



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOSS



Cooperative Principle 7: Commitment to Community

Our economy is a story that we tell each other and ourselves every day. It encompasses many of our expectations, ambitions, challenges, and our wellness. All aspects of our communities are part of that story, from the art that is created, goods that are made, services performed, and food that is grown and eaten by all of us. The seventh principle balances business and social welfare, adding two other “bottom lines” to the business equation.

From the Rochdale Principles of the 1840’s comes the acknowledgement that a business is only as healthy as the community where it does business. The updated version of this principle describes a partnership between the cooperative and the community: “While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies and programs accepted by the members.”

In the mainstream economy that is unfortunately less cooperative and more extractive, how much of that story can each one of us claim responsibility for? How much control do we have over how the work we do affects our community? Many well-meaning charitable efforts respond to the damage done during conventional business activities during the work day, rather than creating shared wealth and well-being every day.

Cooperatives write a different story. It is a story about applying principles through businesses that are designed to work for and by the people who are members in them:

“doing good while doing well” in business.

In Pittsburgh’s Hill District, the Ujamaa Collective arose from the members’ desire to improve their community. Part of their mission is “... developing models of sustainable cooperative economics for Pittsburgh’s Black communities, with an emphasis on the Historic Hill District.”

That is a story we want to be in and continually be “writing”.

Cooperatives put a high value on democratic decision making process, open and voluntary participation, independence and autonomy. This happens in balance with contribution back into the community that supports them, and ongoing collaboration with other businesses.

The focus of the coop story is more centered on the overall growth and sustainability of a community, not one of financial gain for the benefit of a few.

Fourth River Workers Guild, a Pittsburgh design-build cooperative, puts it this way:

“We are a Pittsburgh based worker-owned design build cooperative focusing on natural building, construction, ecological design and permaculture. We utilize a dynamic governance as a means to create a more democratic and inclusive working environment for our members and clients. Our work is guided by the ethos of promoting and improving our local community and ecology.”

This is a story that is not always easy to tell, however, above the noise of the corporate dominated economy. That narrative, the more accessible, friendlier, frugal yet generous, less frantic narrative, is why cooperatives have been around for a long time and will continue to be an authentic business option. It is why there is a renewed interest in cooperative businesses in Pittsburgh and many other places now.

This is reflected in the East End Food Co-op’s community vision and values:

“The East End Food Co-op exists to enhance physical and social health to our community. To these ends, we will create:

- A sustainable member-owned business open to everyone;
- An ethical and resilient food infrastructure;
- A vibrant, dynamic community of happy, healthy people; and
- A creative vision to transform the future.”

In the Work Hard Pittsburgh (workhardpgh.com) member owned co-working space, members agree to perform 50 hours of community service each year that the cooperative’s members approve as meaningful and appropriate.

The cooperative economy is a story more and more want to join, and have their friends and loved ones join them in it.

These seven cooperative principles make up a story that gives all of us a common purpose for our livelihoods and hope in our community.

Now, after reading all about the seven cooperative principles, aren't you inspired to learn more? We're offering "C-School" - A Think-Outside-the-Boss Workshop Series beginning September 23. It's free of charge, supported by our sponsors. All details for that are at www.PittsburghChamber.coop/events.

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Principles one through six are discussed in the New People online and at www.PittsburghChamber.coop/news.

