

Arbo Life

CASE STUDY

By: Annick Milet Wagner in the context of Sociocracy For All's Sociocracy Leadership Training



Presentation from Arbolife

Arbolife was founded by Morli and Marc Mathys because they wanted to take a road to better care about themselves and the planet. They experienced the difficulty of finding the right information, the proper contacts, be informed about ongoing events,...

So, they decided to launch a website where people in the French speaking part of Switzerland could easily join and find information. The first version was launched in August 2016. End of 2018, Arbolife will provide you with:

- a huge directory listing stores, vegetable boxes, online shops, restaurants (second hand, health food, bulks, natural cosmetics, ethical and fairtrade)
- the events in each area (for example: seminar in the forests, a women meet up, a sociocracy workshop, a vegan cooking course,...)
- a blog inviting you to share with others on various topics like Cleaning products, Meditation, Natural health, Renewable energy, Permaculture, Poetry,...
- services of event management platform for people who organize things.

Via their website : we get a very good insight on the project and the story of the team. Here are a few extracts. <https://www.arbolife.com/en/about-us/#story>

Let's summarize it using the VMA model!

VISION: "We're contributing to evolve the world by showcasing and making it easy to access good finds for a balanced life and the environment."

MISSION: "Our goal is for everyone to be empowered and fulfilled"

AIM: "We are creating a space in the French part of Switzerland to get informed, learn and share with each other, join events, and find restaurants, stores, and activities."

This work is performed by 22 people. So what kind of organization did they put in place?

A. From unstructured enthusiastic collaborative team to an engaged volunteer organization!

The co-founder, Marc, comes from a corporate background. When he founded Arbolife with his wife, he had *a strong need to do things differently*. As the usual way of running an association seemed old-fashioned and boring (General assembly, reports,...), they created an LLC.

"If we want to produce results different from those produced by the system we know, we have to start by functioning differently inside the project."
- Marc Mathys

Let's imagine 4 people sitting together, eager to move on with their project! Happy to discuss, imagine, project and create in a fully participatory way... So it progressed without a real structure but when the team grew bigger, the need for a governance structure appeared clearly. The tools provided by sociocracy seemed to match the needs. Actually, according to

Marc, the development of the team was done iteratively in an agile way, particularly during the first year: new needs promoted the introduction of new tools and ways to work together.

These are typical things which were introduced during this evolution:



- Decision by consent
- Role of the time keeper
- Role of the facilitator
- Role of the secretary
- Operational roles organized in circles
- Link via 2nd link (bottom up construction)

The link via 2nd link means that each sub circles chooses a delegate who will represent the circle in the general circles (Intrapreneur and Coordination, see picture below)

Where are they these days?

- Each circle has to formalize their roles
- Maybe a 1st link will be added
- An association has been founded to separate the activities.

On their website, they write about their governance system in the following way:

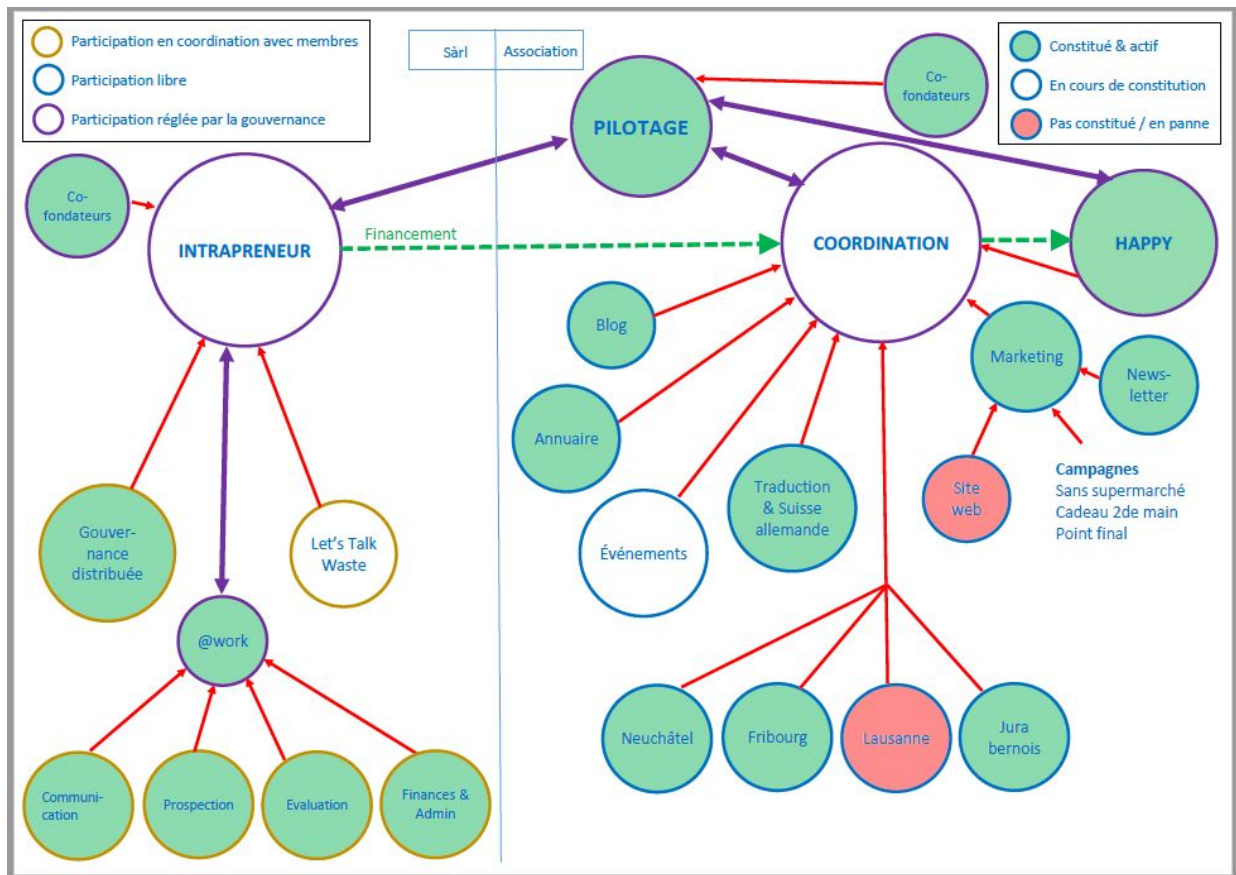
“As it seems obvious to us that cultivating one’s inner garden (balance) and exterior garden (planet) is the same action in a different context, it goes without saying that the choice of our internal functioning (governance system) is directly linked to the results we want to produce outside (transform the world).”

