

# JOHN SHIBLEY CONSULTING STRATEGY INNOVATION LEARNING

COACHING FOR LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS

## Where Do We Stand?

April 2023

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This is a simple but powerful activity that reveals a group's collective and individual opinions about an issue. You are going to lay out an arc on the floor with tape. Then you are going to ask the group a series of questions and have the group stand along the arc in a place that reflects their response, with discussion to follow.

This piece covers the activity and illustrates some typical responses. I finish by connecting this activity to a theory I have about systems, feedback, and self-regulation.

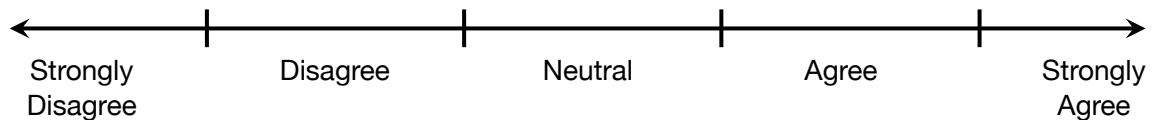
This activity may seem like a gimmick. I promise you it's not. It's a serious and potent way to support learning by showing a system where the entire system stands regarding an issue, in real time, and in such a way that the data are undeniably valid.

You can spend hours creating a survey, collecting, and compiling responses and then send them to the group hoping that they read them only to have them question the results.

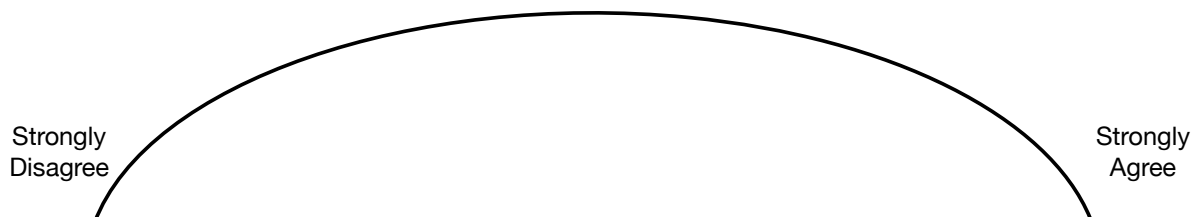
Or you can spend 30 minutes doing this.

### Here's how to set it up

Think of a typical Likert Scale<sup>1</sup>:



Now, imagine bending it and eliminating all the anchors except the two on the ends.



That's what you are creating.

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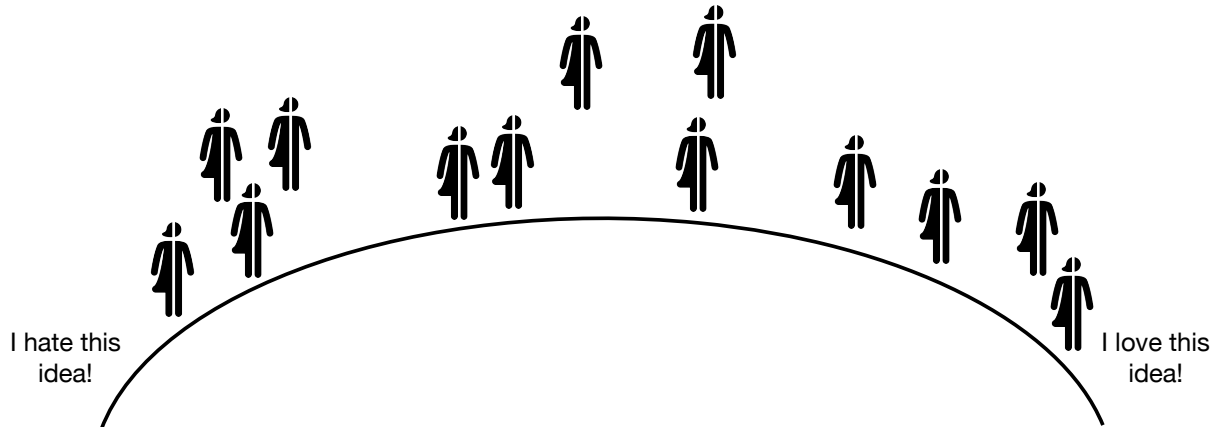
<sup>1</sup> That's what these are called. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Likert\\_scale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Likert_scale)



