



Generating proposals: picture forming and proposal shaping

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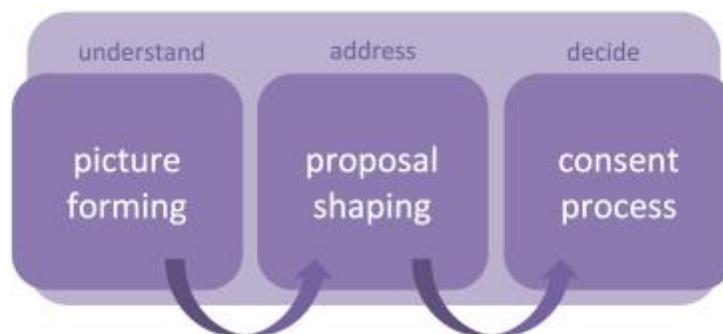
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The goal of policy-making is to come up with a proposal that works for everyone in a time-efficient way. Sociocracy offers a three-step format: picture forming, proposal shaping and consent process. These three steps each offer helpful guidance leading to a proposal.

There are two situations of making policy: when we start from scratch, we use the picture forming process. When we review existing policy, then we go through an evaluation process first, make changes and then go into the consent process.

Picture forming is about finding out about the issue and understanding its dimensions, i.e. what aspects we need to take into consideration. Proposal shaping is when we capture the group's sense of what could be decided. The result of proposal shaping is a draft proposal. In the consent process, we try and see whether the draft proposal raises any objections or whether we can go ahead with the decision.



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1. Picture forming

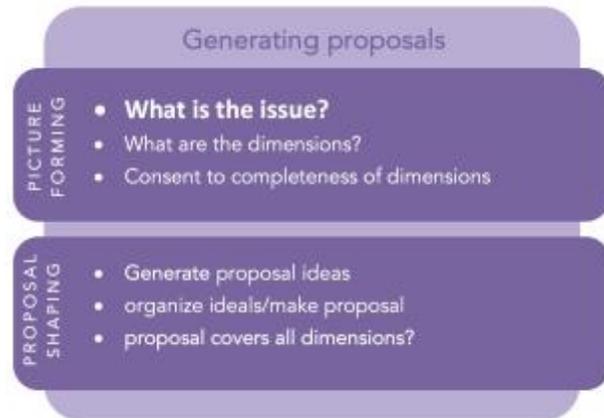
Picture forming serves to help a group get an overview of an issue before thinking about solutions.

a. What is the issue?

We start the process with picture forming. Before we start jumping into our “fix-it mindset”, everyone needs to understand why the group would be dealing with this subject. Was there an issue? What was the nature of the issue? Why do we need policy? There is typically an underlying issue that we are responding to, or we see the need for implementing a change of how we do things. In the Sociocracy 3.0 community, the underlying issue is called the *driver*. You can think of it as this: there

is a reason why our current policies are not working for us. We make policy, or change policy in order to create change. What is the reason behind the need for a change? This could be a complaint, or an accident, a drop in sales, or the desire to achieve more. If the issue or driver is complex, take some time so everyone understands what the issue is. It can get frustrating when, half-way into the process, we realize we still don't have clarity about the issue.

The easiest way to get clarity is to have the person holding the issue (the one who brings it to the circle) present what is going on and what the request is to the circle. Then do a clarifying questions round if necessary. Remember, this step is just about understanding the nature of the driver. Only move on to the next step if there are no more questions.





b. What are the dimensions?

The next step is to find out what we have to keep in mind when dealing with the issue or driver. What are the dimensions, or the elements that we need to consider here? You can do this using rounds, with everyone naming 1-2 dimensions that come to mind. Write down all the dimensions. The list of dimensions will be used later when we see whether all dimensions are covered by proposal pieces and a proposal.

There are two reasons to start with

picture forming. One aspect is group dynamics. Oftentimes, issues trigger controversy, and agreeing on a strategy to address an issue can trigger even more disagreement. For instance, if we are debating (lack of) accountability of dog owners to keep their dog on a leash, there might be very different strategies to address it. It is beneficial for the group process to start with something that unites the group. Everyone will agree on the fact that for a dog policy, on/off leash is a dimension to keep in mind. For a membership policy, depending on the context, membership fees might be on the list. For a policy around a wood workshop, safety might be one of the dimensions. We might disagree on strategy and priority of safety measures in a wood workshop, but we can all get behind the statement that safety is something we need to consider.

