



Children of the Earth
INSPIRES AND UNITES YOUNG PEOPLE

Governing Together

A Sociocracy Primer for COE Chapters and Hubs

EVERY VOICE · EVERY DECISION

Children of the Earth inspires and unites young people, through personal and social transformation, to create a peaceful and sustainable world.

Based on the sociocratic circle-organization method
of Gerard Endenburg, as taught by John Buck · First edition 2026

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ABOUT THIS PRIMER

Children of the Earth inspires and unites young people, through personal and social transformation, to create a peaceful and sustainable world.

Reflection awakens your gifts. Connection binds you to others. And then comes the practical question every group meets on its first real Tuesday: *how do we decide things together?* This primer is COE's answer — an introduction to sociocracy, the method of governing by consent that our chapters and hubs use to run meetings, fill roles and make decisions that every member can stand behind.

It is written for young people leading circles, chapters and project teams. No prior knowledge is needed, and you can start using it at your very next meeting.

CREDITS

Written by Children of the Earth, 2026. The sociocratic circle-organization method presented here was developed by Gerard Endenburg and is stewarded by the Sociocratisch Centrum, Rotterdam; this primer draws with gratitude on *Nonviolent Governance* by John A. Buck and Gerard Endenburg (© Sociocratisch Centrum, 2005). The text, examples and illustrations in this primer are COE's own.

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PART ONE — WHY GOVERN TOGETHER?

Every group decides things. What project to take on. Who speaks for us. How to spend the money we raised. When to meet. Most groups never choose *how* they decide — they inherit a method without noticing, and that method quietly shapes everything else: who talks, who goes silent, who burns out, who drifts away.

The two methods most of us inherit both have a cost. **Majority voting** is fast, but it manufactures losers: every vote splits the group into winners and a minority who must live with a decision they opposed. **Consensus** honours every voice, but it asks everyone to positively agree — and a group that needs full agreement can be held in place for weeks by a single unresolved doubt.

Sociocracy is a third way, built on a different question. Not “*does everyone love this?*” but “*can everyone work with this?*” A decision goes ahead when nobody has a reasoned objection to it — when it is within everyone’s range of tolerance. Nobody has to win. Nobody is forced to lose. And the group keeps moving.

The word comes from the Latin *socius* — companion. Where democracy is rule by the *demos*, the mass of people, sociocracy is governance by people who know each other and share an aim: exactly what a COE chapter is. The term was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century, but it stayed an idea on paper for over a hundred years. It became a working method in the Netherlands: the educational reformer Kees Boeke ran his school on it, and his former student, the engineer Gerard Endenburg, turned it into a complete, practical system inside his family’s electrical company around 1970. It has run real organisations — schools, companies, monasteries, community groups — for more than fifty years. John Buck, who studied those Dutch organisations, carried the method into English.

WHY COE USES IT

Open our Code of Ethics and Guiding Principles and you will find sociocracy already there in spirit: *support shared leadership; assume the good intentions of others; allow decisions to emerge and embrace the process; understand the whole is greater than the parts*. Sociocracy is what those principles look like when a group sits down to make an actual decision on an actual Tuesday.

It also answers a question every young leader meets: how do you lead without becoming the boss? The Spiritual Activism Handbook calls it lateral leadership — the leader as a member of the group. Sociocracy is the machinery that makes lateral leadership work when the group is bigger than a handful of friends and the decisions start to matter.

PART TWO — THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

The whole method rests on four principles. Everything else is technique.

1. CONSENT GOVERNS DECISION-MAKING

A policy decision is made when no member of the circle has a **reasoned, paramount objection**. Take that phrase apart, because each word is doing work.

Reasoned means you can say why. “I just don’t like it” is a preference, and the reaction round is the place for it. An objection explains what the decision would break — how it would harm the group’s aim or make your own part of the work impossible.

Paramount means it truly matters. The test is not “would I have chosen this?” but “can I work with this?” Consent is not consensus: you don’t have to agree that this is the best plan. You are only saying it is safe enough to try.

And consent is not a veto. An objection doesn’t kill a proposal — it improves one. When someone objects, the circle’s job is to amend the proposal together until the objection dissolves. The objector is not the problem; they are carrying information the group needs.

