

A guide to participatory government in business (v.1.0)

- for all businesses that focus on collective intelligence, democracy and social responsibility
- for anyone who wishes to understand them



Produced and published by the working group on participation in business, composed of:



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Introduction

A tool to assist thinking

This guide to participatory government is a tool to assist thinking. It doesn't provide any organisational standard or ready-to-use tools. It is logically constructed, designed to inspire and structure your thinking, and appeals to your judgement, creativity and capacity for innovation.

What's in the guide

The first chapter is devoted to the participatory approach. The second chapter presents a table of key elements and requirements. These first two chapters make up the guide.

In the final chapter, you will learn about the method used by the working group that produced this tool.

Vocabulary

We've chosen to use the term 'government' because it combines the concepts of 'management' and 'governance'.

By 'participation' we mean workers' participation in the government of their business.

Supporting video

A short video (in French) covering the three main themes of the guide to participatory government has been produced by the Union des SCOP Wallonie-Bruxelles. It is available on this link:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnNEndrKcUY>

The working group on participation in business

The working group was set up in connection with the European project 'RE:D.i.a.l.o.g.u.e.s'. Launched in February 2013 by Groupe Terre and joined by partners and experts from various European countries, this project aimed to find suitable solutions for industrial relations (social dialogue) that would enable social enterprises to grow harmoniously and offer quality employment.

A list of recommendations was presented to the European Commission, to officials and members of European workers' political and advocacy organisations, and to the participants of the European Economic and Social Committee, at a closing conference held in the European Parliament in Brussels in February 2014.

In order to study the realities of social dialogue, each partner formed a working group consisting of participatory businesses, which provided information and recommendations at national and European levels. In the case of Belgium, the working group continued to meet after the end of the 'RE:D.i.a.l.o.g.u.e.s' project. The group consists of Walloon and Brussels businesses that practise participatory government (Les Grignoux, Damnet, Scopiton, La Poudrière, Diès, Carodec, RIEPP, Groupe Terre) as well as federations and a university that promote, study and support it (Solidarité des Alternatives Wallonnes et Bruxelloises, the Centre d'Économie Sociale at the University of Liège and the Fédération des Maisons Médicales). This guide results from the discussions of our working group.

The Union des Sociétés à gestion Coopérative et Participative Wallonie-Bruxelles also joined our working group after it had started, and has been responsible for overseeing this guide.

1. The participatory approach



1.1. Business and participation

By comparing our different situations and our respective practices, we have identified several factors that influence the way our businesses are governed: their size, resources, types of activities, the number of workers, the workers' profiles, the number and type of positions, the types of employment contracts, their organisational models, types of management, cultural, social, political and economic environment, current and future challenges, goals and the stage they have reached in their life cycle (launch, growth, cruising speed, crisis or decline).

The diversity of our businesses has shown us that participation adapts to these different factors and changes in them. Moreover, participation does not merely adapt: it actually influences how some of these factors are perceived or chosen, analysed, judged and handled.

Above all, therefore, participation a particular way of thinking, discussing and organising: it is based on a distinctive approach that leads to it taking many and varied forms. We have therefore sought to understand the basis of this approach and the common elements on which it is based.

1.2. The civic-minded, solidarity-based business

To identify the basis of our participatory approach, we asked ourselves the question ‘Why do we practise participation in business?’. The answer is that we do so in order to create an alternative to an economic system that leads to the exclusion, impoverishment and exploitation of part of the population and misuses the planet’s resources. We want to make businesses places of learning where civic engagement and solidarity are practised by and for all workers.

1.3. Collective intelligence, democracy and social responsibility

To make our businesses civic-minded and solidarity-based, we opt for collective intelligence, democracy and social responsibility. This is our answer to the question ‘How do we practise participation in business?’.

Collective intelligence goes hand in hand with democracy. Together, they are required to ensure that the general interest is upheld and pursued, thanks to a system of defining and making decisions that takes account of the views of as many workers as possible. In particular, this means ensuring that all workers have both the right and the ability to access forums for information provision, discussion and decision-making. It also means that where delegation takes place, it must be defined in detail, monitored and evaluated.

Social responsibility is required to ensure that societal or community needs are responded to, and that consideration is shown for people and for future generations. In particular, this means identifying the social project to which our businesses are contributing.

Here is a diagram explaining how these three themes fit together:



1.4. A fundamental principle

The principle from which we start is that all workers have the ability to govern their business, and that practice and training build the skills and ability needed to do so. This belief is essential if we are to consider the business as a place of civic engagement and solidarity by and for all workers.

