

Imago SOTO 2018

Sociocracy and Imago Relationships

I've been asked to talk to you about Sociocracy. Hopefully by now you know that sociocracy is an organizational structure for making decisions. Our global Imago organization is implementing sociocracy to help us work together more collaboratively, effectively and efficiently. We're doing this because the hard working members of the Collaborative Task Force figured out that we needed a way to work together that aligned with our Imago values of cocreation and equal participation which meant leaving behind hierarchical structures based on our cultural norms of competition and centralized power.

Tonight I want to tell you that I believe sociocracy can make us more collaborative and is already doing that for our organization. It can guide us to hear more perspectives, to increase our creativity, and to work efficiently and inclusively at the same time.

I also want to tell you that sociocracy is not a magic bullet. Plenty of groups have tried sociocracy and ended up no better off than they were before. There are a lot of theories about what is missing that keeps these groups from achieving the success that so many sociocratic organizations enjoy. My belief about what they are missing is simple. They are missing Imago.

In most groups I work with, it takes some effort to get people to believe in slowing down and being more intentional about listening to each other. I talk about the triune brain and consciousness and hailstorms and turtles. Just like your workshop attendees, groups find the messages ring true and they begin to see the power of Imago tools.

In this room I think I can skip all that and simply say that by definition organizations are relationships. Of course they need Imago. They are multifaceted and complicated, with so much potential for things to get

messy. And they are simply relationships where everything that Harville and Helen have been teaching us for 30 years still applies.

The challenge we face today as the worldwide organization of Imago, is to do for each other within our organization what we do every day for our clients. Everyone in this room knows the profound power of deep listening.

Imagine being in a business meeting, stuck in a hard place of disagreement, and saying to the person who opposes you, “You make sense to me because . . . “ Imagine hearing those words from them. Imagine a meeting in which the members track the energy in the room the way we do with our clients. When reactivity arrives in its first baby stage and conversation begins to veer off to the place where it is no longer about what it is about, imagine if we all slow down, re-center, mirror, validate and empathize.

I’ve seen what happens in those meetings: Connection arrives, safety grows, and trust begins to take hold. I imagine that for most of you, the best part of your work day is when you witness this transformation in a couple. For me, it is when I see it in a group.

There are many similarities between couple relationships and organizational relationships, and there is at least one important difference. I want to talk about that difference because I think it is key to what is needed now in our organization. It has to do with trust.

In sociocracy, decisions are consent decisions. That means we move forward when everyone consents to moving forward. We welcome objections because they make our proposals better. We use objections to refine and improve our proposals until we all feel they are safe enough to try. There is a respect inherent in this similar to the respect we communicate to our clients.

I experienced that respect recently in a conversation with John Buck, our sociocracy consultant. We were talking about organizational structure and I should say that this is a topic where John has easily 100 times as much experience and expertise as I do. He was calling me because I had expressed an idea that he perceived to be in conflict with a structure he was proposing. We talked a bit and before long I said, "I know I don't understand this as well as you do, I trust your judgement. Don't let me get in the way." His response was clear and firm. "If you are concerned," he said, "I am concerned."

I can't tell you what an incredible statement of respect and value that was for me. I can tell you that John's work will never lack access to my input. I trust him completely, knowing I am safe to share my thoughts and feelings. This is what sociocracy does. But what if it doesn't?

The question that comes up in all this is "What if we can't agree?" What if there is a that one person who just digs in and won't consent to anything? What if interpersonal conflicts get in the way? What if we just want different things?

Those situations do happen, though much less frequently than you might imagine, and they are entirely about trust. When things get stuck, what is needed is familiar to us because it is what you already know how to do with your couples. We use the structures we have, in this case both the relational structures of Imago and the organizational structures of sociocracy, to create a container with enough safety for trust to return.

The trick is to understand that organizational trust is a little different than intimate relationship trust. In an organization we aren't talking about the trust one individual puts in another. It is trust in a group. It is the belief that the collective wisdom and energy of the hive will yield the best decision for the group as a whole. It is the respect that says, "These are all reasonable people who make sense." It is the humility that says "If my ideas, perspectives and needs have been heard and the group still disagrees with me, the collective wisdom knows more than I do and I can consent to try."

