



Will Kempe's Players:

A Sociocratic Case Study

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- [1. Background and History](#)
- [2. Will Kempe's Players and Sociocracy](#)
- [3. Organizational Design](#)
- [4. Perks of Sociocracy](#)
- [5. Challenge One: Egos](#)
- [6. Challenge Two: Getting Things Done](#)
- [7. Takeaways](#)
- [8. References](#)

1. Background and History

Will Kempe's Players (WKP) are a one-year old, cooperatively-owned theatre company based in Troy, NY with fourteen active members. While they stage modern productions, their primary focus is on performing the theatrical works of Shakespeare and other productions "integral and idiomatic" to the Elizabethan era. They are also champions of Elizabethan Clowning, or fooling, from which their name is derived; Will Kempe was a famous Shakespearean clown. According to the [WKP website](#), Elizabethan clowning is at heart a performative act aimed at identifying and addressing social injustice. It's "a tradition of liminality and transgression that is so aware and outspoken regarding systems of power and value in a diverse artistic expression that it transcends boundaries created by class, education, and language." This orientation to social justice and a desire to establish and grow a financially sustainable organization combined in WKP's decision to formally adopt Sociocracy as a governing strategy when they filed their charter documents in December, 2017.

2. Will Kempe's Players and Sociocracy

"How do we do Shakespeare like Shakespeare, egalitarian, but make money?" (3)

WKP was introduced to Sociocracy by a founding member who used it in a cooperative living environment. Hearing that WKP founders wanted to recreate the original cooperative culture of early theatrical troupes led him to recommend Sociocracy; his recommendation encouraged some members of the company to attend the "Sociocracy for Startups" webinar offered by the [Sociocracy for All](#) organization (3). What attracted the players to Sociocracy was the rare combination of member equality with operational effectiveness that was built into the Sociocratic method. They were inspired by the "egalitarian nature" and "gentle urgency" they saw embodied in the Sociocratic motto "good enough for now, safe enough to try" (1). "Consent fit our culture . . . we got consent-based decision making. That was easy. And we were friends, so it was easy to talk" (3). The main resistance came from the more veteran members who were used to established ways of doing things: "the only pushback was from those of us more experienced in the theater world" (2). A key challenge for everyone was to envision a non-hierarchical way to work together: "the difficult part was . . . to create a way to discuss theater that didn't seem top-down" (3).

WKP have now spent about six months working with Sociocracy and are in a process of continual refinement. There was a period of getting comfortable before they fully embraced it. As they say, "it took about three meetings of sharing information, dialoguing utility, and just plain trying it out before we adopted it genuinely" (1). And progress is indeed being made: "meeting times have shortened and, generally, our members feel good about working together in a sociocratic way" (1).

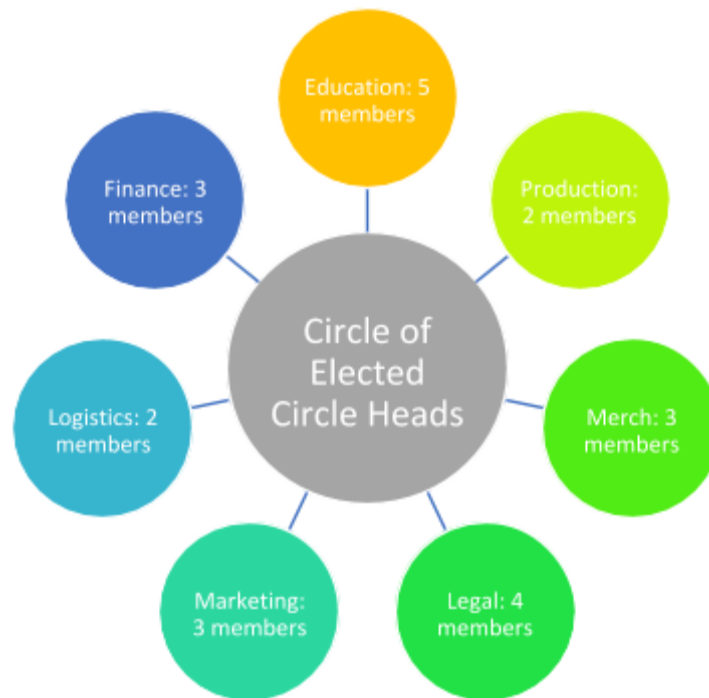
3. Organizational Design

WKP has settled on a four-level organizational structure, with all circles populated by the 14 members (5):