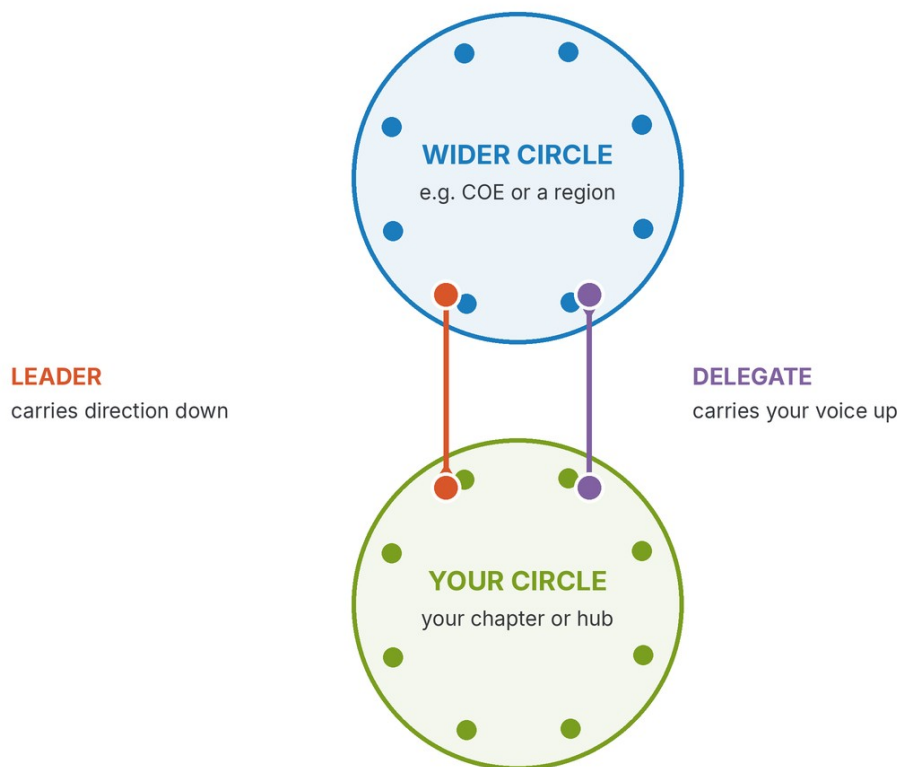
One more boundary, and it matters: consent is for **policy** — decisions that set direction, allocate money, create roles, commit the group. Day-to-day choices don’t need a round. The circle decides by consent *who decides what* day to day, and then lets them get on with it.

2. THE CIRCLE

The group organises itself as a circle: a set of people with a shared aim, meeting as equals. A circle does three things, continuously: it **leads** (sets direction), it **does** (carries out the work), and it **measures** (checks what actually happened, and feeds that back into leading). A group that only does, without measuring, drives with its eyes closed. A circle also keeps its own memory — decisions are written down, every time. A decision nobody recorded is a decision the group will have to fight about again.

3. DOUBLE-LINKING

When circles connect — your chapter to a regional group, a project team to the chapter — they connect through **two people**: the circle’s operational leader, and a **delegate the circle elects**. Both belong fully to both circles.



Both belong to both circles — so power and information flow both ways.

In a double link, the leader and an elected delegate both belong to both circles.

The leader carries direction downward; the delegate carries the circle's voice upward — and because the delegate sits in the wider circle with full consent rights, that voice cannot be ignored. This is the principle that makes sociocracy different from a suggestion box. Information and power flow up with the same strength that they flow down.

