



Knowledge is Power – Foundations and Fuel for Cooperatives' Sustainability

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February 2017

This is the fourth in our series about the seven principles of cooperatives. In this article we discuss principle number five.

Cooperative Principle 5: Education, Training, and Information. Knowledge and institutional wisdom shared by members, officers, managers and elected representatives of cooperatives is key to their effective contribution to the development and sustainability of the cooperative. Outreach to the public, and their education, training, and information, helps to expand the reach of cooperative business, and make the democratic, efficient governance of the cooperative possible.

This is fundamental to the development of a dynamic and resilient cooperative culture. Only when everyone is working with a common understanding of what a cooperative is and how it functions can a coop will be effective in the marketplace. Education, training and up-to-date information sharing is how this happens.

Company culture is an important and trendy topic in business in general. The culture of the business can affect employees' level of commitment, inspiration and the company's longevity. Cooperative businesses intentionally include members in decision making regarding questions about everything from finance to policy. Can you say resilient?

Co-op culture encourages members to seek common understanding, while realizing that the

process is always ongoing and evolving. It starts with a collective mission and continues through all the policies and business functions. Fourth River Workers Guild meets monthly – sometimes more often – discussing what’s going on in their cooperative, what they need to know to make any decisions going forward, and then deciding on their direction. The Pin-up Couriers bicycle posting collective meets weekly to do the same.

Education, training and information sharing builds a level team of workers and leaders. It also supports effective and timely business decision making. In a typical corporate culture, information is usually shared only on a “need-to-know” basis. Little do they know is that everyone needs to know.

Workers in a cooperative need to know what effects not only their job, but their company. When the market or a technology changes, decisions have to be made and action needs to be taken. Only within the context of continual learning and sharing can a group of people make practical business decisions that fit within common principles. This requires but also encourages a greater shared responsibility for communicating ideas, concerns, feedback, industry news, anything that affects the cooperative’s environment.

This isn’t just to be more humane and charitable; the cooperative education and information sharing model makes business more efficient. Take any size category of business, and there are proportionately more cooperative companies in that category than conventional businesses.

Why not help every member of the company be more resourceful, better informed, and knowledgeable about how to do their jobs and help run the company? Cooperatives have answered this question with a resounding “Yes!” and their businesses are better off for it.

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