1. Board of Directors of five elected members
2. Circle of Elected Circle Heads (CECH) formed of the heads of each of the seven functional circles
3. General Circle of all Members, or "Shareholders Meeting"
4. Functional Circles with 2 - 5 members each, meeting up to twice a month
 - a. Finance: 3 members
 - b. Logistics: 2 members
 - c. Marketing: 3 members
 - d. Legal: 4 members
 - e. Merch: 3 members
 - f. Production: 2 members
 - g. Education: 5 members

WKP Circle Diagram





As displayed in the WKP Circle Diagram, heads of each functional circle attend the CECH, which plays a general operational and administrative role. Heads report back on functional circle progress and ensure everything is running smoothly. Currently WKP have only implemented a single link between the CECH and functional circles, but are intending to adopt the Sociocratic norm of a leader-delegate “double link.”

The CECH refers any decision they deem necessary for full member participation to the Shareholders Meeting, which also holds ad-hoc and formal annual meetings to elect members of the Board of Directors, review management, and consider bylaw revisions (6, 4). The Board of Directors functions as a “steering committee” that sets “broad-stroke” policies, processes feedback from all the circles, and ensures WKP’s activities are always in line with the “mission, vision, and aims of the cooperative” (6).

WKP noted some original difficulty finding the right organizational design: “It was difficult to conceptualize circles at first due to our smaller group size” (1). All the members wanted to be involved in all matters, which led to confusion (3). Using Sociocracy helped: the members formed autonomous “task-specific circles” to address “all manner of needs and desires within the cooperative” (1). This circle structure helped give clarity: “now that we have a structure and a practice of meeting regularly as autonomous groups as well as a company we have more clarity” (3).

4. Perks of Sociocracy

WKP finds Sociocracy “useful and honest” and praises those features that lead to inclusive, comprehensive, transparent proposal development. They like “the level of transparency” and “the practice of harvesting objectives in order to reach consensus” (1). They also like that Sociocrally helps them generate thoughtful plans: “the number of participants in any decision making process provides us the opportunity to really flesh out good ideas” (1). Decision-making is now of remarkable organizational significance for WKP: “Making decisions through the Sociocratic method gives you the same feeling as mounting a successful show” (2).

Another advantage WKP sees in Sociocracy is that the normal stress of a young organization is “is distributed in a manner that makes it manageable.” Continuing to distribute this stress and burden is a long-term goal; “Our ambitious organization is seeking a pattern of operation that shares the burden of responsibility in a more balanced way so... members can easily focus more on creative production than administrative tasks” (1).

WKP also appreciates the equality and collaboration inherent in Sociocracy. “The equal part felt good” and “the collaborative nature lends itself to theater,” they said (2). This collaboration felt novel at first: “a lot of people weren’t used to having that kind of control in a lot of ways” (2). In particular, Sociocracy helps WKP members avoid a feeling of exclusion common in non-Sociocratic organizations, that arises from “knowing answers to things and not getting asked” (2).

They expect to continue with Sociocracy for a couple of reasons: because it is a departure from the conventional, negative, repressive experience of working with people in modern society, and because it shares a core interest of the troupe: social justice. As WKP told us:

“The detractions of present-day neoliberal capitalism, poorly accountable representative democracy, hierarchical corporate structure, and a lack of diversity in expression, identity and thinking further a narrative of imbalance and oppression that we do not want to participate in if we can grow out of it.” (1).

5. Challenge One: Egos

“Big personalities had big ideas, and other people didn’t have ideas. How can we make sure the others can form an idea before the big ones take over?” (3)

WKP faced some challenges managing egos. “It can be difficult to balance the big voices and personalities in the room,” they told us. “Actors and artists are sometimes a rowdy bunch . . . this model demanded of us at times to view some of our dearest friends in a more critical light, and still does” (1). Yet Sociocracy seemed to help with this: “we have less ego-driven conflicts and laborious meeting agendas have given way to productive, enjoyable ones” (1).

Feedback and Reflectiveness

How does Sociocracy work to keep big egos in check? According to Michael, Sociocracy's natural encouragement of effectiveness-focused feedback helps. "It gives you an out when you have to be critical of someone . . . they know you're coming from a place of productivity, not a personal thing" (2). Kristoph notices as well that Sociocracy is encouraging reflectiveness in the troupe's members: "I've seen that the biggest personalities now . . . say 'I'm going to step back . . . I have this behavior and I want to change'" (3). Kristoph adds that Sociocracy also helps quieter people step up; "finding a way to get people who aren't comfortable stepping forward, encouraging people to try out new things, in meetings it's the same . . . just say what's on your mind" (3).

