

Communication Design for Mentoring Clusters



**DISCUSSION OF A DIALOGIC
FRAMEWORK**

**ATTENTIVE LISTENING AS
FACILITATION FOR MENTORING
CLUSTERS**

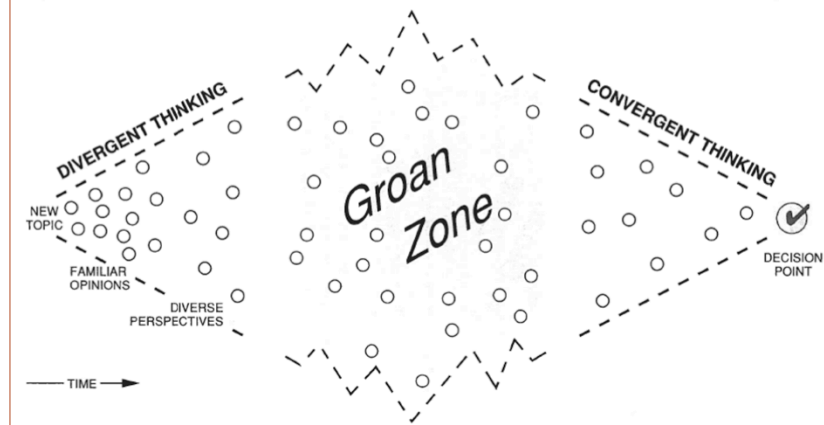
Questions for Productive Facilitation



- How do we create conversations that affirm narratives?
- How do we create settings that identify worldviews?
How do we connect between worldviews?
- How do we move from conversation to impacts?
- How do we set up relational sessions that will continue over a period of time?

Transforming into Dialogue that Addresses Concerns

Figure 1: Kaner's Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making



Kaner, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making*, 2015

Model of the Groan Zone comes from Samuel Kaner's work on participatory decision making in business, government, communities.

However, idea of the Groan Zone can be used more broadly. It is a rhetorical construct—the idea that there is a discursive state of processing and deeply examining different ideas.

Parts of the Groan Zone include:

- The generation of a topic: *what needs to be discussed?*
- Divergent thinking: giving ideas, first the more familiar options, but then continuing to brainstorm and probe deeply around that topic.
- The Groan Zone: This is the part of the process where you sift through ideas to understand them, engaging in perspective taking, considering past, present, and future contexts, and recognize conflicting ideas.

From Kaner:

Struggling to understand a wide range of foreign or opposing ideas is not a pleasant experience. Group members can be repetitious, insensitive, defensive, short-tempered...When this occurs, most people don't have the slightest notion of what's happening to them. Sometimes the mere act of acknowledging the existence of the Groan Zone can be a significant step for a group to take.

Problems with Addressing Shared Concerns

- **What can happen instead? (Carcasson, 2016)**
 - False certainty (discussion not heard, decisions unsustainable, decisions may attract opposition)
 - False polarization (Us vs Them, misunderstandings, one-sided solutions)
 - Paralysis by Analysis (no decisions, chills future engagement through a “don’t make it worse” mentality)

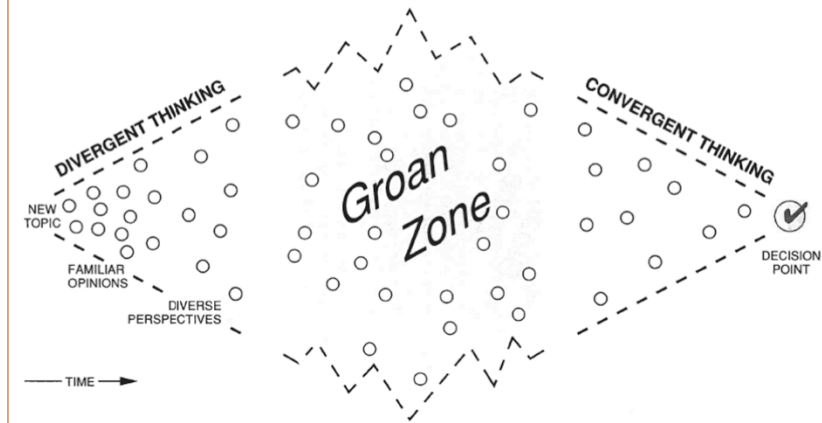
When we exit early from conversation (staying in the “familiar options”) or when people refuse to listen, the discussion becomes unproductive.

Martin Carcasson is a communication studies researcher who argues that an early exit from discussing a problem or issue tends to fall into three categories:

1. False certainty
2. False polarization
3. Paralysis by Analysis

Transforming into Dialogue that Addresses Concerns

Figure 1: Kaner's Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making



Kaner, Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making, 2015

So how do you keep people in the Groan Zone?

-- Strategic facilitation techniques, which can be used by a neutral facilitator OR by peers to better understand others' perspectives and the full scope of ideas.

Facilitating in the Groan Zone during Mentoring Cluster Meetings

- Facilitation in mentoring groups → active listening with a point of view (Kaner, 2014; Dillard, 2014; Makau & Marty, 2013)
- Attentive Listening in Dialogue Principles
 - Speaker's content
 - Empathy
 - Our own critical response
 - Our task at hand

In order to think about communication design for mentor groups, I've brought together a number of communication design principles from deliberation and dialogic practice.

