



Types of decision

A or B?

- Work has been done before the meeting to identify options and explore their pros and cons.
- The amount of time and resource that has gone into this work is appropriate for the scale of decision being made.
- That work has included involving the right people in developing a shared view of the 'problem' the options are designed to solve, or the 'desired future' the options are intended bring about.
- That work has also included creating the options and gathering data and opinions about them, to inform the decision.
- Two (or more) clear options are available for the meeting to choose between.

Yes or no?

- Work has been done before the meeting to identify and explore the pros and cons of the recommendation which is before the meeting.
- The amount of time and resource that has gone into this work is appropriate for the scale of decision being made.
- That work has included involving the right people in developing a shared view of the 'problem' the recommendation is designed to solve, or the 'desired future' the recommendation is intended bring about.
- That work has also included creating the options which were then chosen between to get to the recommendation, gathering data and opinions, to inform the decision.
- A clear recommendation has been made and the meeting will adopt it or not.

What shall we do about X?

- Either before the meeting, or during the meeting, the group needs to develop a shared understanding of X, and whether / why something needs to be done about it.
- The meeting may be used to explore ideas, identify who else needs to be engaged before things get too far, create options, identify and agree criteria to assess options against, do that assessment, agree clear next steps for turning ideas into well-worked out proposals.
- It is likely that the decisions made in the meeting will be to do with process rather than substance.



Descriptive agenda

Most agendas give the topic of discussion, but do not describe task which the people at the meeting need to achieve, in relation to the topic.

A descriptive agenda contains more detail, and helps manage people's expectations about what that part of the meeting will be like. Critically, it give the person running the meeting a clear steer on what the purpose of the item is, making it easier to bring people back to the point.

Compare these two agendas, to see the difference.

Maintains flexibility within a clear structure.

- Agenda**
1. Minutes and matters arising
 2. Finance report
 3. Project report
 4. Village magazine
 5. AOB

Draft Agenda

- 1. Introductions and welcome:**
 - Introductions – everyone introduces themselves.
 - Aims and agenda – check that these are appropriate, and that the proposed end-time suits everyone.
 - Ground rules – agree how we'll work together.
 - Note-taking – agree what we will do about keeping a record of the meeting.
- 2. Finance report**
 - Gerry will present a report.
 - Questions of clarification.
 - Review progress: Are our finances on track? Do we need to adjust our plans?
- 3. Project progress**
 - Small group discussion: What's going well? What's going less well? What are the key indicators of progress we should focus on at this stage?
 - Feedback and whole group discussion: Discuss and agree key progress indicators. Review how we are doing, against these? What's next?
 - Agree any actions.
- 4. Village magazine**
 - Discuss and decide: should we contribute £500 towards costs?
- 5. AOB**
- 6. Next meeting**
 - Review this meeting.
 - Set dates for 2010 – please bring your diaries.
 - Agenda for next meeting - please bring your ideas.

Getting explicit agreement at the start reduces the chances of things going off-track later.

Clear "focus questions" for the group to discuss and reach agreement about.

Open questions which invite a diversity of views and perspectives.

Multi-stage process is set out in the agenda, with an 'action' focus at the end.

Very clear question.



Decision / action grid

One of the reasons that decisions don't stick, or agreed actions don't get taken, is that people don't understand what's been agreed.

A real-time open record

One of the most effective ways of ensuring that agreements are clear and understood, is to write them down in an 'open record' that everyone can see. The advantage of this is that they can be *clarified and improved in real time by the decision-makers in the room*, rather than a minute taker having to puzzle over them later and people then not recognising them when they come to read the minutes of the meeting (sometimes weeks later).

Ways of writing an open record include

- typing into a laptop which is being projected in the room;
- writing on a flip chart or whiteboard.
- using a shared document which everyone has access to on their own computer or other device (essential for a telecon);

The first two methods give you an electronic meeting record which is ready for circulating at the end of the meeting. With flips or a whiteboard, photos can be taken which are then made into an electronic record. People who need it straight away can take their own pictures.

What should be recorded?

For actions, the specific task(s) which needs to be undertaken should be recorded, along with who will do it (specific a 'lead' person if it's a sub-group) and the deadline by which it should be undertaken.

Write in full sentences - this helps ensure clarity. Take the time to specify the tasks, lead action-taker and deadline. If things get done before the deadline, so much the better!

