

Making The Switch

From Consensus to Sociocracy/Dynamic Governance

A snapshot of cultural changes at Pioneer Valley Cohousing

by Deborah Mangrum-Price



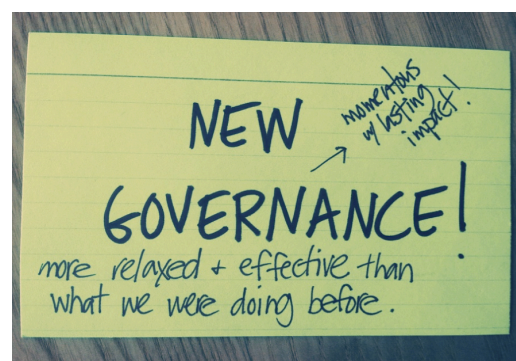
Summary

In 2012, Pioneer Valley Cohousing (PVC) in Amherst Massachusetts adopted Sociocracy (also known as Dynamic Governance). Since its founding in 1994, members of PVC had based their forms of decision making on Consensus, in which all would need to agree in order to move forward with a decision. A core of seven members of PVC spent a year, studying Dynamic Governance by practicing and shaping a proposal to make the switch. This brief case study focuses on a snapshot of cultural changes within the community by interviewing five resident enthusiasts.¹

Naming: *Sociocracy* or *Dynamic Governance*

Culturally, many PVC members hit a stumbling block with the name Sociocracy, which for some had connotations of Socialism. That form of governance however "...advocates central ownership and control for the means of production..." To the contrary, "Sociocracy assumes a market economy and advocates for free organizations owned by them-selves."² Several members at PVC did also find the name to be obscure so the community decided to adopt Dynamic Governance. Amy described it "...as showing that it's something that's in movement."

Several residents feel the name Dynamic Governance describes what this system is more clearly than Sociocracy. Jennifer, on the other hand has stated her preference for Sociocracy and feels it is more distinct. As organizations are implementing the system, it will most likely be an ongoing discussion.



¹ Those 5 resident informants were Bill Baue, Amy Freed, Jana Lussier, Laurie Nelson and Jennifer Rau — for the purposes of this study, participants are referred to by first name.

² John Buck and Sharon Villines, *We The People*, Sociocracy.info, pgs13-14.

Why Leave Consensus Behind?

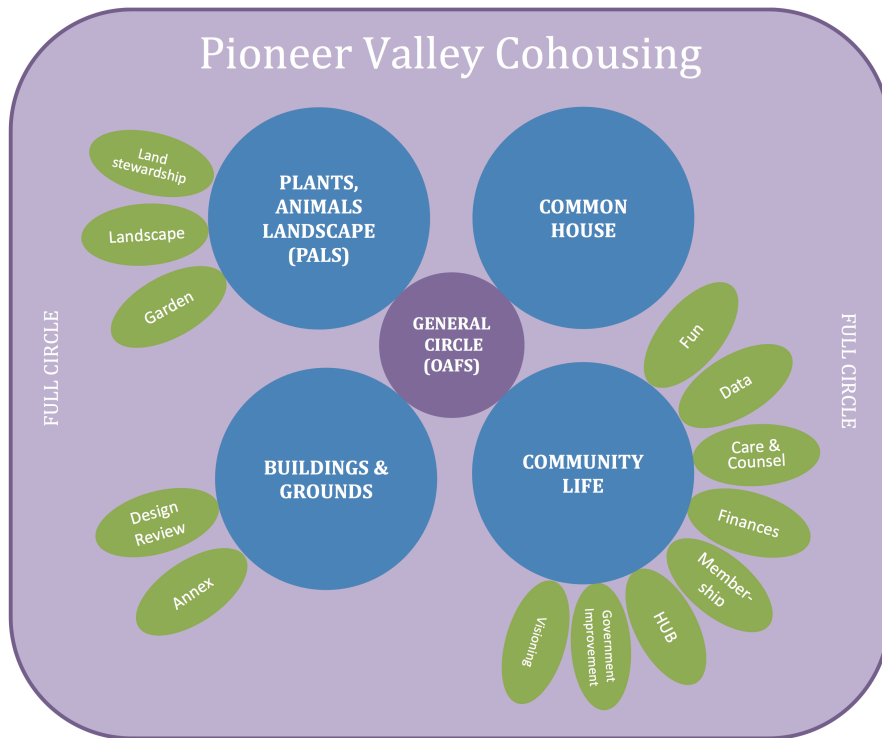
Problems with consensus seem to involve recurring themes: A backlog of decisions to be made and typically, at times when there is a near consensus for the community, it is difficult to push things through as a small minority can block movement causing stagnation. In extreme cases this mechanism is sometimes referred to as a “Tyranny of the Minority” As Laurie described it: “When we were in consensus the backlog of decisions went from here to New York City! Amy echoed this point with a picture of many proposals falling through the cracks. When Jana arrived about a year before the switch, she felt that the community was “fried.” Morale seemed



to be low and fewer people attended meetings. There was a wariness in the community of ever revisiting a proposal once a decision had been made as it often took enormous amounts of energy for all to agree on a course of action. The process lacked a structure to hear from everyone fairly, so generally those who spoke the most tended to dominate the meetings while others remained eclipsed.

Cultural Shifts using Dynamic Governance/Sociocracy

The shifts at PVC have been both dramatic and subtle since making the switch to Dynamic Governance. Bill has noticed that the use of rounds in meetings creates a culture shift where quieter people are confident they are going to be able to get their point of view across, as it is built into the structure of meetings. Laurie has described a feeling of safety compared to the unsafe feelings of being held hostage by a consensus model. Amy and Jana noticed that much more was being accomplished in terms of decisions made and a process that functions to follow through with action. Jana described a sense of relief in the community that decisions can also be revisited and not “etched in heavy stone.” This underscores a sense of fluidity in the system that is adaptable to a changing environment. The dynamics of transparency of recording minutes for the community, selection processes and mapping of the double linking circles were also cited as key elements to this functioning process. Jennifer found it interesting that her new role as coordinator of the general circle stemmed from a need that the community discovered would be useful despite an original aversion to leaders. Originally, PVC was extremely careful not to structure a hierarchy of any type and chose to nest their diagram of circles (also known as their flower chart, see next page and on [Pioneer Valley Cohousing website](#)) on their sides which differs from a traditional top down model despite the double links of leaders and delegates.



Training

Certainly training can only enhance the functionality of using Dynamic Governance in the community. It is an ongoing challenge to get everyone on the same page as some are more thoroughly involved with the study and practice than others. A few participants felt that the system could be picked up on the job. Jenni-fer is a believer in training and made the point, “if only some people know things then you can’t really have equivalence of voices.”

Was It Easy To Adjust?

Overall, participants are strong advocates of the switch to Dynamic Governance. Bill initially felt the structure of rounds and the selection process seemed inefficient, but as he became more experienced he found that the system front loads discussion and sets up a swift decision making process. This structure actually curtails the endless discourse in consensus by dealing with objections in rounds. Also, those who object become part of the solution. When asked how it has changed her culture personally, Amy gave the example of working with groups outside of PVC in other structures and if certain people were talking a lot she would think, “this would be a great place for rounds!”

This case study was written by Deborah Mangrum-Price as part of her contribution to the [Sociocracy Leadership Training](#) offered by [Sociocracy For All](#), 2016.