


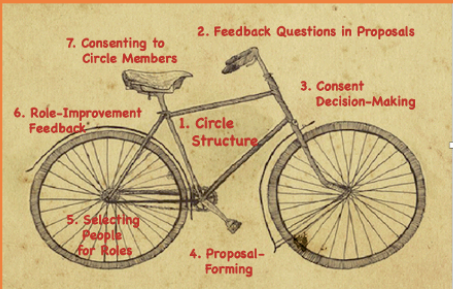
## What Can Go Wrong When Communities Don't Meet the Four Necessary Requirements 6.12.2020

After teaching sociocracy to intentional communities since 2012 and visiting several where sociocracy wasn't working well — I now believe there are what I call "four necessary requirements" for a group to use sociocracy effectively and truly benefit from it. *Not* meeting these requirements can result in ineffective meetings and even conflict, as you'll see in the stories about Cypress Grove and Sequoia Glen communities. As I see it, the requirements are:


 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS:</b></p> <p><b>1. EVERYONE Learns It*</b></p> 	<p><b>1. EVERYONE LEARNS IT.</b> Everyone learns sociocracy's principles, circle structure, using feedback questions in proposals, and its meeting processes. When everyone learns these no one is likely to trigger confusion or conflict by misunderstanding the role of the facilitator as he or she leads the steps of a meeting process, calls on people in rounds rather than responding to raised hands, seeks</p>
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everyone's consent first before agreeing to a request for a discussion.

If all community members cannot or will not learn sociocracy soon after the group decides to try it, I recommend they sign a community agreement to learn it as soon as they can, and in the meantime not try to stop the facilitator from doing their job, or try to induce the group to use they voting or consensus process they may prefer or like better, like consensus or voting. (*Please see two examples of "Community Member Agreement Re Learning Sociocracy," pg. 12.*)

 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS</b></p> <p><b>2. Use All Seven** Parts</b></p>  <p><b>7</b></p> <p><i>(Graphic, Johnny Azpilicueta)</i></p>	<p><b>2. USE ALL SEVEN PARTS.</b> Sociocracy has more than seven parts, however, in my experience intentional communities need to use at least seven parts for sociocracy to work well. Each of these parts mutually benefits and reinforces the other parts, like how the main parts of a bicycle (frame, each wheel, brakes, handlebars, pedals, gears, seat) mutually reinforce and benefit each other to help the rider propel the bicycle forward and keep it upright.</p>
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Consent Decision-Making, for example, needs what I call “Feedback Questions in Proposals” — a series of questions included the wording of a proposal to later measure and evaluate its effectiveness after it’s implemented. These two parts of sociocracy — Consent Decision-Making and Feedback Questions — benefit and reinforce each other because people know they can modify the wording in a proposal’s feedback questions or add new ones in order more easily resolve most objections to the proposal. Doing this feels good, saves time, and helps reduce conflict. And four parts — Proposal-Forming, Consent Decision-Making, Selecting People for Roles, and Role-Improvement Feedback — also mutually reinforce and benefit each other.

 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS</b></p> <p><b>3. Use Sociocracy as Your Sociocracy Trainer Teaches</b></p> <p>18 months to 2 years</p> <p>“Use it like I show ya, OK?”</p>	<p><b>3. USE SOCIOCRACY AS YOUR SOCIOCRACY TRAINER TAUGHT YOU</b> <b>(Don’t combine it with other methods!)</b></p> <p>The group does <i>not</i> try to change how they use sociocracy by combining it with the methods they used before, like consensus or voting. When some community members feel suspicious of sociocracy and want their group to keep using consensus, for example, they may demand that <i>unless</i> the group agrees to</p>
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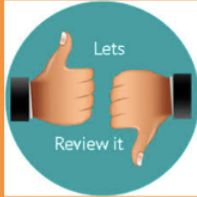
change sociocracy to be more like consensus they’ll block the proposal to try it. Unfortunately, “socio-census” hybrids can trigger more frustration and conflict than if the group used consensus, voting, or sociocracy alone. In my experience, sociocracy **is in a different paradigm than either consensus or voting**. Trying to make sociocracy more consensus-like or voting-like doesn’t work and leads to frustration and conflict for the group in trying to achieve its goals.

