

A Model for Group Collaboration Making Decisions by Consent, not Consensus

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When Kristina Foehrkolb joined the MACRO office recently as the new receptionist, she puzzled about the unusual way the office made its policy decisions, such as the aim and priorities for the coming year's initiatives.

She was told the office had started using the method last year and that it was imported from The Netherlands. She noted that when the office has a policy roundtable, different members of the office, including Rachel, take turns leading the meeting. They follow a specific process to present and consider each policy proposal. When a proposal seems settled, the meeting leader holds a "consent round," asking each person in turn whether they have any paramount objection to the proposal and, if so, why. If there is an objection, the roundtable leader has the participants focus on it, then modifies the proposal, and tries another consent round.

Rachel explained to Kristina that the office was now governing itself "*sociocratically*" – as opposed to *democratically* or *autocratically*. She said, "We interact with each other every day; we have our own office society, in Latin a "socios." "Demos" refers to the mass of people who mostly don't know each other socially, and "auto" refers to one person – the boss. Day-to-day, having a boss make the final decisions is useful and efficient, but if that's the only decision-making structure you use, conflicts can smolder, people get ignored, and it's hard for the office to work in harmony. Roundtables surface any conflicts so that we can deal with them, and we work more organically and creatively. It's a deeper process than traditional participative management."

"But," Kristina asked, "doesn't that mean that you give up some of your power?"

"Not at all," Rachel replied. "We don't make policies that I can't consent to, and what's more powerful than working with people who are willingly aligned with you?"

Kristina decided to get more training and attended a recent workshop I gave at Ellicott City on the Sociocratic circle model of organization. She relayed the essence of the above story to me as she explained why she wanted to learn more.

I became fascinated with the sociocratic model when I encountered it several years ago on a business trip to Amsterdam. I had noticed that many present day organizations have employees who are not enfranchised in their organizations' daily governance. I had been wondering how to create an effective business organization of enfranchised "citizens," people who have a meaningful voice in governing their workplace. Sociocracy solves this problem and seems to me to be a timely addition to American business since basic equality is at the core of our country's values. It extends that value to our working lives.

In addition to the basic strategies for decision-making summarized above, businesses and organizations that run sociocratically use many dynamic concepts and forms. They set up project aims and feedback mechanisms, as well as organizational circles overlaid on the traditional hierarchical structure. However, MACRO and other organizations report success in just using the consent principle when choosing chairpersons or when making important decisions. The consent principle has some subtle but important differences from the use of consensus, including the concepts of one's

“range of tolerance” and “reasoned objections.” Those differences make sociocratic processes practical in a business context.

I have found that people who understand conflict resolution techniques are particularly skillful in using the model since the sociocratic format seems to uncover any organizational conflicts that may be hampering the overall work. Once “on the table,” conflicts can be dealt with, and then the decision-making can continue. Thus, the model helps bring modern conflict resolution methods into the basic organizational governance process.

I presented the model to MACRO about a year ago, and I’ve been happy that they’re finding it useful. Sociocracy is being used in Holland, some other European countries, and Brazil by a variety of businesses and organizations, from schools to building and manufacturing firms, to oil companies, to police, and even a Buddhist monastery. So far, it has been introduced in the United States to planned communities, non-profit organizations, and a few commercial firms. MACRO will be presenting a pre-conference seminar on the model at the Association for Conflict Resolution’s annual conference in the fall.