

The *circle* is a universal symbol for wholeness and inclusion, while the Greek letter *sigma* denotes the sum of all parts of a whole. The *Circle Sigma System* provides a framework for communities of individual people to work together in connection toward wholeness as expressed by their common aim or goal. The community and its members are guided by common central principles, self-organize for connection and success, and commit to ongoing relational development.

A Circle Sigma Community manifests the values of connection, equivalence, and effectiveness through integrated application of the Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, Compassionate Communication and Restorative Circles.

Guiding Principles

- Vision: a view or dream of the world the community is working toward.
- Mission: how the community operates in order to realize the vision (internal view).
- Aim: a product or service that is the focus of work for the community (external view).

Organizational Structure

- A linear hierarchy of operational units and leaders supports getting things done.
- Each operational unit periodically transforms into a circular arrangement that incorporates the contribution of all member in mutually deciding how they work together.
- Every level of the organization is interconnected, providing the two-way flow of power and accountability.

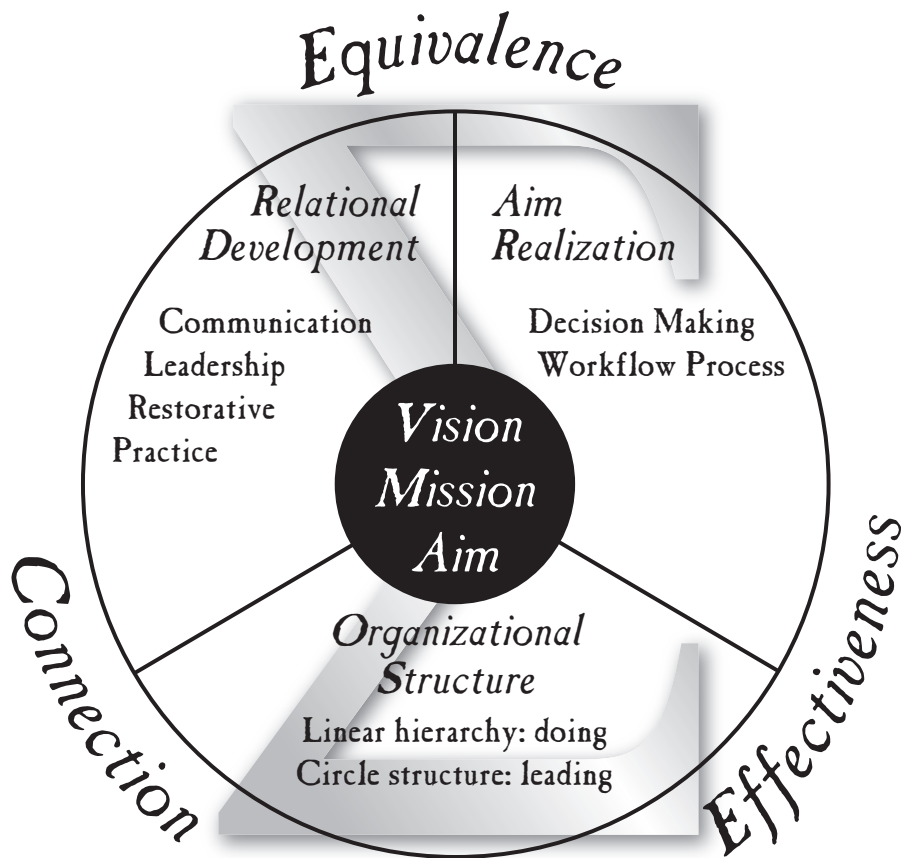
Aim Realization

- Documented, repeatable workflow processes are in place to achieve measurable outcomes.
- Consent decisions are made with equivalence of all circle members, producing policies that everyone can live with.

Relational Development

- Effective communication and interpersonal connection grow from a shared trust that everyone's needs matter and everyone's voice is important.
- Leadership is a function that is shared among members of the community. Members commit to sharing power and developing their own skills for working together.
- The community places a high value on connected relationship and uses restorative practices to address conflict within the community.