If some members of your group insist they won’t agree to try sociocracy unless it’s first combined with consensus or voting, *I advise you to wait awhile and not try*, but continue using your current decision-making method. Sometime in the near future propose again that your community try sociocracy. In my experience, sooner or later those who initially oppose sociocracy may, with one or more later proposals to try it, change their minds and reluctantly agree that it would be OK to just *try* it. This can work far better in the long run than struggling with an ineffective, conflict-producing “socio-sensus” hybrid.

I’ve also found that the *longer* a community has used consensus before they consider using sociocracy, the more likely some community members won’t agree to try it as their teacher taught it, but will advocate changing it (sometimes saying, “But this is how *OUR community* makes decisions!”) This can also happen when one or more adamant or aggressive members feel

suspicious of sociocracy and try to force a group to change what they *think* is sociocracy into a hybrid with consensus or voting.

This doesn't work! This kind of hybrid can result in confusion, conflict, and dysfunction for the group. (And those who didn't want to try sociocracy can say, "See, I *told* you it wouldn't work!")

 <h2>FOUR REQUIREMENTS</h2> <h3>4. Periodic Review Trainings (Workshops, Consultations)</h3>  	<h3>4. GET PERIODIC REVIEW TRAININGS OR CONSULTATIONS.</h3> <p>Periodically getting clear, helpful reviews of sociocracy — tailored to your group's specific questions and needs — can make all the difference in using sociocracy well and seeing a clear benefit from it. When a group doesn't schedule review trainings or consultations when needed they can experience what I call "Governance Drift."</p>
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**"GOVERNANCE DRIFT"** is what I call it when a community gradually shifts away from using their agreed-upon governance method. If they've agreed to use sociocracy, this can happen when one or more assertive or aggressive members who dislikes sociocracy or still feels suspicious of it advocates or even insists the group stop using some of its parts ("Do we still have to do *that*?") or insists that group starts using various parts of the consensus or voting method they used before.



## The Dread "Governance Drift"

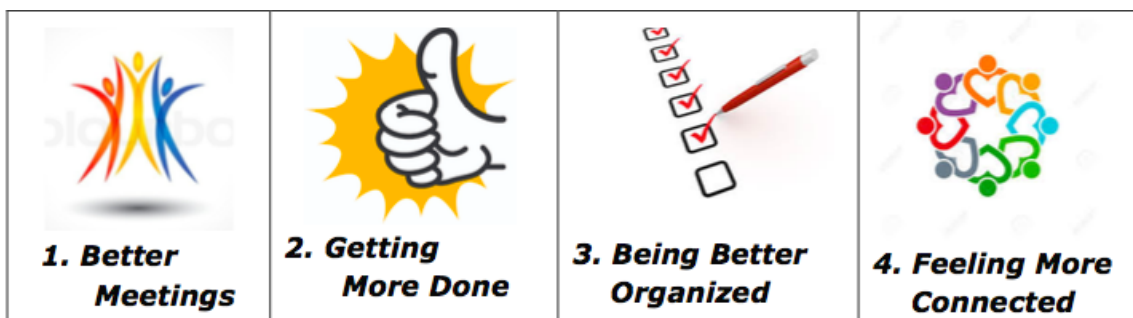


*(Don't let your group's use of Sociocracy "drift back" into consensus!)*

Governance Drift can also happen when some members use classic manipulation techniques in meetings — "Do we have to be so *rigid*?" — to consciously or unconsciously ridicule or humiliate anyone who attempts to remind people how sociocracy actually works.

## THE BENEFITS WHEN A COMMUNITY *DOES* MEET THE FOUR REQUIREMENTS!

When a community meets these requirements its members can experience the following benefits



Two intentional communities, Cypress Grove Cohousing and Orca Landing Co-op (*not their real names*), unfortunately didn't meet these requirements. Seeing their painful confusion and conflict convinced me how important these four requirements really are!

## "SOCIOCRACY WARS" AT CYPRESS GROVE COHOUSING



The founders of Cypress Grove Cohousing began using sociocracy early in their history, in their development and financing phases. At first all went well. But unfortunately, the founders didn't periodically train the new people who joined their group, believing the new people would "just pick it up" by attending meetings. But this doesn't happen — people need training to use sociocracy!

By the time three years later when construction was

finished and people moved into their housing units, as is common in new cohousing communities, approximately 80 percent of the residents had not been in their original founding group. Thus, eighty percent of this cohousing community's members had had no sociocracy training. While the founders had served as meeting facilitators and tried to convey sociocracy to people during meetings, by this time there were almost 27 people out of 33 who barely understood sociocracy, and worse, who viewed it through the lens of consensus.

