

LEADer

A publication focused on sharing ideas to improve on and support excellent cooperative governance for NCGA's Western Corridor co-ops



Focus on Board Leadership

Inside This Issue

Good Grief! Did He Really Do That?—Cindy Owings and Martha Whitman **Page 3**

Engaging All Board Members in Leadership—Paige Lettington **Page 5**

Works for Us: Board Orientation Quincy Natural Style
—Linda Margaretic **Page 7**

Leadership as Influence
—Marcia Shaw **Page 9**

Evolving into a Board President
—Philip Buri **Page 10**

Ask the BEST: What about Executive Committees?—BEST **Page 13**

For More Information—**Page 15**

Your Leadership Style—**Page 16**

Leading from the Middle

—by Marcia Shaw

During my childhood, the leader of the gang in comics, movies, and television shows always went over the hill first. The thundering herd of followers went where he (it was always a he) took them. The leader decided where to go (or what to do) and then plunged in. The leader was often the scout, the risk taker, or the one willing to take action first. The followers, impressed with the derring-do, were thus persuaded that this path was the only choice. Leaders never wanted to discuss the options, never asked for a vote or entertained an alternative choice. This “command and control” style of leadership was heavily based on the military, but we didn’t know



that then. We just absorbed the lessons of leadership as we absorbed the rest of our cultural influences via popular media. In fact, a lot of what we knew about leadership then was derived from studies done by social scientists working with the military during World War II. A lot has changed since then. (To be fair, the military has now embraced a wider concept of leadership, with more process and higher levels of team involvement in decision making.)

What works for a leader is heavily dependent on two things—the rest of the team and the nature of the task. Hierarchical leadership is based on the assumption that one

Meet the BEST in the West



Michele Adams—General Manager, First Alternative Co-op (Corvallis, Oregon)
michele@firstalt.coop



Lucinda Berdon—General Manager, Quincy Natural Foods (Quincy, California)
qnf@snowcrest.net



Philip Buri—Chair Community Food Co-op (Bellingham, Washington)
philip@burifunston.com



Paige Lettington—Former Director, Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op (Sacramento, California)
paigelyn@sonic.net



Cindy Owings—Director Community Food Co-op (Bozeman, Montana)
petunias@3rivers.net



Martha Whitman—President La Montañita Co-op (Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Gallup, New Mexico)
marthawhitman@comcast.net



Program Adviser
Marcia Shaw—Consultant Intentional Management (Corvallis, Oregon)
shawm@proaxis.com



Program Support
Karen Zimbelman—Development Director, NCGA Western Corridor (Arcata, California)
kz@ncga.coop



LEADer

A publication focused on sharing ideas to improve on and support excellent cooperative governance for NCGA's Western Corridor co-ops

Leadership—Co-op Style!

Our focus for this issue is the board's leadership role and how all directors contribute to setting a leadership tone for the co-op. What does leadership mean? How does a group of people, acting as a board, contribute to the leadership needs of the co-op? What are some of the important leadership functions needed for an effective, high-functioning board? We offer articles about leadership styles, how leadership works in a group, and ways to encourage all directors to contribute to the board's leadership role.

We also cover some more practical items: using a code of conduct to enforce standards of behavior, board orientation guidelines, and thoughts on what it takes to be a good co-op board president. Finally, our "Ask the BEST" question this time addresses the issue of access to information and use of an executive committee. In the end, we found the topic of leadership challenging to address, and we know there are many facets not yet covered. We hope you'll let us know your thoughts, suggestions, and questions as we continue our collective learning and dialogue.

About the LEADer

The LEADer is a quarterly publication designed to complement in-person board training sessions sponsored by the NCGA Western Corridor. The LEADer is designed to provide a forum for the continued sharing of ideas and resources and to support a growing and increasingly effective network of co-op leadership. Join in the discussion. Let us know what you think.

- The LEADer is distributed to enrolled directors and leaders of Western Corridor co-ops.
- The next issue will be available in June 2009. The submission deadline for that issue is May 10.
- We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. Send comments or questions to askthebest@ncga.coop.
- You can find information about the LEAD program and an online enrollment form at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.
- For more information about the NCGA, the Western Corridor, upcoming western regional board training events, or the LEADer, or for contact information for any BEST members, contact:

Karen Zimbelman
National Cooperative Grocers Association
P.O. Box 399 · Arcata, CA 95518
866.709.2667—ext. 3150
kz@ncga.coop



Board Effectiveness Support Team

GOOD GRIEF!

Did He Really Do That?

There are few subjects in our own board experience that bring on a yawn more quickly than codes of conduct. The topic is dry as unbuttered toast. On the surface, it's obvious, right? We're all adults; we're supposed to act nice. What else is there to know? The thought that a board member might have to be called on the carpet for a violation makes most of us run as fast as we can in the opposite direction.