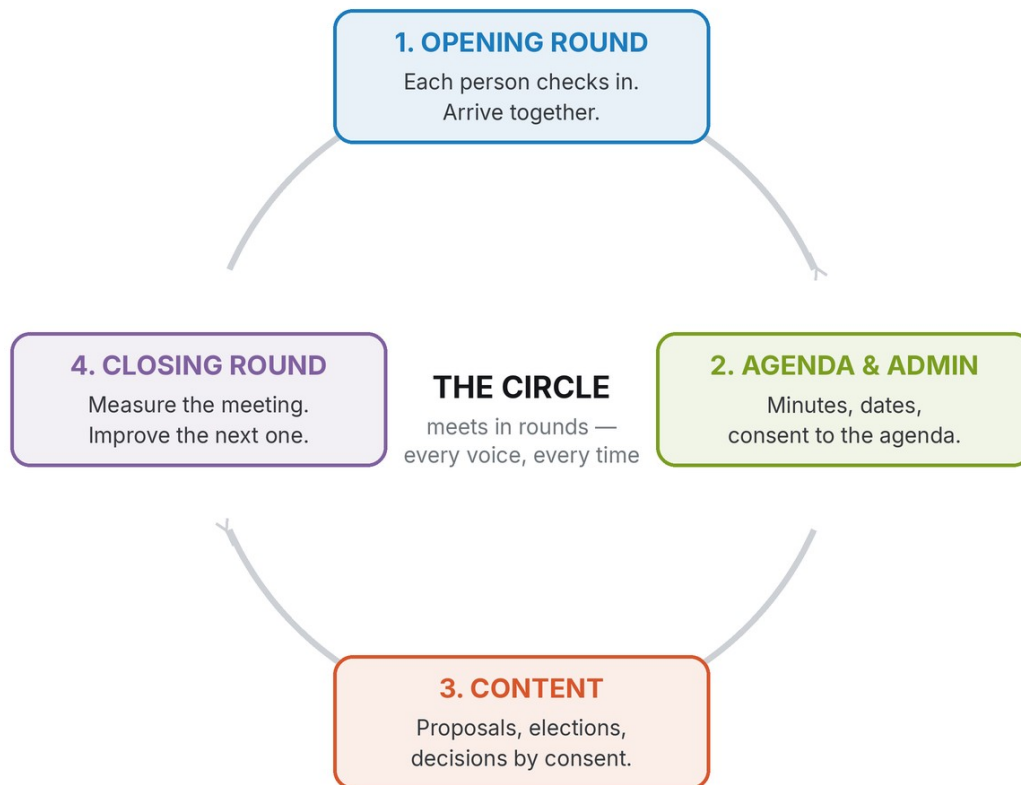
4. PEOPLE ARE ELECTED BY CONSENT

Roles — facilitator, secretary, delegate, project lead — are filled by open election, with reasons, ending in a consent round. Not by “any volunteers?”, which hands every role to whoever is quickest or least able to say no. Not by secret ballot, which hides the reasoning. The election process is in Part Three; it is many groups' favourite part of the whole method.

PART THREE — THE METHOD IN PRACTICE

THE SHAPE OF A CIRCLE MEETING

A sociocratic circle meeting has a simple, dependable arc — and it runs on **rounds**: the facilitator goes around the circle and each person speaks in turn, briefly, without interruption or debate. Rounds are the basic move of the whole method. They sound slow; in practice they are faster than open discussion, because nobody has to fight for airtime and the quiet people — who are often carrying the best information — actually get heard.