The Fifteen Minute Rule

One of the practical methods WKP uses to keep personalities in check is what they call the "Fifteen Minute Rule:" "if something can't be resolved in a timely manner at a full meeting . . . then we need a specific meeting for that thing." This rule helps meetings stay "on track and focused" leading individuals to explore how to "effectively convey what we're thinking as opposed to yelling" (2). Though a time-limit doesn't directly address excessively demonstrative self expression, it does create a heightened sensitivity to what effective engagement feels like, and you know when you don't have that engagement: "when there's an issue with big personalities clashing you can tell because you're off track" (2).

6. Challenge Two: Getting Things Done

Another challenge WKP experienced was getting things done without relying on traditional power structures used in other managerial contexts (1). Indeed, the theater has traditionally had its own kind of hierarchy, which places king-like power in the hands of the producer and director: "We work diligently to differentiate our business practice from the more traditional hierarchy of producer: director: cast/crew" (1). Members noted at first having to resist a kind of ingrained urge to do things themselves and instead learn trust the process. "When you know there are things unfinished . . . there is that need to do it myself . . . I'm wrestling with that," said one member (3). "Sometimes you have to fight that impulse to take the reins on a certain thing that's taking a while to decide," says another (2). Both agree that Sociocracy is helping WKP to delegate the right decisions to the relevant circles, allowing people to trust the leaders of those circles: "we're pretty good at avoiding that [need to intervene personally] through our circles -- circle heads are trusted to make those decisions" (2). "This need to fix things is something Sociocracy helps with . . . it's not about fixing it, it's about addressing it with the group," says another member, who continues, "it's about trusting others to do what they've been assigned . . .

. we are finding out that we can let go of worrying about all the responsibilities that other people have already agreed to take on" (3).

The Functional Bifurcation

What seemed to help WKP make the mental transition to Sociocracy from the traditional, hierarchical theatrical organization was a kind of functional bifurcation: to divide the work of the company into "business" and "theater," and to primarily expect Sociocracy to apply to the former. This seems to address the tension between collaborative decision-making and the normal idea of theater management, where the director is in complete control of the production. As Michael told us, "rehearsals aren't Sociocratic; business decisions are Sociocratic" (2). We note, however, that this distinction, which Michael agreed was hard to draw, seems to be breaking down: in a recent production, the director asked for and got feedback on how his direction was received; this move, we were told, is unusual. "I've never had a director ask me how I thought he did," said Michael (2). And, indeed, we learned from other players that additional such feedback-gathering and discussion rounds were planned related to work on the "theater" side, which they thought could "make appropriate space for a feedback loop" (3).

7. Takeaways

Will Kempe's Players are an exciting, energetic performing arts group invested in equity, sustainability, fairness, and operational efficacy. They are still in an early phase of adopting Sociocracy, and are getting increasingly comfortable with the consent-based governance structure. Problems during this implementation seem to arise not from Sociocracy as much as from the organization's nascent context, having only just formed, and from the need of its members to unlearn inherited assumptions about how people work together. WKP are, essentially, learning how to be a theater troupe at the same time as they are learning a new governance system, and that dual-tier learning is necessarily challenging. Having said that, their use of Sociocracy already seems to have borne fruit; if it causes some cognitive dissonance because it is a departure from the hierarchical model so many of us have internalized, it offers many affordances, visible in WKP's newly found ability to include all voices, manage powerful egos, develop more effective policies, "perform" beautiful decisions, delegate work and trust it will be done, and recruit feedback in novel ways.

8. References

Our case study is based on email conversations with representatives of Will Kempe's Players, collectively-developed answers to a general questionnaire we provided the players, two follow-up, in-depth individual interviews, and organizational documents shared by the Players.

1. "WKP Questionnaire:" collectively-developed answers WKP wrote in response to a brief questionnaire we provided; these we received on May 3, 2018.

2. "Interview with Michael:" an interview we conducted with a key WKP member on May 15, 2018.
3. "Interview with Kristoph:" an interview we conducted with a second WKP member, on May 18, 2018.
4. "By Laws:" a copy of the WKP by-laws we received May 25, 2018.
5. "Circle Chart:" a copy of the WKP circle organizational chart we received May 25, 2018.
6. "Email interview with Kristoph:" an email interview we conducted with a WKP member on May 29, 2018.
7. "WKP Circle Diagram:" a visual interpretation of the WKP organisational structure based on information gained in interviews and from the WKP bylaws.