### **Governance Drift**

In a situation like this, it seemed inevitable that Cypress Grove would experience Governance Drift. Their meetings gradually shifted into a confusing mish-mash of *socio-sensus*. People insisted on speaking whenever they raised their hands, regardless of which step in Consent Decision-Making or another meeting process the facilitator was leading them through.

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Not knowing what to do, the facilitators let people speak whenever they wanted. Meetings became increasingly chaotic and contentious. Feedback questions to later measure and evaluate implemented proposals were not included in proposals, so objections couldn't be resolved relatively easily by just modifying or adding to the feedback questions. Instead people argued passionately for and against objections and, worse, treated objections like "blocks" in the consensus process. Many insisted on attending meetings of the General Circle and functional circles even though they weren't members of those circles. Worse, these non-circle members mistakenly believed they had full decision-making rights in those circles and insisted on participating in every step.

Clearly, most Cypress Grove members didn't understand the basic principle of consent!

### ***"You're taking their side!"***

The relatively few members who understood sociocracy tried to convince the rest of the group to use it correctly. But almost everyone else had a variety of mistaken ideas about how sociocracy works and so wanted to do things differently. Both groups had a high emotional charge on these issues, and arguments in meetings and community emails were fierce.

At one point a founding member arranged for me to do a Sociocracy Review Workshop. He paid for it himself, as only a few community members Cypress Grove believed they could benefit from a sociocracy review training.

But my attempts to present basic sociocracy principles and the steps of its meeting processes, while confirming the views of the few who'd studied it, only inflamed those who saw it differently.

"*You're taking their side!*" some of them yelled out. The review workshop failed completely.

### ***"I'm the boss."***

Sometime later Cypress Grove elected a relatively new member as Operations Leader of their General Circle. He hadn't learned sociocracy and knew only the top-down management method of business. The group was then embroiled in conflict about who makes decisions in Operations Meetings (Work Meetings) because of contradictory statements in the Sociocracy book *We the People*. On an earlier page the authors said circle members make decisions in Work Meetings any way they like; a later page said Operations Leader made its decisions.

To try to help the group I emailed John Buck, co-author of *We the People*. He emailed that these were not contradictory statements, but two options for how circle members could decide things in Work Meetings — they could choose whichever method they preferred. I forwarded John Buck's email to my friends at Cypress Grove, including of course the new Operations Leader.

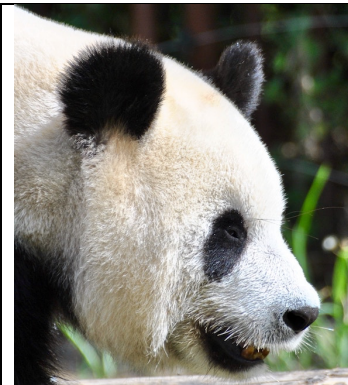
Again, this didn't help. The new Operations Leader was convinced that, because the page in *We the People* that stated the Operations Leader makes all decisions appeared *later* in the book,

many pages after the first statement, this later statement must be the *actual* truth. Therefore, he would make all decisions for Operations Meetings.

He also had the greatly mistaken idea that any issue other than an actual proposal *was in fact an operations issues* (not true!), so he would decide these issues as well. I emailed the new Operations Leader and offered him a series of sociocracy training sessions on Skype at no charge. But he declined, saying he was too busy, and it was unnecessary anyway since he already understood sociocracy very well.

Cypress Grove's "sociocracy wars" didn't seem to result from anyone's harmful intentions, as community members seemed motivated by a genuine desire to help their community. These wars occurred, in my opinion, simply because the Cypress Grove simply hadn't met what I now see as the four necessary requirements.

### **SOCIOCRACY GETS A "BLACK EYE" AT SEQUOIA GLEN CO-OP**



A few years later I did an afternoon review workshop for Sequoia Glen Coop — three small cohousing developments in a rural area.

Some Sequoia Glen members had participated in a sociocracy workshop for their organization with a sociocracy trainer friend. Before I visited Sequoia Glen he told me they now used sociocracy.

Later Sequoia Glen's president and meeting facilitator, whom I'll call Sam, called on Skype to tell me about a series of difficult meetings they'd since the group began using sociocracy.

They had leased a building with a kitchen and dining room on an adjacent property where they held weekly shared meals, he told me, but the building had become overrun with mice. So, they created and consented to a proposal to have two cats to live in the building to catch mice, and they'd review the implemented proposal in six months.

