An Introduction to Dynamic Governance

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Dynamic Governance, more properly known as sociocracy, encompasses a complete system of social organization. It addresses group dynamics, organizational structure, leadership, and includes an egalitarian philosophy of decision making that encourages personal responsibility and participation. This approach can be employed on a small scale by individuals and small groups, as well as on a large scale by governments and businesses.

When compared to other governance systems, dynamic governance provides a middle ground that avoids the "tyranny of the majority" that occurs with majority rule voting as well as the "tyranny of the minority" that occurs with consensus based decision making. Because dynamic governance addresses each individual's role and responsibility in making decisions that affect them, some say it embodies a better democracy. Because it addresses the procedures groups use to conduct business, some say it embodies a better meeting process. Finally, because it includes an organizational structure, some say it demonstrates way to create more effective organizations of all sizes and purposes.

Decision Making by Autocracy, Democracy, and Consensus

Autocratic systems allow for a single person in charge from whom all authority flows. Whether a military structure with commanding officers, a business with a CEO and hierarchical management structure, or a democracy with elected leaders, decisions are made and handed down to those below. These systems can be highly efficient and effective in accomplishing specific objectives so they have their place when such efficiency is of the utmost importance; however, the voice of the people is usually drowned out in such systems.

Sure, there have been attempts to make autocratic systems more responsive to the people. Some organizations have added ombudsman positions to provide an alternative communication channel that is directed upwards from below. However, the inherent structure of autocratic systems does not support democratic participation. Such things can only be achieved by working around the autocratic hierarchy.

To work well, these improvement efforts are always dependent on the personal skills and attitudes of the leaders. For example, successful military leaders learn to use the informal advice of their non-commissioned officers as a "back channel" for information on their units.

Even the practice of majority rule voting, long upheld as the most egalitarian system known, often produces oppression of minority groups. When minority views are suppressed by the system, itself, the "tyranny of the majority" occurs.

Some have promoted consensus-based decision making to be a better alternative to

majority rule voting. (By "consensus" I am referring to the ideal that all participants must agree with a decision before it can be considered final. Here unanimity of agreement is the essence of consensus.) The simple principle of consensus-based decision making has immediate appeal. How can you go wrong when everyone is in agreement?

Unfortunately, many groups have experienced difficulty in practice when they have relied solely on consensus. Chief among the problems has been the phenomenon of "deliberation fatigue" where decisions are long fought out and consequently participants stop engaging in the process. As a result, when decisions are obtained they are considered so precious that the group is loath to reconsider them for fear of starting another dreary discussion.

Another by-product of lengthy deliberations that cause participants to "drop out" along the way is a growing undercurrent of disagreement that builds when decisions have been reached without a true meeting of the minds. Some participants may have yielded on consensus when they perhaps should not have. Therefore, the group proceeds with a decision when there is a lingering doubt, or even outright disagreement, from some. The undercurrent of disagreement becomes a slow acting poison that grows and threatens the harmony of the group.

Perhaps an even more serious problem is the occurrence of a "block" by one or more group members that illustrates a seemingly irresolvable conflict between members. Such blocks are ostensibly a result of principled or philosophical disagreement, but many groups do not have a well defined procedure to evaluate the nature of a block to establish its legitimacy. Since the criteria for appropriate blocking is not always clear, the way to make progress after a block is also not clear. It is because of this that "tyranny of the minority"[2] often occurs.

Just as autocratic systems that are successful over a long time period depend highly on the sensitivity and skills of the leadership, so does consensus decision making. However, being dependent on leadership skills for success is not a sustainable situation. Much better to employ a system that works well in a much larger set of situations and not just when talented facilitators are involved.

The Dynamic Governance Solution

Dynamic governance provides refinements to decision making that are absent from autocratic hierarchies and majority rule democracy and, at the same time, help avoid the pitfalls encountered by consensus alone.

These refinements come as extensions to, and more elaboration of, the decision making process along with an organizational structure. Both the additional structure and process details have been carefully designed to overcome the shortcomings of consensus while preserving the essential valuable qualities it has over autocratic systems. Dynamic governance specifically retains the egalitarian idea that each participant holds equivalent power in the decision making process. Additionally it

provides more help to groups in managing that shared power to promote group productivity.

Three Governing Principles

Here are the three governing sociocratic principles[3]:

1. Consent governs decision-making. Consent means there are no argued and paramount objections to a proposed policy decision.

2. Governing is through circles. A circle is a semi-autonomous and self-organizing unit that has its own aim. It makes policy decisions within its domain; delegates the leading, doing, and measuring functions to its own members; maintains its own memory system; and plans its own development.

3. Circles are connected by double links. The connection between two circles is a double-link formed by the operational leader and one or more representatives who participate fully in the decision making of the next higher circle.

Understanding Consent

Dynamic government uses *consent* as the basis for decision making. Circles make policy decisions with the consent of all circle members. Votes are not taken. Instead the facilitator goes around the circle asking if each member consents to the proposal at hand. Any member who has an objection to the proposal must say so. In the absence of any objection the circle has made a decision.

