



The Green Amigos Succeed with Sociocracy

As a writer, the best way I can explain sociocracy is to write a story. "Green Amigos" is a story about three friends and their shovels who start a small landscaping company and are drowning in success when a bartender tells them about a business fixer.



1. Happiness

Alita, Eamon, and Taylor had been the Three Amigos since they started in the same class at the New York Botanical Garden's horticulture school. After graduation, they started a business and called it, of course, the Green Amigos. Eamon had an uncle who lived in a small town on Long Island. Uncle Max said they needed someone to do lawns out there and if the Amigos would come out they could live in his guest house until they got on their feet.

Being close to the beach sounded good so they packed up their books and shovels and took the Long Island Rail Road to Bellport. People stood aside when they saw the shovels but the Amigos didn't notice. They got seats together with an extra one for the tools and stuff. Uncle Max met them at the station and they all piled into his car, a salt-water-faded slime-green Beetle, the shovels hanging out the window.

Getting their business started was pretty easy since Uncle Max and Aunt Dorothy knew everyone. Just mention Max and Dorothy and they were in. In exchange for using the guest house the Three Amigos took care of the yard. It was a nice guest house but it was a huge yard. It turned into marsh down toward the water, no beach at all. No wonder Uncle Max was so happy to see them, but it gave them a lot of experience with long island "lawn" care.

The guest house was small so they discussed business over beer at a local bar, the Blue Cactus. They were able to buy a used truck, again with the help of Aunt Dorothy who knew someone whom she decided didn't really need it. She took Alita along as an example of a girl in need of a truck and

just kept talking until they took her check. Aunt Dorothy drove off in it like she had driven trucks all her life, which was good because Alita had never driven one. The Green Amigos had a year to pay Aunt Dorothy back.

The Blue Cactus was their office and the truck became their desk. They went through the mail standing around the truck with their morning coffee. The Amigos worked so well together and were so happy digging in the dirt, that customers multiplied like weeds and the business grew quickly. When the papers in the truck piled up, Aunt Dorothy took them inside and organized them. Three years later the Three Amigos were working from dawn to dusk and summer was coming around again. Would they be able to keep up? No.

Uncle Max said it was time to move on and up. They needed a big garage to work out of, their own address, and to hire some help.

Uncle Max and Aunt Dorothy were pushing the birds out of the nest.



2. The Perfect Barn

Two years later, after living in an apartment over a two car garage that served as their staging and storage area, the Three Amigos had hired 12 new Amigos and formed work crews. Eamon took charge of the planting and lawn care. Alita took the landscape design, bidding, and contracting. Taylor took over ordering and tending plants, and delivering them when necessary. It did occur to them that left no one in charge at the garage but that would have to take care of itself. All day every day, six days a week, the Three Amigos raced around from one work site to another trying to keep track of the new Amigos. Some were full-time and some part-time. Some were university students with changing schedules. The Three Amigos just kept track of them in their heads.

To store enough equipment and supplies, they needed a larger space. And they needed a better place to live than upstairs over it. They had very little idea what was really going on in the business, but they seemed to have enough money in their bank account to keep going, and they didn't have any time to spend it except on the business. It would be late in the day when they finished, often too tired to even think about the Blue Cactus. They rarely saw each other, no longer talking several times a day.

When Uncle Max and Aunt Dorothy decided to move back to Brooklyn, their last piece of advice was to hire a business manager. Then they explained what a business manager was.

The Amigos hired a business student from the University at Stonybrook to set up proper books and files, keep track of salaries and bills, and rent a larger warehouse. The business manager, Charlene, seemed to be very happy sorting out the boxes and paper bags of paper and bank statements, *and* she had found a barn for the new site. They could spread out and have room for

whatever they needed. Charlene was also using her student networks to find a house for them to rent and organized four students to paint it green. A surprise to the Amigos but they liked it.

Every day was still pretty much chaos, but the Amigos had a business manager to organize all that. Things would work out just like they always had. They were Amigos one and all, equals in life and work, doing what they loved. And now they had new Amigos to share their dream.



3. *Unhappiness*

Actually, not one of the Three Amigos was having fun. None of them had had time to plant a plant in months. They supervised, ordered, or delivered. They drove trucks. When Charlene said they had to make some decisions about the future. But they didn't have any information to make decisions with. They knew what equipment they needed and where their clients lived and what needed to be done, but they didn't plan ahead farther than a month or so.

Since they didn't have the information Charlene needed, they scheduled a meeting and included the new Amigos to help sort things out. Maybe they could all put it together. The Three Amigos didn't like meetings and the new Amigos didn't either. Everyone just wanted to work outside, except Charlene. And meetings didn't pay salaries. In the end they just left Charlene to decide.