Six months later the mice were gone, and Sequoia Glen members liked the cats and wanted to keep them. But two members disliked cats and a third was highly allergic to them. These members had waited for six months for the proposal's review meeting to tell the others why they wanted to reverse the decision and get rid of the cats. At this meeting Sam tried to conduct a discussion to evaluate the effect of the cats. But people were so emotional and the meeting so contentious, he said, nothing was resolved. Those who wanted the cats and those who didn't want them used what he called "bullying and shaming tactics" to shout each other down.

This didn't sound much like sociocracy to me!



### ***Few Sequoia Glen Members Understood Sociocracy***

Then I learned that only a small group of homeowners regularly attended the business meetings, and these were the relatively few members who had taken my friend's original sociocracy training. Other members only attended meetings when there were issues they cared about. Then I learned the small group that had taken the training and regularly attended meetings were the members who'd proposed and then consented to their own proposal that Sequoia Glen Cooperative stop using consensus and use sociocracy instead. (The proposal was not, as most sociocracy trainers now recommend, to first try sociocracy for 18 to 24-months to see if they liked it, but to just change to it completely.) Thus, like at Cypress Grove, *most* community members hadn't attended the meeting where sociocracy was proposed and consented to, nor had they ever had any training in it.

This was supposedly a group that "used sociocracy," yet most Sequoia Glen members knew relatively little about it. And they weren't interested in learning more!

### ***Sequoia Glen's misunderstanding about including Feedback Questions in proposals***

It was obvious to me that even though Sequoia Glen members had agreed to a six-month period to try out and later evaluate the cat proposal, neither Sam nor the other members who'd taken the sociocracy training actually understood how to include feedback questions in proposals. In the wording of the cat proposal, for example, they had *not* included questions to measure and evaluate how well using the two cats to clear out the mice had worked, and what people thought about it and felt about. They included no questions to determine how effective the proposal was re the mouse problem. Nor did they understand that after measuring and evaluating specific impacts of the cats on the building and the people, they would have three choices: (1) keep the cats, (2) change how the cats functioned in their mouse-catching role, or (3) remove the cats and try something else. Lastly, they also didn't seem to understand they could do this process several times if they wanted, adjusting the implemented proposal as needed as they got new information. Instead the proposal wording said only that after their six-month review period they'd continue to use the cat solution, "if we can live with it." This kind of wording is *not* how feedback questions are used in sociocracy! This wording was more like a "sundown clause" in consensus, because their idea was to abandon the cat solution if they found they couldn't "live with it" — whatever that meant — as "live with it" was not clearly defined.

No *wonder* Sequoia Glen had so much conflict!

### ***No Community Membership Process or Shared Understanding of Governance***

I soon realized the community had an even more basic problem. *They didn't actually have the basic structures in place that any intentional community needs in order to function well.* This

was first, *an agreed-upon governance and decision-making method*, and second, *a clear, thorough membership process for new incoming members*. If they'd had had a community membership process, it would require getting to know and then choosing new members based on their shared values and lifestyle choices *and* on the new members' willingness to learn and use the group's governance and decision-making method. Rather, at Sequoia Glen, anyone who bought a home from a departing member in any of the three neighborhoods immediately became a full member with full decision-making rights in the Co-op's business meetings, regardless of whether they'd ever been trained in their decision-making method yet or even knew what it was. Second, as we've seen, relatively few of their members even understood how to use sociocracy in the first place.

*This* was the group — with its controversial cats topic — that Sam bravely tried to lead through the various steps of proposal-forming and consent decision-making!

I didn't realize all this at first though. I thought Sequoia Glen's problem was simply their misunderstanding about using feedback questions in proposals. So, I suggested to Sam that the group consider trying again with another trial period for the cats, *this* time with clear, specific questions for how to later measure and evaluate the cats' impact on the mice, the building, and themselves. And to make sure that group members knew their three "keep it," "change it," or "throw it out" options each time they measured and evaluated the implemented cats proposal.

### **"Sociocracy — We don't like it!"**

Unfortunately, this turned out to be bad advice. Sam later emailed to say the group had tried to do this but endured another six months of horrible conflict. Desperate, unhappy, and feeling pressured by the three anti-cat members, the group finally reluctantly agreed to remove the cats. This pleased three people but was painful for everyone else. And worse, most people in Sequoia Glen felt so bitter about sociocracy they no longer wanted to use it at all!

