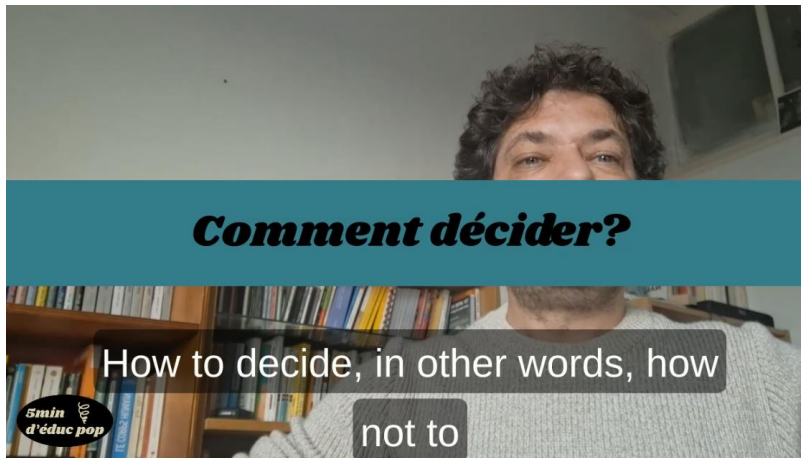


## Post #6: The 4 steps of decision-making process

Watch Anthony's video [here!](#)



### Let the expert decide?

A recurrent shortcoming of meetings is the need to make decisions in an uninformed way, forcing us to defer to the person with the best command of the subject, which doesn't facilitate participation at all! The culture of expertise, so prevalent in our capitalist system, is the opposite of that of participation.

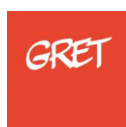
The problem is often not so much a lack of methods, but rather an overloaded agenda involving numerous decisions, the reasons for which are known only to a few. Should we then seek, as in management, to optimize these meeting times, or should we arbitrate on the agenda? Is it desirable to systematically rush through all points at a meeting? What needs to be rethought in the way the group operates to break out of this spiral?

Short-circuiting stages in order to reach a decision more quickly is the whole point - and the flaw - of the culture of expertise. The key is to remember that a meeting is part of a process that enables participants to express their views on the issues on the agenda, then to reflect on them, make proposals and reach a decision. From the point of view of an expert on the subject, it's time-consuming...

### Thinking every step of the way to a decision

Let's take Paul Ricoeur's definition of democracy: **"A society is democratic when it recognizes that it is divided, i.e. traversed by contradictions of interest, and sets as its modality the equal participation of each citizen in the expression of these contradictions, the analysis of these contradictions and the deliberation of these contradictions, with a view to arriving at an arbitration"**. (Paul Ricoeur and Joël Roman, *L'idéologie et l'utopie*, Éditions du Seuil, 1997).

This definition of democracy invites us to think of a popular education process in terms of these 4 stages. A meeting will be participatory if a process enables the collective to draw up its actions and decisions. Tools must facilitate the implementation of this process.



## 1- On the expression of contradictions

There are few tools for working out **disagreements and dissensus**. In my opinion, the best method is "a good frank discussion". We can, however, mention **Moving Debates**, the principle of which is to give a divisive statement and invite participants to physically position themselves for or against this statement, by standing on one side or the other of the moderator. By giving the floor alternately to each camp, it's easy to get the main arguments from each side.

It is also possible to create a **central circle of people sharing a position**, who have access to the floor, and to place people opposed to this position in a second circle, without access to the floor. The circles are reversed in a second phase, followed by a third phase in plenary, during which different points of view are collectively worked out.

These two tools enable people who have not mastered a subject to quickly understand the main issues and points of disagreement. But they don't go much further than expressing different points of view.

## 2- On the analysis of contradictions

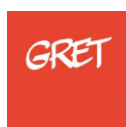
The ideal number for a collective analysis of a subject is around **5 or 6 people**. Fewer people can give the impression of running out of material, while more people can lead to group effects, with some people contributing little. However, when working on a disagreement, it's often preferable for everyone to hear each other's point of view, which is why it's best to work in plenary.

If the points of disagreement are clear within a group, thanks to the previous expression phase, the small groups formed, or the plenary group, can set themselves the task of explaining the causes of these disagreements, clarifying the problems posed by these disagreements, working out different scenarios, different proposals based on these disagreements, and clarifying the consequences of adopting each of these scenarios.

