

# **NVC, Sociocracy, and Social Change**

Advanced reading for the Sociocracy Workshop for NVC Practitioners in the Pacific Northwest, May 5-7, 2006

Mitch (Michele) Henrion

With significant contributions by:

Paula Kolthoff, The Netherlands  
John Buck, USA

Note that the following contributor reviewed a previous draft but has not yet had a chance to review this substantially different one.

Dominic Barter, Brazil

Comments and questions are encouraged; email Mitch at [mmh@alum.mit.edu](mailto:mmh@alum.mit.edu).

## **Why sociocracy? Isn't NVC enough?**

Reflecting on these questions, I'm reminded of the times I've also been asked, "Why NVC?"

I've met people who have never heard of NVC, yet operate in an NVC way. I haven't met many, but when I meet one I'm awestruck and think, "A natural giraffe!" I marvel that they naturally accomplish that which I struggle to achieve.

In those moments, I'm reminded that people around the world have many different tools to support them in connecting to themselves and to others, in living their lives to the fullest, and in making a difference on our planet.

Although NVC's four-part model supports my living from an energy I enjoy more than anything else I've ever found, I also derive benefit from other things like exercise, meditation, journaling, and time in nature.

For as many different tools as there are for living more fully, there are as many different ways to refer to this special state. Some descriptions allude more to the individual experience, some to the connection with others, and others to the functioning of a group.

In the world of NVC, I hear people speak of "getting in touch with what's alive in themselves and others." Practitioners of other disciplines talk about becoming more "centered," "grounded," or "connected with what's really important."

Others talk about

"connecting to the oneness of everything" or "...the universal energy" or "...the divine." Some business gurus speak of "spirit" or "high morale" in corporations or refer to "learning organizations." In sports there is talk of "dream teams." In some scientific disciplines, and in sociocracy, "dynamic" or "organic" describe living, adaptive systems.

So, why NVC? What makes NVC special? Why do we need NVC when there are already so many tools and techniques to help us live more fully and effectively? (And also, why sociocracy?)

For me the answer is encapsulated in the following story. I once read a fantastic book about common patterns in relationships and their source. Throughout the first half of the book, I felt awed by the clarity of the author's insights and became excited and hopeful about what those insights could mean for my life. I then started reading the second half of the book where the author offered tips for how to shift uncomfortable patterns. At that point I became discouraged and never finished the book. His most frequent suggestion was to keep your heart open and to love. In my head I screamed, "Yes, of course that would help, but how do you DO that?!"

For me, then, the answer to what's special about NVC is that it gives me concrete suggestions of what I can DO "to keep my heart open," "to love," to help me reconnect with an energy that I enjoy. It gives me a way to frame my experience and to structure my thinking that consistently supports my connecting with others and myself.

My answer to the question, "Why sociocracy?" is similar.

If I were a "natural giraffe," I might not feel drawn to study NVC. I might enjoy hearing words put to what I was intuitively doing and might appreciate knowing that such a framework helps others, but I might struggle to see how NVC could benefit me personally.

Likewise, if I were part of a team or organization that naturally, or by fully utilizing NVC, or by some other means, already functioned in a way that I thoroughly enjoyed and that regularly tapped into an energy bigger than all of us, I might not feel drawn to sociocracy.

The team in the following account might derive little additional benefit from sociocracy other than, perhaps, gaining insight into what they were doing that was supporting their phenomenal performance. Over thirteen years they won eleven world championships:

"By design and by talent," wrote basketball player Bill Russell of his team, the Boston Celtics, "[we] were a team of specialists, and like a team of specialists in any field, our performance depended both on individual excellence and on how well we worked together. None of us had to strain to understand that we had to complement each other's specialties; it was simply a fact, and we all tried to figure out

ways to make our combination more effective.... Off the court, most of us were oddballs by society's standards—not the kind of people who blend in with others or who tailor their personalities to match what's expected of them.”