Like so much in our individual-centered culture, this sort of trust is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. We are accustomed to competing for the power of influence. We expect to make decisions by majority vote not quite noticing that what we are doing is creating winners and losers when we could instead be creating better ideas and solutions.

As Imago Professionals, you already know about the substantial disparity between our cultural norms and the practices that support joyful relationships. Imago therapists and workshop presenters have been working for decades to help couples let go of negativity and competition and adopt practices that support consciousness and cocreation of their relationship goals. We help them create safe containers for the hurts, hopes and fears, where trust can be rebuilt and connection can thrive. We are achieving our mission: the world is becoming a better place as each relationship heals and grows.

Our challenge is to do for our organization what we do for our clients. Sociocracy is a powerful tool for moving in that direction, and it isn't enough. Our organization has 30 years of amazing impact on our world, but we also have 30 years of rupture and hurt that continue to get in our way as we move forward. Sociocratic tools will help us collaborate safely in meetings despite that rupture. It is the Imago tools that will facilitate healing, but even they will not allow us to escape the vulnerability and pain inherent in growth. In the end it is up to each of us to decide whether to move toward that growth.

For some it is a choice about whether to engage at all. For others it is about calling in to that next meeting after the last one was painful and difficult or continuing on after hundreds or thousands of hours already invested. For some it is about naming out loud the hurts it hasn't felt safe to name. Wherever you are in this organization, you are part of the choice we are making about how to move forward.

I believe there is something vital and precious at stake in that collective choice. It isn't a choice about whether Imago will continue. I believe that one way or another Imago will continue to be taught and practiced, that people will come together to share and celebrate the work. And, I believe there are two kinds of paths to that end. One of them leads around the pain, the other leads through it, and they appear to take us the same place, but that is an illusion. I believe that the Imago we will find on the other side of hurt and rupture will embody the things I value most - wholeness, welcome, authenticity, cocreation. I believe that if we choose the safer path around the pain, an essential piece of those qualities will be lost.

Tomorrow you will have an opportunity to participate in Communologue. I hope you will take advantage of it. More than that, I hope you will use communologue in the months and years to come in interest circles, working task groups, regional circles and ad hoc meetings of fellow professionals. The renewal of the global Imago organization isn't something that is being orchestrated by leaders on a Board, it is the work of every member willing to show up and share ideas. Our many circles provide opportunities for all of you to participate in the work of accelerating the spread of Imago in the world.

More important, communologue provides opportunities to feast on the shared passion of our work, to generate creativity and inspiration for the work to come, and to hear and hold one another through the joys and the struggles that all human beings experience when they try to be in relationship with one another.

If you know how to facilitate communologue, I hope you will consider hosting them for the Imago professionals in your circles. If you don't know yet, reach out to the Peace Project and learn so that you can offer this safe and transformational space to those who need it.

In particular, as we transition into a new way of organizing the work of Imago, I hope you will all take time to communologue with others who are interested in the areas where you are working. New things are being created all the time in Imago. As you begin something new, whether it is a circle of care or a workshop curriculum, or a whole new institute for instruction, I hope you will invest the time for communologue. Use this powerful tool, to listen deeply to those who will work with you in your creation, those whose support you will need, those you hope to serve and anyone who will be impacted by your work. I promise you, it is worth the effort. You will likely never know how much time and energy was saved by hearing many perspectives early on and throughout the process. Besides that, communologue is fun and rewarding.

As Imago professionals the connection that comes of that sort of deep listening is our birthright and our explicit responsibility. It is our identity. It is what makes Imago Imago.

For tonight, in the next hour or so, Hayley and I are inviting you into an experience of sociocracy. It is a tiny taste of a very big idea. We figure you've done enough listening for one night, and like most things worth understanding, the best understanding comes from experience. So Hayley is going to explain the game and then we'll invite you to do a little problem solving in small groups.