In a few weeks, Charlene wasn't looking as happy as she once had. One day when they were returning to the Barn, she handed them the keys and said goodbye. On her way out the door she pointed to the computer. "Don't forget to look at the books. In six months you will be bankrupt."



4. *Back to School*

Charlene had done exactly what they asked her to do. Sort out all the records, do the bookkeeping, and whatever else she thought needed doing. The organization she had done, unfortunately made it much easier for them to understand exactly why they were almost bankrupt. They weren't charging enough and weren't planning purchases well enough to purchase in bulk to lower costs.

The Three Amigos realized they had to buckle down and do the stuff they didn't want to do. Alita got on the phone with her Aunt Dorothy to ask her what she had been doing for them before they moved to Brooklyn. Eamon and Taylor started looking at all the data on the computer and double-checking files for invoices. They knew how to add up the numbers; they just didn't want to. They didn't understand exactly how much money they needed but they knew it was a lot and nothing could change in time to pay all of next month's bills. They couldn't fire any Working Amigos

because then they couldn't earn anything.

Alita returned and said, "Aunt Dorothy said we need to learn how to run a business. Go back to school. She said a lot of other things but basically that was it. We have to learn how to run a business."

None of them wanted to go back to school, even once a week for an evening course. They spent the evening at the Blue Cactus trying to decide what to do. They felt like they were drowning in success as gardeners but just plain drowning in the business. They had tried a business manager and she quit. Uncle Max and Aunt Dorothy were staying in Brooklyn with no plans to help them out. The birds were out of the nest but avoiding learning to fly.

The next morning Alita and Eamon went to work and Taylor went to the university bookstore. He came home with the thickest business management book he could find and spent the rest of the day reading it. And the rest of the next. And the rest of the next.

When Eamon and Alita came home on the third day, exhausted and beginning to worry, Taylor started explaining what they had to do. Business is like going to war. Go to Battle! Be ruthless!

The book said the Three Amigos should maximize profits by streamlining services and specializing. They needed to focus on big accounts because they were less time-consuming than a lot of small accounts. They should hire twice the number of workers, even three times as many, and pay them less. Then hire skilled Managing Amigos to tell the unskilled Worker Amigos what to do.

The Three Amigos promoted some of the Amigos to Managing Amigos and the Managing Amigos told the new Worker Amigos what to do. The Three Amigos, now feeling lost in a sea of Lawn Maintenance Amigos, Sod Amigos, Planting Amigos, and Landscaping Amigos began calling themselves the Original Amigos and went back to making all the decisions themselves the way they had when they were the only three people in the business. They stopped visiting job sites and focused their attention to the real business—making money. They stopped wearing dusty Levis, started wearing business casual, and courted corporate clients over long lunches. They learned how to be comfortable drinking wine. The Blue Cactus became a memory.

When Worker Amigos were sick or the weather was bad, the Managing Amigos gave priority to the big new clients and not their small faithful clients. When Green Amigos couldn't pay its overhead at the end of the month, some Worker Amigos would be fired. The books started balancing sometimes but they were still going down-hill. Big clients meant bigger equipment and more inventory.



5. Disaster

At first, all the Worker Amigos worked as hard as they always had, but then they would just be

required to work harder as there were more clients and less workers. They didn't believe the best Amigos had been chosen to be Managing Amigos and they resented being told what to do. The Managing Amigos were expected to produce results, but they had no control because the Original Amigos made all the decisions. The decisions were bad because the Original Amigos no longer knew what was happening on site or even knew the clients.

Ideas from Worker Amigos were now a bother to the Managing Amigos because they had deadlines to meet and budgets to maximize. Ideas from Managing Amigos were a bother to the Original Amigos because they only had time to court new contracts. Calling attention to a problem was no longer helpful; it was complaining. Too many complaints and an Amigo was fired.

The Worker Amigos no longer felt like Amigos at all. They were hired hands. Dispensable and interchangeable. They "were out sick" more often and only did as much as they were told, never more. They left as soon as they could find another job. Clients complained about sloppy work and incorrect billing. The Original Amigos were over-whelmed and angry. Angry at each other and angry at the business and angry with their unappreciative Amigos.

The Three Original Amigos were miserable, but they were the only ones who couldn't leave. They wanted to sell the business, but their lawyer told them that they couldn't. Green Amigos was still too close to being bankrupt. They would be lucky if a buyer assumed their debt. Doubling the size of the business had quadrupled the size of their debt.

There were too many shovels in the tool shed and not enough in the dirt.



6. *Back to the Beginning*

The Three Amigos left their lawyer's office and automatically went to the Blue Cactus. As soon as they sat down on the bar stools they felt like the Three Amigos again. But it only lasted a few minutes. As soon as they raised their beers to toast themselves, reality returned. There was nothing to toast.

