

What is Dynamic Governance?

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I attended a workshop on Dynamic Governance recently. While the concepts were not entirely unfamiliar to me, it wasn't until I used them at a recent group facilitation that I noticed how big a difference they made in both the energy level and the satisfaction of the individual group members.

What is Dynamic Governance? To answer that question, we need to take a look at what governance is. More than just the process of decision-making, governance is also the system by which decision-makers are determined and decisions are implemented.

Back in high school we learned about our nation's Constitution and the Bill of Rights that amended it. With all the political bickering that occurs over what is and is not a "constitutional right," we sometimes forget that the Constitution is also the document by which our government was formed. It provides the structure for the three branches of government and the checks and balances system that has made for a pretty good system of law-making, law-enforcement, and law-interpretation. It also describes the system by which our Senators, Congressmen, President, Vice-President, and Supreme Court Justices take office. It isn't so specific as to describe congressional rule-making procedure, but most of us are familiar enough with the voting process to know that in most cases, majority rules, and in some cases, a super-majority vote is required.

How we run our town councils, non-profit boards, and other governance structures pretty much mirrors the government system just described. Issues are aired in the board or council room, and a majority vote carries the day. *Roberts' Rules of Order*, which was published in 1870, has been the primary source of parliamentary procedure in our country's board and council rooms for over a century and is based on what Congress follows today. But is it appropriate in all instances?

It's important to have form and structure to reign in chaos. That's what rules and laws are for, after all. From a professional perspective, there's nothing worse than attending a meeting where no real progress seems to be made, where discussion deviates from the agenda, and too much table talk defeats the meeting's purpose. But Roberts' Rules, which follows a strict regimen of practice, may have only limited application in today's complex environment, where both expertise and different constituencies are valued.

The Dynamic Governance methodology derived from a systems thinking approach developed by Gerard Endenburg, a Dutch electrical engineer who wanted an atmosphere of cooperation in a business environment. In the 1960s and 70s he developed a formal organizational method named the Sociocratic Circular Organizing Method (Sociocracy), which has since been applied around the world by corporations, small businesses, nonprofit organizations, colleges, cohousing communities, and international professional and educational membership organizations. It is particularly well-suited for situations where there are a number of different stakeholder groups who are equally impacted by a decision.

So, how does it work? There are 4 principles:

1. **Consent governs policy decision-making.** *Policy decisions are made only after issues are fully explored. Individuals are individually polled for the reasons for or against a proposal. A decision is considered finally made when there are no “paramount objections.” Decisions regarding operations are made using traditional autocratic fashion, so it is important to know the difference between an operations decision and a policy or governance decision.*
2. **The organization is comprised of a hierarchy of semi-autonomous circles.** *Circles form around subject matter area. It is assumed that each circle is knowledgeable about its own processes and goals, but it must also adhere to the policies set by the larger organization.*
3. **The circles, including the “top circle,” are double-linked.** *Individuals participate in the decision-making of both their own circles and the next higher circle, which results in a feedback loop between circles.*
4. **Elections are by consent (no volunteers).** *Individuals are elected to leadership positions through a nominations process and every nominator is polled for the reasons for the nomination. The nominees are then allowed to give their agreement or objection to the nomination.*

Pretty heavy stuff. And even though I have received training on these principles, it's best to get a certified professional involved when tackling the organization of a complex structure that is interested in employing the Dynamic Governance methodology. However, there are a few processes that are easy to remember and can apply in any group setting. Here are a few that can start you off on the right foot as a facilitator of a new group (or even be used as a fresh approach to existing groups):

- **Periodic “Check-ins” done in rounds.** Check in with everyone at the beginning of the session and periodically throughout the meeting. Do the “check-in” with everyone in the room by engaging in a “round.” This process has the potential of keeping individuals engaged in the process and promotes trust in the room. The “check-in” also allows everyone to shed distractions and concerns.
- **Fully explore issues by asking each group member individually if they have concerns.** This process is done as a round. The group member will be empowered to offer his or her opinion, or if he or she has none, may pass. The issue becomes fully framed by the participation of each member.
- **Ask each group member to develop a proposal/solution (this may also be done in small groups).** Each group presents their proposal to the larger group, which is fully explored, again in rounds.
- **Always give the accepted proposal a term and a measurement.** This provides a means for evaluating the effectiveness of that proposal, and even though there is a specific time to revisit the decision, anyone can ask to revisit the decision at any time.
- **Never ask for volunteers.** Instead, tell the group to nominate themselves or someone else to the role. Following Principle #4, the nominators must state the reasons for the nominations, and the nominees must then respond. A discussion then follows which ultimately will determine who fills that role.
- **Continue to use agendas.** But combine them with an initial check-in, requests for changing agenda items, announcements, consent to minutes of the last meeting, and

confirmation of the next meeting. Then move into the Content agenda, which will require focus, exploration of issues, and suggestions of proposals, done in round form.

Even incorporating these little changes could make for a more robust and engaged discussion. They sure did for me!