

*cia*

# Continuous Improvement Associates

## Facilitating Group Action

**Frustrated that meetings drag on & on with no decision, issues revisited repeatedly? Then there's action without consensus? Here's what to do about it.**

**Systems Thinking:  
It's more than you think.™**

### Here's why

Multiple personality disorder. That's right, it's the same problem that I would have with that affliction. I couldn't make up my mind ... because, essentially, I'd have more than one. Groups are *literally* composed of many different persons with different personalities, each with a history of different experiences and perceptions.

Because of this, it's especially difficult for a group to get the best information from each individual and arrive at consensus for action. And we'd like action based on what should approach the *best* available knowledge in the group, not simply actions on which everyone superficially agrees.

### What to do about it?

Conflict in groups is a good thing. We need conflict ... just not too much ... and not too little. Decision quality is less than optimum when conflict is too low or too high. At the low end we have "groupthink," where no different views are considered. At the high end we have continuous conflict where we never identify common ground.

Because groups face their greatest challenges when addressing situations that are complex and difficult, a decision-making process must allow individuals to be both assertive and cooperative. We must allow those with strong opinions to express them while promoting mutual understanding in the group.

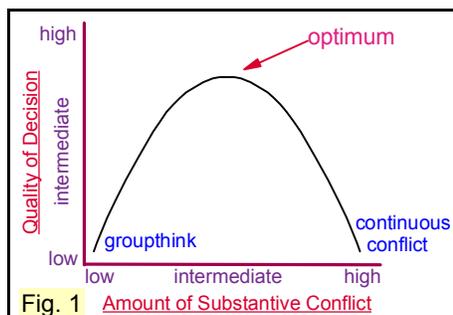
### How to do it?

Though this facilitation approach is

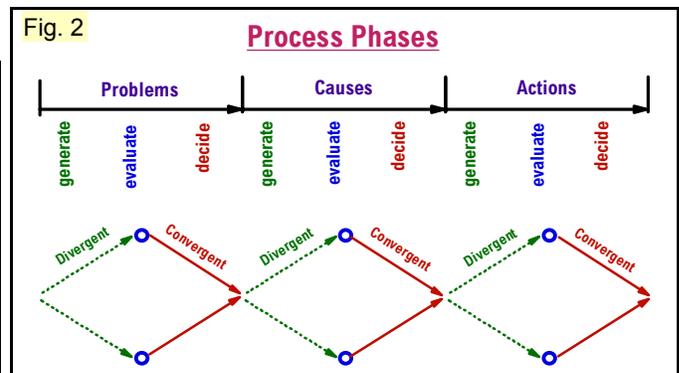
**What is systems thinking?**  
Seeking to understand system behavior by examining "the whole" ... instead of by analyzing the parts.

described for addressing process problems, groups can adapt it to assist in developing organization values, purpose, vision, strategies, structures, tactics, and action plans.

Briefly, this approach breaks problem solving into three phases that determine problems, causes, and action priorities. Within each phase there's an initial divergent step for idea generation, then a step for idea evaluation, and then a convergent step for deciding. The generation step produces a wide variety of independent ideas of higher quality than brainstorming. The evaluation step allows inquiring about, advocating for, and critiquing ideas. The deciding step consolidates ideas and discovers consensus. A group alternates between a nominal mode for idea generation and an interacting mode for idea evaluation and decision-making. The term "nominal"



**Fig. 1** Amount of Substantive Conflict  
We need conflict to make good decisions ... just not too much, nor too little.



**Fig. 2** Process Phases  
This sequence of divergent and convergent phases allows individual input and efficiently finds the extent to which there is group consensus.

means non-interacting; that is, a group is only *nominal* a group during the idea generation step.

### Process Phases and Steps

This may seem overly detailed and constraining, but it is actually liberating and energizing. It frees participants to hear and contribute competing ideas without fearing they'll get into battles or get trapped in

**Insanity in individuals is something rare – but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.**  
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900)

endless debate from which they'll emerge exhausted, either without a decision or with a decision that they are sure does not have consensus.

**Identify problems:**

- The group generates, evaluates and ranks the problems.

**Identify causes:**

- For each of the top problems, the group generates, evaluates and ranks potential problem causes.

**Identify actions:**

- For each top problem, the group generates, evaluates and ranks the potential actions to address each of the problem causes.