After years of hard work and success, all the Three Amigos had was a failing business. The Worker Amigos didn't even say good morning when they walked by. The Managing Amigos were not much friendlier.

When the bartender announced the last round, the Three Amigos were too depressed to order. He delivered anyway. Then like a good bartender who had been carefully not listening, he said, "You know, there's a business fixer who comes in here sometimes. I don't know what what she does but she wears a seriously expensive suit. With a skirt. And high heels. Orders the best Savignon Blanc I've got."

That sounded good to the Amigos. The bartender said, "She usually comes in Thursdays. About

9:00.

The next day the Three Amigos were at the Blue Cactus by 8:00. The bartender nodded toward her when she came in, but he didn't really have to. She was the only person in the bar with high heels. Probably the only person who had every been in there with high heels. The bartender called to her and introduced them. He only gave first names because that's all he knew. Madeline seemed happy to talk to them and they all moved to a table.

"I know your business. That big Green barn off Brookhaven. Nice color."

At least that was something. Eamon and Alita jumped right in, interrupting each other and finishing the other's sentences. They explained about the Three Amigos and Green Amigos and their faded dreams. Sometimes they were pleading for help, and sometimes laughing at their goof ups. Madeline sipped her wine and listened. After a bit, Taylor interrupted and explained in business language he thought she would understand, how they got into trouble and how they had tried to get out. That nothing had worked even though on the slowest days they had more business than they could keep up with.

Madeline nodded and ordered another glass of wine. They were all so anxious they forgot to order more beer. "Okay, number one, your aims are clear and your interests are clear," she said, "and you are united. That's good. Not all my clients are so clear about what they want and I usually had to start there."

She said this was a case of how to manage a company and organize work and workers. She said she could start right away, as in now. "It's hot in here. I need some air and I'm taking the day off tomorrow so I can sleep in. Let's go over to the Barn and look at the numbers."



7. The Numbers

The Three Amigos didn't exactly race out the door, but they were relieved. Madeline asked Taylor to ride with her so she could ask more questions about the cash flow. Since little sports cars driven by smart women move faster than old pick-up trucks driven by anxious gardeners, Madeline and Taylor were already looking over the numbers when Eamon and Alita arrived. But all she said was "Okay, and left."

Madeline cancelled her day off and came back the next day to talk to the work crews at work sites. Madeline hadn't told them her fees and they hadn't asked. Whatever it was, they had to come up with the money. When she returned to the Barn where the Three Amigos had been asked to wait, she started right off with "Okay, I think we are good to go. This is a solid business. You have lots of clients and growth potential. Not big growth but smart growth. Big growth is bad for you. Maybe for everyone, but certainly for you. I want to think about it a few days but I'm pretty sure

what a plan might look like. Since my normal fees are too high for you and I have faith in your business, I'll charge you 10% of profits for the next ten years." She finally stopped to take a breath and said, "And I'll be sure your profit is enough to cover my fees. She looked at each of the Amigos to see if that was acceptable.

The Amigos had to let it all sink in, and then they nodded and did high fives all around.

"Talk to your lawyer, Frances Martin, right? Tell her to call me if she has questions. I'll bring a contract in next week. Not sure which day. I'll call you." They wrote down their phone number for her. They had run out of business cards and hadn't even bothered to order more.

The Three Amigos' called their lawyer the next morning. She said she knew Madeline and would review the contract but trusted that it would be a good one. "You are very lucky she likes you and your business. She charges \$400 an hour and up. The big guys who can afford the 'and up' love her. Who do you think pays for those \$1,000 Manolo Blahnik shoes? And that metallic silver car? It's probably real silver."

The Three Amigos were now excited about their prospects. It was only Taylor' however, that started calculating how much the Fixer thought they would earn if 10% of it would cover fees of \$400 "and up." He didn't know how many hours she would bill them but he knew that for Three Amigos digging in the dirt, it would be more than enough. Unless Eamon really did decide to get married and have those four kids. Then they would still have to step it up, but still....

Taylor went to the drugstore in the shopping mall to look up the Fixer's car. None of the Three Amigos had ever seen one like it. Taylor started with *MotorTrend* and *Car and Driver*, and then read *European Car*. It was a Porsche Boxster GTS convertible in Rhodium Silver Metallic with Agate Grey Leather. Brand new. It cost least \$80,000 plus taxes. What kind of income could she have to afford that?



8. Consenting Amigos

A few days later, Madeline called back. "Okay, I've talked to your lawyer and we're good to go." They scheduled a meeting for Thursday at 10:00 at the Green Barn. Madeline appeared in jeans this time but still in high heels. They had been working for three hours before she arrived so they were mostly in dust. Their euphoria had worn off but they were still skeptically optimistic.