Russell is careful to tell us that it's not friendship, it's a different kind of team relationship that made his team's work special. That relationship, more than any individual triumph, gave him his greatest moments in the sport: “Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even a mental game,” he wrote, “and would be magical. The feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened I could feel my play rise to a new level . . . It would surround not only me and the other Celtics but also the players on the other team, and even the referees . . . At that special level, all sorts of odd things happened. The game would be in the white heat of competition, and yet I wouldn't feel competitive, which is a miracle in itself . . . The game would move so fast that every fake, cut, and pass would be surprising, and yet nothing could surprise me. It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells, I could almost sense how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken ....<sup>1</sup>

Just as I've seen people who have no knowledge of NVC operate in NVC ways, I've seen highly effective groups of people who have no knowledge of sociocracy operate in sociocratic ways. Not surprisingly, I've seen experienced NVC practitioners naturally doing many of the things that sociocracy consciously incorporates.

You may, then, conclude, “So, all we need to do is have everyone practice their NVC more fully!” I truly believe that would work.

If that is not already happening, however, I can't help being reminded of the book that recommended “keep your heart open.” How do you DO that? How do you get everyone in a group to practice their NVC more fully so the group begins to experience Boston-Celtic-style magic?

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday), 1990.

Sociocracy answers that question, which is, then, my answer the question, “Why sociocracy?”

## **The history of sociocracy**

Though I’m tempted to jump straight to how I see sociocracy supporting the full utilization of NVC in organizations, I want to first tell you where the word “sociocracy” comes from and to introduce you to a natural giraffe: Gerard Endenburg.

In the early nineteenth century, French philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term *sociocracy*, defining it as a social system in which all members participate in their own governance. During the two hundred years since then, sociocratic ideals have been extolled by various philosophers and scientists dissatisfied with a subset of society (even a majority) operating a dictatorship over the rest of society.

Gerard Endenburg grew up steeped in sociocratic ideals. His parents publicly advocated reform of the prevailing social system and used their business (Endenburg Electrotechniek) as a laboratory for implementing their egalitarian principles. As a youth, Endenburg went to a sociocratically-organized school founded by Kees Boeke, an internationally renowned peace activist. In the school, Boeke based the school’s sociocracy on the Quaker model of self-governance.

“I too have found by trying out this method in my school that it really does work, provided there is recognition that the interests of others are as real and as important as one’s own. If we start with this fundamental idea, a spirit of goodwill is engendered which can bind together people from all levels of society and with the most varied points of view.”

...

In his school the process began in “talkovers” or weekly meetings that included both teachers and students, acting equally. Boeke envisioned that all society could be structured the same way. Kees taught the children in his school to be responsible for helping guide their own education and they flourished.

...

Gerard Endenburg finished his high school studies under Kees Boeke and went on to a traditional technical college. This shift from a sociocratic school to an authoritarian school was dramatic for Endenburg. The instructor was an autocrat ruling the classroom.

The students were quiet or even sullen and did not form cooperative groups. Some students were even bullies. Endenburg was amazed but adapted quickly. Boeke had taught him that people's behavior is molded by the prevailing governance structure.

...

After his mandatory military service Endenburg worked for Philips Electronics, and quickly displayed his technical genius by inventing the flat speaker that is still used today in personal radios and other hand-held electronics such as cell phones.

...

At this point Endenburg's father interrupted Gerard's career at Philips by challenging him to test his management skills. His father had bought a small, failing electronics company and suggested that the young Endenburg try to turn it from a loss to a profit. Endenburg succeeded in less than a year, and the company was merged with Endenburg Electrotechniek. Encouraged by Kees Boeke and challenged by friends to apply his understanding of sociocracy and cybernetics [the science of steering and control] to management, Endenburg eventually took over as general manager of Endenburg Electrotechniek with a charge from his parents that the company continue to be a living laboratory for new ideas in business management.<sup>2</sup>

From his lifetime of experience and experimentation, Endenburg has defined a set of organizing principles that answer the question: How do you DO it? These organizing principles form the foundation of Endenburg's sociocracy and have led to the flourishing of sociocratic governance outside of spiritual and other intentionally-egalitarian communities, as well as within them.