Dimensions will typically have the format of phrases or of questions, but never of statements.

Another aspect is the quality of policy. If you think about dimensions first, your group will be more likely to cover the entire topic without forgetting central pieces. That way, we can build a foundation for our policy before emotions get high. You can think of picture-forming as making a check-list that we make for ourselves.

Picture-forming does not take long, around 5-10 minutes, 15 min at the most. Groups get better with experience. While with inexperienced groups, you will have to explain more and dig into their suggestions to find the dimensions between opinions they might have. An experienced group will give you keywords that work well very quickly. The best way to learn picture forming is by example. If the group is new to the process, then the one who has most experience might model by giving their own dimensions before asking for the group's suggestions. Modeling will bring the group onto the right track - away from strategies and focused on dimensions.



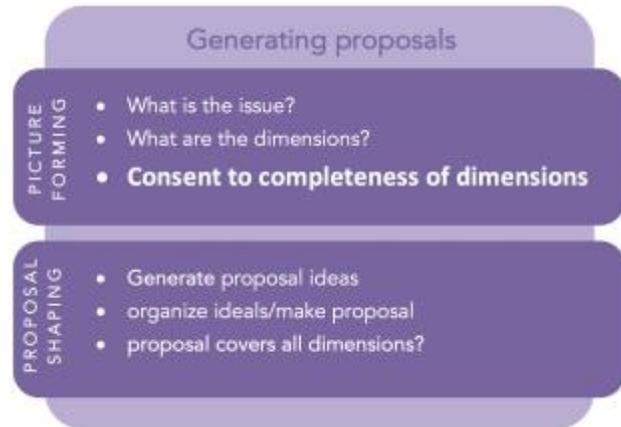


c. Consent to completeness of dimensions

After you have completed gathering the dimensions, you will as a group consent to the completeness of dimensions.

We consent to the list for several reasons:

- We decide at some point that our list is good enough for now. We might never have an exhaustive list. There might still be new elements coming up now and that's ok. We ask for consent to we can be sure no one is cut off who still had important dimensions to add. You want to close the process of gathering dimensions together in a joint decision so the whole group can transition together.
- Consenting to the list is a transition marker. Picture forming is free of "fix-in mind". The next step will be strategies and opinions on what is a good strategy.



Below is an example that covers picture forming. You can see that the process can be lean and brief, especially with an experienced group.



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Picture forming

EXAMPLE

- Joe 🖐 So the decision to make here is that we need to figure out when to schedule our webinars that we decided we'd start. Does everyone know about this, and is there anything we need to know here?
- Claire I guess since I was not part of this, can you tell me again who the audience is for these webinars?
- Joe 🖐 Tor, do you want to answer that?
- Tor Sure. We said that the audience was social change agents, so in non-profits, worker-coops and other similar projects that want to learn more about sociocracy.
- Clair Thank you.
- Joe 🖐 Anything else? (pause) Ok, issue seems to be clear. So let's go to the next step. Let's gather all the dimensions that are important here. I think in this group we can just go in rounds since there is only 5 of us here. Let's start with Hannah. For making a general decision on when to schedule webinars, what do we have to keep in mind? Just give me keywords, and remember, I am not asking for your opinion at this point. Carlos, would you write them down for all to see please? Ok, Hannah, please start.
- Hannah Weekday or weekend.
- Carlos Integration into people's work schedule.
- Joe 🖐 Time zones.
- Tor I'll pass right now.
- Clair Length of webinar
- Joe 🖐 Ok, that was one round. Let's just continue in our rounds.
- Hannah Our schedule.
- Carlos Nothing to add.
- Joe 🖐 I'd like to add taking into account when people have the attention for sitting through a webinar, so what time of day.
- Tor Interference with family time.
- Clair Nothing to add.
- Joe 🖐 Ok, I think we might be complete now. Anyone anything more to add? (pause) Seems like that is not the case. Do we have consent to this list?
- Hannah Consent.
- Carlos Yes, I think that's good enough.
- Joe 🖐 I consent.
- Tor Nothing to add.
- Clair Consent.
- Joe 🖐 Ok, so let's go to the next phase then.



