

DIANE LEAFE CHRISTIAN - Part 2 - What I learned about Sociocracy for intentional communities in Findhorn

August 14, 2015

Hello again,

This is the second report (one of a planned four reports) for friends and colleagues who teach or are interested in Sociocracy, and especially in intentional communities.

It's about what else I learned during my trip to the Findhorn Community -- in this case (unlike the previous report about the GEN Conference there), as a consultant along with Robert Gilman for the "Working Group for Change." This happened the week after the GEN Conference. And especially what I learned from the small informal Sociocracy consultations I did that week for various individual groups within the wider Findhorn Community.



One part of "The Park," one of the Findhorn Community's several locations.

The "Working Group for Change" -- "Working Group" for short -- was created by the New Findhorn Association (NFA). The New Findhorn Association is a networking organization that organizes some community-wide activities and publishes a newsletter for the many individuals and organizations that comprise the Findhorn Community, which folks there call "the Community." One of these organizations is the Findhorn Foundation, itself -- the original spiritual intentional community.

The Community has several non-contiguous locations. These include The Park, one of two locations of the Findhorn Foundation and four small housing developments, located on the peninsula between two villages. And Findhorn-affiliated people living in these villages and in the nearby town of Forres. And Cluny Hill, the Foundation's other property, located in Forres. What most of us call "Findhorn" is actually not just the famous original intentional community, the Findhorn Foundation, but this multi-stakeholder, multi-location intentional community.

Some members of this wider Community have expressed concerns about the current state of the group, and so the New Findhorn Association (NFA) and the Findhorn Foundation created a five-member Working Group to learn more about people's concerns and propose some changes. Two members are from the NFA Council, two are from the Foundation, and the fifth is from Community in general.



The two leaders of the New Findhorn Association, David, in maroon sweater (far right) and Dürten, in turquoise jacket (second from left). David facilitates meetings of the NFA Council, which uses Sociocracy, and Dürten is a member of the new Working Group. That's Robert Gilman, far left, and me, next to David.

Many people in the Community have been exposed to Sociocracy. John Buck has offered introductory workshops and consultations for the NFA and others in 2012, 2013 (I co-led a workshop with John in 2013), and 2014.

John is training two Community members, Ariane Burgess and Jane Hera, to be Sociocracy trainers. Arianne and Jane have organized a Sociocracy study group, offer consultations, and serve as outside Sociocracy facilitators for various groups in the Community using Sociocracy (or rather, using parts of it).

As a result of these efforts, the nine-member NFA Council uses Sociocracy in their meetings, and some managers in the Findhorn Foundation are also now interested in the possibility of the Foundation shifting over to Sociocracy as their governance process. And some organizations in The Park use Sociocracy (or rather, parts of Sociocracy) in their meetings.

With this much wide exposure to Sociocracy, one possibility is that the new Working Group for Change might -- might! -- propose that the whole of Findhorn Community adopt Sociocracy as their governance structure.

So Robert Gilman (*photo above*), an early ecovillage activist and co-author of a widely used ecovillage definition, and longtime friend and consultant to GEN, the Findhorn Foundation, and the NFA, suggested me as a co-consultant with him for the Working Group's first week of meetings right after the GEN conference.

My role was to offer what I know about intentional communities in general, how they change, and -- when requested -- to provide information about how Sociocracy could be used in the Community.

This second report touches on some things I learned about the way the way the NFA and some Findhorn managers use or view Sociocracy, and what this implies for me as someone teaching Sociocracy to intentional communities.

The third report focuses on what I learned about how some organizations in the Community have used and partially used some aspects of Sociocracy, and the challenges they've experienced. And again, what this implies re teaching Sociocracy to intentional communities.

And the fourth report, coming in a week or so, is about what I learned in conversations with

Markus Spitzer, a community founder and Sociocracy trainer from Austria who was visiting too.

The NFA Council seems to understand and use most aspects of Sociocracy relatively well. I spent an afternoon with them to answer questions and offer a Sociocracy review in response to people's questions. I also spent one-on-one time doing the same with David, one of the NFA's two directors, and who serves as meeting facilitator. Afterwards some Council members, and David, told me the afternoon review and my conversation with David had been very helpful and helped clarify some things.

The NFA Council doesn't currently do Performance Reviews (which I call "Role-Improvement Feedback"), and they only rarely and partially use feedback loops in proposals.

What I learned from this experience -- and of course what many Sociocracy trainers say -- is that groups who've been taught Sociocracy in workshops need ongoing consultation to further clarify things and ask questions, and to correct misconceptions.



At the afternoon review meeting for the NFA Council members -- my drawing of what I call "the seven parts of Sociocracy," which I always present as a visual overview first when answering questions or doing workshops.