Madeline sat down and started right off. "The short version is that you need to trust your employees. Define jobs, set realistic expectations, and leave them alone. Pull together a team of experts to help you with financial planning, inventory management, and marketing. Write a one-year plan and a five-year plan. Take those to the bank to refinance your debt. Put your banker and your lawyer on your team of experts. Get all of them talking to each other so you have a halo of

trust and good will. That's the direction I recommend and the path I will help you follow."

She paused for 30 seconds. "Here is my contract. You can send it to Frances and then sign it but since I've talked to Frances, I'll start work today on the basis of your personal commitment."

All Three Amigos nodded, trusting but not really understanding. What did "start today" mean?

Madeline put a rather large organizational chart on the table. The Three Amigos hearts sank. It looked too much like the one they had copied from the business book, but instead of boxes there were overlapping circles and most of them were green. One circle was marked "team of experts".

"Okay," she said. "I fix businesses. That's my job. I'm a Fixer. And people pay me a lot of money because I make them a lot of money. That pays for my shoes." She lifted a foot so they could admire the pair of heels she had on. The shoes were nice but none of the Three Amigos knew a Manolo Blahnik from a Nike. The only thing they were sure about is they weren't Nikes. "I make a lot of money by being efficient and effective and honest. And I'll teach you to do it too. From now on I'm The Fixer. Think of me that way and it'll be easier for you to remember why I'm here and why I'm saying you need to do this or that. Okay?"

No response from the Three Amigos who were wide-eyed and silent.

"Okay?" Madeline repeated.

All Three Amigos snapped out of overwhelmed and said, "Yes, yes, of course." But they still had no idea what they were actually supposed to do or what she would do. Or what she was talking about.

She pointed to the top circle on the chart. "That's your team of experts. We'll talk more about them later."

She pointed to the circle in the middle. "The Managing Amigos need to talk to each other. They need to support each other and have ongoing discussions so they know what problems the other work crews are having and how they are planning to fix them. Managers also need to take responsibility for each other, ensuring that each of them is doing a good job. That they are up to date on new information. They need to be prepared to substitute for each other when one is missing, even though that won't happen very often."

The Three Amigos just looked sideways at each other. It wasn't uncommon for two Managing Amigos to be out the same week. And Eamon had had to show one Managing Amigo how to use the edger four times because he broke the blade three times. Two other crews weren't double digging deep enough. And another had put in rose bushes—expensive ones—where they wouldn't grow. Not enough sun.

The Fixer noticed the doubtful looks. "Don't worry. Everything will change around here beginning next week."

Next week? the Amigos thought. On Monday mornings they stood around at 7:30 just hoping everyone showed up for work.



9. *The Green Amigos*

Pointing again to the large middle circle, the Fixer hurried on, “So, this is the Managing Amigos’ team. They meet as a group for the big decisions and long term planning. At first they need to meet weekly and then every 4-6 weeks. They will plan as far out as five years out but for now just thinking a year ahead. That’s the Managing Amigos Team.”

She pointed to the green circles. “All these green circles around the outside represent the Worker Amigo Crews, except don’t call them the “Worker” Amigos. You don’t want them to act like worker bees who only exist to feed the Queen or field hands who unthinkingly plow fields all day. I suggest “Green Amigos.” They are the ones your clients see all day. They are your front line. Your business doesn’t exist without them. It’s appropriate that Green Amigos Landscaping is represented by Green Amigos.

“Each work crew of Green Amigos has a Managing Amigo, a defined set of responsibilities, and a budget. The work crew plans their work. They decide what to do first or last. They decide what equipment they need to purchase. Which shovels they can work with best. They work with the Landscape Designer so information on soil conditions and sunlight can be updated as the workers discover complicating situations. Then plantings can be corrected before planting. Otherwise they die next year and the job costs are doubled.”

“To repeat,” the Fixer said, “The work crews and their Managing Amigo are responsible for their daily work, operations. They know what needs to be done. No need to wait for orders.”

The Three Amigos remembered what it was like when they worked as the only crew. The freedom and immediacy of doing what needed to be done. It was also like that when they hired the first six Amigos. They had fun working together and making decisions together. This all sounded good but Green Amigos were so big now and working at sites too far away to have lunch together.

And could they trust all the Green Amigos? The Three Amigos were so far from the work sites now that they didn’t really know.

“When you started, any one of you could raise a concern and have it discussed. Then something changed. When you hired the first new Amigos, you still checked to be sure they thought the plan was good. Was it something they could do? Was there a better way. Right?”

The Amigos knew it was and nodded their heads. Did the Managing Amigos do that? Had they been encouraged to do that? The Amigos couldn’t remember, but it hadn’t happened lately.

The Fixer said, “Remember how this worked? Not everyone was involved in every decision but when a decision affected an Amigo’s work, you didn’t impose it. You worked something out. That’s the power of asking for consent and that’s what you need to get back to if you want the Green Amigos to be Amigos like you all were then.”

