

Social Analysis Systems^{2.0M}

Concepts and Tools for
Collaborative Research and Social Action

<http://www.sas-pm.com/>

Name of this technique: Levels of Support

Author(s) and correct citation: Jacques M. Chevalier, 'SAS² 1.0: Levels of Support,' in *Social Analysis Systems²*, <http://www-sas-pm.com/>.

Acknowledgements: *Levels of Support* is a SAS² adaptation of a technique developed by S. Kaner et al. (see *Readings and links*).

What is the goal of Levels of Support?

Levels of Support is a technique that helps you choose the decision method and level of support that are appropriate to particular activities and options for action.

What are the guiding principles for this technique?

- The level of support needed for a decision to be implemented is critical to success and varies according to the situation.
- Decision methods based on a majority of either yes or no votes are poor indicators of level of commitment and key stakeholder support.
- Levels of support are easier to understand when we use terms that are chosen and negotiated by the parties themselves.

Here's how to use Levels of Support

Defining the level of support needed

1. Select a precise **option** for action that a group is seriously considering. Define the option as clearly as possible, and clarify the purpose of this exercise.

2. List the **reasons or factors** that are needed for actions to require **high levels of support** (such as ‘A proposed action requires a high level of support if... there is a lot a stake for all parties concerned’).
3. Assess each reason or factor in relation to your option for action. **Rate** each factor using a scale from 1 to 10. The maximum score 10 means that the factor ‘applies perfectly well’ to the proposed action. If you want to be more precise, identify **indicators** that define the meaning of each number on the scale.
4. If you consider certain factors to be less important, you may use a different **scale** (1 to 8, or 1 to 5, for example). If you decide to do this, write (in parentheses) the maximum score possible with the scale. Here’s an example of a list of reasons and scores using a variable scale:

<u>Proposed action: Renovating the School</u>	
Suggested scale:	1 = False (does not apply at all) 10 = True (applies perfectly well)
This proposed action requires a high level of support because...	
There is a lot a stake for all parties concerned	score 9 (maximum 10)
We won’t be able to change the decision once it is made	score 3 (maximum 10)
We need everyone’s active involvement	score 6 (maximum 10)
We will need to work hard to achieve our goal	score 3 (maximum 8)
This is going to cost a lot	score 5 (maximum 5)
Total	score 26 (maximum 43)
Percentage score	26 / 43 = 60%

- To convert the total score into a **percentage**, total the scores and divide this number by the maximum total. Results that are closer to 100% suggest you need higher levels of support.

Support levels and polling

- Before you take a vote or reach a formal decision, talk about and develop the precise wording or pictures you will use in your agreement scale. The agreement scale should consist of nine statements or pictures ranging from the most positive to the most negative, or from the highest level of commitment to the lowest. Remind participants that the polling exercise is only a quick survey, and that the **level of support** obtained through a face-to-face discussion can change over time.

Use words or images to express levels of support, not numbers. Be sure to use expressions of support and commitment that clearly indicate what participants may expect from each other. Avoid expressions that are too vague or too extreme for the option you are discussing.

Here’s an example of a set of nine statements that express support and lack of support.

Support levels								
Yes. I agree!	This is a good idea	It’s worth the risk	As long as others do the work.	I’m really not sure.	I agree, with reluctance.	I don’t like it but won’t block it.	It’s not a good idea.	I’ll fight this.

- Discuss whether participants should express their levels of support **openly** (by raising their hands, displaying cards or marking their responses on the whiteboard or flipchart) or through **secret** ballots.
- Ask each participant or group to choose the support level that suits them best. Collect the responses using the method chosen in Step 7.

9. Map out the responses on the agreement scale (using X marks). For a clearer view of differences between group responses, use a separate row for each group (see Illustrations).
10. Discuss the results, and compare them with the level of support that participants are aiming for.
11. If the level of support is not as high as the group wants it to be or if key stakeholders reject the proposal, participants may wish to continue the discussion and modify the proposal. If the technique is done with secret ballots and the non-supporters are anonymous, the facilitator may invite all participants to speak out as if they were the ones who opposed the proposal. **Role playing** allows the group to continue the discussion at the same time as it preserves anonymity.

