Sociocracy and Consent

by Donna Freiermuth

One of the toughest challenges communities face is how they reach decisions. Although consensus is the ideal for many cohousing projects, let's flirt with the idea that there is an alternative decision-making process. "I was ready to listen," says Sharon Villines of Takoma Village Cohousing (http://www.cohousing.orghttp://www.takomavillage.org/) (Washington, DC) when she was told "sociocracy is a way to govern ourselves that respects the equal value of all persons as individuals and that produces more effective, responsive, transparent and productive organizations."

Sociocracy, also called dynamic self-governance, suggests an organizational structure as well as a decision-making process called consent. This article will focus on sociocracy's decision-making tool.

Curiously, while cohousing was emerging in Denmark over 30 years ago, an effort was underway in the Netherlands to come up with a better way to make good decisions. Sociocracy is the result of work by Dutch engineer Gerald Endenberg. It is now in use by hundreds of companies in The Netherlands, Brazil, Switzerland, Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere.

Residents of Champlain Valley Cohousing, which uses consent, at a social gathering on the site of what has since become their common house.

The nuts and bolts of consent

Sociocracy holds that within a group that shares a common aim every single person must be included in decisions. In its consent decision-making, a proposal is adopted only when no one has a reasoned and paramount objection to it. This sounds like a form of consensus, but distinctions exist.

One of the defining principles behind consent is the idea of "doing more with less." Rather than spend lots of time crafting a proposal that anticipates every imaginable possibility, consent strives to come up with the fastest and most effective way to achieve a group's aims. This means:

- decisions are made based on everyone's range of tolerance rather than their preferences
- the decision reached is then implemented
- implementation is followed by measuring how well it is working
- the solution is refined as needed based on what is really happening rather than what might have been imagined beforehand.

Two other conditions make it easier to achieve consent. Every decision is given a term – a length of time it will be tried and, if it doesn't work as expected, reassessed. During that trial period, the second condition comes into play: the group measures how effectively the strategy is working.

According to cybernetics – the science of steering and control – the idea of navigating and correcting one's course as you move toward your goal produces the highest quality outcome in the shortest time. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about a group trying to find a good solution or a satellite launched into space: repeated corrections are the recommended strategy.

Seeking the best course of action

It is easier to go along with a proposal under consent because nothing is cast in stone. The group is working toward the best course, so if there are problems, refinements can come into play later. If need be, the course can even be changed dramatically. Consent is an invitation to everyone in the group to become more creative. Any problem is a puzzle laid on the table that everyone can help solve.
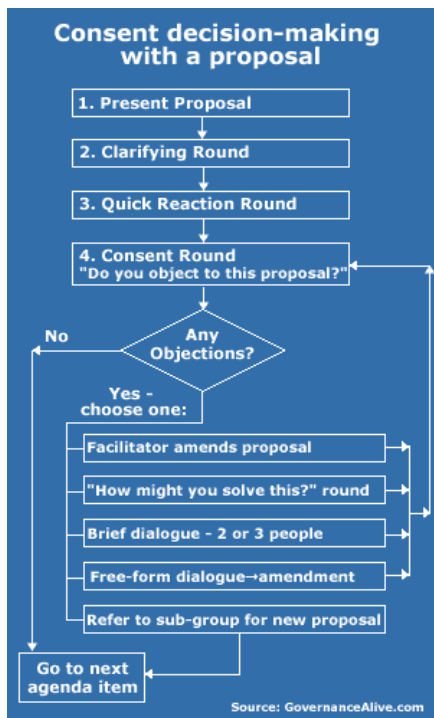
In practice, sociocracy has a format for the overall meeting and other situations including how to handle a proposal (see sidebar). Let's assume that a proposal has been brought to the meeting. Step one is its presentation. The next step is the "clarifying round" in which everyone at the meeting, in turn, has a chance to ask questions so they fully understand the proposal. No objections, no reactions, no cross-talk or interruptions, just clarification at this point. In the third step, the "quick reaction round," everyone in turn goes around again and voices any problems or concerns they have with the proposal.