**Develop plans:**

- With actions identified, the group plans who's going to do what, by when, with what level of quality.

**The Wheel of Learning**

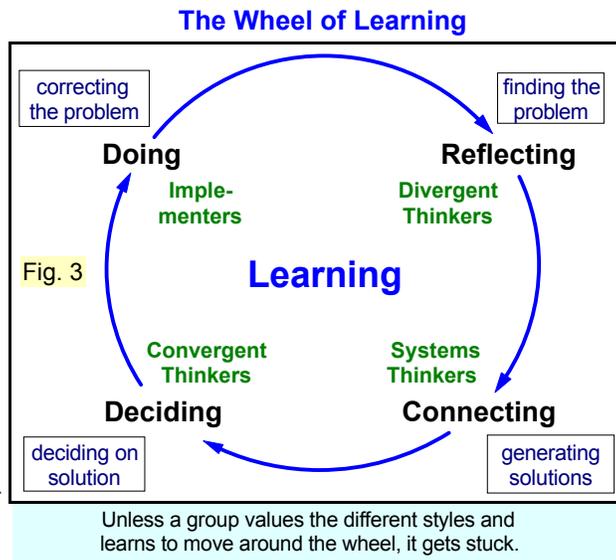
The steps within each phase follow the "wheel of learning" in Figure 3 that describes the sequence for effective learning. We generate ideas, inquire and advocate, and then decide.

Each of us tends to favor a style (in green) on the wheel. Groups need participants of all styles for effective learning. Unfortunately, people with different styles can drive each other crazy.

As an example, "doers" just want to get on with it and "reflecters" never stop thinking about alternatives. *This is a major source of group conflict.* But it's better that groups recognize the advantage of having individuals of different styles to take the lead as a group moves around the wheel.

One group had no members whose primary style was "deciding." It was telling that the group did not have a decision-making process that worked. That is, they could only make decisions when everyone was present ... and it was rare, if ever, that everyone was present. Catch-22. They were stuck.

Briefly at each phase these are the steps:



**Generate ideas**

- Using the nominal group technique.

**Evaluate ideas**

- Solicit and post ideas.
- Consolidate, clustering like ideas.
- Inquire about ideas that are unclear, don't criticize.
- Advocate ideas you think are important, others seek to understand.
- Discuss or critique ideas, get objections on the table.

**Select the ideas to pursue**

- Each person allocates votes using a proportional voting technique.
- Distribute votes among alternatives.
- Rank the ideas according to the number of votes.
- Select how many of the top ideas to pursue.

**The "Actions" Phase**

In prioritizing the different potential actions, a useful technique is to categorize each action according to its expected difficulty and expected impact using the Action Priority Matrix in Figure 4. Generally, we'll first want to do actions that are easiest and have high impact — not always, but usually. After the group categorizes the actions, it re-ranks them to determine priorities.

**Summary**

Group facilitators who use this approach to guide groups through these phases and steps will find it promotes raising differing points of view, while not letting conflict get out of hand. People perceive

the process as fair because it assures everyone's ideas are considered. Use it to promote the exchange of substantive information, reduce competitive behavior, promote cooperation, and deliver higher quality decisions.

People say, "We can use this!" And they do.

**Action Priority Matrix**

Fig. 4

		Difficulty	
		Easy	Hard
Impact	High		
	Low		

First things first.

**Feedback is Power - Tap It**

The Wheel of Learning is a feedback process and the foundation of this facilitation approach. The more efficiently and effectively we use it, the more productive we'll be. It's a necessary ingredient for:

- creating exponential process improvement.
- developing a winning strategic focus.

**Workshop Benefits**

How do groups learn this facilitation technique? Practice. Practice in the context of a real problem ... that's the workshop benefit. We can design a workshop around a process your organization wants to improve, where there is hard data, or around an issue about which the group determines the "correct" answer, such as group values, mission, vision or goals.

That's practical.

**Keep it simple?**

Everything should be made as simple as possible, ... but not simpler.

Albert Einstein, 1879 - 1955

*Continuous Improvement Associates*

Bob Powell, Ph.D., MBA  
 6992 Blackhawk Place  
 Colorado Springs, CO 80919  
 Phone: (719) 599-0977  
 Fax: (719) 599-0564  
 E-mail: scuba@usa.net