**Where Do You Stand, April 2023?**

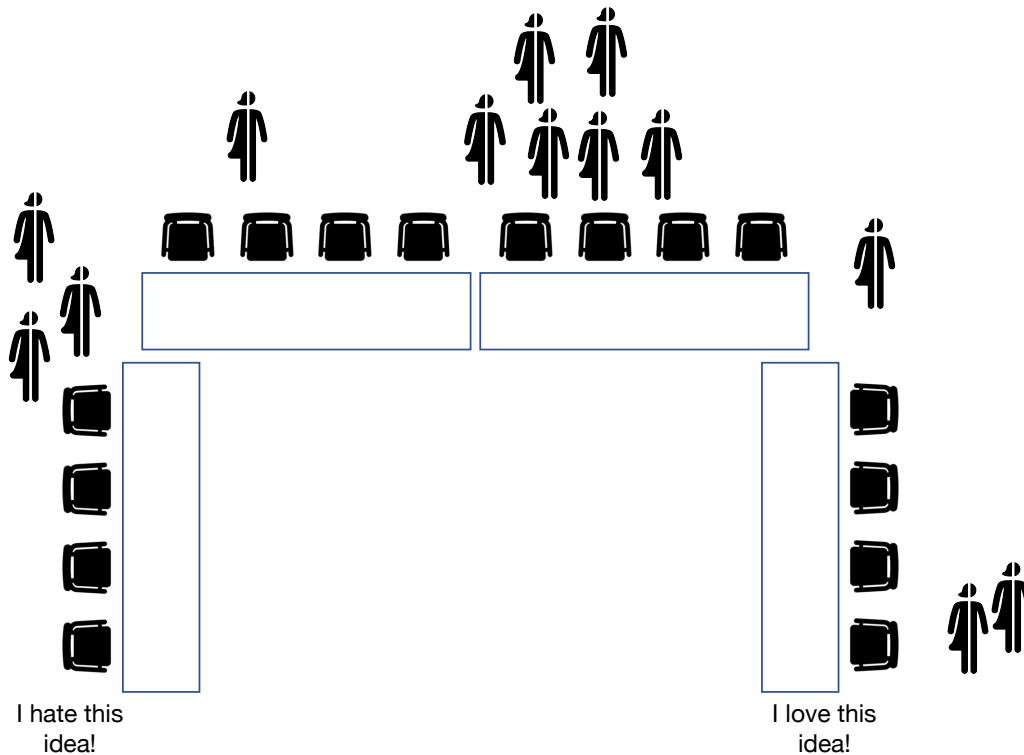
The easiest way is to lay tape in the floor in an arc, large enough that people can stand around it. Bend it enough so that people at either end can see one another. I usually go for something that's not quite 180 degrees of a circle. You'll tell people what statements are at the ends of the scale, or you can have flipcharts on easels at either end with the statements written.

You end up with people standing at different places along the arc.



If space is limited, you can also just use the typical set of tables in a horseshoe and anchor the scale at either end. It's not as good because movement is more difficult and because group members will tend to speak to you rather than to one another if you stand in the center, but it will work in a pinch.

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Here are the instructions I give.

*There are several important questions that we want to deal with today, and to begin I want to let us all see where we all stand on these issues. We're going to be polling in real time, and in a way that enables everyone to see where everyone stands, and where the group stands as well.*

*I've drawn an arc on the floor with tape. I'm going to say one position for one end of the line, and the opposite position for the other end, and then ask you to stand on the line in the place that indicates your position. Then we'll look at where the group stands, and talk. Any questions?*

*Don't move until I tell you to. Think about where you want to stand, and then I'll tell you to move. That way you won't influence one another as you find your place in the line. OK... here's the first question.*

Then I'll state the ends of the scale, twice so people get it. People usually need to be reminded to not move after sharing the question. I'll give them ten seconds or so to think about where they want to stand, and then say "Go," and people will move to their positions.

Here are some questions I used in the past when a group was considering a new project, and the language I used to anchor each end of the arc.

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<b>The issue was...</b>	<b>One extreme</b>	<b>The other</b>
How simple is this project?	When I think about pulling off the X, I don't see many serious obstacles for us. Piece of cake.	Oh my God... This is a complex and daunting project. We've got a lot of things we had to figure out.
Do I have a role in this new thing?	Separate from whether I think it's a good idea, I can absolutely see a role for myself in X.	Separate from whether I think it's a good idea, I'm not clear there is any role for me to play in X.
Is it aligned with our mission?	Separate from whether I think this is a good idea, X seems to me like it's not aligned with our mission.	Separate from whether I think this is a good idea, I think X is a bull's-eye in terms of our mission. It fits perfectly.
Is the new thing a threat to anything we already do?	You know, when X really takes off it will threaten some of the other programs that we do.	When X really takes off, it will support everything else we do.
How confident am I that I understand this new thing?	Got it. I feel completely confident that I understand what X is.	In all honesty, I still don't feel like I understand what this thing is.
Do I think we can succeed doing this?	You know I think it's a long shot that we ever really pull this off.	Oh, this is definitely going to happen.

You will note that I make the anchor descriptions extreme. I want to encourage people to use the entire arc, and, like a Likert Scale, people tend to cluster their responses at “Strongly Agree.” Using extreme language for the anchors at either end means those positions represent a near fanatical degree of agreement or disagreement, pushing people away from the ends and toward more thoughtful positions across the entire arc.