“I remember standing around our trucks,” Alita said. “We loved your work and we had full control over how we did it. We wanted to do the work the best way possible. Somewhere in the middle we forgot our original purpose.”

The Fixer said, “When people can control their own working conditions, calling in sick will be reduced by 80%, and they won’t be quitting all the time. You can relax and not have to spend so much time training replacements.”

The Three Amigos perked up. On the worst days 20% of their work force was on sick leave. That meant they had to hire 20% more workers than they needed just to cover sick days. Or hire temporary workers who understood nothing about the work needed.

“Allowing workers to object will produce far-reaching changes in your company. Amigos won’t be able to hide behind bad decisions by managers. If they know something won’t work or the estimates are flawed, it becomes their responsibility to speak up. If an Amigo has information about a problem or an opportunity, they are obligated to speak up. When an Amigo objects, Amigos will have to listen. An Amigo is an Amigo. And you need all their intelligence to run an intelligent company.

“When Amigos are proud of their work, they are healthier, work harder, and produce more consistent quality.”

So far so good, the Three Amigos thought. This was sounding good and familiar. It was true for them so why not the other Amigos? But they also thought this is what they tried to do when they promoted managers and put them in charge. It hadn’t worked at all.



10. *Amigos with Tasks*

“Work Crews are groups of Green Amigos with a Managing Amigo. They are responsible for a specific set of tasks—lawn care, planting, design, etc. Each Amigo needs a clear task description that all the Amigos help write so all the team’s tasks are assigned and assigned to the best person to do the job. When your company began to grow, you didn’t define roles or responsibilities for yourselves or anyone else. No one had clear task descriptions or quality expectations. You had been able to work without them because you all worked together collaboratively. That didn’t work as soon as everyone couldn’t talk to everyone else everyday. You had no other communications structure.

“When you decided to move to the Barn, you weren’t clear how it could be used to support the business. It became a storage shed instead of a staging area or the hub of a smart purchasing program. Or a marketplace.”

“Each work crew needs to have clear expectations and they need to be measurable. What is the client expecting? Is the client expecting too much or too little? Each person needs to be focused on

the aims associated with each client, each job, and the overall planning for that crew.

“Members of Work Crews are interdependent. They have an unusual amount of control over their work, and an equal measure of responsibility. They will decide who they will hire and what tools they need to buy. They will control their own budget.

“Work Crews have meetings to make agreements on how they will do their work and how the Managing Amigo will manage them. They can be on lunch breaks on site or in the truck driving back to the warehouse or in the office before work. It doesn’t matter. It can be a stand up meeting. But in these meetings, all Amigos are peers, including the Managing Amigo. Each Amigo takes responsibility for the Crew’s success as well as for their own. They are responsible to each other. Every one suffers when one Amigo is malingering. Amigos are responsible for this, not just the Manager. Amigos know when an Amigo is being honest.

“Work crews need enough independence to self-manage, not sit around waiting for orders or for their action to be countermanded. The Green Amigos are also expected to educate themselves about best practices and new discoveries.”

The Three Amigos sighed a big sigh in unison. That felt like a load off their shoulders. They were afraid that the Fixer would say they hadn’t been taking enough responsibility for inspecting all the work done or doing enough training.

The Fixer was saying that each work crew should be doing what the Three Amigos used to do themselves. And that the Managing Circle could still keep things under control. The experts in the Top Circle could help them from getting into a hole again.

The Fixer said very slowly and patiently, “When you are not sure what to do, think back to what worked so well for you in the beginning. You were clear about what you wanted and you figured out together how to do it. You have a lot of successes to learn from. Don’t forget that.”

The Three Amigos sat a little taller.



11. The First Assignment

The Fixer gave them assignments for the next week. She said, “This isn’t everything. When you do this there will be more questions and more refinements to make but you have to get started in order to understand all that. This is the list of things you need to do. I’ll be back next week. You can call me if you have questions or everything totally falls apart.” In response the fear on the face of the Amigos, she laughed and said, “I don’t think that will happen. If it does, that’s why you hired The Fixer.”

She handed them three copies of the list and sped off in her sparkling silver Porsche and Manolo Blahnik shoes.

The Three Amigos sat down and individually read their copy:

1. **Call your Managing Amigos together for a meeting to explain what we have talked about. (You will forget half of it. Normal.) Include one Green Amigo from each work crew. Ask the crew to select someone else. Two people from each crew attend this meeting.**
2. **Explain shared responsibility and distributed decision-making. Each person is a leader. And accountable. No waiting for orders and no micro managing or second guessing.**
3. **Have your Managing Amigos and the Representative Amigos make a list of your equipment and inventory on hand and compare it to the requirements for the jobs for next month. How can they schedule jobs so the equipment can be shared without buying more than one back up. Let them do it themselves. You have other things to do.**
4. **Each of you meet with a work crew and their Managing Amigo and explain the new expectations. Have them work on tangible task descriptions of their work. Include specific measurements methods of work results. What should they see at the end of the day to know they have done a good job? What is a good job? What will make them proud?**
5. **Figure out what inventory you will need for the summer. How can you plan your jobs so you are purchasing inventory most economically. Not at the beginning of each job.**

Those five tasks will keep you busy this week. More to come! Madeline.