The Circle Sigma System



The Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, also known as Sociocracy or Dynamic Governance, was developed by Gerard Endenburg, a Dutch engineer. It is a governance model that produces an effective organizational structure, efficiently organizes tasks, features a decision-making process that values the input of every individual and makes room for meaningful relationships within the group, and organically produces accountability and interconnection between different levels of the organization. Sociocracy is one of the principal components of the Circle Sigma System.

Structure:

One interesting aspect of a sociocratic organization is its structure. The basic unit of organization is called a “circle,” which can be thought of as “an arena in which things happen.” An organization can be made up of several operational circles, each of which serves some function that supports the overall mission of the organization. In day to day operations, an operational circle operates like any other group or entity with a mission; there is an operational leader who directs the activities of the circle members according to the circle’s mission, aim, and policies, and things get done. The difference from a typical organization is that periodically the circle meets in a different way, called a circle meeting, in order to decide on the policies that govern these day-to-day activities (see the section on Decision Making). Circles in the organization exist at every level of the hierarchical structure, including a General Circle responsible for the day to day operations of the organization, and a Top Circle that fulfills many of the strategic functions of a traditional Board of Directors and connects the organization with the outside world.

Workflow:

Within an operational circle, the sociocratic method provides a variety of tools to organize production in an efficient manner. The most important aspect of these tools is the idea of a “circular process,” known as Leading - Doing - Measuring. We are all most familiar with the “Doing” phase; we spend most of our time in organizations getting things done (or trying to!). We are also somewhat acquainted with the “Leading” phase, which in sociocratic terms means the policy or instructions governing our doing. The revolutionary part of the circular process is in “Measuring” - how are we doing relative to the instructions or policies? When we organize our production in this way, we develop what is known as a “steerable” organization. Each time we finish a task (Doing), we check the results against the policy or instructions (Measurement), and make adjustments to either bring the task execution (Doing) in line with the policy (Leading), or to change the policy if it is not working.

Decision Making:

Another aspect of a circle, alluded to earlier, is the circle meeting. In terms of what we've learned so far, the circle meeting is intended to create or modify the policies (Leading) that direct how tasks are accomplished (Doing). Within the circle meeting each member is equivalent, regardless of position in the hierarchical structure. Decisions are made by consent, meaning that each member must be willing to live with any proposed policy or decision. When a member withdraws consent by making an objection, the circle works together to find an alternate strategy to resolve the objection. The principle of equivalence, embodied in decision making by consent, leads to a spaciousness and energy within the circle meeting that is often not present in a typical majority-rule organization. There is never the chance of a "tyranny of the majority" or a "disgruntled minority," and resolving objections becomes a practice in working together to ensure everyone's needs are met. This decision making method is also used to select individuals for tasks and positions, matching the qualifications and experience of a person to the requirements of the task or position.

Accountability:

Just as water in a pipe can only flow in one direction at a time, so information, power, and accountability within an organization can only flow in one direction at a time. In a typical organization, the flow is only downward (except for accountability, which is usually only upward); in a sociocratic organization, the circles at every hierarchical level are interconnected with those above and below them through what's called a Double Link. For example, the General Circle (think of this as the operational leadership of the entire organization) appoints the Operational Leader of each Operational Circle, providing a "downward link" of information, power, and accountability. Each Operational Circle also has one or more elected representatives on the General Circle, providing an "upward link" or feedback path for information, power and accountability.

Circle meetings provide a format that helps the facilitator balance the tension between creative chaos and organization, in order to produce effective results. Characteristics include:

- Assignment of roles to help keep the meeting on track.
- The use of rounds to provide a structured opportunity for each circle member to provide input.
- Distinct variations of the consent decision making process for preparing proposals, refining existing proposals, and selecting people for tasks and positions.

Roles.

Roles are clearly defined, with specific responsibilities and expectations. Roles may be assigned long term, or meeting by meeting. Roles include:

- **Facilitator:** works with Recorder/Meeting Manager to develop agenda for upcoming meeting, reviews previous closing round comments to learn from any suggestions for improvement, and guides (facilitates) the meeting and keeps the group on track.
- **Recorder/Meeting Manager:** records decisions made and applicable discussion for future reference, circulates record in a timely manner, retains records for easy access by all members, solicits and collects agenda items from members for next meeting, works with facilitator to develop agenda, sends out agenda several days before the meeting, and ensures room arrangements are in order for next meeting.