Once people have taken their places, I’ll facilitate a conversation. It’s common for people to speak to me and not one another, so I remind them to talk to the group, and I’ll sometimes sit in a chair off center to force people to focus on one another.

The conversation tends to go in two directions.



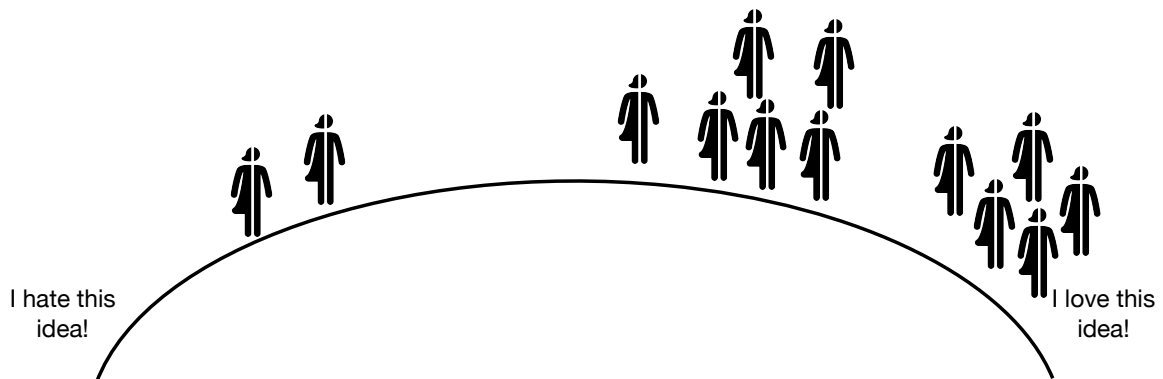
### Where Do You Stand, April 2023?

- The first is to have people talk to one another about their individual position - why they are standing where they are. Encourage people to ask questions of one another to help them understand one another's position. I add that if people find themselves persuaded during the conversation that they can move to a different place in the arc to reflect their changed opinion. People do move, but not very often.
- The second is to get people to reflect on what the data says for the entire group. I often say something like *"You're all smart people. Here's the data. What meaning do you make of it?"* This is a facilitation move that gets them out of what they think individually and encourages them to reflect on what they believe as a group or organization and the implication of that believe on what they need to do next.

### What happens?

Here are some of the common patterns I've seen doing this activity.

#### Most People in Agreement

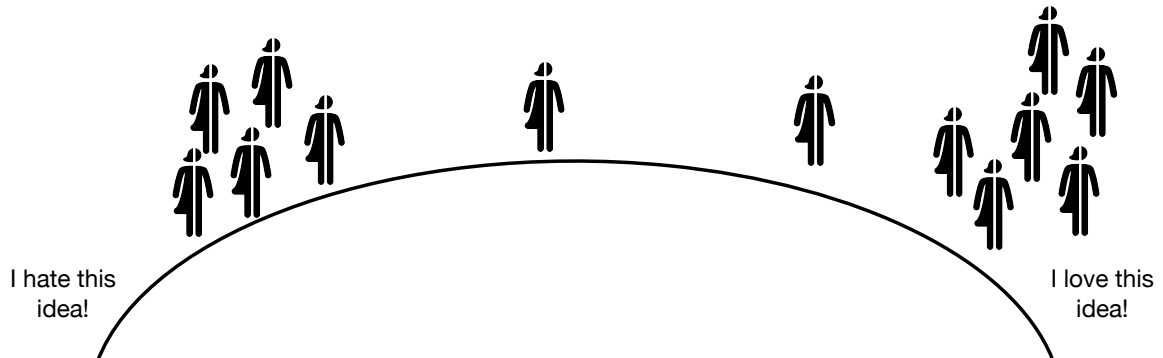


This is the most common result, with almost everyone in some agreement.

This kind of response is often a surprise to the group, who tend to over-estimate the number of dissenters. Sometimes when one or two people voice their disagreement, it's just those people, and making the data visible, as this activity does, makes everyone aware of how small the objecting minority is. When they see that their objections are truly outliers, many dissenters will simply drop them in the interest of moving forward.

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### A Bimodal Distribution



Lots of people at the ends, nobody in the middle, a classical bimodal distribution.