Step four is the consent round. If problems were raised in step three, the facilitator would work with the note taker or the group as a whole to tweak the proposal so those objections are overcome and everyone can live with the proposal – at least to give it a try. If that tweaking isn't enough and someone still has reasoned and paramount objections to the amended proposal, the adaptation continues until everyone can live with the amended proposal.

The process sounds time-consuming but once a group is familiar with the steps, it proceeds quickly. And meetings aren't dominated by one or two outspoken members. Instead, everyone has a voice. Consensus supporters would say that a good facilitator makes sure quiet members speak up and the outspoken are less vocal. Consent seems to make that balance an integral part of the process.

Doing more with less

Consent decision-making with a proposal

1. Present Proposal
2. Clarifying Round
3. Quick Reaction Round
4. Consent Round "Do you object to this proposal?"

Any Objections? — No →
Yes - choose one:
- Facilitator amends proposal
- "How might you solve this?" round
- Brief dialogue - 2 or 3 people
- Free-form dialogue→amendment
- Refer to sub-group for new proposal

Go to next agenda item

Source: GovernanceAlive.com

"The basic approach is to make a quick decision based on the available information at hand, then try it out and see if it works," John Buck explains.

John has been the driving force behind sociocracy in the U.S., giving workshops and phone conferences across the country to cohousing communities, Nonviolent Communication groups, churches and corporations. After careers in aviation and the federal bureaucracy, John happened to learn about Sociocracy on a trip to The Netherlands. Since then, he earned a master's degree in quantitative sociology and learned Dutch so he could translate Endenberg's work on sociocracy. He and Sharon Villines are now writing a book together on sociocracy to be published next spring. Sharon has spent the last 10 years promoting cohousing through her websites and publications and is a generous resource on the cohousing list-serve.

One of the companies using Sociocracy is Philadephia's Ternary Software, which has been recognized for its innovative business practices and voted one of the Best Places to Work in the Philadelphia area.

Ternary's president and CEO Brian Robertson emphasizes the advantage he sees with consent. "Consent is about the decision or argument itself and what's best for the whole, while recognizing that the best way to get the best decision is to listen to the perspectives brought by every individual involved."

Sharon explains, "In sociocracy, you make the best decision you can make at the moment, then move forward and then revisiting the decision later, usually in less than two years. You also review a decision when there's a reason to review it. If you made a decision when you had only two cats and all of a sudden you have 20 cats, you revisit it because the conditions have changed."

Other critical elements

There is much more to be said about consent. Sharing a common aim is critical, as is good facilitation. Sociocracy also offers up concise, step-by-step approaches for the nominating process and for dealing with a situation when there is no proposal before the group.

Sharon points out that it's always important to use the decision-making tool that best serves your purpose. "You can use sociocracy and still reserve some decisions to be resolved by consensus or by majority vote. The decision about what time to hold the common dinner – what time most people can make it – is better decided by majority rule. But everyone would have decided by consent to use majority rule for that decision."

Some intentional communities in the US are now using sociocracy: Champlain Valley Cohousing (http://www.cohousing.orghttp://www.champlainvalleycohousing.org/) (Charlotte, Vermont) and Ecovillage of Loudoun County (http://www.cohousing.orghttp://www.ecovillages.com/) , Virginia. Sociocracy is also being practiced by other organizations such as the US Green Building Council (http://www.cohousing.orghttp://www.usgbc.org/) and the Center for Nonviolent Communication (http://www.cohousing.orghttp://www.cnvc.org/) .

Interest is growing. A group in India recently contacted John to explore whether sociocracy makes sense for them. The group organizes neighborhoods into groups of 30 families each. Some 100,000 people are involved.

Donna Freiermuth is the editor of Cohousing magazine and a founding member of a forming group in Ventura, CA.

Related pages: Group Process (http://www.cohousing.org/taxonomy/term/29) , Sociocracy (http://www.cohousing.org/taxonomy/term/182)

Print this page (http://www.cohousing.orgjavascript:window.print())