



# On rounds

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The signature tool of sociocracy are rounds. Like all tools in sociocracy, rounds support equal voice and effectiveness. Everybody gets a chance to talk. Everybody gets a chance to listen. Rounds can easily be underrated. This article is a celebration of rounds!

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## 1. Rounds support equal voice and effectiveness

### a. How rounds support for everyone to be heard

Not having any format in a meeting typically turns discussions into debates. In debate style conversations, whoever speaks up will be heard. This works well for people who have an easy time with this kind of format. It does not work for people who don't enjoy this.



Oftentimes, debate style requires over-talking people, and some people are more likely to do that than others. That means that we favor more extroverted people if we choose to talk in debate style. Since debate style is what we resort to in the absence of a format, not being intentional about how we talk with each other will favor some voices and ignore others. It is crucial to understand that *not*





*making the choice to talk in rounds (or in any other format that supports equal voice) is still a choice we make, and it has an impact on the conversation.*

When we talk in rounds, we know that we will have our turn to talk. We don't have to sit in a discussion wondering how to get our contribution heard, and how to get a turn. We can prepare – to some extent – what we are going to say. We can relax and know that we will be heard.

## b. How rounds support for everyone to listen

In debate style, everybody loses. We all lose valuable information which could be contributed. Because someone is less likely to speak up in a heated discussion does not mean their contribution is less valuable. If we choose to skip rounds, we lose out on valuable information.

Rounds change the dynamics of a conversation. In a round, we know when it is going to be our turn. When it is other people's turn, we can sit back and listen. And by that I mean: really listen. I don't have to wait for a good moment to jump in and interrupt. I don't have to think about how to prove the other person wrong. I can just listen and take in the other circle member's experience.

In debate style, we often tend to try and convince people of our viewpoint. With rounds, it feels more like everyone brings their ideas, perspectives and experiences to the table. We can only be a group when we are sure that everyone in the circle is included. Talking in rounds gives me the confidence that this is the case. What we each bring individually becomes the group's. The group wisdom starts growing in the middle of the circle. It is deeply satisfying when that happens, and rounds make it much more likely.



In debate style, our "task" is to be heard. In rounds, we spend more time listening than speaking.. It is so easy to forget that we all only have access to our view on the world. After taking in the experiences of a number of people in a row without even considering saying something for myself, it becomes obvious how my experience is just one way to see things. One way among many others.





## c. How rounds support effectiveness

When people start out learning about rounds, their first judgment is often that rounds will be lengthy and not time effective. It takes a bit of practice and experience to see how the opposite is true. There are several ways in which rounds support effectiveness.

- In debate style, people feel compelled to re-state their contribution so they can be sure they can be heard. Rounds slow down conversations just enough so every contribution can be taken in and valued. That also means it typically does not have to be repeated. We all have been in discussions where the same thing was said by the same person multiple times. Rounds reduce the amount of redundancy because we can be sure we hear it the first time. In the end, we will save time.
- In rounds, as much information as possible is heard early in the process. That means we as a group (or, more precisely, a subset of the group) don't run into one direction just to find out it was a dead end. We move more slowly, taking into account a wider number of aspects and viewpoints. That way, we don't have to change direction as many times. Slow and steady wins the race.
- There is a subtle but powerful effect of rounds that is easy to miss. When we start a round, we all start with the same prompt. That means, everyone having their turn after the first person to speak has options: refer back to the prompt and give a reply that reflects the first reaction. In that case, we get someone's genuine response which is valuable to increase the variety and to see an issue from different angles. The other option is to reflect on what other people have already said and let statements build on each other with increasing information in the group. Ideally, people do both, share their initial reaction and then their reflections on what has been stated before them. In a perfect world, people are transparent about that and build their statements according to the pattern "My first reaction/idea was ..., and then I heard... and I learned that ..., and now I think that..." In a "debate style" discussion, we miss out on first impressions from people because we jump right into the subject (and into trying to convince each other). Rounds give us the maximum input, both from individuals and from group wisdom.
- When everyone is part of a decision, it increases the accountability and buy-in of everyone involved. Everyone in the group owns a decision. If members are heard and fully contribute to a decision, no one will undermine carrying out the plans you made together.

