Dynamic Leadership: Getting Around Blind Spots

by Sheella Mierson, Ph.D.

What if you could use a decision-making process to make your organization smarter than any one leader or even a small leadership team?

Businesses and nonprofit organizations ask leaders to encourage honest feedback – to make good decisions, measure the impact of those decisions, and learn. The feedback leaders need could be from people at any level of the organizational hierarchy. But the organizational culture might inadvertently discourage people from speaking up. Even if the culture encourages them, the people who have needed information and ideas could be hesitant to speak up if they were penalized for doing so in the past. And if they do speak up, the leader might have a blind spot – we all have them, after all – and can ignore the feedback. Yet leaders are held responsible for the outcomes of their decisions, even with only partial information on which to base those decisions. What if your organization used a governance structure that both encouraged feedback and ensured that it actually is heard?

Enter sociocracy (sometimes called "dynamic governance" in the USA), a new way to run organizations. This method hard wires feedback loops in a way that no one's feedback can be ignored. It does this in two ways:

- Periodically every group of people who work together holds a "circle" meeting to set policies that govern their work. In those circle meetings, the operational hierarchy is temporarily dissolved so that all voices are equivalent. This equivalence is enforced by (a) carefully-crafted meeting formats to bring out the wisdom of the group, (b) consent decision-making, and (c) training for a member of the group who serves as facilitator.
- Each circle has two members who are also full members of the next higher circle. One of these people is the operational leader, taking direction from the next level up – CEO, executive director, vice president, division or department manager, supervisor, committee head, etc. The other is elected by the circle members using the consent process, to represent them in the next higher circle. It can be difficult for one person to accurately convey information in both directions; hence the "double-linking." The result is that information, policies, and feedback flow top-down *and* bottom-up, and information gets to where it is needed in the organization.

And that leader's blind spot? It becomes less limiting, since the meeting formats and consent decision-making ensure that no one's voice can be ignored, and ideas can come from any source. That assumes that people actually speak up. In a long term care facility, the executive director (ED), who introduced sociocracy when she first took on the position, found out only later that her predecessor had been abusive to the employees. At the first few circle meetings, none of the employees contributed agenda items and they barely opened their mouths. Finally one of the women brought a thread-bare towel to a meeting. She showed the towel and said, "This is disgraceful, we need new linens and towels," and sat down. The ED, who had been waiting for just such a moment, said, "Oh my goodness, you are right. We'll get new ones. Thank you so much." The whole room collectively let out its breath. Because of their experience with the previous ED, they expected the woman who spoke to be fired on the spot. From then on employees gradually began speaking up in meetings and taking more initiative outside of meetings.

Here is the phenomenon in different words and from a different sector: *"When I was an enlisted man in the Navy, I wondered why the officers didn't listen to our good ideas. When I became an officer, I*

wondered why I could never get the enlisted men to tell me what they were thinking. I tell you from experience that sociocracy solves this problem from both ends." (Richard Heitfield, President, Creative Urethanes, Winchester, Virginia, using sociocracy since late 1980s)

If you'd like to introduce just one technique to get the best wisdom of a group, at any level from the board down, try using a *round* in your next meeting. Ask a question to generate ideas about a challenging topic, or to get quick reactions to a proposal. Each person in the meeting gives input in turn (with the option to pass), avoiding cross-talk and criticism of others' ideas. People who are usually quiet in meetings may contribute ideas you would have missed otherwise. And people seem to think more creatively when they know everyone will have a turn without interruption. Using a round enlivens a meeting by bringing discipline to it.

Here's another idea. You know those policies that don't really work, yet the organization keeps following them? The next time you consider a proposal for a new or modified policy, view it as an experiment. Decide on the time frame and how you will know whether it is working – determine measurements and who is responsible for them. Put the experiment's end date on the calendar, and put the policy review on the agenda for the first meeting after that date. At that meeting, look at the measurements and do a *round* to evaluate the experiment based on those measurements. Then decide whether to continue the policy as is, modify it to make it work better, or throw it out and start over.

Sociocracy is a new method of governance that creates more inclusive and effective organizations. A Dutch electrical engineer designed the method forty-some years ago, based on cybernetics (the science of communications and control) and systems theory, to run his electrical contracting company in the Netherlands. Business and nonprofits in multiple countries are using it successfully.

Sheella Mierson, Ph.D., is a consultant with [The Sociocracy Consulting Group](#). This article was slightly modified from a guest post in the [National Council of Nonprofits](#) newsletter, Nonprofit Knowledge Matters *(October, 2013). Contact Sheella at [sheella.mierson@sociocracyconsulting.com](#).* *To learn more about sociocracy, go to [sociocracyconsulting.com](#) for free articles, case studies, and short videos.*