But, and this is a big *but*, consider a few instances that may cause you to squirm. How would you handle a board member who used inappropriate language with a co-op staff person? What would you do if your general manager revealed that he was confronted at a party by an acquaintance claiming to know his salary? What if the co-op wellness manager said she was pressured to carry vitamins being marketed by a certain board member? How would you handle the awkward and uncomfortable situation of one board member verbally attacking another during a meeting and subsequently hiring an attorney

to resolve the dispute? Imagine your reaction in finding out that the grievant in a grievance procedure against the co-op knew of the board's decisions and plans before a written notification had been sent.

You might be saying to yourself, "That could never happen here!" However, no co-op is immune to such circumstances. Each example listed above happened within the past decade at a food co-op.

One board chair recalls, "We had a situation where one board member was completely inappropriate in the store. Initially, I learned of his use of profanity in the store. Another board member and I spoke to him about it. He would barely acknowledge it had happened and said, 'Well if I did do it, I apologize and it won't happen again.' Months later the GM told me he would have to ban the same board member because he had been completely inappropriate to a cashier. We

met with him again. He denied it, but we had witnesses and stuck to our guns. It was awful. We had to insist he resign in writing immediately.

"I believed the fellow had significant personal problems. Regardless, we had to protect the co-op, and we were not his rehabilitators. While having great compassion, we had to draw the line. We were very relieved to be able to reference a policy as justification. Our board's policy states: 'As representatives of the co-op, board members shall project a positive image and conduct themselves in a professional manner. All board members will respect the rights of other board members, staff, and member/owners to communicate their ideas, and will communicate with honesty and respect.'

"A week after the board member's resignation, two staff members approached me separately and thanked me

—by Cindy Owings and Martha Whitman

Continued on Page 4



Did He Really Do That?!

Continued from Page 3

for responding quickly to the problem. This incident taught me that the board's conduct does affect staff morale, even if you never hear about it."

If you should ever have to warn or reprimand a board member, does your co-op's policy framework include a code of conduct that will support your actions? Who on your board will carry out the warning? What are the stated consequences of a violation of the code of conduct? Hopefully, you can answer these questions based on established board policies.

But if your co-op does not have a code of conduct, dealing with awkward and problematic situations can be chaotic. A code of conduct that carefully

and thoughtfully defines expectations of board member behavior in relation to other board members, co-op staff, the general manager, and co-op owner/members is essential to board accountability.

In the face of recent breaches of ethics by U.S. corporate executives and Wall Street brokers, well-run co-ops have the opportunity to shine. By running a business openly, honestly, and based on sound policies, co-ops can provide an alternative model that bucks the trend. The devil is in the details.

FYI! Looking for sample codes of ethics or codes of conduct? Look at these online documents from Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op (<http://www.sacfoodcoop.com/PDFs/ethics.pdf>) and La Montañita Co-op (http://www.lamontanita.coop/images/documents/2008_07_15_bpm.pdf; see page 7).

Leading from the Middle

Continued from Cover

person has all the knowledge and the designated power to enforce it. Co-op boards are usually more balanced, with different styles and experiences to share. Our diversity means that we have different perspectives and opinions that are worth hearing. Co-op boards generally focus on the big picture and the long range, with time for thorough discussion and fact verification. Neither the task nor the nature of the team depends on an "expert" to lead us into new territory.



Since an out-in-front leader is not usually appropriate for the co-op board, leading from the middle is a better option.

Middle-distance leaders listen more than they talk. They pay attention to process and sense the center of board opinion. They ask good questions that frame the problem to be solved or the choices to be made. Although they have opinions, they are not focused on winning the argument. Their satisfaction is derived from facilitating honest exchanges when decisions are tough. Leaders paraphrase and summarize as a way to move the process forward. They don't have all the information or answers, and

they know their board doesn't expect them to; everyone owns the process and the choices. They delegate frequently and are happy for all members of the board to become leaders on some issues or projects.

Co-op boards have benefited from a postfeminist consideration of leadership and more women in leadership roles. Board work is often "relational" work, and the wise leader pays attention to relationships among members and with the general manager. When a board flounders, the first things that surface are fractured relationships. A tuned-in

Continued on Page 6



Engaging All Board Members in Leadership

—by Paige Lettington

Everyone understands that a co-op's member/owners elect the board of directors to provide leadership to the co-op. And most folks assume that the board president or chair, whether elected by the members or by the board itself, takes the leadership role for the board. While it is certainly true that the president (or chair) has certain responsibilities as an individual officially representing the board, there are many opportunities for leadership on the co-op board and many good reasons to develop leadership qualities in all your directors.

