

# DELIBERATION BY MEANS OF THE METHOD *MIDDLE GROUND*

## *Introduction*

The aim of the meeting:

**Intro:** With the method Middle Ground, you deliberate among peers about a moral or political issue and try to develop a compromise that each participant can subscribe to as a fair and defensible outcome.

**Topic:** Description of the problem situation (a fictive case), including a characterization of the predicament, where negative consequences are to be expected of a lasting disagreement and indecision. The case is fictive, but participants are invited to develop their authentic opinions.

**Approach:** At a preparatory stage, you examine whether a substantial consensus can be realized. If that attempt succeeds, the procedure ends, for then there is no reason to develop a compromise. If it fails, the remainder of the procedure is aimed at the development of an acceptable compromise. The aim is to fabricate a compromise that all participants, or all but one, can subscribe to. To that purpose, you need to reflect on possible ways to “commodify” your position, and the positions of others, into items fit for negotiation and exchange. The moderator explains at every stage what is to be expected of you. This document contains a full description of the procedure, but you are only required to read the parts of the text that are boxed.

**Background:** This procedure is meant to facilitate the construction of a well-considered and well-reasoned compromise in a systematic and transparent manner. Therefore, the procedure is staged, and the participants are invited to keep a record of their considerations.

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## Ground Rules

1. Participate
2. Give room for others
3. Address one another directly, and not via the moderator
3. The moderator sets the time limits
4. The participants themselves control and monitor the dialogue, and the moderator does not make substantial comments.

## 1. Opinion Formation Stage

The moderator informs the participants about the goal of the Opinion Formation Stage:

The goal of the Opinion Formation Stage is to develop and clarify, both to oneself and to the other participants, your personal points of view about the (kind of) policy that you would like to see adopted in response of the problem situation sketched above. (1.1) First, each participants introduces him- or herself to the group and mentions one personal experience that relates to the topic at hand. (1.2) Second, you are asked to draw a list of considerations on which you have based your point of view, or on which basis you think you ought to establish your point of view. (1.3) Third, you can pose questions, aimed at clarification. (1.4) Fourth, we see whether it is possible to make groups of like-minded participants, and each groups formulates its group position on a "position-poster."

### 1.1 Ice breaking (5 minutes)

Each participants introduces him- or herself to the group and mentions one personal experience or thought that relates to the topic at hand.

### 1.2 Personal positions (± 10 minutes)

[Possibly as part of a home-work assignment:] Each participant carries out the following task individually:

Search for information in order to adopt a well-considered position. Suppose, you don't have to deal with opposing points of view:

- (1) List the main considerations (experiences, duties, emotions, consequences, stakeholders' interests, uncertainties,...) that you think are relevant for developing a proper policy decision.
- (2) Formulate your position on (or your intuition about) the best policy choice, i.e., your *personal position*.
- (3) What moves you? Underline the main considerations that motivate you to take this position.

### 1.3 Clarification (± 10 minutes)

1.3.1. The moderator asks each participant to inform the group about her position.

1.3.2. The moderator invites the participants to question one another's positions, with the aim of clarifying them. (The exchange is not aimed at persuasion.)

### 1.4 Group positions (± 10 minutes)

1.4.1 The participants are encouraged to form groups of like-minded participants. Each group has maximally 5 members.

1.4.2 Each group formulates its position, notes down the four most important motivating considerations by means of key words on a so-called "position poster," and attaches the position poster on the wall.

1.4.2 Finally, each group informs the others about its position.

Our preferred policy choice is: [...]

Our motivating considerations:

1. [...]
2. [...]
3. [...]
4. [...]

## 2. *Compromise Formation Stage*

The moderator informs the participants about the aim of this stage:

The goal of this stage is to determine whether a reasonable compromise is possible that does justice to the various positions and is preferred to a lasting dissent and a situation of indecision. (2.1) First, we will ask you to reflect on ways to “split the difference,” and to develop a compromise proposal. (2.2) Second, you are asked to examine each compromise proposal, to table improvement proposals, and to weigh up the most promising proposals. (2.3) Finally, exactly seven minutes remain to reach agreement on a compromise proposal, that all participants, or all participants but one, can subscribe to.

### 2.1 Possibilities for mutual concessions (± 10 minutes)

Each group performs the following task:

1. Reflect on the way your preferred policy choice can be adapted so as to accommodate (some of) the motivating considerations of (some of the) other groups, as well as on the ways other groups could revise their preferred policy so as to accommodate (some of) your considerations. In other words: what are possible ways to split the difference by means of mutual concessions?
2. Formulate a proposal based on mutual concessions that your group prefers to dissent and indecision. Use the following format, write it down on a new poster, the “proposal poster,” and attach it next to your position posters on the wall:

Our compromise proposal is: [...]

What we ask the other groups to sacrifice:

1. [...]

2. [...]

...

What we sacrifice in order to accommodate other groups:

1. [...]

2. [...]

...

### 2.2. Argumentative inquiry (± 38 minutes)

2.2.1. The moderator asks each group to inform, in about 1 minute, the others about the compromise proposal. Possible questions for clarification are dealt with immediately.

2.2.2. The moderator asks the groups to rate each proposal, including its own proposal, in light of the degree to which the compromise would be a reasonable result: ‘negative’ (--), ‘somewhat negative’ (-), ‘neutral’ (±), ‘somewhat positive’ (+), ‘positive’ (++), ‘we don’t know’ (?). All ratings are noted down on the proposal posters, and if needed, ratings are clarified orally.

Our compromise proposal is: [...]

What we gain by other groups' sacrifices:

1. [...]

2. [...]

...

What we sacrifice in order to accommodate other groups:

1. [...]

2. [...]

...

Group 1's  
rating:  
[...]

Group 2's  
rating:  
[...]

Group 3's  
rating:  
[...]

2.2.3. The groups are invited to:

- set aside compromise proposals without a chance of adoption
- to table improvement proposals, and to rate these new proposals
- to discuss what compromise proposals are most promising

### 2.3 Agreement on compromise [± 7 minutes]

If no agreement has yet been achieved, the moderator informs the participants that they have at most seven minutes for developing a compromise that all participants, or all participants but one, are willing to subscribe to, and to formulate it on the whiteboard. The moderator reminds the participants about the problem situation and their predicament. During the conversation, the moderator announces each passing minute.

The moderator determines whether or not a compromise has been realized that each group, or each group but one, is willing to accept as preferable over no compromise.