Because this process appears similar to that of obtaining consensus, it is important to highlight the distinction between them. Consensus seeks *agreement* from participants. Agreement requires an alignment of thought that is sometimes difficult to achieve. Indeed, consensus works best when thoughts are largely in harmony before the decision making meeting is begun. This is why consensus sometimes appears to work well at the beginning of a group's life but breaks down over time. As life happens and people's experiences diverge their viewpoints diverge as well, separating the people from each other. Bringing them back together can sometimes require personal skills of each participant (to get them in a frame of mind that is conducive to group decision making) and discussion facilitation skills that are lacking in the group.

In contrast to the quest for *agreement*, dynamic governance seeks *acceptance* in order to make decisions. Acceptance can be achieved when there is the absence of an *argued and paramount objection* to a proposed decision. These terms have specific meaning in the context of dynamic governance. Their definitions are intentionally designed to highlight the essential characteristics of the objection for the specific purpose of resolving the conflict inherent in the objection. The focus here is on the problem solving required to remove the objection.

An *argued and paramount objection* has two parts. The "argued" part is a problem with the proposal that is clearly explained so that others can understand it. If "it just does not feel right" or "it seems unfair" are the only basis for an objection then it does not yet qualify. Such feelings must be explored until concrete, logical, and fact-based argument can be made based on those feelings. Until that can happen, no objection can be made.

The "paramount" part means that the problem would cause the organization to fail to function properly. Even if this means a single individual would be prevented from doing their job, the objection is paramount. Paramount objections require that the situation be adjusted to keep the organization functioning. Sometimes the proposal can be modified to accommodate the objection. Alternatively, a group's vision/mission/aim can be adjusted in response to an objection. Sometimes replacing a person in a specific role will remove the objection.

The key here is to focus on problem solving. An argued and paramount objection always addresses a flaw in a proposal and it must do so in a clear, reasoned way so that a rational process can be followed to resolve the problem.

When an objection to a proposed decision occurs it is a problem solving opportunity. Dealing with the objection solves the problem it represents and progresses the group toward a decision. Therefore, objections can be viewed as a welcome step in the process of reaching a decision.

Once all objections are dealt with, the group has effectively made its decision. Complete *agreement* by all participants is not necessary - only *acceptance* of the proposal.

Usually this process of making proposals and resolving objections is a smoother one than reaching agreement by consensus. Therefore, it can be faster and become more routine for the group. That, in turn, makes decisions - even about important issues - less of the "big deal" that they sometimes become when using consensus. That reduces deliberation fatigue.

Structural Aspects

Circles are structural elements of an organization. Usually there is a main management circle that provides a central coordinating role. All the members of the main circle are members of the organization.

Above that might be a smaller "top circle" that acts similar to a boards of directors. The top circle might include people who are from outside the organization who act as advisors or consultants.

Since most organizations do not conduct business as a whole, the main circle is comprised of the operational leaders and representatives of other circles that have more specific aims. Think of them as committees created by the main circle. These sub-circles are given their aim by the higher circle and they act semi-autonomously within

their domain.

The operational leader of each sub-circle is selected by the higher circle. When the sub-circle meets it selects a representative who then joins the higher circle. The operational leader's job is to communicate the needs of the higher circle to the sub-circle including its initial aim. The representative's role is to bring the concerns of the sub-circle to the higher circle.

This double link between the circles, comprising the operational leader and the representative, is an essential component of the dynamic governance structure.

This brief introduction to the sociocratic circle method may seem complex. If so, several references are available (see [3]) that include diagrams and other visual aids that illustrate these ideas clearly.

Procedural Aspects

Dynamic governance has a specific process for decision making and following this process is important to obtain the benefits of dynamic governance.

Circle meetings have a specific agenda that is published ahead of the meeting. Each circle meeting is begun with the facilitator conducting an opening round and concluding with a closing round. During each round each member has a chance to speak.

Between these rounds are other rounds that consider agenda items. The specifics are detailed in other places. What is important to note here is that following the procedures is an essential part of practicing dynamic governance.

The parts that are most important here are:
- employing each round. Each is an essential component of the DG procedure and has an important role to play.
- avoiding discussion until the proper time. For example, opening round allows each participant to share information that is not up for discussion.
- listening to contributions. Avoiding discussion also enables participants to hear what others think. That often influences what they think.

For lesser proposals the process can be shortened, but essential steps should always be included. A comment round should always be initiated even though members may not have much to say. It is the opportunity to comment that is important.

A consent round is even more important for that is where circle members actually make a decision. Providing an opportunity to hear objections is critical to healthy circle life. This can be as informal as just asking for any objections or as formal as asking for each member to respond in a round. Usually the more significant the decision, the more formal the procedure.

Underlying Model and Theory

All the details included in dynamic governance have been carefully considered and refined. Taken in their entirety they form a system that is well grounded in theory and experience. This means when you follow the dynamic governance system you should expect to reap the benefits that others have. In other words, the benefits derive from the system itself, not from the individuals involved or some specific magical parts of dynamic governance that you "cherry picked" to extract.