Decision	Action	Who	Date
Go ahead with a plot speaker event this year	Ask for volunteers for task group at next Sunday's service	PW	1st 2nd 28-7-15
	Brainstorm list of people to invite	PW + volunteers	30-8-15
Assign £500 budget for kitchen refurbishment	Send formal invite to Finance Committee confirming this	AP	7-8-15
	Ask FG to get quotes from builders	AP	28-7-15
	Ask members for donations of tables + chairs, at service and by email	AP MM	28-7-15 7-8-15
	Ask FG to give progress report to next Steering Committee meeting	AP	28-7-15

Circulating the record

You may be putting together a lengthy or complex record of the whole meeting which you know will take a while to prepare. But you can still circulate the decisions / actions to everyone very fast – perhaps even the same day.

If you used flip charts, bring the actual flips to the next meeting to help jog people's memories and to show that actions and decisions are meant to last to the next meeting, not fade away!

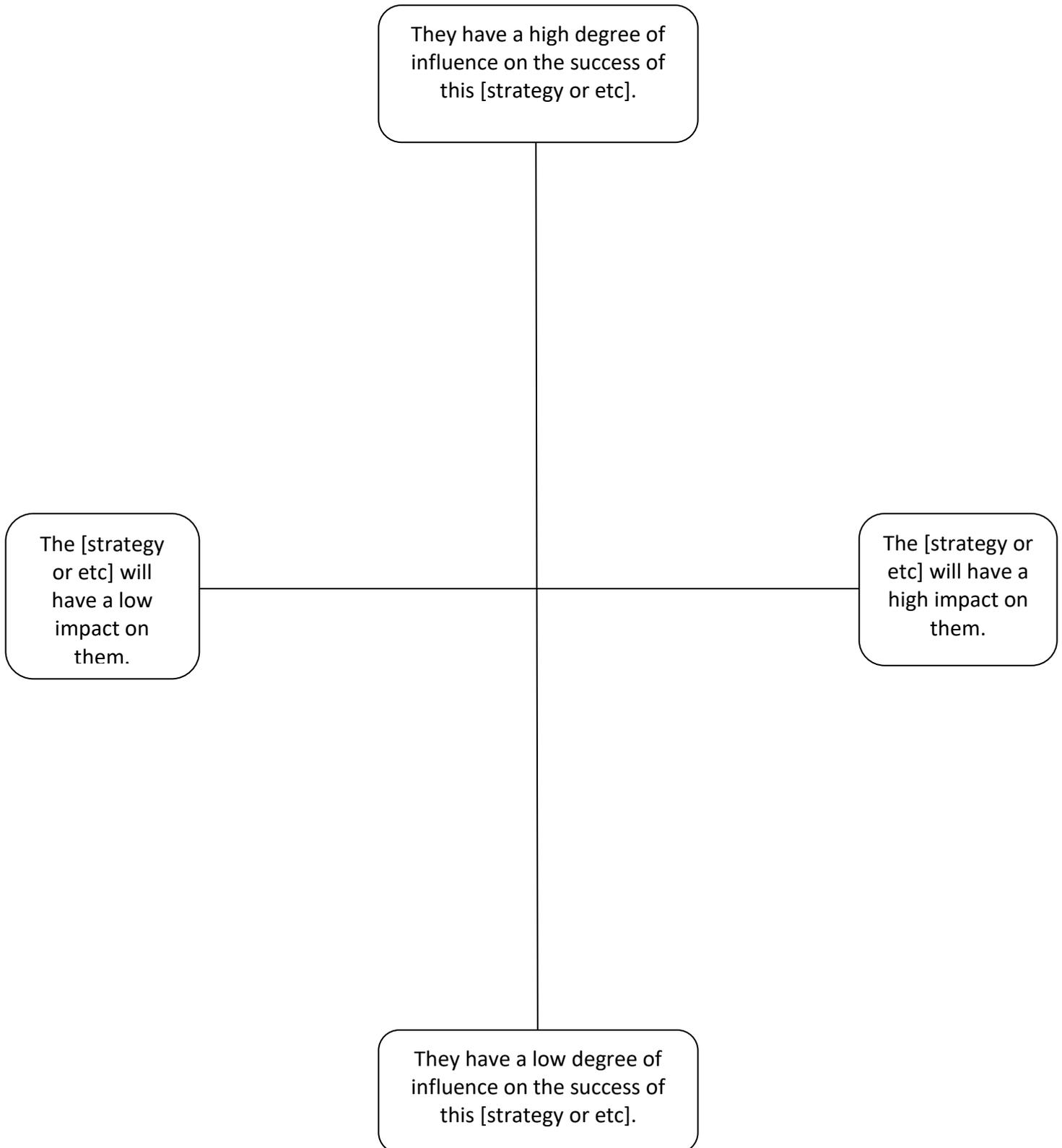


Who shall we engage and how intensely?