## **The foundation of sociocracy**

Just as NVC's four-part model gives me a way to structure my thinking that supports my living from an energy that I enjoy, Endenburg's four organizing principles give a way to structure an organization that supports it operating in a satisfying and enjoyable way.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Buck and Sharon Villines, *Sociocracy: A New Power Structure for Ethical Governance (A Working Manuscript)*, unedited draft ([www.buildingcommunitynews.org/sociocracy](http://www.buildingcommunitynews.org/sociocracy)), October 2005.

While I have described the sociocratic structure as supporting an enjoyable way of operating, others may describe it differently. Some might underscore that it respects the intrinsic worth and unique contributions of every member of an organization. Others might stress how it optimizes functioning and creativity. Others might particularly value its potential to guarantee socially responsible operation. Others might emphasize that it fosters the conditions necessary to create a consciously developing organization or a learning organization. Others might extol its establishment of an environment in which their most deeply held values are honored. Still others might highlight that it's fun!

## **Egalitarian values**

The four organizing principles derive primarily from two sources: 1) from Endenburg's experiences in organizations steeped in egalitarian values and 2) from his scientific understanding of system dynamics. The section on the history of sociocracy touched on some of Endenburg's egalitarian influences. In what follows, I'd like to give you a sense of the systems-based influences that also underlie the principles.

## **System dynamics**

I, personally, see the world through NVC lenses. Everything that happens, I translate into the language of NVC (sometimes after-the-fact!) to help me make sense of both the internal and external aspects of my world.

What does the world look like to someone with a scientific understanding of systems? How does such a person translate incoming information to make sense of it?

Imagine I'm explaining NVC to Endenburg. Looking through his systems-based lens, how might Endenburg make sense of NVC?

Picture me describing the four parts of the model, using the example of how I apply them at the level of the individual, the level of self, 'self empathy.' I'm bubbling with passion as I talk about how the NVC framework brings clarity to my experiences and how I feel so much more alive and capable than ever before.

After hearing my explanation of the four-parts—‘observation,’ ‘feelings,’ ‘needs,’ and ‘request’—Endenburg is grinning. (This is a fictitious scenario, but I bet he would be grinning, and what follows is my guess on what he’d say.)

“This NVC must work very well. Do you know why?”

I’m flustered at first because I’m guessing that he thinks that I don’t know why. “Yes, of course, because it connects me to myself, to what’s alive in me.”

Still smiling he says, “Yes, and do you know why it does that?”

Now I’m a bit more flustered, “Because it gets me to pay attention to myself?”

Being a gentle soul, he doesn’t leave me on the hot seat too long. He explains, “It’s because it brings your attention to how your human system was designed to work. All organic life maintains itself through cyclical processes. These processes allow the organism to constantly adapt to changes and disturbances in the environment. Cyclical dynamic processes always have three functions. By consciously identifying all three, NVC strengthens and begins to optimize the functioning of your human system.”

He continues, “I was smiling because you call it getting in touch with what’s ‘alive’ in you and you talk about how you feel more ‘alive’ when you use it. Dynamic processes are crucial to life. Life would not be possible without them. By strengthening the natural, dynamic functioning of your human system, NVC is literally bringing more life to your system.”

Now it’s my turn to smile.

Something seems a bit off though, so I interject, “But NVC has four parts. Didn’t you say, ‘By consciously identifying the three parts...?’”

He replies, “Yes, I did. The three functions that steer a dynamic process are *leading*, *doing*, and *measuring*. The precise manifestation of each function depends on the system. A cell performs all three functions. The part of your human system described by the NVC model performs all three functions. And an organization can perform all three functions.”

