



Family HEART Camp, Colorado 2013

Family HEART Camp

A case study of a sociocratic community

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Family HEART Camp (FHC) provides children and adults with a week-long summer camp experience at multiple campsites that vary by location and amenities. A sociocratic nonprofit charitable organization since 2013, FHC provides campers of all ages with diverse opportunities to experience meaningful community based in the principles and practices of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Family HEART Camp’s dream is that “every family in north America will have access to a Family HEART Camp within driving distance of home.”¹ FHC started in 2009 and, in 2017, had been operating fully sociocratically for about 5 years.² During the summer of 2018, Family HEART Camps are planned to be held in Wisconsin, West Virginia, California, and Indiana.³

¹ Family HEART Camp (familyheartcamp.org)

² Interview with Gregory Rouillard and Jennifer Rau

³ Family HEART Camp



This case study briefly describes Family HEART Camp, documents significant aspects of the organization's development, examines the organization's sociocratic structure, briefly discusses how sociocracy is learned on-the-job, and identifies particular strengths and challenges of the organization.

Beginnings

The three founders — each members of Capital NVC, a non-violent communication organization in the metro DC area — were inspired in September 2008 to create a family retreat. One of the main motivators behind the creation of Family HEART Camp was that its founders were “completely devoted to community and offering opportunities for people to experience *meaningful* community.” They were motivated to achieve their mission to create an environment in which children could be treated with unconditional love and respect, and where parents could find the support and relief to allow them to raise their children in accordance with their values. Family HEART Camp would be a place where children and parents could learn to cherish, honor and respect each other by building relationships based on nonviolent communication (NVC), which is also known as compassionate communication. It was intended that the Camp would bring together families from different backgrounds and socioeconomic status to celebrate diversity in all forms. Family HEART Camp's Website explains: “HEART stands for Harmony, Ease, Authenticity, Respect, and Trust, important family values that Compassionate Communication supports us in living, both at camp and in the wider world.”

The first camp was held in 2009 in Virginia and brought together 45 participants and staff for a week long adventure in compassionate community, which has since continued annually. Within three years, the success of the original event had spawned two new camps in Colorado and Wisconsin. In 2013 it became clear that a single organization was required to tie together the common threads of these three camps, to connect them in their values and overall shared mission. This realisation led to the formal creation of Family HEART Camp as a sociocratic non-profit organization of between 25 and 30 people organized into circles to aid effective decision making.



Sociocratic structure

Each of the individual Family HEART Camps has its own **Hosting Team** to “organize, plan and operate member camps with full autonomy over most aspects of the camp.”⁴ Each camp hosting team is represented on the **Coordinating Circle**, which “makes decisions that impact the entire camp community, including common policies, processes and procedures.”⁵ Each Hosting Team has, therefore, at least one person who has been part of creating shared policies and procedures. The Coordinating Circle meets monthly, online, to ensure that learning is shared and the philosophy of an intergenerational community is upheld across the organization.

Finally, the **Top Circle** “fulfills the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of a traditional nonprofit Board of Directors, as well as connecting the organization to the external environment. The Top Circle meets annually at a retreat (most recently in Chicago) where the officers of president, secretary and treasurer are selected through traditional sociocratic selection processes. The FHC Director and an elected representative of the Coordinating Circle also serve on the Top Circle.”⁶ The FHC Director serves as downward link to the Coordinating Circle.⁷ “This structure has produced clarity for each circle’s domain and creates effective delegation of authority. When there are times when something is not clear, the structure provides a process for clarification.”⁸

The sociocratic **role selection process** provides an opportunity to learn about each other and was felt to be surprisingly valuable in the selection of officers. While appointing people to key roles may seem trivial, Rouillard commented that going through the selection process and providing feedback to each other...

“...really makes interdependence visible. When I can share with you how you impact me and I can hear how I impact you, it creates that sense of being in something together, rather than just like putting things out into a vacuum and never getting any sense of what the result is.”⁹

Figure 1: Family HEART Camp governance structure.

⁴ Family HEART Camp

⁵ Ibid.