I now tell groups I work with that there are two interrelated principles of learning Sociocracy well. First, it takes *doing* Sociocracy to really learn Sociocracy! And second, doing Sociocracy inevitably brings up important questions and the need for further clarification that don't come up in a workshop. And getting answers for these helps the group learn it better.

John Buck points out two things. (1) Organizations using Sociocracy often devolve in their understanding and practice of Sociocracy over time. Specifically, they can start reverting to a hierarchical top-down "boss" model if that's what they used before, or revert to a consensus-like model ("I want to talk now!!") if that's what it used before, *unless* the group builds in periodic review trainings and opportunities to deepen their understanding of how Sociocracy works in their organization.

And (2) of course provide ongoing consultation and training for the group after the workshop. Since intentional communities often don't want to pay for or see the need for this, there are several ways to handle this. (In my case I make it free so the community will do it anyway.) John recently suggested finding someone in the community to serve as an in-house coach who will organize an ongoing Sociocracy study group, and every six weeks offer Skype check-ins and further training for the coach.

Robert Gilman and I also spent an afternoon with the executive director and most managers (department heads) of the Findhorn Foundation.

Some of them generally liked Sociocracy but harbored some misinformation; some were suspicious because of misconceptions about it; others couldn't see any reason to change what they have now. Still others were dead-set against whatever they imagined Sociocracy might be.

Fortunately I was able to address some concerns and misconceptions.

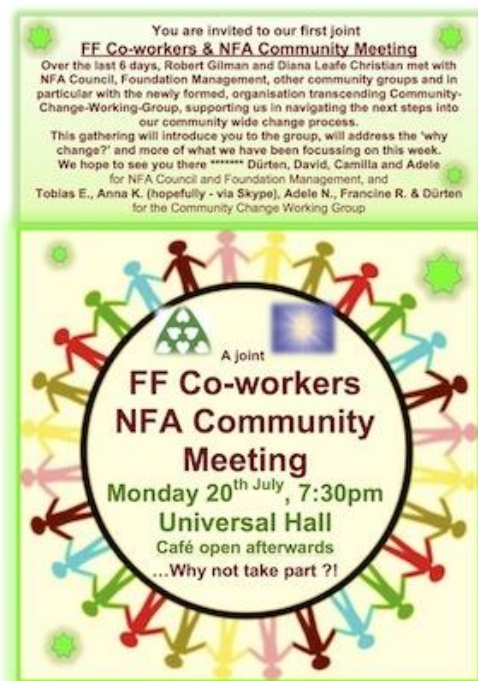
Some were turned off by the belief, which they'd heard expressed by some enthusiastic Sociocracy advocates in the Community, that Sociocracy would be a kind of panacea and fix all the Community's problems. I said this wasn't true, and Sociocracy simply offers a governance structure with a decision-making method and other meeting processes and that's all. (*Please see more on this misconception, below.*)

Some thought Sociocracy would impose non-Findhorn culture and beliefs on them. I said Sociocracy doesn't have a culture or beliefs itself, but provides a helpful structure and meeting processes to help the group manage the tasks and projects that arise naturally from its own culture and beliefs.

Some thought using Sociocracy would mean they specifically couldn't begin and end meetings with Attunements, a brief meditation-like practice which is a beloved cultural tradition from Findhorn's earliest days. (Both John Buck and I have told them, and I reiterated it then, that *of course* they could include Attunements in meetings.)

At the end of the meeting both Robert and I could see a shift in the energy and attitude of the Foundation managers, with most or perhaps all of them much more open to the possibility of the Foundation adopting Sociocracy sometime in the future. And maybe even soon.

I learned more about the "Sociocracy will save us" idea in the large whole-community meeting the Working Group hosted, July 20th, the last night we were there.



The Working Group's poster advertising their big meeting



Some of the 140 audience members in the Working Group's big meeting in the Universal Hall. They're doing the warm-up exercise before the meeting -- the Hokey Pokey. (Really!)

Several participants in the meeting began to ask about Sociocracy, however the Working Group didn't want to talk about any potential solutions just yet.

One woman asked to hear specifically from me, as she knew I'd been visiting to provide information on Sociocracy. There was a kind of rumbling of interest in the audience of 140 when she asked this. So I spoke briefly.

One man interrupted with a loud question, asking if I thought Sociocracy could be a useful shared governance method for the Community. I said Yes, I thought it could be.

His question and the comments I heard in the Findhorn managers' meeting, and other events convinced me there were quite a few people seeing Sociocracy as something magical that might solve all the Community's problems. So I wrote a brief article for the Findhorn Newsletter, "Sociocracy is a Governance and Decision-Making Method (And That's All)." It's attached below if you'd like to read it.

The third report, coming probably later today or tomorrow, is about what I learned about how some organizations in the Community have been challenged in their attempts to use consent decision-making, feedback loops in proposals, and the elections process. And what this implies for me re teaching Sociocracy to intentional communities.

All good wishes,

Diana