

Sociocracy – “Effective, Efficient, and Fun”

Sociocracy, which means “governance by peers or colleagues,” is an increasingly popular governance and decision-making method based on the principles of transparency, equivalency, and effectiveness. I recommend it because when a community uses Sociocracy correctly, its governance and decision-making tends to become far more effective than when using consensus or any of its modifications.

“A visitor said she’d never seen a community meeting be so effective, efficient, and fun!” —Hope Horton, *Hart’s Mill Ecovillage, US*

“In our first six months of using Sociocracy, we have more effective management and better follow-up to our decisions, which no longer fall into a ‘black hole of exhaustion.’ We have a clearer sense of responsibility about who does what, and so information flows better, which creates greater transparency for members. We have a stronger cohesion — our meetings are faster and lighter and have a rhythm that feels satisfying. And at the end of our last meeting, we started dancing for joy.” —Anamaria Aristizabal, *cofounder, Aldeafeliz Ecovillage, Colombia*

Sociocracy is not a modification of consensus. It was designed in the 1970s by Gerard Endenburg, a Dutch electrical engineer, inventor, and cybernetics expert so that his company, Endenburg Elektrotechniek, could function more harmoniously. It is sometimes called “Dynamic Governance” in the U.S.

This brief description is only an overview to give a sense of Sociocracy. To learn it well enough to use it, I recommend a two- or three-day workshop with follow-up consultations, in person or online.

Sociocracy has many parts, but in my opinion, the following seven parts are needed to work together synergistically to provide checks and balances against potential abuses of power. They are four meeting processes — proposal-forming, consent decision-making, selecting people for roles/elections, and role-improvement feedback — as well as a governance structure of “double-linked” circles, clear aims or objectives for each circle, and “plan/implement/evaluate” feedback loops built into every proposal.

Here are some brief descriptions.

Double-linked circles. The governance structure consists of semi-autonomous, self-organized circles (like committees), that help the community do its work tasks, both administrative and in terms of physical labor. Each circle provides a specific, concrete function for the community re its ongoing work tasks; for example, a Membership Circle, Finance Circle, Land Use Circle, and so on. Most circles are relatively small, with perhaps four to eight members.

The General Circle creates the functional circles — determining the area of responsibility, objectives, and budgets for each — and coordinates the work each functional circle. The General Circle also provides longer-term planning for the whole community, very much like whole-community business meetings. However, General Circles usually have fewer members, perhaps eight to ten people. The community will probably also hold whole-community meetings several times a year.

“Double links” are two people who are members of two different circles and convey information between them.

This “double-linking” ensures a direct, two-way flow of information between the General Circle and

each functional circle, and helps all the various work areas of the community function smoothly and synergistically in relation with one another and not work at cross-purposes.

Each functional can create more focused and specific functional circles if needed. For example, a Promotions Circle could create separate Website and Newsletter circles to accomplish these more specific promotions tasks. Again, there are double-links between these circles. These smaller, more specific functional circles may have just a few members, and sometimes, only one person.

Each circle uses consent decision-making and the other three meeting processes noted above.

Clear, specific objectives for each circle. Objectives are what the circle produces or provides for the community. A Finance Circle, for example, could provide the services of paying the community's taxes and other annual fees like utility bills, insurance premiums, and so on, and invoicing and collecting dues and fees from members. A Promotions Circle could inform and inspire potential visitors, neighbors, and the general public about the community's mission and activities through its website, blog, online newsletter, brochures, tours for visitors, and so on.

Specific objectives are important because when circle members make proposals, consent and object to proposals, and resolve objections to proposals it's usually based on how the proposal may or may not support their circle's objectives.

Plan/implement/evaluate feedback loops. Engineers and inventors use feedback loops to create and test their ideas. First is a design or plan. Then a prototype is made to try out the design — the implementation. The prototype is measured and evaluated to learn how it works in real-life circumstances — the evaluation.

Feedback loops are built into Sociocracy too, because the wording of every proposal includes criteria for how it will be measured and evaluated for effectiveness after it is implemented, and dates of upcoming meetings when these evaluations will occur. Criteria for measuring proposals can include "how much" and "how many" questions, while criteria for evaluation are more subjective, and might include questions such "Do we like it?" "Is it working well?" "What do community members say about it?" and so on.

After each evaluation circle members can keep the implemented proposal as it is or change it as needed or even dismantle it (if possible). So when circle members are creating or considering a proposal, they know that, depending on the proposal, they may later be able to keep it, change it, or throw it out. Thus no proposal or decision has to be perfect, but only "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try." This flexibility reduces the fear of making a mistake or not creating an "ideal" proposal. This takes the pressure off people to "get it right," so meetings are often much more relaxed than when using consensus (since it is so difficult to change a decision once it's been agreed on, and as Tim Hartnett points out, there is disproportionate power to those who support the status quo.

Consent decision-making. This meeting process includes going round the circle to each person, called a "round," with a round for consenting to or objecting to the proposal. This is followed by resolving objections by modifying the proposal then conducting another consent round and alternating these steps until there are no more objections — which means the circle has consented to the latest modification of the proposal.

As noted above, the checks and balances of these seven parts prevent power abuses in decision-making. When consent decision-making is practiced correctly, no one can stop the circle from approving a proposal because it violates their own personal values or lifestyle choices. Objections to proposals are desirable and indicate a need to modify the proposal before continuing. There is no blocking, and certainly no “personal blocking,” “threatening to block,” or frivolous blocks.

Each of the other three meeting processes are based on consent decision-making.

Proposal-forming. Circle members draft a proposal about an issue that relates to the circle’s area of responsibility and specific objectives.

Selecting people for roles (elections). Circle members choose people for roles in the circle based on the specific tasks and requirements for the role.

Role-improvement feedback. Circle members give feedback to other circle members relative to the specific tasks and requirements of the role.

As noted above, Sociocracy is based on the values of *equivalence, transparency, and effectiveness.*

Equivalence — circle members have an equivalent voice in decisions in their circle. *Transparency* — all policy decisions are known to everyone through the linked-circles structure as well as from minutes of meetings. *Effectiveness* — when practiced properly, Sociocracy tends to take less time and help people accomplish their goals more easily than the group may have done before.

“We’ve made more decisions in the past two months than we have in the past two years!” —*Davis Hawkowl, Pioneer Valley Cohousing in the US, after it began using Sociocracy*

I have learned in teaching Sociocracy to intentional communities worldwide, that those that adopt it, like Aldeafeliz in Colombia and Hart’s Mill in the US, tend to experience more equivalence, transparency and effectiveness than when they used consensus, but only when everyone learns Sociocracy, ~~how to~~ they use it correctly, and they use all or mostly all of its seven parts. Sociocracy tends *not* to work when people only partially understand it, or some understand it but others do not, or they use just a few parts, or group interprets aspects of Sociocracy through a lens of consensus and creates an awkward hybrid that doesn’t solve the problems of consensus-with-unanimity and creates new ones.