Each small group can work with the instruction, for each disagreement, "**what's the problem?**", then in a second step on "**what would be the ideal?**" and in a third step "**what would be your proposals?**". This division into small groups and 3 stages with these instructions is called "**GrO-DeBaT**". It allows each person to take ownership of a topic, preventing those who already have the solutions from proposing them too quickly.

Each small group can work on all the **disagreements**, or the disagreements can be distributed among the small groups. Each small group can work on different scenarios, or the different **scenarios** can be distributed among the small groups. It is difficult here to provide generic tools for analyzing any problem or disagreement with a view to formulating proposals. We need to work on a "tailor-made" basis.

If the choice is made to work in small groups, as in the expression phase, the question arises as to who should report the results, as they are often not listened to very much. Everyone listens politely, still mentally in their own small group. In the end, it's often preferable to dispense with rapporteurs and opt for a written report from each of the small groups, which is then sent to the participants.



### 3- On the deliberation of contradictions

In the best-case scenario, the preceding analysis phase leads to a number of proposals, drawn up in small groups or in plenary. The next step is to **deliberate on these proposals**.

To deliberate is to **discuss with a view to making a decision**. In concrete terms, this means putting one or more proposals up for discussion before making a decision. These discussions enable us to refine a proposal, to nuance it by modifying or amending it. Without this phase of collective elaboration based on proposals, it is likely that the decision will seem to fall "from on high". There is then a real risk that implementation will not proceed smoothly.

Some methods, such as the **world café**, enable consensus to be reached: the various proposals are divided between several tables, and participants move from table to table to amend each of the proposals they have to study. Once all the participants have been able to amend each proposal, it is to be hoped that a consensus decision is in sight.

However, there may still be a choice to be made between different proposals, which may be contradictory, and within each of the proposals, there may be disagreements over amendments. On the basis of these contradictions and disagreements, it is then possible to resume the process from the expression phase. The work of consensus can thus be infinite. Depending on the stakes involved in the decision, and on the decision-making method chosen, the group will, at some point, move on to arbitration.

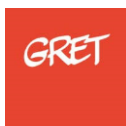
### 4- Arbitration

Whether by **vote** or by **consensus**, with many variations in these two major models, there are many different ways of making decisions. Resistance to consensus means not spending more time on the arbitration. The resistance to voting is to ensure that there are no losers in the trade-off. The many variants in each of these two decision-making modes enable us to break out of this binarity between **the time-consuming search for consensus** and **indifference to the minority through a vote**.

However, all these existing variants do not eliminate the tension that can exist in arbitration: **deciding collectively means defining a collective position that cannot respect all individual choices**. Depending on the value each individual places on his or her personal position, it may be more or less frustrating to give up that position in order to accept collective arbitration. Sometimes, it may even be preferable to make a minority position highly visible through a vote: the group will then be clearly aware of what is at stake within the group.

Behind the appearance of consensus, we can observe **4 different types of position**: some people will **not feel able to express disagreement** with the decision taken by consensus, so as not to prolong the discussion, not to show their disagreement, not to show that they disagree with those who support the proposal... Among these people, some will conform to what is proposed, others will submit to it.

And among those who **might disagree with the decision**, some will compromise with themselves (wanting to get the decision over with) or with all or part of the group (I'll let you do this in exchange for other things, implicitly or explicitly).



**Consensus postures**

	<b>In agreement with the decision</b>	<b>Disagree with the decision</b>
<b>Able to disagree</b>	Membership	Compromise
<b>Not able to disagree</b>	Compliance	Submission

More to the point, these **different positions often co-exist** within the same person: human beings are complex and paradoxical, and can agree with a decision in part, and disagree with it in part. This position can also evolve over time, depending on the people with whom it is held. And some of the reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with a decision are unconscious to the person themselves...

The quest to rationalize a decision and to objectify the decision-making process is therefore partly futile. However, there is one principle that can guide the group here: what can help participants to take part in implementing the decision?

*Further information*

The "Deciding" chapter of the book "Micropolitics of Groups":

<https://micropolitiques.collectifs.net/Decider>

The Aequitaz document presenting a whole range of voting and consensus variants, by clicking on "choose your voting method" in the middle of the "toolbox" page:

<https://www.aequitaz.org/ressources-2/boite-a-outils/>