“Well this is sure different than what the business management book said to do,” Taylor said. “I’m sure I didn’t misunderstand that book.”

“I doubt if you did. It’s good this is different because the business book didn’t work,” Eamon said.

“The inventory stuff is the same but we didn’t understand how to do it.” Alita said.

“We didn’t know how to do it. The Fixer says make a list and compare it. Maybe we could use a calendar, too. We know what a calendar is. I couldn’t even understand what the business book was talking about. ‘Uniquely positioned procurement’ Who knows what that is? Or cares.”

They were silent for a while reading the list again. Then they started making their own lists.

Over the next week the Three Amigos carried out each point on the list. It went very well except that they were very anxious about whether it would work. There was a lot of snickering but there was also a new energy around the Barn. The Green Amigos liked their new name and some even started coming in early to plan their day and load the right equipment so they didn’t have to come all the way back to the Barn to get something. The Managers seemed to be confused sometimes because the Green Amigos actually did work together and didn’t hang round expecting instructions. And everyone came to work. One of the Managers said they were just afraid to miss something but Alita wasn’t so sure. Eamon thought it was possible. Taylor had no thoughts. “Let’s wait and see.”

Three days later two Managers approached Eamon about some orders they had. The plants specified wouldn’t grow well beside each other because they would compete for water. The trees

that had arrived were not the right species and would be subject to local molds. The Amigo's estimator had been routinely specifying too few border plants. "We can thin them out in two years and have the extra plants back, but this year the borders won't look like good work."

The Three Amigos used their calendar to fit in all the meetings with crews to explained the new plan. After a few days, the crews began believing that something might change permanently. The ones who were most believing were those who had been the first hired. The long-timers. They had the old experience to trust.



12. Amigos Communicating

The Fixer came back the next week and said, "What went wrong first is that you stopped communicating across the organization and adopted an autocratic structure in which you made all the decisions from the top and kept all the information there as well. Who else besides the autocrat needs information? Sharing information just causes trouble. The only information autocrats share, even if they are benefolent dictators with good intentions, is orders. And they don't listen to anyone because no one had the information required to make decisions. Or to criticize their decisions.

"It's impossible to make good decisions from the top without full information from the front lines. It's the Green Amigos who have the information you need to run your business. Along with the clients, they are your business. It seems easier to tell people what to do and expect them to do it, but as you discovered, it doesn't work. You don't know what they are coping with so you can't know what needs to be done. They lose respect for you."

"The Managing Circle is the center of communications. It brings together information from all the Green Circles. Without this communications hub, the work crews would become isolated and distanced from Green Amigos as a company. They would lose their sense of purpose and start working for a salary."

The Fixer pointed to the area on the organizational map where the Managing Team circle and the green circles of the Work Crews overlapped. "Remember that I asked the Managing Amigos and an Amigo the work crew selected to meet in the Managing Circle meeting? There is a bigger reason that involving more people. Having two links between a Work Crew and the Managing Team establishes two flows of communication. The Representing Amigo is responsible for carrying information from the Work Crew to the Managing Team, and the Managing Amigo from the Managing Team to the Work Crew. Each one has clear communications responsibilities. This avoids the tension that causes static when one person has to carry messages in two directions. Often one message or the other gets mangled—or forgotten."

The Fixer paused for the Three Amigos to ask questions but they had none. Or none that they

could verbalize.

“Both links are equal members of the Managing Circle. The Representative is not just a token. The Representative could even be elected by the Managing Circle to serve on the Top Circle of Experts.”

“As an expert in what?” Taylor asked.

“In the work. The Green Amigos are doing the work of the company. They produce the product and interact with the client. They are experts.”



13. *Who Is in Charge*

The Three Amigos were getting anxious about everyone except them making decisions. The Fixer had fixed everyone but the Three Amigos. They were the Three Original Amigos. This was their company! They were nowhere to be seen on the organizational chart.

“What about us? Do we fit in?”

The Fixer said, “You need to decide which jobs you want. ‘Owners’ isn’t a job description. It doesn’t come with roles and responsibilities. The Managing Amigos guide the day to day operations—which work crew goes where and how many rakes they need and which job doesn’t get done when Amigos get sick or it’s pouring rain, just like they do now.