Reaching a decision

12. Before reaching a final decision, discuss the ways the group can decide. Choose one of the following decision methods (see Attachment A):
 - Majority rule (50% + 1 or 2/3 support)
 - Minority rule (designated expert, appropriate authority, executive committee, forceful action)
 - Mutual agreement (achieved through bargaining or mediation)
 - Arbitration
 - Unanimity
 - Impasse and exit (parties agree to disagree and to put the issue aside)

Making this process work for you

For simpler versions

- Do not define the level of support needed.
- Use the same rating scale for all factors (such as 1 to 10).

- Don't use precise indicators when assessing reasons or factors that are needed for actions to require high levels of support (Step 3).

For more advanced versions

- Use the technique to assess and compare two or more options for action.
- Repeat this polling exercise at a later date (such as one month later).
- During the exercise, discuss and record the views that parties express.
- Take more time to gather the information you need to complete the exercise.
- Write a description for each reason or factor that seems to favor seeking high levels of support; do the same for statements that express support and lack of support.

Readings and links

Sam Kaner et al, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, New Society Pub, 1996

Accurate Democracy Definitions and Contents, http://accuratedemocracy.com/a_toc.htm

International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA

On majority rule processes: <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/majority.htm>

On consensus rule processes:

<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/consenpr.htm>

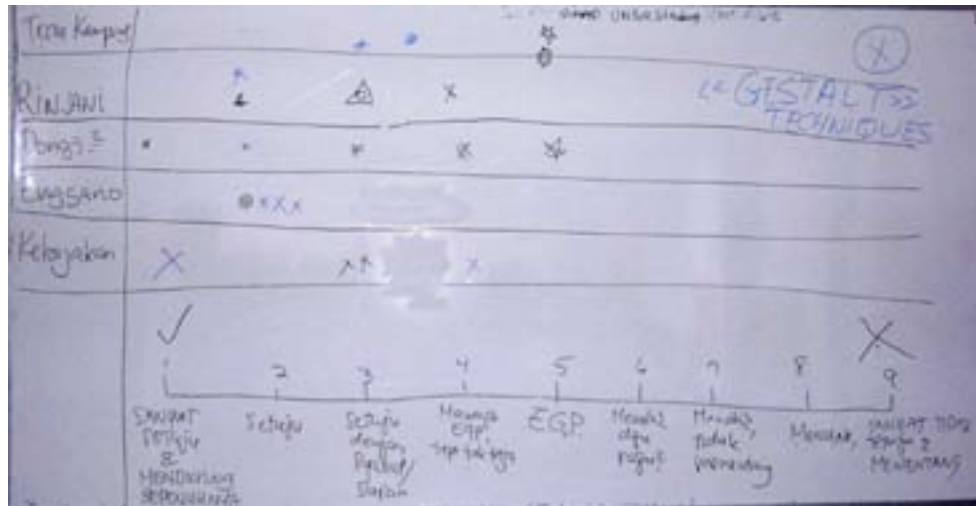
Attachment A: The Pros and Cons of Various Decision-Making Rules

Rules	Pros	Cons
Majority Rule	Quick Efficient Practical when working with large groups	Minorities may be dominated by the majority Quality of decisions is questionable The minority usually feels left out
Minority Rule Designated Expert Designated Authority Executive Committee Forceful people within the group	Saves time Clear and efficient One part of the group may be informed and committed	Expertise hard to determine No group input Members compete for attention Members compete to impress authority Weak commitment to decision
Unanimity rule Consensus	Quality decisions Commitment Satisfaction	Time consuming Difficult Creates tension

Source: Edited version of Lynn Meade, *Group Discussion: Effective Decision Making and Problem Solving*, Chapter Seven, http://lynn_meade.tripod.com/id183.htm

Illustrations

Ubud, Bali, World Neighbors and DFID, April 2003



La Ceiba, Honduras, IDRC, PROMESAS & REMBLAH, February 2003