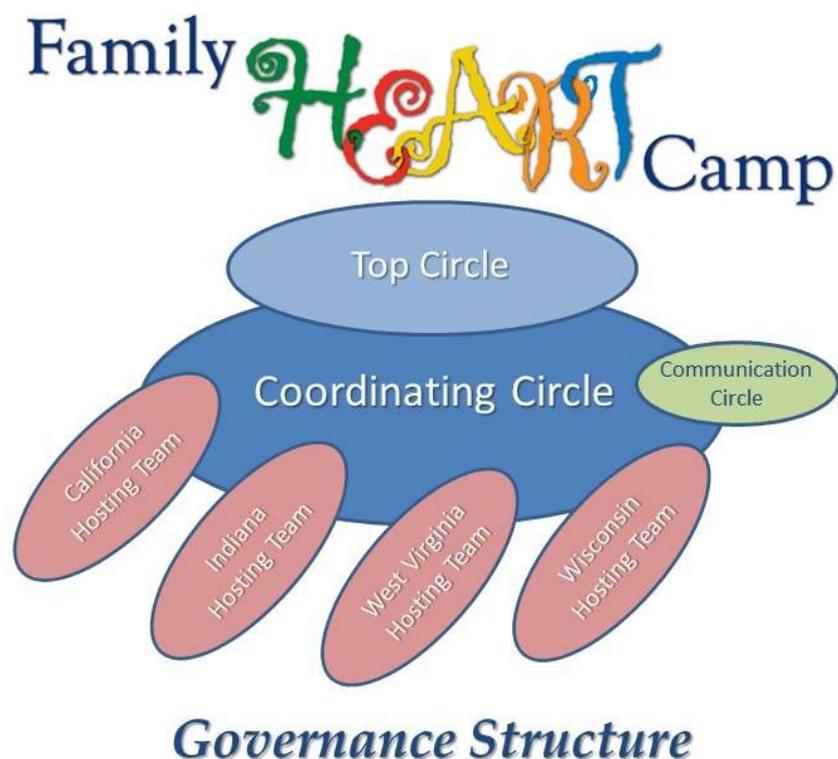
⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Art of Community (Webinar)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Gregory Rouillard and Jennifer Rau





Shared by Greg Rouillard with permission of Family HEART Camp

Sociocracy during Family HEART Camps

Time is structured at Family HEART Camps so that everybody has a chance to feel connected, said Gregory Rouillard:

“No explicit sociocratic training [is provided] at camp, but it infuses what we do — rounds, having a facilitator. People who are holding a space for processes are holding it internally and adapting it for the group itself.... [Camp] is one of the few places... where it’s not either NVC or sociocracy..., but they are [both] part of the DNA of the organization and they have really contributed to how we live and learn together.... People are surprised at how much the voices of young people are heard.”¹⁰

Learning Sociocracy on the job

New camp hosts receive sociocracy training on the job, but there are also opportunities for more formal learning with experienced members. As Rouillard admits, without experience of sociocracy it can be "quite overwhelming at first but [there is] a quick learning curve”

¹⁰ The Art of Community (Webinar)



because of the support available.

West Virginia Camp Co-host Rhonda Eldridge shared with the author (Lynn England)¹¹ that she learned sociocracy on the job after her first experience of Family HEART Camp with her family. Previous organizers had moved, or were moving out, of West Virginia and new camp hosts were needed. Rhonda's friend Mali urged her to volunteer alongside her, arguing that it would meet their need for fun. At the first meeting after camp, director Greg Rouillard brought up the topic of sociocracy. This appealed to Rhonda, who lives in a cohousing community. Rhonda said,

“ We make all our decisions consensus-based. So sociocracy was pretty compelling to me as an alternative to consensus. To come to this place of no objections because there's a review, and because there are metrics [to support the review of past decisions] as opposed to what I've experienced in my cohousing community, [which] is this sense of consensus is forever. So, it was truly learning on the job.”¹²

After receiving materials from Greg Rouillard on how Family HEART Camp was organized, and without a workshop on sociocracy, they “dove right in.”

“And, Mali and the rest of the hosting team, we just started trying it... so, we use the circle process.... I love—one of the first things that jumped out to me is the agenda—that everyone has a chance to object to the agenda even if it was sent out beforehand. In the moment, you can object to the agenda, request changes, and even that is a go round to see where everybody's at... And there [are] lots of go rounds gathering information and that sort of thing, but... every decision is then documented with metrics and a review And that was it; it was just like [we] hit the ground running.”¹³

About a year later, when Rhonda knew Rouillard was going to be in town, she invited him to facilitate a sociocracy workshop for the hosting circle. She commented that it was “interesting to participate in a sociocracy workshop after practicing sociocracy for about a year.”

Role of Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

One of the guiding principles of Family HEART Camp is the use of nonviolent communication (NVC), which is also known as Compassionate Communication, a process developed by Marshall Rosenberg (1934-2015) in the 1960s.¹⁴ NVC not only inspires Family

¹¹ Interview with Rhonda Eldridge

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview with Rhonda Eldridge

¹⁴ <https://www.cnvc.org/about/marshall-rosenberg.html>



HEART Camp's work with families, but also their own organizational practices. There are on average three-to-five staff trained in NVC at each camp, but as Rouillard explained, "NVC exposure for children is through the context and culture of the camp and how we respond to difference, difficulty, and conflict."¹⁵ There is a strong belief within the organization that sociocracy and NVC reinforce each other, with the former providing strong governance practices and the latter enabling relationship building, needs strategizing and the empathy required to make it a success.

An example of the synergy that is built is demonstrated in how the following conflicts from camps were resolved, as provided by Rouillard:

- Using hammocks as swings... and being creative and aggressive about how play is conducted on the hammocks;
- A parent wanted to do carving and whittling, bringing knives into the community;
- A creek that runs through the venue.