“You’ll need a General Managing Amigo. A CEO. Only one. You could split the job, but I think your business needs one person to work with Managers and organize the day-to-day operations. There are other jobs that need doing that are as important as being General Manager. You started developing an exotic plant business but that greenhouse is now empty, a wasted investment. You started an internship program with the University but no one called them back the last time they asked for applications. What about leading those programs?”

The Three Amigos brightened up a bit but were non-committal.

“I don’t think any of you wants to be the General Manager because that’s a job that has needed doing and none of you have done it so far. You may need to hire someone.”

An implied criticism, but they couldn’t disagree. They all waited because it sounded like there were more interesting jobs. And someone else could be in charge for a change.

The Fixer pointed to the chart again. “You have to have leadership that focuses on the big picture. You can’t have a sustainable organization without a plan. What will your world be like in five-years? How can you plan for that? Who does research and development?”

She pointed to a circle overlapping the Managing Team. This is your Board of Experts. Your lawyer, accountant, Exotic Plant Expert, community leaders — all the people who can help you run the business. As members of your Board, they are part of your business. The synergy of discussion

between all of them is better than just asking questions in isolation. The Board also includes the General Managing Amigo and a member of the Managing Team that represents the Amigos.



14. New Beginnings

The Fixer scheduled two all-day workshops, one a week for two adjacent weeks with all the Amigos. She discussed self-management and the importance of ongoing education. Taking courses at the university and online. How to choose representatives and how to conduct a meeting in an efficient and inclusive way. They practiced doing rounds so everyone could speak on every issue. Ensuring that everyone was treated as amnequal. The importance of transparency so everyone had the same information. If Amigos were responsible for making decisions, they had to have the information to make them responsibly. She taught them a lot of other stuff, too. Like the difference between policy and operations decisions.

Within a month, everyone was whistling and showing up for work everyday, and often staying late to organize supplies in the Barn for the next morning. The office no longer looked like a whirlwind of paper. Billing complaints disappeared and past-due accounts were paid. The work crews submitted suggestions for improved work schedules for the Managing Team. The Managers asked for time in the office to do planning and organize inventory. They were no longer needed on site all the time.

When the Three Amigos asked The Fixer about that, she said they don't need to ask you. If they can manage the work better by having planning time in the Barn. The Managers and Green Amigos are the two parties who can best evaluate the quality of that decision and plan how to make it operational. It's a policy decision that governs operations.

All the Amigos were beginning to understand that keeping records was a way to improve their work, not to avoid being fired. Work Crews kept records and measured their own productivity. The records belonged to the Work Crews as a whole, not to the Managing Amigo. Part of each Amigo's pay was linked to the financial success of the company. Even the high school students who came each afternoon to do odd jobs were paid two wages: one at market rates as a steady salary and one that varied based on the success of the company.

Financial records were open. There were no secrets to make anyone suspicious. Everyone was responsible for understanding how the business ran—where it was successful and where it failed.

In the end Taylor did become the General Managing Amigo because the job was now about developing the company and not riding herd on employees. He even spent one day a week in working on a job site. Usually one where they were installing a new landscaping design. Alita took over the Exotic Plant Greenhouse and Internship Program. Eamon took over responsibility for

marketing and public relations. He actually enjoyed all those lunches and dinner meetings. And dressing in business casual. All three, along with the experts on the top circle worked on plans to develop a marketplace and nursery in the Barn.

The Three Amigos still owned the company, but that didn't mean they had to be bosses. That's not why they started the business in the first place.



15. *Sailing Along*

It was hard for many Amigos to assume full responsibility for their own work, particularly to plan, but gradually they began to act and feel like equals, speaking up more, even objecting. With encouragement they began educating themselves and studying methods for making their work more efficient and effective. The Managing Team budgeted and purchased a computer with a big monitor for the Barn so they and the Green Amigos could take online courses and do research on plants and other things. Equipment. Soil treatments. Bug solutions.

The Managing Amigos learned to participate in Work Crew meetings and not take over the discussion. They were day-to-day operational leaders but not in meetings.

As General Manager, Taylor learned to organize his work and interpret financial reports and not let them pile up for the accountant. Now that they had experts on the Board who understood the business, he often asked for advice. He devised ways to keep everyone informed and double-checked that information was reaching everyone.

The work process was orderly and everyone understood their jobs. Decisions were made on time and with dates on which they needed to be reviewed. Confidence was high. Sick days were down. There had been no Amigo turnover since the Fixer started fixing. Green Amigos was once again a company that was alive from top to bottom and bottom to top, as profitable and efficient as it wished to be.

After the first few training sessions the Three Amigos thought everything was perfect and they could get along without the Fixer. They would just keep sending Fixer her checks each month. She was gone as quickly as she came, but she said on her way out, "Call me when it gets tough again."

Of course, the Amigos knew it wouldn't. They were fixed.