2. Proposal shaping

The next phase is proposal shaping. This is where we do the core work, coming up with a proposal. This often seems daunting to groups. There are so many opinions and things to keep in mind -- how are we ever going to come to a decision here? Picture forming and proposal shaping actually get you results in a painless, doable way. The process of proposal making in sociocracy seems a little artificial at first but it serves the purpose well of coming to a good enough proposal while incorporating everyone's ideas.

If a group skips the early steps and, for instance, tries to make a proposal without getting everyone on board, or trying to get approval for a controversial proposal that one circle member brought without doing the work leading up the proposal, we are going to end up spending much more work in the later steps of that process. We might have to backtrack what happened and how we could miss important aspects and ignore people's voices. It saves time and nerves to walk through the process steadily, without skipping steps, and with care for the process, the issue and the group.

a. Generate proposal ideas

While in picture forming, we were trying to wrap our head around the issue and its dimensions, in proposal shaping is where opinions are wanted. In rounds, every circle member can suggest a proposal piece that covers one or more of the dimensions mentioned. For instance "We should introduce a membership fee of \$50 per month" is a proposal piece. While dimensions are phrases or questions, proposal pieces are statements. Have the dimensions visible to everyone during this process so you can refer to them and see which dimension has not been addressed in a proposal piece yet.



Please note that the proposal pieces are NOT being discussed in this process. Gathering proposal pieces is the moment where all opinions matter. Comments like "well, that's not going to help" would be poison for the process, and every group and every facilitator will have to make sure to hold the process with care. If you can create a safe and respectful context, you will get the nuggets of wisdom from everyone in your group. Everyone in the circle is an expert on the circle's work, and every voice will speak with all their experience and passion for the circle's aim. Make sure to set the stage for a process that honors that.

It is a good idea to write all proposal pieces down, again for all to see. Appoint a scribe to do so, or let the secretary do it. Just write everything down as people say them, only ask



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questions to clarify, not to judge. You can start to group them into themes if that is easy to do on the fly but it is more important to gather proposal pieces than to start grouping them. The proposal pieces can contradict each other, they can build on each other, they can converge or not, just take them as they come. (See what this sounds like in the example below.)

The group now has a list of proposal pieces. Although a need for a decision might have seemed daunting in the beginning, with an indefinite number of options of going forward, this process already boils the options down to only the ones the circle members find relevant. The group should now already have a lot of clarity on where the group is at. You will find yourself in one of these groups:

- It might be a simple issue – all the proposal pieces seem to go together well and you realize how much you are on the same page. The process guided you into wording a proposal draft in a participatory way.
- Proposal pieces mixed. Some areas of your proposal pieces seem straightforward, some are highly controversial, with many mutually exclusive proposal pieces. You now know what is already taken care of and what will need more attention. We are not trying to solve the controversial issues now, as that comes later. For now, just notice the differences in opinion.
- You might find out that you do not have enough information on the issue yet. In that case, if it seems safe, make a decision and focus on gathering more information. If it does not seem safe to move forward yet, do a round on how to gather more information, and make a plan. You do not want to hit the same wall again next time the issue comes up.

This process draws on group wisdom. You influence and inspire each other. It is a participatory process and can be very creative and productive. At the same time, since no one circle member has to come up with “the” perfect proposal and everyone puts their heads together, the task becomes more doable. We therefore strongly recommend doing this step of the proposal shaping in the circle -- it is a process that benefits from many minds. It can also be done by email or other asynchronous ways, but only with a group that understands that discussing or judging other’s ideas is out of place here.

If a group, in person or by email, runs out of proposal ideas, refer them to the list of dimensions which will inspire them to cover all the issue as best as possible.



Generate proposal ideas

EXAMPLE

Joe 🖐️ I am putting the list of dimensions right here so it can inform us for the next step. We are going to generate proposal ideas. It is time to hear what you think would be best to do for webinar timing. Let me hear only one or two proposal ideas at a time. We'll do as many rounds as needed. Carlos is going to write the proposal pieces down. Let's start with Tor.

Tor I think webinars should be in the early afternoon on a weekday.