Largely drawn here from Makau & Marty's chapter on listening (see resources), attentive listening includes:

Speaker's content – what are they saying? Does everyone understand? Gather information

Empathy – Help identify the speaker's feelings, attitudes, interests, and values.

Critical response – how does this relate to my own experience? Critical here is not "critique" but rather critical engagement, challenging our own perspective

Our task at hand – what is the purpose of the meeting and how does the speaker's contributions relate?

Communication Design: Preparing Facilitation Strategies

1. Paraphrase the speaker's words
2. Ask a probing question or follow up question to the same speaker
3. Ask a reaction question to the group after the speaker
4. Shifting speaking roles / moving on to the next speaker
5. Tracking / Stacking
6. Encouraging full range of possible outcomes (best case / worst case scenarios)
7. Encouraging perspective taking
8. Synthesizing meaningful themes

Preparing facilitation is NOT about creating a script.

It is about placing yourself in the mindset of coming into a Groan Zone situation ready to engage, discuss, and try to understand a larger, more expansive context of the issue or concern.

Particular facilitation strategies: (defined here, next slide they are discussed in terms of how to use them)

1. Paraphrase the speaker's words. This is designed to make sure that you understand what the speaker is saying thematically, but now in different (your own) language.
2. Ask a probing question or follow up question to the same speaker. **Note, this is designed to better understand the speaker, not to ask a question that may bring in a different perspective. Dialogic conversation and attentive listening first needs shared understanding of perspective.
3. Ask a reaction question to the group after the speaker. **This is the first strategy that encourages others to respond, bringing different perspectives into conversation to add support, consider alternatives, frame a key difference, etc. It's important to do this after sharing understanding has been created.
4. Shifting speaking roles / moving on to the next speaker. When you want to explore quickly several different ideas, an attentive listener might suggest that

Facilitating in the Groan Zone during Mentoring Cluster Meetings

- Speaker's content: Paraphrase, asking probing questions
- Empathy: Asking probing questions, synthesize meaningful themes
- Critical response: ask a probing or reaction question, tracking/stacking, shifting speakers
- Our task at hand: encouraging full range of possible outcomes, synthesize meaningful themes

To help understand the speaker's content, an active listener might paraphrase or ask a probing question to learn more.

To create empathy for particular experiences, an active listener can also ask probing questions, or synthesize themes from a perspective or speaker.

To engage in critical response or consideration (more of the groan zone here), there are a number of strategies including asking probing or reaction question, tracking speakers to get a full range of comments, shifting speakers

If you are trying to bring the group into convergent thinking (either for the group or independently), you might find it useful to focus on the task at hand through encouraging the full range of outcomes and discussing them, or synthesizing

Moving from Topics to Outcomes



ONE MEETING, ONE GOAL

Another Reason We Dislike Sessions/Meetings



- Sessions are rarely well defined → Lack of clear expectations amongst members
- Sessions too often serve multiple functions → Limit voice and opportunity
- Participants need to understand meeting function to be engaged, as well as motivated to share/consider/decide

Types of Meetings Goals, aka Focus Points of Conversation Design

1. Share Perspectives/Information
2. Advance Thinking
3. Provide Input
4. Make Decisions
5. **Improve Communication**
6. Build Capacity
7. **Build Community**

(Kaner, 2014)

Although the research I do focuses on meetings and sessions, you might also thinking of ways of designing your conversation to have **different focus points**.

A focus point encourages a group to be together in the groan zone, being comfortable that sometimes a conversation might exist solely in that place.

These are categories, but not in any hierarchical order or progressive order. Each group and context needs to determine its unique starting place.

I have bolded two here because although “meetings” seems like a bad word and contrary to mentoring, even a decision-centered model like Kaner’s suggests that improving communication (learning how to talk with each other) or building community in real ways (being together, embodiment)

1. Share Perspectives/Information – focusing on sharing and understanding in a deep way
2. Advance Thinking – discussions can involve multiple stages, multiple groan zones. An active listener might try to hone the group towards a particular idea and “advance” thinking by trying to determine a definition, root causes, underlying patterns and problems, sorting the group’s comments into themes, asking to identify the most significant factor, etc.

Example



- **Overall Goal: Build interest and capacity in a faculty work-life balance mentoring group**
- **Possible meeting goals:**
 - Share Information – Demonstrate demand through narrative
 - Make Decision – How should we develop
 - Advance the Thinking – Develop a timeline
 - Provide Input – Ask for feedback from others
 - Make Decision – How should we proceed in a broader capacity
- **Why think of each separately?**

Linking Topics of Conversation



- Good way to break up agenda
- Allows a group to have multiple focus points in a session
- **Example**
 - Share Information – Demonstrate demand through narrative
likely needs a separate meeting
 - BUT combine
 - Make Decision – How should we develop
 - Advance the Thinking – Develop a timeline

Designing Your Meeting



What goals do you have for YOUR meeting?

Where is your beginning?

Resources



Facilitation/Communication Design Focused

- Kaner, Samuel. *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Practice*. 2014.
- Makau, Josina M., and Debian L. Marty. *Dialogue and Deliberation*. Waveland Press, 2013.

**Please email if you have more questions or would be interested in theoretical scholarship.