16. *Into the Wind*

But things did get bad again. As the Fixer had known all along, the happy days lasted only a matter

of months. What went wrong?

The Three Amigos were too proud to ask The Fixer to come back officially so they stopped by the Blue Cactus hoping she would be there. They had to go back three nights in a row before she appeared. Over beer and wine, they eventually got around to explaining that her ideas were good but their Amigos were different. They didn't want to make decisions and wanted the Managing Amigos to just tell them what to do. The Board was getting difficult too. They thought all this equality stuff was bound to fail. You don't ask workers what to do, you tell them. The Three Amigos were no longer miserable on the top, they were miserable in the middle. Both the Experts and the Amigos were in rebellion and expecting them to fix it.

The Fixer listened but the Three Amigos could see that she already knew what they were going to say. This time she didn't need to walk around the Barn or interview anyone. She just laid it right out.

"Expecting everyone to make decisions requires changing the culture of dependence. The Amigos want to rely on managers because then they can blame managers. Changing that, even when people want to change takes more than a few days of training and an organizational chart. Living as equals means everyone has to both step up and allow each other to fail. They have to know that if they aren't perfect, their Work Crew won't fire them. The point is to learn and improve. The Managing Amigo has to become a coach, not a boss."

The Three Amigos realized that it had been hard for them to share decisions too. They were probably sending signals that in the end they knew best and would do the hiring and firing. They invited the Fixer to meet with their Board. And she agreed.

The board members were even more impressed with the Manolo Bahnke shoes than the Three Amigos had been. They all sat up taller and a couple adjusted the ties. Everyone stood and shook hands and introduced themselves. She walked around the table in a soft cloud of perfume that seem to the Three Amigos to be overdoing it. Frances caught their eye and smiled.

While everyone was still captivated with her, The Fixer explained that all the Amigos had to learn not just a new way of making decisions, but a new way of relating to each other. It was a new culture focused on everyone being committed to the success of Green Amigos and beautiful gardens. A culture in which each person had an equally important part in a large system of interdependent pieces.

"Everyone has just been sent to China and wants to go home. And they've forgotten how miserable they were at home."

The Three Amigos nodded their heads and the experts seemed to understand more about what was happening.

"What you need is a Training Team to work with your Amigos on an ongoing basis," The Fixer said. "This is too hard for them to do alone and do their actual jobs too.

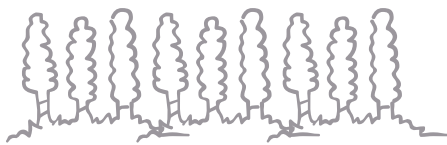
The Board agreed and even agreed to attend the next round of training sessions. They insisted on

a date before they let the Fixer of the door.

Then Fixer helped the Managing Amigos set up a Training Crew with Amigos selected by their Work Crews. Taylor as Managing Amigo was Manager of the Training Crew and met with the Fixer once a week to discuss problems and ways of addressing them.

Alita began to understand more clearly why the organization had to work from the bottom up, not just the top down. The energy had to flow up from the Work Crews to the Managing Team and the Board of Experts, as well as from the Managing Team down. That would keep the organization balanced and prevent autocratic decision-making. Autocrats were not big on hearing feedback from workers.

The Training Team's major task was to help the Amigos design a development program that included personal skills so they would feel more confident when speaking up and when representing their Amigos in the Managing Team and even the Board. They were all taught to read the financial reports, at least well enough to understand their Work Crew budgets and the numbers behind their variable compensation, the part of their salary based on the company's earnings.



17. Green Amigos Becomes Famous

The real turning point at Green Amigos came almost a year after the Three Amigos met The Fixer and she started changing their culture. A Work Crew saw the first evidence of what became an area-wide tree blight—strange markings on leaves that they couldn't identify. From what they had learned in the company log books was that the five-year plan called for developing a tree farm. but A tree blight might wipe out the new trees before anyone could identify it. The Amigos weren't confident enough to tell the Managing Team what they suspected and also feared what would happen to them if the company took a big loss.

What if they were wrong and the information damaged the company's reputation? But if the company suffered, they would too. But they had also learned to problem solve and that problem solving rather than ignore problems.

The Work Crew watched the spots a few days and identified a unique characteristic and logged which plants it affected. They pointed it out to one of the interns from the University. The intern took it back to the University lab to show her professor. The professor developed a treatment and gave it to Green Amigos to test. The treatment worked and made Green Amigos famous. The blight is called "Green Amigos Tree Spots."

The Green Amigos on the work crews now had evidence that they were the strength of the company. It was no longer a problem to find an Amigo to be a Representative to the Managing

Team, or even the Board of Experts. And no one even considered withholding negative information, even if it was later proven to be wrong.

All the Amigos were once again just Amigos.