As we were developing ArboLife, our integral vision of functioning naturally led us towards sociocracy, a participative model with no hierarchy, where everyone can be equally involved in the project. Similar to holacracy, sociocracy is a dynamic governance model that is emerging as an alternative to classic hierarchical organizational models.

Fundamentally, the project is organized in autonomous and connected circles, there are no hierarchical links between people, and all decisions are taken unanimously within each circle.

In order to facilitate action and reduce time spent in meetings, each circle can make decisions autonomously and propose its decisions to other circles. As in agile organizations, current conditions guide decisions, and these decisions are considered "temporary". Everything can be challenged and created differently by the group, should the circumstances evolve and require a different course of actions."

This is how the organization is currently defined.



On the left side, we have the LLC, it contains the activities which are meant to produce sales revenue, it can welcome new entrepreneurs who start an activity and it defines the governance of the whole system. 10% of the revenue is given to the association.

On the right side, the association gathers all the volunteers' activities running the blog, participating in events, taking care of the website or Newsletter, stimulating local networks in each city,...

The members in the purple circles are defined by the governance (delegates from the sub-circles), the ones in the blue circles are free to join, the participation in the yellow circles is coordinated with others. We can see the 2nd links in place (red arrows). The "Pilotage " circle monitors the coordination between both entities (the limited liability company and the association).

Have you seen that there is a circle called HAPPY ??

Its members are dedicated to promote happiness inside the organization. They intervene if there are doubts or tensions and they are the ones sending friendly reminders when a member is not clarifying his-her engagement.

B. Engagement? What do we mean here?

"We are building a platform to meet the evolving needs of our society and for the preservation of our planet. Our values are the source of our motivation, our actions, and the results we produce."

— The ArboLife Team



At Arbolife, there is a specific induction process. Indeed, when you join, your motivation as volunteer will be formalized:

- You agree to the founding values (Integrity, Kindness and Authenticity)
- You add your personal values
- You write your engagement for action
- You sign a kind of contract in which you
 - Commit to your engagement for action with integrity (meaning no over commitment and change possible)
 - Choose one or several circles to participate
 - Organize a contact with the Happy circle
 - Adopt the use of the team tools (One Note and Slack)

Of course, your engagement is visible for everybody inside Arbolife. According to Sophie, it helps:

- Clarifying what you bring to the collaboration
- As well as your inner motivation
- Making you acknowledge and adopt the ways of functioning at Arbolife
- Taking more seriously your time investment

As an example, when Sophie joined in spring 2017, her main engagement for action was to create the circle in Lausanne, now her current engagement is more linked with helping Arbolife to get the B-Corp certification (Social and environmental impact).

Your engagement has to be renewed each 6 months.

How to help newcomers embrace the Arbolife dynamic governance?

Marc is proposing a 2-days training to the Arbolife members. During the 2 days, participants get an introduction to a more systemic approach using the four quadrants model (Ken Wilber, 1995) and the Spiral dynamics (Don Beck, 1996). They learn as well about the principles of sociocracy and practice the facilitator role. Thus, members get a good practical understanding on how to help within Arbolife.

C. What about the future?

There are many wishes for development into the future. Let's list some of them:

- Make the circles fully autonomous and add the first link
- Develop new activities
- Simplify the onboarding
- Grow within the whole country (German and Italian speaking part).



A final word? Arbolife's motto!

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD...

by taking care of ourselves, others, and the planet!