

Got DG?

Healthy Transformation in an Eldercare Facility

by Dr. Sheella Mierson and Elana Kann

With Dynamic Governance, a health care facility changes its culture and uses the best ideas from people in all parts of the organization—while being served by a vertical hierarchy. Leaders' jobs are easier and more enjoyable.

How Did It Start?

In the town of Bristol, Vermont, a fortuitous combination of people and concepts came together in 2004. They transformed a small, failing residential care home into a successful, groundbreaking one. This little 15-bed home, now called Living Well, offers a new effective model to the medical care world.

Dee DeLuca, Living Well's Administrator/Executive Director, had owned several small businesses that she pulled from red into strong black. Paul Kervick, Living Well's Outreach Coordinator and Board Member, also had business experience, including running a manufacturing business for many years. As friends, both had discovered a paradigm-shifting organizational method called Dynamic Governance (DG)* and were impressed by it. Dynamic Governance uses everyone's best ideas regardless of their place in the organization. It also uses a vertical hierarchy to meet its needs for efficiency. Together DeLuca and Kervick received training in DG from John Buck, the first person in the U.S.—and the first outside the Netherlands—to be certified as a DG consultant by the Dutch engineer who developed it. DeLuca bought the facility in Bristol and worked with Kervick to put Dynamic Governance structure and processes in place.

Why DG at Living Well?

Rather than running Living Well with the usual "command-and-control", "top-down" method, DeLuca and Kervick wanted the staff to take initiative and responsibility. DeLuca says that DG allows access to human creative potential that generally "goes completely untapped."

How Did It Go?

"People are not used to having this much power! The learning curve for all of us was straight up," exclaims DeLuca. With DG, says Kervick, "Everyone has a voice in setting policy, a voice that cannot be ignored. This structure is hugely different from any other kind of system I have ever seen or experienced. It's scary for some people."

Over time, with support and education, Living Well's staff rose to the challenge of operating under DG. Now staff members are flourishing in this environment. Kervick says they are making policy decisions that are good for Living Well, beyond what may have developed in a traditional organizational system. They have made the transition—the transformation—from passive rule-followers to proactive rule-makers.

What Changed?

The original facility had been a mainstream care home for 30 years. Isolation and loneliness were pervasive among the residents. The food was low quality, and medication usage was high. Medication and mealtimes drove the schedule, beginning at 4 a.m.

Using DG structure and processes for decision-making, the Living Well staff adjusted the schedule and introduced much higher quality food. While conventional institutions focus primarily on short-term food costs, Living Well administrators and staff understood that serving nutritious food works better financially in

* Dynamic Governance is also known as Sociocracy, the term that is used in much of the world outside the U.S.

the long term. "Since we started serving freshly-prepared whole foods and leaving out all refined sugar, residents sleep better and take fewer medications," explains DeLuca. "So we are reducing the cost of medications." Living Well's focus is on wellness rather than illness. It offers options for holistic medical care. Activity, stimulation, and connection to a community also contribute to better health. Residents can be as engaged socially, physically, emotionally, and intellectually as they wish on any given day, through exercise classes, art and music programs, on-site gardening, helping with household chores, games, trips to state parks and community cultural programs, and volunteer opportunities. Prioritizing residents' health *is* cost effective. While statistics say that a care facility needs 80% private clients to have adequate funding, Living Well's client population varies between 60 and 80% Medicaid clients with 20 to 40% private, and is in the black.

"After we had been in business two or three years," DeLuca says, "people from much larger health care institutions started coming to us saying, 'You have accomplished more culture change than what we have been able to do in twenty years, and we want to know how you're doing it.' Here we are, new to the long-term care industry, and we're managing to get these outstanding results in terms of taking care of the clients—often they get *better!*" enthuses DeLuca. Both Living Well and DeLuca have won program quality awards from the state of Vermont. Living Well has become a resource for others interested in Dynamic Governance and in holistic elder health care. Fortunately DG scales up well for larger organizations.



Paul Kervick

What Role Did DG Play?

DeLuca explains, "When all voices are equally heard, we achieve solutions that are very creative—better than the top leaders could have devised, however smart they are." For example, "Living Well has the same requirements for medications and mealtimes as other facilities. But with DG we have a framework to talk with the people giving meds and preparing/serving food; those people have input into how things are done. It's unusual to have a structure to even begin that conversation. Here every staff member looks out for the good of the whole and becomes a creative problem-solver. Residents have input about what they want as well; they have a role in the governance structure. So two aspects of DG have made our positive changes possible: (1) We have a way to get everyone's ideas, and (2) we maintain a focus on outcomes at every level of the organization—what do we want and how do we get there. "

DeLuca is thrilled at the change in her administrative role since settling in to Dynamic Governance. "I don't need to discipline staff. My job is to steer the creativity, and that's exhilarating."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The Authors

Sheella Mierson, Ph.D., is President and Owner of Creative Learning Solutions, Inc. (CLSolutionsInc.com); and a member of The Sociocracy Consulting Group (sociocracyconsulting.com), a division of an international company headquartered in Rotterdam, Netherlands. She helps organizations implement the principles of Dynamic Governance to become more effective, efficient, and resilient. She lives in Newark, Delaware, USA.

Elana Kann is a writer, editor, and woodworker, with a long-standing interest in the relationships among form, function, and elegance—both in organizations and in physical structures. She is owner of Branching Out Woodworks (branchingoutwoodworks.com) and lives in Asheville, North Carolina, USA.

Acknowledgements

For more information about Living Well, see livingwellcarehome.org. Ted Millich and Sheella Mierson conducted the interviews in this article. Millich's interviews and the photos are from his DVD "Introduction to Dynamic Governance" (beyonddemocracythefilm.com), and are used here with his permission.