## 2. Supporting rounds

### a. Do we always have to talk in rounds?

No. But reading through this, why would you choose not to? We understand that some free flow and some direct response can work well in a group. Do it intentionally and by consent:



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“I propose we spend the next 10 minutes in free flow conversation and see if that brings up any new ideas.” What has worked well in practice is to always start a topic with a round. If you choose to do a period of free flow, then close that free flow period with a round. You always return to hearing everyone’s voice.

## b. What do we do if there is a lot of cross-talk?

How harmful cross-talk is to group process is sometimes invisible. The impact includes

- People silently resenting that someone is talking out of turn
- People getting cautious about what they say in fear of being interrupted
- Missing out on “group magic”



People who tend to engage in cross-talk have to be educated on the impact of their behavior. A way to address this in a meeting

is feedback during the evaluation round which is part of the closing round of every sociocratic meeting.

To deal with the cross talk in the moment, simply say “I want to hear what you have to say. Please hold that thought or write it down. Let’s get back to the round.”

Here are some other blame-free phrases you can use to help live up to the discipline of rounds:

- *I have things to say but I am noticing that I would have to over-talk other people to speak and I don’t enjoy that. Can we do rounds so we don’t have to over-talk each other?*
- *I am noticing a lot of cross-talk. I would prefer to go back to our round.*

Phrases to introduce rounds in non-sociocratic organizations:

- *I would love to hear from everyone about this because I am curious about each one of us thinks. Could we do a go-round and have everyone say briefly what they think about this?*
- *We could give everyone 1-2 minutes to explain their viewpoint. That way we could gather all the expertise in the room.*

## c. Rounds 201 – boost your rounds

I have been part of many rounds, and it might be helpful to hear how we can make rounds even more effective and pleasant.



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- Passing. Oh, how I love when people have the courage to say “I have nothing new to add. I pass.” Taming your ego and supporting a group process by saving time and redundancy requires maturity.
- Asking for more time. “It is my turn now but I’d rather think more about what I want to say and hear some more from others first” I will really listen the next time this person speaks because it is easy to assume it will have substance! This might be hard on the facilitator to track everyone to go back to. I would also not over-use this one because we are never fully prepared to make a perfect statement. But used in the right moment, this is a way to enhance your contribution to the group.
- Write notes. I often note down what I want to say. That means I will write down all my comments while other people are speaking. That serves three purposes
  - o I can deal with my own impatience and write instead of talking out of turn
  - o I can prepare my own contribution and make it denser and more to the point
  - o An unexpected effect: I will say less. Typically, something feels urgent and burning the moment I write it down. A few minutes later when it is my turn to speak, half of it does not seem all that relevant anymore. That way, all the unimportant stuff gets filtered out.

This is a tool to use wisely. Since it requires some multitasking, you don’t want to prepare in detail a 5-minute statement while it is the time to listen to others.

- We want to avoid redundancy but we also want to understand where everyone is coming from. If something has been said a few times that you agree with, just passing would be a loss in information. As a temperature check, it is helpful to know how many people in a group agree with something. Just saying “I agree with XYZ” might not be specific enough because not everyone might remember who said what in every moment. Give the highlights or keywords. “I agree with Charlie. Environmental impact and re-using instead of buying new.” Is a good enough statement. Don’t explain it all over.
- Not being decisive is fine. It in a round, it is perfectly fine to say, “I hear this side because...., and I hear the other side because...”. You don’t have to be the judge. The groups decides.
- Timing rounds. Rounds do not have to be timed but if you are running out of meeting time or if you’d like to keep air time more or less equal for everyone, timing people is a good idea. Facilitators can do it themselves or appoint a time keeper. You might want to explain in a blame-free way that time keeping is helpful for everyone “Let’s time ourselves so we all have an easier time to stay on track.” Use a friendly sound – but everyone has to be able to hear it. Don’t get too tense when someone goes over time. What is important is that overall, everyone respects the group process. While maintaining equal voice, insisting on exact fairness kills group culture. Finding the sweet spot where everyone can express themselves without feeling too restricted and everyone sees the group respected will create ease.