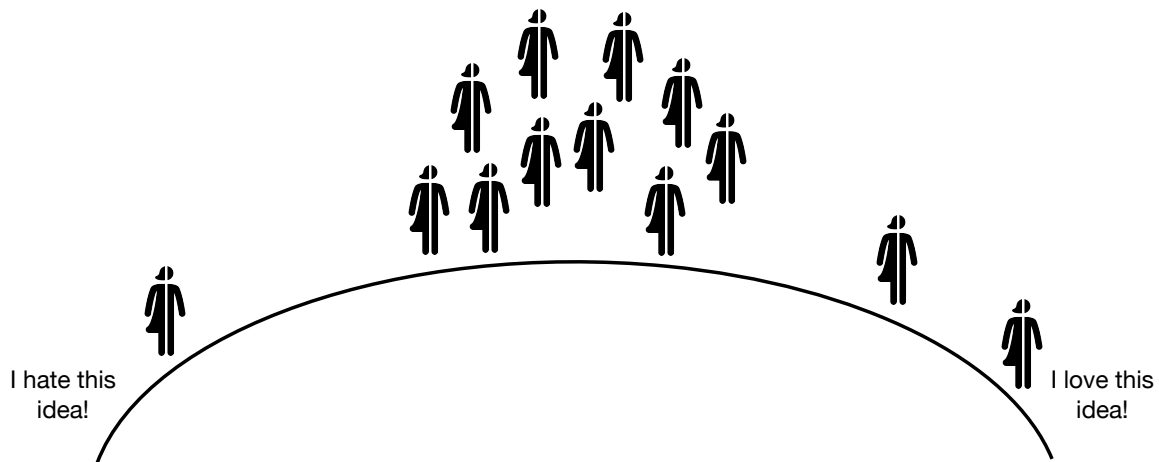
The great advantage of this type of response is that it's easy to learn from. Try to tease out the paradoxes and nuances that drive intelligent people to honestly differ about the issue.

Key here is to prevent this becoming an argument that solidifies people in their positions. Chances are they have been talking past one another for a while. The activity here reveals the reality of their division, illustrating why they have not been able to come to a decision easily, and presents an opportunity to understand the complexity of an issue that they may have wanted to believe was simple.

When I did this with the group considering new projects, their response to "Do I have a role in the new things?" produced a bimodal distribution, with the most senior people expressing confidence that they would have a role, and the rank-and-file members expressing the opposite. It led to an important conversation. The senior people slowed down and included the rank-and-file more deliberately.

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### Lots of People in the Middle



This usually means most of the group is uninformed and undecided about the issue. It's a good invitation for everyone to learn. Let the group explain the issue to itself, and after it seems clearer, ask people to choose positions based on how they understand the questions now.

#### Considerations

- I find four to six questions are usually the limit for this activity.
- I usually have more than six potential issues to explore, and I choose the next one to use based on the conversation we are having and the issues that are emerging.
- Where people stand is real data, with more granularity than a conventional Likert Scale. Capture it with a photograph or by having a scribe transcribe where people stand onto paper.
- I always develop the language for the anchors in collaboration with my contact in the group. If people ask questions about the language during the exercise, try to understand if they simply don't like the extremeness of the anchors, or if the anchors are wrong.

If the former, explain the thinking above. If it's the latter, you'll need to make new language on the fly.

Ask the group for help in designing the new language. Don't rush it. You need to understand the issue before you can make the right language, and while the group explains it to you, they also explain it to one another.

#### Why it works

Someday I'll write more about my idea of Perfect Feedback, but in a nutshell...

*Perfect Feedback happens when the entire system sees the performance of the entire system in real time, all the time.*

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It rarely occurs, but systems can move closer to perfect feedback in many ways.

To move closer to this...	... do this
The entire system sees...	Increase the number of people who see performance data
.. the performance of the entire system...	Increase the visibility of more parts of the system
... in real time...	See the data closer to the activity being assessed
... all the time.	Do it more often

So what?

Well, an interesting thing happens. The closer a system gets to perfect feedback, the more the system self-regulates, often without trying or making formal plans. If people have enough freedom to act, they just begin to do things that serve the health of the system, informed by better feedback.

I once worked with the General Electric factory manufacturing GE's LightSpeed CT scanners. The factory designed, engineered, and manufactured the most advanced scanners in the world, really fast.

Twice a day all the managers would gather in front of a set of whiteboards in the middle of the factory floor, positioned so that everyone had to walk by them all day. The boards were marked into a grid so that the managers could track the progress every scanner the factory was working on. Twice a day they would make formal adjustments to the grid, and thus to their manufacturing process.

I sat once, watching people walk by the boards, look them over, checking on how the entire system was doing. I have no doubt that they went back to their tasks better informed about the entire system, and that having that knowledge made them more productive.

The GE white boards are remarkable example of approaching perfect feedback. Everything was visible, everyone could see it regardless of their organizational role, it changed a few times a day, every day. I'm convinced that it's a big reason why this factory was so accomplished, meeting more aggressive deadlines for more complex products every year.

The "Where do We Stand" activity is based on the same theoretical principle as the white board: make the system visible to itself in a way that everyone can understand, and the system will naturally self-regulate to accomplish its goals.