Clair Yes, I think webinars should be at 4.30pm our time.

Joe 🖐️ I think some webinars should be on weekdays but every other webinar should be on a weekend day so people who work a 9-5 job can attend then.

Hannah I think we should do Tuesdays because that's when everyone is here.

Carlos 4.30 is too late because that is 10.30pm in Europe which is really late to start an event. I think 3.30pm would be better.

Tor I don't think webinars should ever be on weekends because we can see in our click rates that our audience really accesses our content during their work time, not so much when they are off work.

Clair I also think weekends should be out, because weekends would interfere with my free time.

Joe 🖐️ Ok, Tor and Clair convinced me. Weekends are not a good idea.

Hannah I actually just realized that Tuesday afternoon would conflict with our circle meeting. So I guess Thursday would work better because we don't actually have to be there, and Tor could be here on some Thursdays if he has to.

Carlos I was thinking about including Australia but I am afraid, a live webinar just is not viable with that time difference. Let me see the list of dimensions... Length of webinars... If webinars were only 1h instead of 1.5h, then I could consent to 4.30, and that still does not interfere with family time at 6pm. I guess I'd be ok with 4pm too.

Tor I actually think 4pm is the latest. I at least am just too exhausted to go longer than 5pm with something that is so intense.

Clair I guess Tor has a point here. 4pm is good for me.

Joe 🖐️ Thank you Hannah for bringing up circle meetings on Tuesdays. Thursdays are ok with.

Hannah I have nothing to add.

Carlos Nothing to add here.

Joe 🖐️ If no one has anything to add here, I guess we're done. Carlos, would you bring a proposal next time?

round 1

round 2

round 3



b. Organize ideas/make proposal

You might think that writing a proposal is hard - but with a list of proposal pieces it gets much easier. First you will go through the straightforward parts - the dimensions that only have one proposal piece covering them and that seemed uncontroversial. Then you look at the ones that have a few proposal pieces and come up with something that seems to incorporate all the pieces. On the controversial pieces, you will have to make a decision. It is absolutely crucial to remember here what consent decision-making means. It means everyone in the circle will be able to object to anything. So there is no risk in making a draft proposal, and there is no overpowering anyone. You are just making a suggestion so the group has something specific to work with.



This step benefits from having only a few people, or even just one individual to write up the proposal. Pick a circle member that is good at synthesizing information. Also, if the issue is controversial, pick someone who is not a strong proponent of either side. Remember, everyone will have their chance to consent or object.

You might be wondering why we make a proposal in the first place if it is only preliminary. Understanding this is crucial for understanding why sociocracy is so efficient. You can easily imagine a discussion in which everyone has a strong preference for something. In this example, people could be discussing days of the week. Some will strongly prefer Tuesdays, some will strongly prefer Thursdays. You might easily spend an hour discussing the ins and outs. However, in sociocracy, we don't want to spend time on preferences. We are looking for a solution within a reasonable amount of time that works for everyone. The decision just has to be in their range of tolerance.

Imagine a discussion on Tuesday or Thursday with no outcome or frustrated taking sides. And now imagine a typical sociocratic situation: the proposal just goes for Tuesday, and nobody objects. In that scenario, we just skipped an hour long discussion on preferences. Basically, we are writing down a proposal early because that is what gets the group to the next level. Instead of circling around preferences with no action following and while staying in the vague, we put out a proposal to trigger objections if there are any. A proposal on the table pushes a group to get down to the real issues right away.

A proposal does not have to be coherent. It is ok to write "webinars are going to be held on always the same day of the week: Tuesdays/Thursdays". That way, you can flag an item for discussion because someone will object to it being inconsistent. That is confusing to some people so only do it with a group that feels confident with the process. Also, remember that