Who are the people who will be affected by, or who have an interest in, the [strategy / topic / issue / decision / project / organisation / policy]?

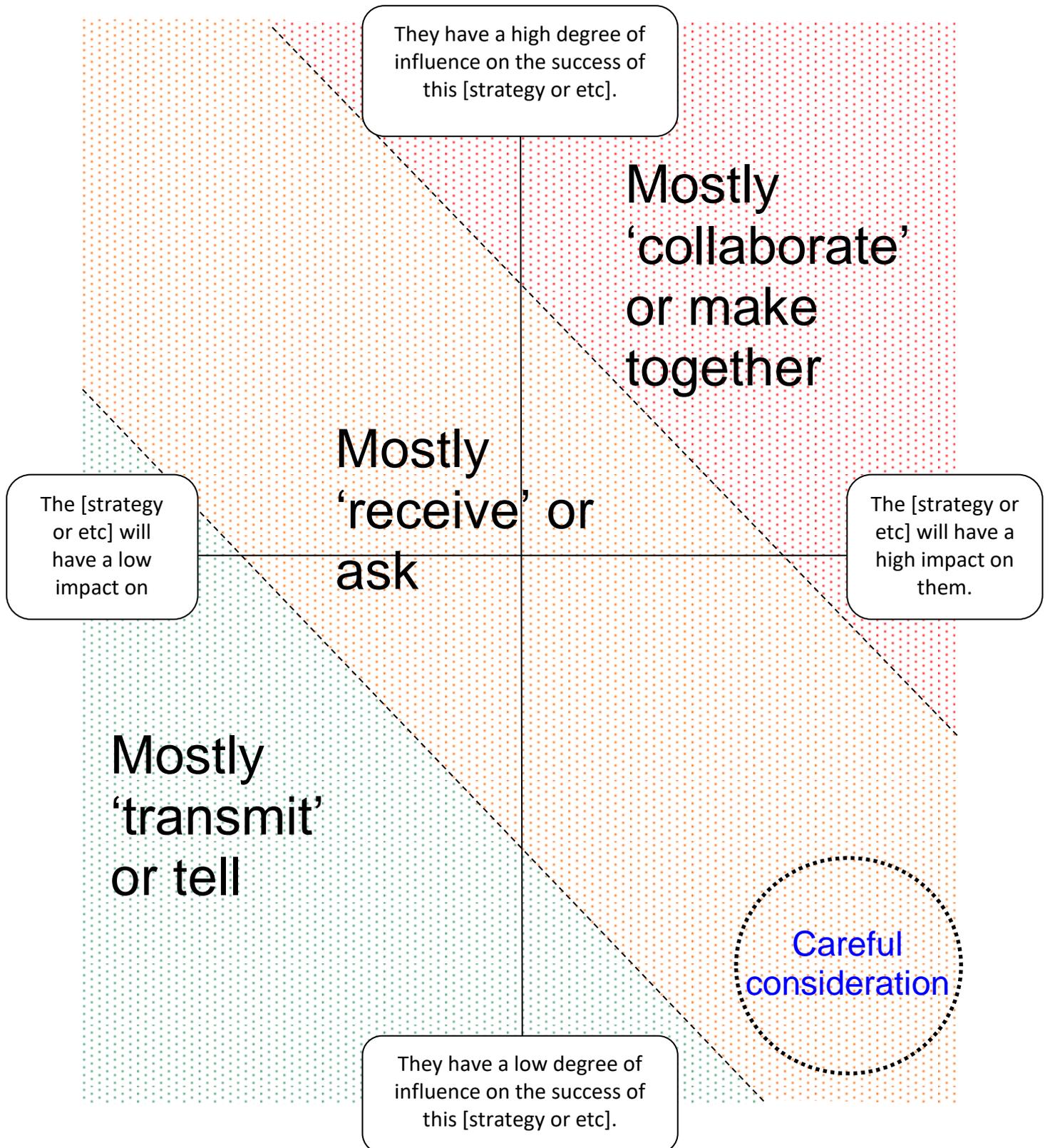
Step 1: Identify all the people and organisations.