Each of these situations created concerns among community members. In each case, staff have drawn on NVC skills and sociocratic structures to find a resolution for "now." Some processes were longer and some shorter, some more or less formal, but in each situation a small group prepared a proposal and the community and within 24 hours the community was willing to give it a try. In every case the proposals were working well enough¹⁶

In sum, it is widely felt that NVC "increases the capacity of people to be effective circle members."¹⁷ NVC also supported regular decision review cycles that enabled opportunities to get feedback on past decisions that simply would not have happened in more traditional hierarchical decision making procedures. It allowed the organization to change future implementation or change policy entirely, leading to an invaluable learning process.

Strengths

Family HEART Camp's history includes people who have strong skills in NVC. Director, Greg Rouillard is a Certified Trainer with the [Center for Nonviolent Communication](#), has a Master of Divinity degree from Naropa University, and has studied sociocracy for about ten

¹⁵ The Art of Community (Webinar)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with Gregory Rouillard and Jennifer Rau



years since a chance meeting with John Buck, an international sociocracy consultant, author, and the CEO of [Sociocracy Consulting Group](#). In addition, everyone involved in FHC's Coordinating Circle and Top Circle have enough experience in NVC that challenges Rouillard has seen in other groups have been mostly eliminated.

Another strength of FHC says Rouillard, is the synergy between NVC and sociocracy “that arises when we cultivate both, and the end result is connection and equivalence and effectiveness.”¹⁸

“Relational development is an aspect of being in community and being in a group that is not addressed by sociocracy and, conversely,... NVC does not provide a governance model or decision-making method. So, I think the marriage of both and cultivating fluency in being able to communicate and to be self-connected and to receive others and make offers and requests, that is supported by NVC learning and practice, it really increases the capacity of people to be effective circle members, because listening and being able to articulate one's own needs and strategies is so important to an effective system.”¹⁹

Rouillard describes the use of the sociocratic decision review cycle as a simple and radical way to engage in experimentation and learning in the organization. Most organizations do not regularly review and adapt decisions. Although Rouillard admits that most decision reviews are straightforward because things are working well, sometimes getting feedback from people who were not part of the original decision making group can be very powerful:

“Going back two or three years later and getting feedback from folks who are new, who say, ‘Well, I really don't understand that part,’ and then we go and we dig into it a little bit and recognize, ‘Oh, that, you know what, that bullet point is not really relevant any more because we've moved beyond it,’ or ‘Wow, we really need to add some more here.’ So, to me, it's... been such a vivid experience... of the power of reviewing the policy and then evaluating: Do we need to change our implementation? Or do we need to change the policy? and then trying it again... [It's this] cycle of experimentation and learning that I really love.... I just wanted to name that because it's been unexpected for me. I thought it would be boring and... kind of stilted, but it really is, it's a learning process.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with Gregory Rouillard and Jennifer Rau



Challenges

Because Family HEART Camp has circle members located in states across the country, the Coordinating Circle meets online using the Zoom platform. Circle members sometimes have challenges connecting to the platform and learning to use it. A key challenge to the success of sociocracy for all members is to ensure that equal access to education and training is available to assure capable use of the technology required to access online meetings.

Challenges sometimes emerge during a circle meeting. Rouillard discussed how a pause in sociocratic practice to engage in NVC can help meet the challenge:

“Even when something happens that becomes challenging, the group may pause the process and relate to each other on a human level. Without losing track of where the group is in the process they can make effective choices — maybe dropping the process or coming back to it.”²¹

He also provided an example of how a the Top Circle resolved a challenge that emerged during an online meeting:

“[Circle members] don’t have direct contact, but can see each other [online]. A camp host presented a proposal for financial support for a project important to them. During a question round there was a sense that the person was not understood. The circle created a space for NVC to authentically transform the tension that was felt to [create] clarity about what was the next step. Most meetings have a sweet balance between communication and efficient and effective structure.”²²

Future

If Family HEART Camp is able to realise its vision of a camp within driving distance of every family in the future, there will be many more hosting circles, making the current structure unworkable. When asked how this challenge might be addressed, Rhonda speculated that regional circles might be created so that the coordinating circle would not become too large. Growth will bring with it challenges for training in the use of technologies as well as learning NVC and sociocracy. More formalised and intentional on-boarding and training could be beneficial to the future success and growth of the organization. Overall, though, Rouillard feels there have been relatively few challenges experienced by the organization as the culture of Family HEART Camp is steeped in the idea of communicating effectively and this is central to its ongoing success.

²¹ Interview with Gregory Rouillard and Jennifer Rau.

²² Ibid.



Additional new host camps and representatives unfamiliar with sociocracy may make double linking between circle levels more necessary, even though the additional representatives would add to the size of the general circle. Currently, the Top Circle has a double link to the Coordinating Circle, but double links from each of the six Host Circles to the Coordinating Circle do not currently exist, although they are allowed. The lack of double links to and from each Host Circle helps to keep the size of the Coordinating Circle smaller and works effectively due to a high level of experience and trust among many of the circle members. Rouillard explained, “I think double linking is really important in the case where there is a lot of turnover or when the access to that upward flow of power and information might be restricted due to top circle structure or the personality of someone in the role.” Double links will be implemented to the degree needed at such time when their current structure no longer works.

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