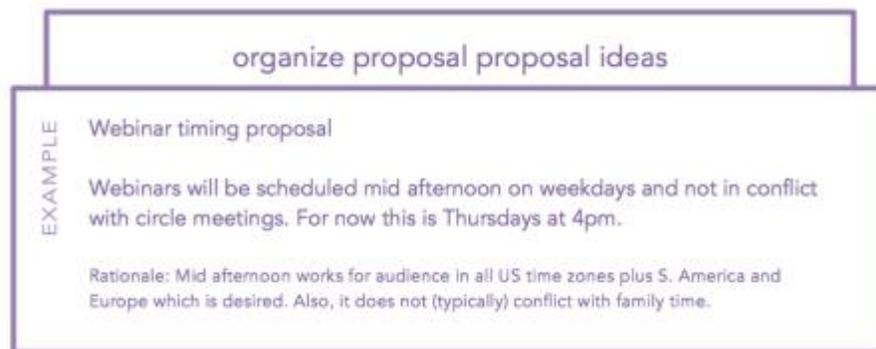
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writing up the proposal is a service to the productiveness of the group. If you tiptoe around all the controversial issues, you will make the circle's life harder.

If an subject seems to be side tracking a discussion, and you are worried about including it in the proposal, you can also break up your proposal into chunks. Discuss the chunks separately. To use an image, it is all about building a house. If the foundation is good enough for now, then just do the foundation - discussing the color paint you are going to be using might be important to discuss but maybe it is better to just agree on the foundation, start building and discuss paint later. If you lose yourself in details, you might never start building. On the other hand, try to make the chunks as big as possible to save time.

It cannot be said enough times: remember that circle members will be able to object if need be. In writing up the proposal, do not only go for the smallest common denominator. If we do that, we are only going to make cautious decisions. Put some big ideas from the proposal piece list into the proposal - and see if someone objects. You might be surprised by how much willing the group is to try new, innovative ideas. They might not be their preference, but maybe they are willing to try it out? Put it out there, and see what they do with it.



In our above example, there is not much controversy. (We will talk a lot about controversy and how to deal with objections later.) The proposal contains the essence of what had been suggested. This proposal includes a rationale (optional) which is a good way of keeping simple records of what were the driving factors behind a decision.

Why not write a proposal in the large group? Because it is not efficient use of your time. A group larger than 2 or 3 cannot write together. It makes sense only do picture forming and gathering proposal pieces in one session and then have someone write the proposal pieces into a proposal between meetings. If you really want to do it all in one circle meeting session, just send everyone on a short break and have one person do work on the proposal. This is still much more time-efficient than wordsmithing in a large group - and it saves you a lot of impatience and frustration.



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c. All dimensions covered?

The last step is to go through your list of dimensions from the picture forming and seeing whether all dimensions are covered. You might notice that in the heat of the moment of generating proposal pieces, you forgot a whole aspect of the issue. Good you made a list when things were calmer which you can refer to now. Are all the dimensions addressed? Do we say something about every single one of them?

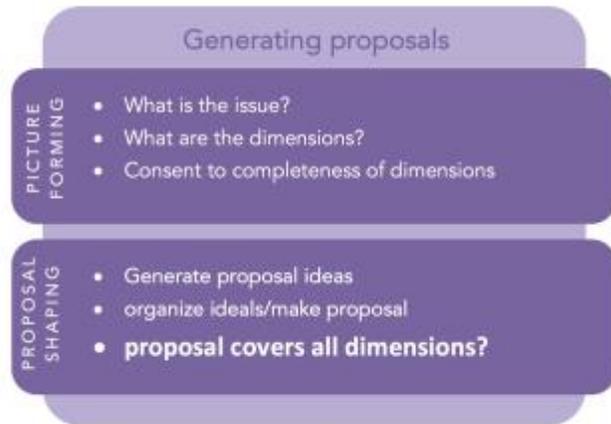
There does not have to be a 1:1

relationship between sentences in the proposal and dimensions. One part of the proposal might be addressing several dimensions of the issue, just like one dimension might need several proposal pieces to be covered.

This step is best done by the individual who writes up the proposal but it might be good to keep the list in reach for the further process so all circle members have the option of paying attention to completeness (complete as in “good enough for now”).

What’s next? You now have a draft proposal. Now that you have something to work with, if this makes sense in your context, it is a good time to gather feedback from people outside of the circle. You might get some valuable input, hear about blind spots you had or unwanted side effects that you had not considered. You can send out the meeting minutes including the draft and explicitly ask for feedback on the draft, or send the draft proposal to specific individuals (maybe the ones that are the most affected or have some expertise on the subject).

Your circle is ready to go into the consent process. (See reading [Consent process.](#))



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