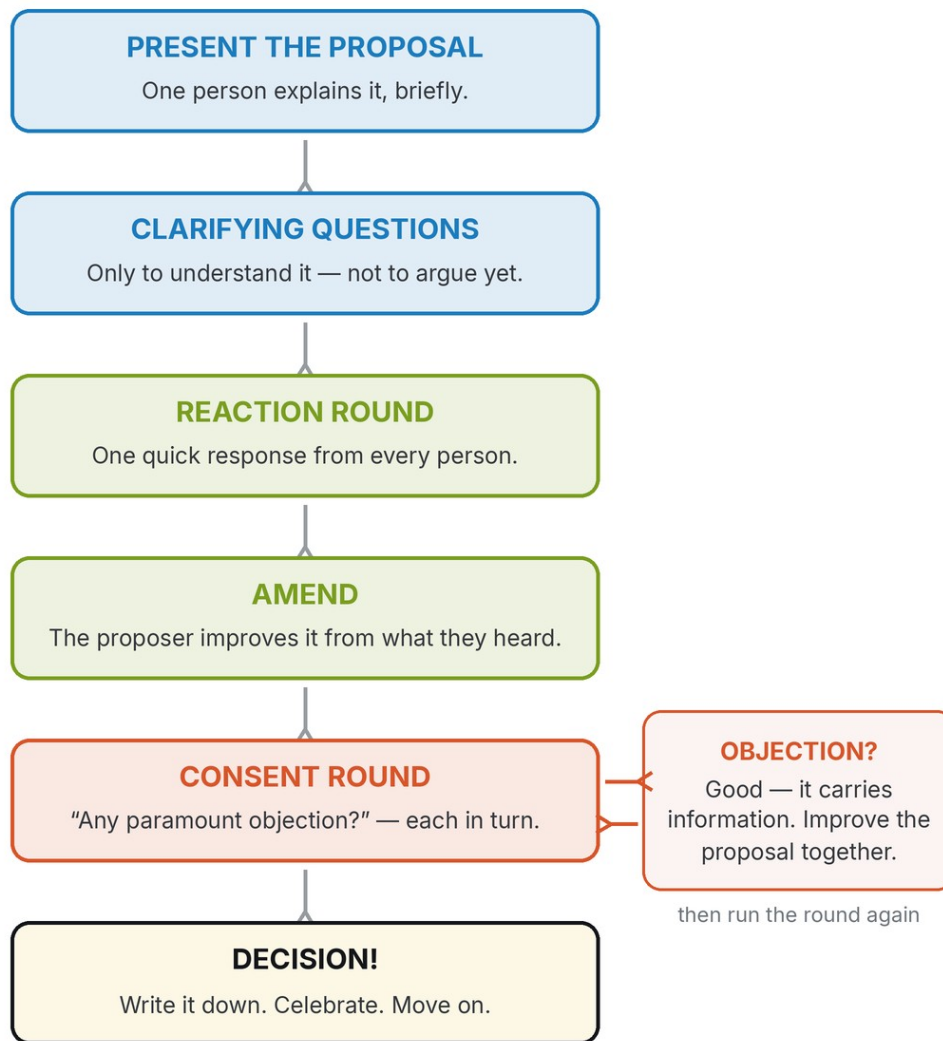


The arc of a circle meeting: opening round, agenda, content, closing round.

Open with a round: each person says how they arrive, in a sentence or two. Handle the admin: last meeting's decisions, today's agenda, consent to both. Do the work: proposals, elections, decisions. Close with a round: how was this meeting, and what should the next one do better?

That closing round is the circle *measuring itself* — the third circle function, applied to the meeting you just had.

MAKING A DECISION BY CONSENT



Consent decision-making, step by step. An objection loops the proposal back for improvement.

Here is the process on its feet, in a scene any chapter will recognise.

A chapter wants to raise funds for a partner school. Amara has been asked to bring a proposal, and she presents it: a sponsored walk in six weeks, with each member gathering pledges. **Clarifying questions** come first — "how long a walk?", "who holds the money?" — questions to understand the proposal, not to argue with it. Then the facilitator runs a **reaction**

round: one quick response from each person. Most like it. Tomas says the date worries him. Priya wants a rain plan.

Amara **amends:** she moves the walk one week later and names a wet-weather fallback. Then the **consent round:** the facilitator asks each person in turn, “any paramount objection?” Tomas objects — the new date still collides with school exams, and half the group would have to choose between the walk and revision. That is a real objection: reasoned, and paramount, because the aim is a walk the whole chapter can join.

Notice what does *not* happen next. Nobody votes Tomas down. Nobody pressures him to “just go along”. The circle treats the objection as information and works with it — and in five minutes they have moved the walk past the exam window and added a study-break stall to the event itself. The next consent round is clear. The secretary writes the decision in the log, and the meeting moves on. Total time: perhaps twenty minutes, and every person in the room owns the result.

That ownership is the point. A decision made this way doesn’t need enforcing, because nobody is quietly against it.

ELECTING PEOPLE BY CONSENT

The same logic fills roles. Say the circle needs a facilitator for the next six months.