I believe Sequoia Glen's original sociocracy trainer was mistaken. They had *not* been using sociocracy. They'd been using an improperly understood version of some of its parts. But they *believed* they were using sociocracy. No wonder sociocracy got a black eye in their group!



### **My Big Mistake as a Sociocracy Consultant**

My mistake with Sequoia Glen, I now think, was failing to realize that this group was not actually using sociocracy. And in not advising them — given their situation — *to not try to use what they thought of as "sociocracy" at all*, but to hold another sociocracy training — this time for everyone. No group can use a governance method if only a small percentage of members decided to use it or understand it.


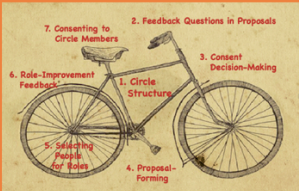




It's quite different for businesses and nonprofits. If the bosses agree to try sociocracy, employees will learn and use it; it's a management decision. Everyone benefits, as the distinctions between bosses and employees are reduced when everyone has consent rights. In intentional communities, though, I now believe using Sociocracy *only* works if the whole group approves a proposal to try it for a time (with all its parts!), and agrees everyone will learn it.




## CYPRESS GROVE AND SEQUOIA GLEN – NO REQUIREMENTS WERE MET!

 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS:</b></p> <p><b>1. EVERYONE Learns It*</b></p> 	<p><b>(1) Not everyone learned sociocracy.</b> Too few members in each group had learned sociocracy, and neither offered additional training so other members and newer members could learn it too. At Sequoia Glen, only the relatively few who learned some of its parts consented to their proposal that the whole group would adopt it. They autocratically imposed it on everyone else! This violates the principle of consent.</p>
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At Cypress Grove as well, too few members had learned sociocracy originally, and that had been years before. Neither community realized everyone needed more sociocracy training so everyone would be on the same page about how to use it.

 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS</b></p> <p><b>2. Use All Seven** Parts</b></p>  <p><i>(Graphic: Johnny Azpilicueta)</i></p>	<p><b>(2) Both communities used only some of the seven parts.</b> Neither community used Role-Improvement Feedback or Consenting to Circle Members. Sequoia Glen didn't really understand how to include Feedback Questions in proposals correctly. Cypress Grove didn't include Feedback Questions in proposals at all.</p>
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 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS</b></p> <p><b>3. Use Sociocracy as Your Sociocracy Trainer Teaches</b></p> <p>18 months to 2 years</p> 	<p><b>(3) Both communities modified and changed sociocracy until it barely functioned.</b> Neither group seemed to understand sociocracy very well after they'd changed it and combined it with consensus, whether they realized this or not. Thus, they used sociocracy incorrectly and ineffectively. And with Governance Drift, more errors crept in over time.</p>
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 <p><b>FOUR REQUIREMENTS</b></p> <p><b>4. Periodic Review Trainings</b> (Workshops, Consultations)</p>  	<p><b>(4) Review trainings and consultations couldn't help.</b></p> <p>When each community finally had review trainings, or even short review consultations, it didn't help. In both cases there was a backlog of misinformation, confusion, and conflict. My attempts to help and those of other trainers to give accurate information and correct their misunderstandings were "too little, too late," and only served to drive a wedge even further</p>
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between those who understood sociocracy and their fierce opponents who understood less, giving rise to power struggles and inevitable sociocracy wars.

### A Fifth Requirement?

Perhaps there should be a fifth "necessary requirement." I've recently found it works well to as an in-house consultant for a week or two, working with each circle individually and facilitating Policy Meetings in order to model meeting facilitation and help train each circle's facilitators. My friend and fellow sociocracy trainer Sheella Mierson does this for the businesses and nonprofits she teaches, with excellent results.

