

Sociocracy at Work: Blue Scorcher Bakery Cafe

a worker owned bakery in Astoria, Oregon thrives with consent decision-making



How it began

Around 2003, a small group of people decided they wanted to organize as a worker co-op. Their interests were in bicycles at first, but attention shifted when the best baker in town followed his calling+ to become a priest. The bread had supplied the beloved food co-op in town, so when the baker left the group of five moved to fill this new void as The Bread Collective. The workers kept their day jobs but each dedicated one day a week to baking in order to supply to food co-op with five days of bread. By 2006 Blue Scorcher Bakery opened a storefront with a cafe and over 20 employees.

Becoming a co-op

In 2011, the collective decided to broaden its ownership. With help from the Northwest Cooperative Development Center, the small collective sold the bakery's ownership to what had become the Scorcher Artisan Cooperative. There are now 15 member-owners of the co-op, and they all work in the bakery.

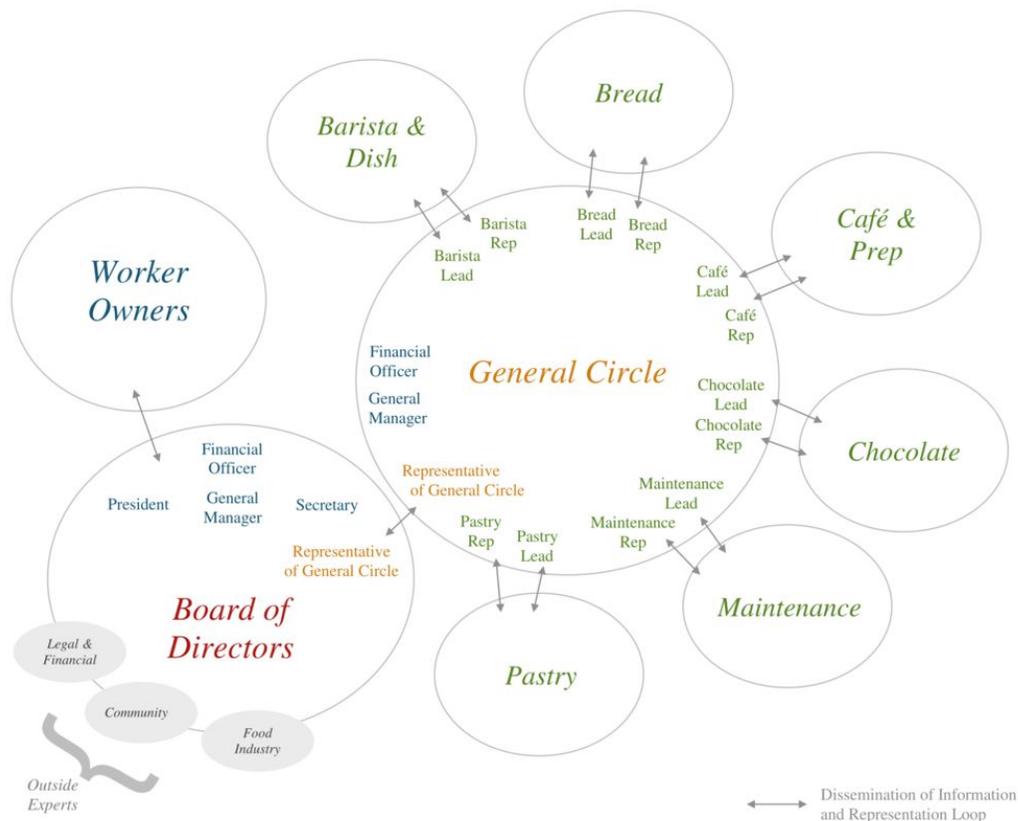
Consent decision-making

When the collective had formed, the bakers had agreed that ownership would be equal amongst them and decisions were made by consent. They looked to the book *On Conflict and Consensus* by C.T. Butler and Amy Rothstein for guidance in their decision-making. When one member reached out to Butler for further consultation, he pointed them toward Sociocracy instead. Not long after, members were able to attend a workshop in Portland led by John Buck.



Implementing Sociocracy

After being a part of John Buck's trainings, they hired him as a consultant to help implement Sociocracy. Issues they had found with using Consensus, like proposals being blocked by solitary members, were becoming less problematic as they learned more about the process. Consent was became understood as a lack of an objection, not personal preference. A structure for their bakery management and operations became tangible and implemented. Sociocracy was formalized in the bylaws in 2012.



How it's organized

The bakery has four production circles: bread, pastry, kitchen, and store front. Each of those circles have at least one representative and a leader, who all sit together with the general manager to form the general circle. The general manager and representative(s) from the general circle sit with other worker-owners and outside experts to form the board of directors. The board is elected by the worker-owner circle. Anyone who has been employed at the cafe for one year and has worked at least 1,000 hours is eligible for ownership. The general circle must give the employee an endorsement, and then the final decision for ownership is made by the worker-owner circle. If accepted as an owner, the person will buy in and then participate in the worker-owner circle. The production circles and general circle meet once a month; the board of directors meets quarterly; the worker-owner circle meets biannually.

Changes in the company

One of the most impactful differences seen since the implementation of Sociocracy is the clear understanding of consent and objections, which allows this type of decision-making to work.

Another cornerstone of the organization is the process of elections. The sociocratic process of nominating people to positions seems to neutralize the power in the company, and the positions having an end of term helps to control interpersonal tensions. Everyone is eligible for a turn in the hot seat as a leader by fulfilling circle roles, and people usually get put into positions they perform well in. Some people have even been removed from positions they were elected to, but they remained as employees and were still smiled at in the morning. They even use the nomination process to make other company decisions as a way to reveal everyone's preferences and move into proposal.



Plans going forward

Certain skill sets such as financial management, meeting facilitation, and budgeting are centralized in one or a few people, keeping the company from being truly resilient. The plan is to curate and broaden the skillset of the workers so that the company can live on after certain people leave.

Why would you recommend Sociocracy?

Joe Garrison, an original owner and the interviewee for this study, says that Sociocracy is a process that feels natural. "It's like getting a new game from the toy store. Some games you're agonizing over the rule book trying to figure it out. Other games you're playing within 15 minutes - Sociocracy is like that." A person coming into the company can quickly plug in. "Here's your circle, this is its aim. Here is your circle leader, elect a representative. This is how to elect people, this is how to object to proposals."

Joe feels that the decision making process speaks for itself. Watching a group of people in the same business with differences of opinion make decisions they all agree to in 15-20 minutes is a powerful thing. "After seeing that, they'll be motivated to figure it out how it works themselves."