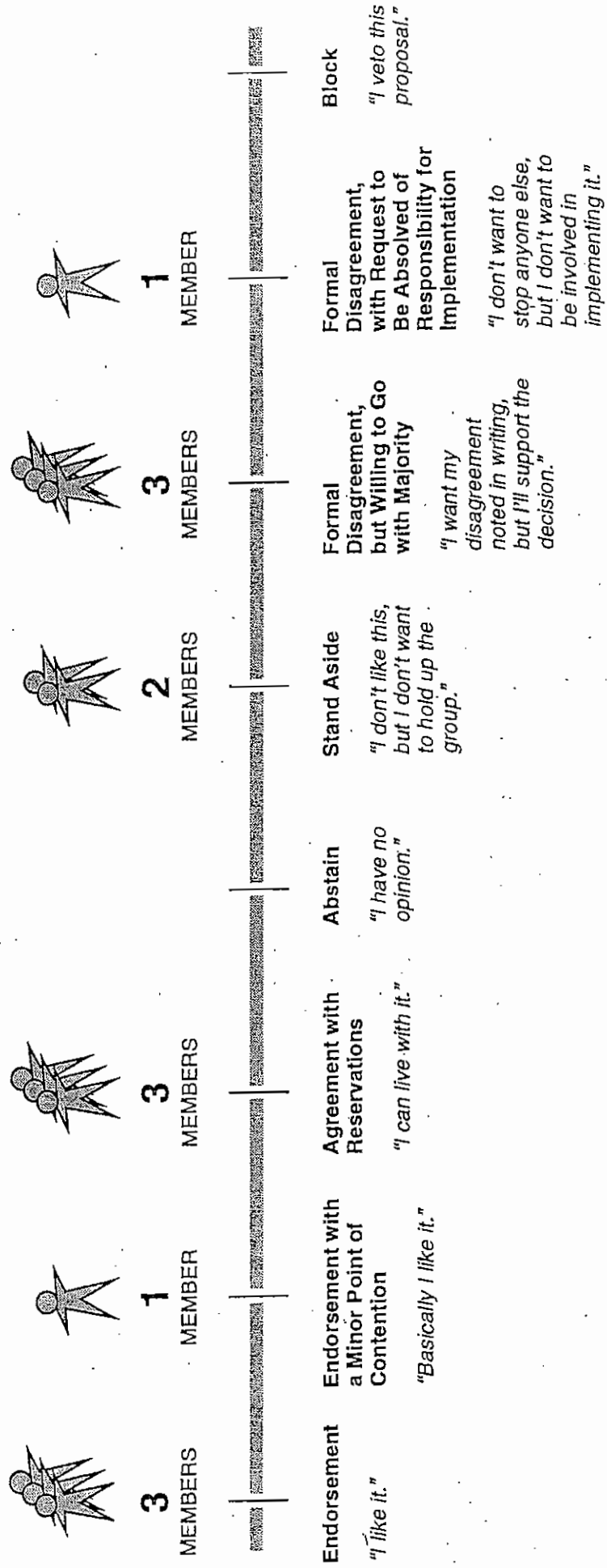
GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT



This diagram portrays a group of people who are all over the map in their response to the proposal. Ambiguous results frequently indicate that the original problem was poorly defined. As David Straus and Michael Doyle have often said, "You can't agree on the solution if you don't agree on the problem." This group would definitely benefit from more discussion. Yet many groups would treat this result as indicating unanimity, since no vetoes were exercised.

GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

MEAGER SUPPORT



It would obviously be risky to implement a decision that was based on the meager support shown above. Yet sometimes the risk is justified – in an emergency, for example. Moreover, many situations are *inherently* risky. Entrepreneurs must make risky decisions all the time. Some work, others backfire. When a group is faced with meager support for a proposal, its challenge is to evaluate whether it is wiser to slow down and search for a better idea, or whether it is wiser to act quickly and take the risk.

WHEN TO SEEK ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT

When does a group need to seek enthusiastic support? And when is lukewarm or even ambivalent support sufficient? Here are some variables that help to answer this question:

