

Carver, Permaculture & Sociocracy

If you want to lead (govern, manage, collaborate in) a functional organisation based on the Permaculture principles, Carver's Policy Governance is not enough.

It is a good top-down system, but has very little “bottom-up”. Permaculture requires the flow of information, creativity and influence to go both ways.

I will use Holmgren's version of the Permaculture principles, and explain why Carver is a good start but does not go far enough – and how Sociocracy can take us all the way.

- **Observe and interact** – This principle may be satisfied by Carver. The process by which a Board develops its End statements and other policy can be based on extensive experience with the system, and there is room for ongoing iterative learning.
- **Catch and store energy** – See next principle...
- **Obtain a yield** – Carver's approach does not emphasise the Ends of an organisation as being an exchange with the environment, which is a key requirement for a system to be alive and is codified in Sociocracy as the “Aim statement” – the primary and most concrete purpose of a living system being one of giving and receiving.
- **Apply self-regulation and accept feedback** – Although Carver emphasises the importance of monitoring and accountability, his model has power and accountability flowing from owners through the Board to the staff and then customers. There is no return flow in his model. Permaculture requires us to be tightly coupled to our immediate working and living environment, and to organise feedback loops for ourselves that are difficult to ignore. Sociocracy offers that through various mechanisms, especially the double-link between layers of the organisational hierarchy and the use of Consent-based decision-making for policy-making and performance review.
- **Use and value renewable resources and services** – This also relates to one's exchange with one's environment and ensuring that one is closely coupled with it.
- **Produce no waste** – Sociocracy offers a workflow modeling process that not only builds in feedback and iterative learning but also makes it easier to track outputs and match them to inputs from other organisational processes. Carver's governance system is explicitly not a management system, and offers no such design tools.
- **Design from patterns to details** – Carver has an excellent End/Means pattern distinction, similar to the Policy/Operations distinction in Sociocracy. That can be applied for any self-managing team at any level of an organisation. However, the Carver approach is neither fractal nor modular – all Ends, all Policy, is made by Carver's Board and no-one else in the organisation makes policy. Sociocracy offers a full tool box of organisational patterns, all of which can be applied at every level of the organisation, from the largest and most abstract down to the smallest and most intricate.
- **Integrate rather than segregate** – Carver's approach does not offer organisational integration.
- **Use small and slow solutions** - Small and slow are relative terms; however we can apply this to human organising by arguing in favor of self-managing teams that are largely autonomous in relation to their immediate work. Carver wants to make room for this (by focusing on the Board as creating boundaries within which staff are free to act) but this still leaves the Board as the only policy-making group. This represents unnecessary centralisation.
- **Use and value diversity** – Carver writes in favor of diversity but suggests majority-rule voting, which is less effective at drawing out and synthesising group creativity than sociocratic consent-based decision-making.

- **Use edges and value the marginal** – Carver does not address this. Sociocracy uses double-linking to couple the organisation to its stakeholders and every group within the organisation to every other. This produces an organisation that is, like a Permaculture garden, made up of edge.
- **Creatively use and respond to change** – Of course one hopes that a board using Policy Governance will do so, but they do not have processes and tools that specifically support transformative and creative learning – at least, not from Carver. Sociocracy does bring those tools as part of the overall set of patterns.

My reader will no doubt perceive my biases and predilections -- I believe that I have found in Sociocracy the basis for organisational Permaculture that I started looking for in 1997 when I first did my Permaculture design training and we were trying to find a marvelous new structure for the Ecovillage Network of the Americas – but I hope this gives those of you who are somewhat familiar with Carver, Permaculture and Sociocracy a useful space for reflection and spur to your own thoughts.

Contact me if you have any questions. My colleagues and I would be delighted to talk with you about anything I mention here, and help you think through any organisational design and transformation goals you have.

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