We have noticed that the sharing of workers' skills and abilities, due to their diversity and complementarity:

- makes the pursuit of social objectives possible;
- enhances the quality of governance and management (i.e. government);
- promotes the emergence of ideas.

1.5. Participatory government in business

Based on the approach set out above, we define participatory government in business as a mode of corporate government that organises the direct input of workers in choices concerning the projects pursued by the business, its direction and its life, and in choices concerning the business's relationship with its environment and society.

This mode of government is based on information-sharing, dialogue, direct participation in decisions and the monitoring of their implementation.

It aims to set up, ensure the viability of and develop an economy based on joint decision-making responsibility, appropriation by the workers of their work tools, serving the members, and consideration for people and for future generations.

2. Table of key elements and requirements



To implement collective intelligence, democracy and social responsibility (the three themes) in our businesses, certain key elements must be ensured and various requirements must be met. These key elements and requirements are set out and explained for each of the three themes in the table that you will find attached to this booklet.

2.1. How the table is arranged

Each theme includes several key elements [🔗], and each of these elements is itself broken down into four types of requirement [🌐]: clarification [▶], formalisation [▶], operational [▶], facilitation/training [▶]. To identify the requirements for facilitation/training, we have identified the skills and attitudes required by each worker in order to participate [👤].

This produces the following table:

	 Key elements	 Requirements				
		▶	▶	▶	👤	▶
Social responsibility 	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-

Collective intelligence & democracy  	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-

	-	-	-	-	-	-

2.2. Working out the details

Each type of requirement consists of a question:

- [▶] Clarification requirements: what are we talking about?
- [▶] Formalisation requirements: what have we put in our reference texts?
- [▶] Operational requirements: how do we use the forums and tools?
- [👤] Required skills and attitudes: what should each worker be capable of?
- [▶] Facilitation/training requirements: how do we promote the development by all workers of the skills and attitudes required for participation?

2.3. How to use the table

a) Potential

You can use this table to:

- understand the rationale behind participatory government in business in general and each action in particular;
- gain an overall idea of the extent to which your company is implementing collective intelligence, democracy and social responsibility;
- identify priorities for improving your participatory government.

b) Preliminary points

Before looking at the key elements and requirements, we encourage you to ask the question, 'Do we agree with the principle that all workers have the ability to govern their business, and that practice and training build the skills and ability needed to do so?' If your answer to this question is negative, we believe it is impossible to envisage fully participatory government, given that this mode of government consists above all in putting in place and ensuring the requirements are met that allow all workers to get involved.

To complete the guide, you need a good knowledge of the factors that affect how your business is governed. We suggest that you create an 'identity card' for your business, using the factors set out in the chapter on the participatory approach on page 6.

c) How to read the table

The order in which the themes appear in the table is not fixed. They can be addressed in whatever order suits you best.

The table can be read horizontally (according to rationale) or vertically (according to category). The point is to understand and recall the reason behind your participatory practice, regardless of how you do so.

Some boxes have been left empty, as we couldn't find anything to put in them. You can fill them in with anything that seems relevant, or simply move on to the next box.

d) An external party

Getting someone from outside the business to support you in your use of the guide may be a useful way of aiding discussion, helping you to approach certain 'taboo topics', helping you to ask questions, or gaining advice on adopting a methodology that suits you and helps you answer the following questions:

- Who should answer the questions in the guide?
- How do we arrange our ideas in the table?
- How do we share the results?
- How do we identify our priorities for action?

This external party can also inspire you by providing concrete examples of practices set up in other businesses.

Whether you choose to use an external party or not, we recommend using the guide in an approach based on collective intelligence and democracy. In response to the key elements and requirements listed in the guide, it is not unusual for our businesses to acquire their own distinctive structure, tools and procedures, which in some cases have been specially developed to suit their requirements in a very creative manner.

Given the diversity of situations encountered by each business, we believe that it makes sense for you to choose your own methodology, answers, action plan and tools. This is the best way to respond to your own particular situation and ensure the appropriation and legitimacy of the work done and any solutions to be implemented.

e) Reactions

To aid your thinking on this subject, here are some reactions we received during the presentation of the guide:

‘Participatory government isn’t anarchy. Clear and precise forums for debate, decision-making, evaluation, consultation, training and giving information must be provided. Individuals and teams need to check that the decisions that have been made are actually being implemented.’

‘Although some people have more charisma than others, we have to make sure that people who find it easy to organise their thinking and express themselves don’t monopolise the conversation and take control. Modes of discussion and tools for expression can be varied. Some people are more visual and others prefer writing. There are even people who don’t understand French. They too must be able to state their opinion.’