That is not to say the system is rigid. Within the overall framework lies plenty of opportunity for creative application and adaptation. But the value is in following the essentials faithfully. This is why some training is usually required to adopt dynamic governance successfully.

Becoming Dynamic

For most of us the principles of dynamic governance are not as familiar as principles such as "let the elected leader decide" or "one person, one vote" or "majority rule". Those ideas are so ingrained in western democratic culture that we are more comfortable with them than ideas of "consent" or "circle rounds". For this reason we must practice trying these new dynamic governance ideas out. As we practice, some mistakes will be made and perhaps some flawed policies will be adopted. One of the enviable attributes of dynamic governance is the built-in expectation that proposals should be reconsidered. Under dynamic governance, when a flaw is discovered in a policy (often due to changing circumstances, but sometimes due to sheer experience), then one or more participants can withdraw their consent and force a reconsideration of that policy.

This is one way the governance becomes dynamic. Each circle deliberates and adjusts its policies with full participation of its members. New policies are adopted with the consent of the participants and then shared with connected circles. Since no policy changes are made without due consideration and consent, connected circles receive new decisions that are already well considered. As this happens, the changes flow up and down the organization, improving the affected parts. Thereby, the organization adapts to changing circumstances without major management reorganizations.

Good ideas can come to anyone at any time. Consider what might happen to a good idea if it occurs to a worker in a lower part of an autocratic, hierarchical organization. She might tell her boss. The boss might like the idea but knows that *her* boss does not take kindly to subordinate suggestions, so the idea is discarded and goes no further. So the contribution of the worker who had the original idea is stifled.

Now consider that the same good idea occurs to a worker in a lower circle of an organization using dynamic governance. The worker takes the idea to his primary circle as a proposal. It is considered. Because in this scenario it is a good idea, the circle consents to passing it up to the next linked circle via the delegate. Because it is the

delegate's role to perform this service, the idea gets presented at the next circle. Someone there recognizes a problem with it and, therefore, does not consent to the idea. It gets passed back to the original circle for reconsideration. The idea gets refined and passed back. The second circle now consents to the idea and passes it on to another circle for implementation.

In this scenario no boss gets to quash the good idea. No boss gets to take credit for it and not share that credit with the original worker. Everyone is focused on considering the idea from the viewpoint of their circle's vision/mission/aim and of the overall organization's vision/mission/aim. In fact, the original worker has already looked at the idea from the viewpoint of the organization's vision/mission/aim because she knows what they are and knows the idea will not get far without being in accord with those ideas. Possible objections get dealt with readily and not deferred. The idea is improved every step in the process. It is not likely that the idea will get undermined, subverted, or otherwise ruined by self-interests because it is being considered in the open by multiple people at every step.

Associated Concepts

Several concepts and models are usually mentioned when discussing how to implement sociocratic principles. These are often employed to help the implementation process while dynamic governance is being adopted.

The most important model used is "lead-do-measure". This is sometimes referred to as a "cycle", which leads to describing it as a circular procedure. This, in turn, leads to "circles" which, of course, is one of the central concepts employed by dynamic governance.

Lead-do-measure describes how one should introduce a task (lead), then perform the task (do), and then evaluate what was done (measure). This may seem simple, and it is, but it is also one of the fundamental concepts of dynamic governance. The realization that this basic feedback loop, so prevalent in engineering procedures and products, is also a missing feature from other governance schemes is a key revelation that resulted in its inclusion in dynamic governance.

As a result, sociocratic circles use procedures that follow this model. The double links between circles implement this model. It is one of the aspects of dynamic governance that cannot be removed or substituted or adjusted.

Another relevant concept is the rather abstract notion of "input-process-output". This simple model can be used to describe any process - manufacturing, engineering, construction, decision-making. When considering an existing process to assess how it would be done under dynamic governance, examine the input, process, and output. That may help to discover the best lead-do-measure steps to employ.

If doing this helps you to better understand an existing situation then please use it. On

the other hand, if using input-process-output obscures your understanding, don't bother using it. There is nothing essential to understanding dynamic governance that requires that things be put into input-process-output terms. Just be aware that this model is one of the underlying concepts used in the development of dynamic governance.

Another concept is "both-and" thinking. This is sometimes used when facing a choice between what appear to be opposing viewpoints. When it seems you must pick A or B and you cannot decide, try to find a solution that includes both A and B. Once again, if "both-and" is helpful, use it. But do not forget about it because it still could be useful in the future.

[1] For more on tyranny of the majority see http://www.answers.com/topic/tyranny-of-the-majority
[2] For more on tyranny of the minority see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyranny_of_the_minority
[3] These principles are taken from *We The People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy, A Guide to Sociocratic Principles and Methods* by John Buck and Sharon Villines, 2007, ISBN 978-0-9792827-0 available from http://www.sociocracy.info