OVERALL
IMPORTANCE
OF THE RESULT

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

EXPECTED
LONGEVITY
OF THE RESULT

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

DIFFICULTY
OF THE ISSUE
AT HAND

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

NEED FOR
STAKEHOLDER
BUY-IN

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

EMPOWERMENT
OF GROUP
MEMBERS

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

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

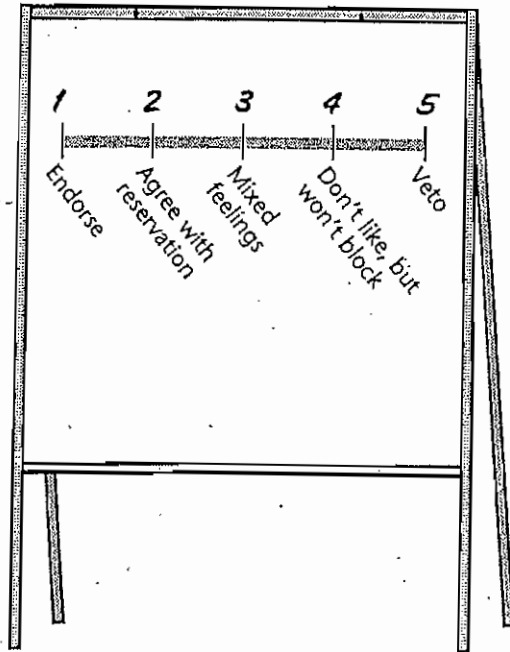
HOW TO USE THE GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT SCALE

▶ Let each group create their own set of gradients

Show the group the handouts on gradients of agreement. Ask them to select which gradients *they* want to use. Many groups invent brand new gradients; for example, a typical adaptation is shown at right.

Write the group's gradients on a flipchart and hang it where everyone can see it.

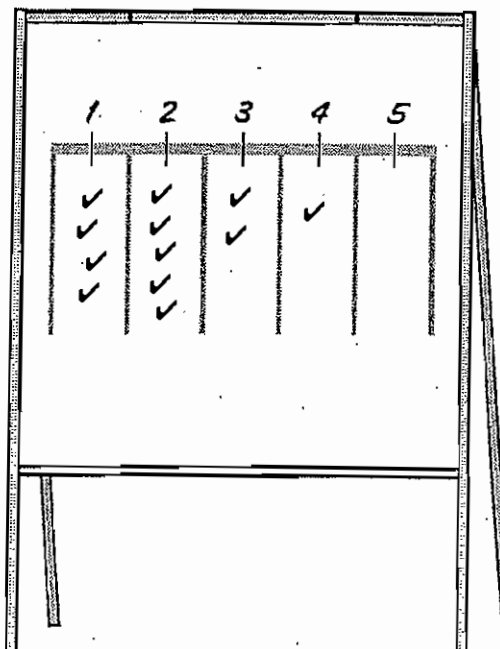
After a group has used their gradients a few times, they can use numbers to represent the different gradients. For example, a group might use numbers 1 through 5 instead of "Endorse" through "Veto."



▶ Record the results of the poll on a flipchart

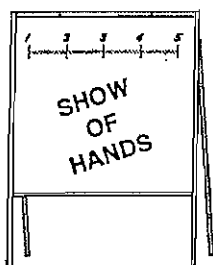
Draw a scorecard like the one shown at right. Use it to capture everyone's positions and tally the results.

The diagram at right shows the results of a poll of 12 participants using the gradients shown in the upper diagram. Four people said they endorsed the proposal. Five said they agreed with reservations. Two said they had mixed feelings. One said they didn't like it, but wouldn't block it. This type of graphic presentation gives everyone a quick, clear picture of the degree of collective support or nonsupport for any given proposal.



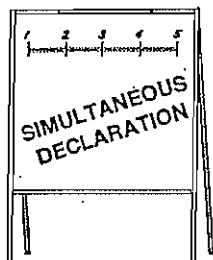
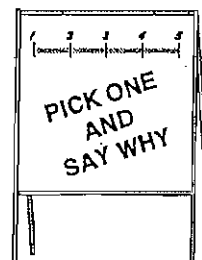
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▶ Five ways to find out where people stand



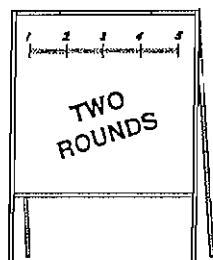
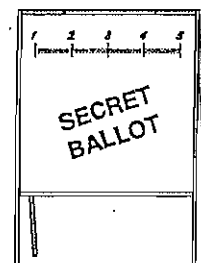
Say, "Please raise your hands if you endorse this proposal." Count the raised hands. Record the data on a flipchart. Now say, "Please raise your hands if you agree with minor reservations." Count hands and record. Repeat for all gradients.

Go around the room, one person at a time, and ask each person to state which gradient s/he prefers and why. No discussion is allowed. As everyone declares his/her preference, record the data.



Have each person write the gradient (word or number) of his/her preference in block letters on a large piece of paper. On cue, have everyone hold up his/her card. Record the data on the scorecard.

Have each person write his/her preference on a slip of paper. When everyone has finished, collect the ballots and tally the results.



Before beginning the poll, let people know that the first poll is a preliminary round and that it will be followed by a brief discussion and then a final poll. Next, gather the data in any of the ways listed above. After a brief, time-limited discussion, poll again. This method lets a person see where others stand before s/he registers a final preference.