Rounds.

A round is used to get input from each circle member. The facilitator calls for a round, selects the starting point in the circle (a person), and defines the direction and time limit for each person, if applicable. Types of rounds:

- **Opening (check-in):** align the group members with each other and the aim or purpose of the meeting through sharing and connection; collect additional agenda items.
- **Closing:** provide feedback on the meeting process and outcome and share what's alive for the members.
- **Clarification:** an opportunity to ask questions about the proposal, question, or idea, and say what needs to be added for clarity.
- **Quick Reaction:** what is each member's initial reaction to an idea or proposal?
- **Consent:** is each member willing to go along with this decision? What needs to change for an objection to be withdrawn?

Decision Methods.

Three distinct variations of the consent decision making process are used in different situations.

- Short Format (Tune-up): An existing proposal is reviewed and revised, with final approval determined through consent. Clarification and quick reaction rounds collect input to modify the proposal if necessary, and a consent round is used to check for objections.
- Long Format (Proposal Development): A decision is made “from scratch.” The group determines the issues to be addressed, develops a proposal to address all the issues, and approves the proposal through a consent round.
- Election: Select people to tasks and for positions such as facilitator and recorder. Rounds are used to collect nominations, offer reasoning (arguments) for proposed candidates, and make the selection by consent.

Consent decision making produces high quality, mutual decisions with the input of all group members, without the use of majority voting and the related possibility of a disgruntled minority. Some characteristics of consent decision making are:

- Each group member is equivalent, and must have no paramount objection (consent) to a proposal for it to become a decision.
- Each group member may withhold consent to a proposed decision by presenting a paramount and reasoned (argued) objection.
- Given one or more objections to a proposed decision, there is a process for refining the proposal to address the objections and make a decision.

Equivalence.

Each group member has an equal voice in each decision, and each member's input is required when considering a proposal. The circle meeting format and use of rounds help a group achieve equivalence.

Consent.

In consenting to a proposal, each member is saying that he can live with it. A proposal need not be perfect in order for consent, but it must be "good enough." We assume that no decision can be perfect and "good enough" improves with time.

Objection.

An objection must be reasoned (argued) and paramount in order to be valid.

A reasoned objection is clearly stated, has characteristics that are observable by others, and relates to the aim or purpose of the group ("if we decide to only have one workshop slot, we will only be able to train twenty people, so we will not be able to meet our aim of training fifty people during this weekend."). An objection is paramount if the proposed decision takes the member or the group outside any personal limits or agreements ("We are unable to provide three workshops because we only have two trainers."). Objections are ignored at the risk of damage to the group. A "niggle" or preference may be the starting point for a discussion resulting in an objection.

Resolution.

Objections are resolved by modifying the proposal such that consent can be reached. One way this can be accomplished is by beginning with a proposed modification from the member raising the objection, then using rounds to see if it meets the needs of the other members. In the end, a final consent round is required to approve the decision.

Example.

The concepts of equivalence, consent, objection, and resolution of objection can be illustrated using the example of a car with a missing wheel, faced with the decision of whether to continue driving down the road.

- Equivalence: each part of the car has an equal voice in whether the auto will continue driving.
- Consent: a missing wheel has withdrawn its consent to continue driving.
- Objection: the missing wheel's objection is paramount ("I can't continue driving because I'm not attached to the axle") and reasoned ("if we decide to continue driving, we will suffer damage").
- Resolution: repairing the missing wheel removes the objection, and results in consent by all members of the system (the car's parts) to continue driving.

Consider this: if the car were to make this decision by majority vote, 75% of the wheels vote to continue driving. With a clear majority, the car's decision is to attempt to drive despite the missing wheel, which would probably result in severe damage to the system (the car). Likewise, majority voting in groups can result in damage to the system (the group and its relationships) when paramount and reasoned objections are ignored.