First, **define the role and the term** — what the job is, for how long. Then each person writes a nomination: *I, Amara, nominate Tomas*. Nominating yourself is allowed. The facilitator reads each ballot and asks the nominator **why** — and this round of spoken reasons is where the election really happens. People hear qualities named aloud that they hadn’t considered, and hearing your peers say why they trust you is worth more than winning any vote. Then a **change round:** having heard the reasons, does anyone want to change their nomination? People often do, and that movement toward a candidate is the group organising itself. The facilitator weighs the arguments — not the count; three strong reasons outweigh five habits — and **proposes a name**. A final **consent round**, asking the proposed person last, settles it.

No campaigning, no losers, no popularity contest — and no role dumped on the person least able to refuse it.

WHEN IT GETS STUCK

Sometimes an objection won’t dissolve in one discussion. Some tools for that moment: ask the objector “*how would you solve this?*” and let them carry their own information into a fix; shrink the decision — try it for one month, then review, because a decision with a review date needs far less certainty to be safe; or send the proposal back to one or two people to rework for the next meeting. And if a decision later turns out to be wrong — that is what measuring is for. Sociocratic decisions are not carved in stone; they are the best current answer, held until the feedback says otherwise. As practitioners of the method like to say, a proposal doesn’t need to be perfect — good enough for now, safe enough to try.

PART FOUR — STARTING IN YOUR CHAPTER

You do not need permission, a constitution, or training to begin. You need one meeting.

Run it in rounds — that alone will change the room. Elect a facilitator by consent, even just for the meeting itself; it takes ten minutes and teaches the method better than any explanation. Make one real decision with the consent process, and write it down. Appoint a secretary before you leave, because the log of decisions is the circle's memory, and a circle without memory repeats its arguments forever.

Then, as the work grows, let the structure grow with it. A big project becomes its own small circle with its own aim — and connects back to the chapter by double link: the project's lead plus one elected delegate, both sitting in chapter meetings. When your chapter links to a region or to COE internationally, the same pattern: your leader and your elected delegate, carrying your circle's voice where decisions about you are made.

FIVE HABITS THAT PROTECT THE METHOD

Keep the rounds when you're in a hurry. The moment the group is stressed is exactly the moment open discussion collapses into the three loudest voices. The rounds are not a luxury for calm days; they are the discipline for hard ones.

Don't let consent become veto. An objection opens a conversation; it doesn't end one. An objector who won't explain their reasoning, or won't work on a fix, isn't objecting — and the facilitator can kindly say so.

Don't polish forever. If a proposal is good enough for now and safe enough to try, consent to it and put a review date on it. The review date is where your certainty lives.

Decide who decides. List the day-to-day choices — buying supplies, posting on the chapter account, replying to routine messages — and consent, once, to who handles each. Then stop meeting about them.

Keep the circle yours. The Training Manual says it plainly: you are the youth in charge. Adults who support your chapter are guests and advisors — welcome in the circle, valuable in the circle, but the consent rounds belong to the members. A well-meaning adult who starts directing the process has stopped helping.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

This primer is Children of the Earth's own introduction to a method we did not invent, and we want its lineage to be clear.

The sociocratic circle-organization method was developed by **Gerard Endenburg** at Endenburg Elektrotechniek in the Netherlands from around 1970, drawing on the consensus-based schooling of **Kees Boeke** and on systems theory. The Sociocratisch Centrum in Rotterdam, which Endenburg helped found in 1977, has stewarded the method since. **John Buck**, a certified sociocratic consultant whose research first demonstrated the method's effects statistically, brought it to the English-speaking world; his article with Endenburg, *Nonviolent Governance* (© Sociocratisch Centrum, Rotterdam, 2005), is the direct inspiration for this primer. The concepts here are theirs; the words, examples and illustrations are ours; any errors of simplification are ours too.

GOING DEEPER

Gerard Endenburg, *Sociocracy: The Organization of Decision-Making*, is the method from its source. John Buck and Sharon Villines, *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*, is the fullest treatment in English and the natural next step after this primer. Sociocracy For All (sociocracyforall.org) offers free guides, training and a worldwide community of practice. And within COE's own library, the *Spiritual Activism Handbook* introduces circle groups and the acceptance model of decision-making, while the *Training Manual* sets them out as facilitated exercises.

One Earth... with all her children smiling.