‘Experts are useful to the business, but they have to agree that all workers should be able to understand their work and the rationale behind it, and maybe even call them into question. One way to do this is to give them guidelines to follow and ask them to explain their thought processes.’

‘Not everything can be discussed in large groups: some issues need to be addressed individually in order to respect people.’

‘If the manager runs the meetings, he or she show humility, be ready to explain things and respect the decisions made by everyone. The manager has to change hats and lay aside his or her role of being in charge.’

‘It’s better to have a half-solution that everyone understands than a complete solution understood by just one person.’

'When someone doesn't understand something, it's not always because he or she is stupid: it may be because it's been poorly explained.'

'Accepting a decision made by the majority may be annoying at times, but that's how democracy works. We must all stand behind the decision, and instead of saying "I told you so," keep on explaining the risks and suggesting improvements.'

'Using the table takes time, energy and maturity. It's not always easy and it takes a lot of courage. I wonder where we'll start.'

'We won't be able to use the guide right away, but it feels good to get a new perspective and remember why we are trying to be participatory.'

'It's good as a tool for talking to other businesses that are doing the same thing as us and seeing what they have put in place.'

'There are some people who agree to be participatory, up to the point where a decision is made that they don't agree with.'

'Asking someone's opinion about something other than their job isn't easy. They'll expect something to be done in response to their opinion, like when you ask a child what they want for Christmas. In addition, they may also need to say what they think about their colleagues and manager. This isn't always easy.'

'We're in a workers' cooperative. When all the workers own a stake, they're more likely to get involved in the life and management of the business.'

‘Participation and democracy, even outside the business, isn’t common. In my entire life, when I think of my family, school, sports club, and youth movements, I haven’t often had the opportunity to participate in decisions. The times that I have can be counted on the fingers of one hand. I’m not used to it, and it takes time.’

‘We were told that we shouldn’t have more than one hundred workers if we wanted to remain participatory, but we found solutions to stay participatory, although some people think it was better before.’

‘We made going around the table compulsory in our sector meetings. When someone has nothing to say, they have to say so, and this in itself is a first step towards participation.’

‘It’s at the critical moments that you can see if a business is really participatory.’

‘A “liberated company” isn’t always participatory and a hierarchical business can be participatory.’

Please feel free to add to this list by writing down your own thoughts below:

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3. The working group's methodology



The working group created the guide in several stages. The process began in 2013 and took almost four years.

3.1. Inventory of participatory practices

The participants met in pairs. They gave each other questionnaires and drew up an inventory of their respective participatory practices. The questionnaires were then pooled and provided useful material for organising thematic meetings.

3.2. Thematic meetings

Every meeting of the working group was prepared by two participants. Through the discussion that took place, they came up with a concrete proposal based on the identification of common practices and aims and the identification and addressing of 'contentious issues'.

Four themes were discussed: personnel management and governance, participation training; ownership and money, economic development and growth.

3.3. The creation of the table of key elements and requirements

The discussions were compiled, synthesised and analysed. This led to the creation of a systematic table based on the three themes of collective intelligence, democracy and social responsibility. This table, which handles each theme in terms of key elements and requirements, was then amended and approved by the working group.

3.4. The definition of participatory government

The working group finalised and approved the definition of participatory government in business given on page 9.

3.5. Circulation

Once it had been drawn up, the guide (including the definition of participatory government and the table of key elements and requirements) was presented to and tested by businesses. In response to the demand from other businesses and the interest it aroused, it was refined and placed under a creative commons licence, and is now being more widely circulated.

Conclusion

The participatory approach is fundamental to our businesses. In a manner that complies with the regulatory framework, it underpins the organisation and functioning of our governance and management bodies. The challenge, as with any business, is to have sound governance coupled with effective management. But participation also has an impact on the choices we make. In order to meet our economic imperatives, we rely on our workers' sense of solidarity and civic engagement.

It is from this perspective that the guide for participatory government in business has been written. We are aware that participatory government is far from easy and always presents challenges. It requires a change of mindset from the normal approach in most businesses. This is precisely what makes it an essential tool for introducing an entrepreneurial alternative that leaves space for social responsibility, collective intelligence and democracy in business.

We invite you to try out or continue with participatory government, and we wish you the necessary creativity and perseverance.

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We encourage the circulation of this guide, but doing so for commercial purposes is prohibited.

In the interest of continuous improvement, we invite you to let us know your experiences in using this guide. This information will remain confidential and will not be communicated to third parties without a request for authorisation to do so.

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