### MEETING ALL FOUR REQUIREMENTS

	<p><b>1. Better Meetings</b></p> <p><b>"We've made more decisions in the past two months than we have in the past two years!"</b> —Davis Hawkowl, Pioneer Valley Cohousing, Amherst, Massachusetts</p> <p><b>"A visitor said she'd never seen a community meeting be so effective, efficient, and fun!"</b> —Hope Horton, Hart's Mill Ecovillage, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2014</p>
	<p><b>2. Getting More Done</b></p> <p><b>"The biggest thing is that we get things done. We don't have a backlog of things people are afraid to bring up."</b> —Mike April, Pioneer Valley</p> <p><b>"People are happier and more satisfied and getting more things done."</b> —Laurie Nelson, Pioneer Valley Cohousing</p>
	<p><b>3. Being Better Organized</b></p> <p><b>"I would never have joined the community if we didn't use Sociocracy. It's our saving grace."</b> —Kreel Hutchison, Baja BioSana Ecovillage, La Paz, Mexico</p>



**4. Feeling More Connected**

***"The meeting process creates a sense of connectedness."***  
—Bill Baue, Pioneer Valley Cohousing

***"People feel heard and supported."***  
—Mike April, Pioneer Valley Cohousing

Using Sociocracy doesn't have to be like the experiences of Cypress Grove or Sequoia Glen. Hart's Mill Ecovillage, a forming ecovillage near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Rocky Corner Cohousing, a forming cohousing community in New Haven, Connecticut, both meet all four necessary requirements. Everyone learns Sociocracy, as each community regularly offers in-house trainings for new members. Each group uses all seven parts, including building feedback questions into proposals and later measuring and evaluating the effects of their proposals after trying them for awhile. And each community benefits from review trainings and consultations.

***"Our meetings rock!"***

"Our meetings just rock," observes Hart's Mill cofounder Hope Horton. "Recently we had a huge amount of business to conduct in one large-group meeting that lasted for 3 hours. We moved through it easily, spending no more than about 10 minutes on each issue. It took a lot of preparation and training to accomplish this, but we have a group coherence around this process now, and people tend to have more energy after a meeting than before. When new people learn the steps of the process, and learn how to do rounds, they're amazed at how much we can get done. They feel confident that when they come to a meeting it will be productive, so people don't mind coming to them — lots of them!"

***"I want everyone to use sociocracy!"***

"I personally place so much value on sociocracy that I have become critical of every other organization in my life," wrote Rocky Corner member Marie Pulito in the Spring 2016 issue of *Communities*. "The redundancy of tasks where I work is horrendous. My church meetings make me cringe. The annual meetings of my small New England town fall far short. Where is the equivalence of voice, the power of many minds coming together to find a solution to a problem? I now want every organization in the world to use sociocracy!"

*See two versions of "Sample Community Membership Agreement", next page.*

*This handout appeared in a shorter form in the Winter, 2016 issue of Communities magazine*

# Sample Community Member Agreement (short version 6.12.20)

## Participating in Meetings Before Learning Sociocracy

1. **I, \_\_\_\_\_(name)\_\_\_\_\_ will learn Sociocracy as soon as I conveniently can.**
2. **In the meantime I won't try to make our community revert to using consensus in meetings. I won't try to induce the facilitator to call on me whenever I raise my hand, or to force the meeting to have an open discussion unless I propose an open discussion for a specific period of time and everyone then consents to that proposal.**

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 (person making this agreement)

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Person representing the community in this agreement)

# Sample Community Member Agreement

## Participating in Meetings Before Learning Sociocracy

(longer version, for community which has used consensus a long time or has one or more aggressive members 6.12.20)

1. **I, \_\_\_\_\_(name)\_\_\_\_\_ will learn sociocracy as soon as I conveniently can.**
2. **In the meantime, in meetings I won't try to make our community revert to using consensus decision-making or voting. Specifically, I will:**

- *Remember I haven't yet learned sociocracy and don't yet understand the steps of Consent Decision-Making and the other meeting processes in Policy Meetings (Circle Meetings).*

- *Support a meeting facilitator rather than question, interrupt, or try to stop him or her lead our circle through the steps of a meeting process. More specifically, not consider a facilitator to be, or label or accuse a facilitator of being an "autocrat," "dictator," or similar term, but remember I haven't yet learned sociocracy and until I do will support facilitators in doing their job.*

- *Not insist that the facilitator call on me whenever I raise my hand, or blurt out that I want to be called on immediately. Rather, I will wait as the facilitator calls on each person in turn around the circle, knowing that I can speak freely when it's my turn, and will wait until it's my turn to speak.*

- *Try to force our circle to have an open discussion in a Policy Meeting unless I first propose — in an informal "process proposal" — that we have an open discussion for a certain specific period of time (5 minutes, 10 minutes?), and everyone in our circle consents to my proposal that we have a discussion for that amount of time.*

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Person making this agreement)

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Officer of the community or a community member represents the community in this agreement)

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