Step 2: Map them on this matrix, according to their degree of influence on the situation and the degree of impact it will have on them.



Who are the people who will be affected by, or who have an interest in, the [topic / issue / decision]?

Step 3: Overlay the zones, to see which stakeholders need mostly 'transmit', 'receive' or 'collaborate' intensity of engagement.





Exploring before taking a position: pros and cons

Once people have adopted positions, it is hard for them to move away from them without losing face. It is hard for them to draw attention to the weaknesses in their own preferred option, or acknowledge the strengths in others'. So identifying the strengths and weaknesses BEFORE asking for 'positions' is a great idea.

If you can help the group stay in an exploratory mood, examining options or ideas from many perspectives before converging on decisions, you can help avoid unnecessary conflict. (And necessary conflict can be given the space it deserves!)

One technique for doing this is to give space and permission for people to notice both what they like and what they don't like about every idea or option.

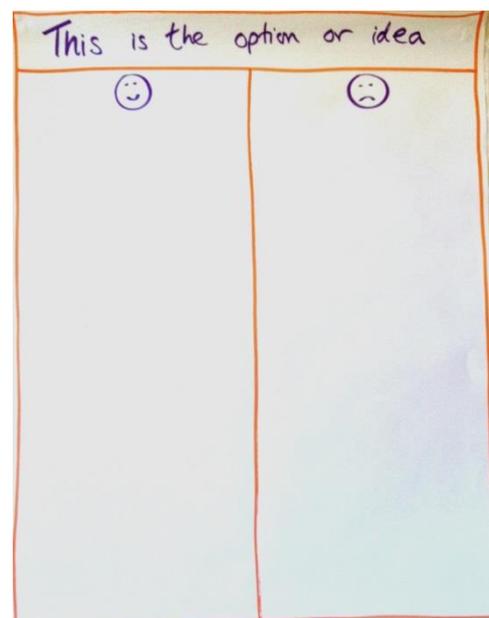
Create flips (or worksheets) which have space for the options or ideas, and then two columns: one for the strengths / likes and one for the weaknesses / dislikes.

Working in small groups, people take one option at a time and note down in both columns their initial thoughts.

This could be done as a carousel. In a carousel, each group begins with one option, working on flip charts at a 'station'. They work on this option for a short time. After five or six minutes, they move on to the next one which already has some ideas from the previous group. They build on and comment on the previous group's work. After another short while they move on to the next station and next option, until the time is used up. Each group uses different colour marker pens to make their notes, so that the responses are clearly distinguished.

Or it could be that each small group is assigned one option to look at in detail, trusting that the other groups will build full pictures of the options they are looking at.

If there is enough time, all the groups can look at all the options in this way.





Some more resources - free to download!

Penny Walker <http://www.penny-walker.co.uk/blog/2016/2/15/decisions-decisions>

This blog post pulls together some resources for people in community organisations wanting to make *clear decisions that stick*. Groups of volunteers can't be 'managed' in the same that a team in an organisation is managed: consensus and willingness to agree in order to move forward are more precious. Sometimes, however, that means that decisions aren't clear or don't 'stick' - people come away with different understandings of the decision, or don't think a 'real' decision has been made (just a recommendation, or a nice conversation without a conclusion). When that happens, it's hard to move things forward.

Please visit this web page to find some resource that I think groups like this will find useful:

- Descriptive agendas - that give people a much clearer idea of what to expect from a meeting.
- Using decision / action grids to record the outputs from a meeting unambiguously.
- Guidance on being clear about the decision-making method (e.g. will it be by consensus, by some voting and majority margin, or one person making the decision following consultation?) and criteria.
- Understanding who needs to be involved in the run-up to a decision.
- Taking time to explore options and their pros and cons before asking people to plump for a 'position'.

There are more articles and downloads on my blog: [penny-walker.co.uk/blog](http://www.penny-walker.co.uk/blog) and you are welcome to drop by.