A natural teacher (as well as a natural giraffe), he queries, “Would you like to guess which parts of the NVC model correspond to the three functions that guide a dynamic process?”

I’m still feeling a little confused since the NVC model has four parts, but I take a stab at it anyway, “The ‘observation’ ... hmm ... that must be a *measurement*?”

After a pause, I muse, “‘Feelings,’ ... I think I’d call them a *measurement*, too.”

After another pause, and feeling a bit like I’m grasping at straws, I take a guess, “‘Needs,’ ... ‘needs’ must be ..., *leading*, or maybe *doing*?”

The next part seems a bit more obvious, so with some relief, I finish by saying, “The ‘request,’ ... that must be *doing*.”

Looking pleased, he responds, “That’s close to what I’d say.”

Picking up a sculpture of a triangle that is about the same size as one of his hands, he continues, “With the special way that you define the terms in NVC, I agree that the ‘observation,’ and particularly, the ‘feelings’ are the *measurements* of, or *feedback* on, how the system is doing.”

As he rotates the triangle and dangles it from one of its apexes, he adds, “I would say that identifying the ‘needs’ is part of the *leading* function. The *leading* function determines what the *measurements* mean and, depending on the goals of the system, decides what action to take. When you look at your ‘observation’ and your ‘feelings’ and identify which ‘needs’ are alive and what strategy might meet those needs, you are performing the *leading* function.

“This means that the determination of the ‘request’ is also part of the *leading* function. Carrying out the request is the *doing* component.

“We could go into more detail about how the NVC model fits into the basic structure of a dynamic system, but the important part is to see that the NVC model incorporates all three functions. This is critical and I’m sure part of why the model is so successful.”

Sitting back in my chair, I revel in the thought that Marshall Rosenberg, working in parallel with, but independently of, systems theorists, created a model congruent with system dynamics!

Shifting the focus, he says, “Would you like to hear the other reason that I was smiling earlier when you first told me about the NVC model?”

“Yes,” I urge.

He elaborates, “I was pleased to see that the NVC model starts off by focusing your attention on the most immediate *measuring* (or *feedback*) components possible. Have you ever wondered why so many organizations seem somewhat dead and lifeless?”

With only a moment’s pause, he continues, “It’s because for a great many years, perhaps for the last several thousand years, the majority of social constructs—governments, businesses, and even families—have incorporated minimal *measuring* or *feedback* into their systems. In a very real sense they are lifeless. They are not structured in a way that supports life.”

“Now put humans in those structures from the time they are infants. In order to adapt to a structure with a reduced or non-existent *measuring* function, humans will reduce their own *measuring* functions. Otherwise they could not survive in the structure—the constant alarm signals from their internal *measuring* would be intolerable.

“It is extremely difficult for people to become fully alive within structures that do not respond to and incorporate their feedback. In order to stay alive to our internal *measuring*, when our feelings indicate that a change is necessary then we need our social structures to incorporate that *feedback* and change accordingly.

“If we don’t create structures that we can effectively steer in response to all available and relevant *feedback*, our ability to support life on this planet will eventually cease.”

Reflecting on this possibility, we fall silent.

Eventually Endenburg breaks the silence, “Would you like to hear how the four organizing principles of sociocracy establish dynamic functioning in an organization? How they support an organization in coming to life?”

With wide eyes I reply, “Yes. Please.”

Clasping his hands around the little triangle, he says, “Just as the parts of the NVC model support an individual in coming more fully alive, the organizing principles of sociocracy support an organizational system in becoming responsive and steerable. The organizing principles focus attention on the *leading*, *doing*, and *measuring* functions essential to a dynamic system, and, like the NVC framework, they place particular focus on strengthening the *measuring* or *feedback* functions that have been weak in modern social structures.”

## **The four organizing principles of sociocracy**

These will be the main topic of the workshop May 5-7. Looking forward to seeing you there!