- In online meetings, time lag and technical issues can make flow in a group conversation hard. In that case, rounds are even more important. Since we lack the visual cue of sitting in a round, it is not obvious whose turn it is. It has proven helpful for the facilitator to call on the next person and the person after that. “So, next we will hear Kim next and then Diego.” That way, Diego can start thinking ahead about what to say.

### 3. What kinds of rounds are there?

Although all rounds are very similar, these are some differences in the nature of a round, depending on where in the decision process a group is. There are also more generic rounds, like opening rounds, closing rounds, evaluation rounds etc. The ones we are mentioning here are the most specific.

#### a. Clarifying questions round

A clarifying questions round is called whenever there has been a proposal or a statement that needs to be understood before the group can form its opinion about it. This could be a



policy proposal, or a nomination proposal but it could also be a complex objection, We are transparent about the nature of the round: “Let’s make sure we understand the proposal/objection before we talk about it more. Now is a time to ask the questions you need answered before moving forward.”

A challenge in the clarifying questions round is that sometimes people will jump ahead and give an opinion. Or they may express their negative judgment about the proposal through a biased question. In either case the facilitator can say, “That sounds to me like an opinion. Please hold that for the next round. Is there a question you would like to ask in order to understand the proposal as it is written?” Sometimes the facilitator will need to work with the speaker to tease out a real question that is mixed in with the speaker’s opinions.





## b. (Quick) reaction rounds

Reaction rounds are a way to get a feel on where the group is at. It can be just reflecting the impact of what is up on circle members, it can have a concrete prompt (like “what do you think could be done about this issue?”). Do not restrict this phase to only one round if what people contribute seems rich and productive. Keep going around until more and more people pass because they have nothing new to say. In that case, the facilitator can end the rounds asking if there is anything anyone wants to add to make sure no one gets cut off. “We did three rounds now and we heard a lot of good input. Is there anything that still needs to be said before we move on?”

Time and attention span are often concerns in meetings. To introduce a quick reaction round the facilitator can say, “Let’s do a quick reaction on that. And by quick reaction, I mean five sentences or less.” Some groups will find it supportive to use a talking stick and/or a timer to keep things moving in a round. It is also a good idea for the facilitator to remind people to not repeat redundant information.

**Quick** reactions rounds are used in the consent process. Assuming that any policy proposal has been worked on in the circle, and everyone has had a chance to be heard earlier in the process quick reactions should be very brief. They are more a temperature check than re-opening for discussion. They are also the place for appreciations, feelings. Someone once said “people will have feelings anyway so it is better to have them on the table than to pretend they are not there.” In addition, positive feelings of gratitude or contentment should have a place as well, as positive feedback (what is going well) is just as important feedback as feedback aiming to improve something.

Quick reaction rounds are also a place for critique, a statement of “I will object to this because...”. They are not the place for long elaborations of objections. Objections are addressed in details after the consent round, not during the quick reaction round.

## c. Consent rounds

Consent rounds are very brief. They give only two options. (In consent decision-making there is no third option of standing aside.)

- “I consent/I have no objections.”
- “I have an objection.” (You can give a 1-phrase statement about the objection, for instance “I have an objection regarding the time frame of this.” Or “I am not ready to consent. I have concerns I want to explore more.”)





- You can get consent, especially on uncontroversial decisions (like for instance a non-controversial agenda) in a non-verbal way. In that case, the facilitator has to make an effort to get brief eye contact with everyone in the group. In online meetings, non-verbal consent can be given by showing your thumbs up.



#### d. What are “rounds on process”?

Rounds on process can be the most magical rounds. A good sociocratic facilitator will involve the group in facilitation decisions. In particular, this is a good idea whenever it is not clear how to move forward. For instance, when a discussion gets out of hand, emotional, mired in controversy, or just plain muddy. Find your way out with a process round instead of losing more time. You can combine a process round with a moment of silence (or a stretch break, or other ways of re-focusing).

Examples can sound like that:

- *“Wow, there are a lot of emotions in the room right now. I suggest we all take a deep breath and a moment of silence. (pause) I’d like to do a round on what people think would be a good idea to do next.”*
- *“I am not quite sure what would support the group best right now. Anyone have an idea? Let’s do a round, and I’d ask you to pass if you don’t have anything that comes to mind right now.”*
- *“We seem to be stuck here. Let’s do a round on any ideas for how get unstuck,”*

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