When I was a newbie board member, trying to learn as much as I could from any and every source, I heard something from a co-op veteran that has always stuck in my mind. To paraphrase, "If you aren't comfortable with at least half of your directors becoming president, you have a problem."

Why is that a problem? For one thing, elections and term limits could take all your experienced leaders away at once. The board needs several people who are willing and able to step into leadership roles. Finding "nonofficial" leadership roles for board members can help them develop the skills and confidence needed to take on the "official" leadership role of board chair or president. It's also important to develop leaders because any director might be put in a position of representing the board when interacting with owners or others. But perhaps more important, by engaging all your board members in leadership roles, you're tapping into their strengths and their motivations for serving on the board, and in turn creating a more engaged and effective board.

OK, sounds good in theory—how can we make that happen?

Certainly, there are some traditional, obvious ways to get more board members involved in leadership:

- Make sure each director gets an opportunity to chair a committee, whether a standing committee or an ad hoc committee.
- Have different directors take lead roles at member meetings or lead roles in different parts of member meetings.
- Rotate the job of writing articles about board meetings, board activities, and other topics of interest for the co-op's newsletter.

There are nontraditional ways as well. For instance, when new directors join the board, the president and other directors should find out where their strengths and motivations lie. Find out what inspired them to run for the board and look for leadership roles related to that

Continued on Page 6



Engaging All Board Members in Leadership

Continued from Page 5

inspiration. The information on new board members can come from candidate application forms, campaign materials, election-related events, interviews, and orientation sessions.

Often, people run for the board because they perceive a lack of engagement or attention by the board in a certain area. Rather than getting defensive about this lack (there often is at least a grain of truth in those views), look for positive ways to address the areas and get new directors involved. Ask them for ideas (and get the buy-in of the

whole board before proceeding). Letting new directors take a lead role will show them that the board values their input and will help develop their leadership skills at the same time. (Of course, you need to make sure these assignments are under the purview of the board and not delving into operational issues.) For instance, if a new director believes the board needs to do more member outreach via the Web, ask him or her to research free online tools and make a proposal for how the board might use these tools effectively (via a blog, for example). Or if a new director likes structure and is very organized, see if he or she will lead a project to create or update the board's manual.

Developing and nurturing the leadership qualities of all your directors makes your board more productive, enhances trust and teamwork, and helps perpetuate a strong and effective board.

Leading from the Middle

Continued from Page 4

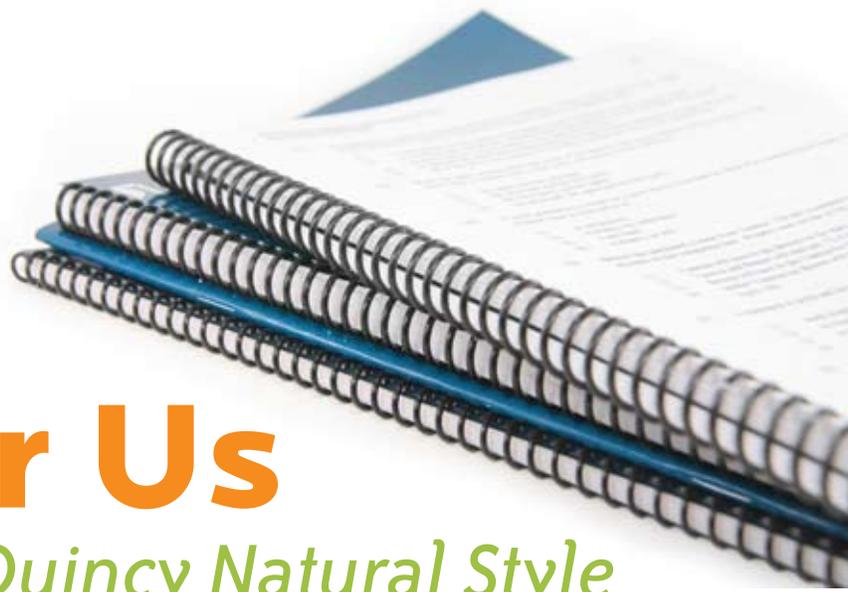
leader can often smooth out the misunderstandings and get members connecting again. Of course, these days both men and women bring a multitude of tools and skills to the leadership role. Introverts who don't need the spotlight are often process-oriented leaders. Make sure your board is not overlooking potentially great leaders in these quieter, middle-of-the-pack people.

► **Try This!** Think about the best leader you've ever worked with. How would you describe his or her leadership style? How has that style influenced your own leadership? Have you been successful at adapting that person's skills into your own repertoire?

Have your board discuss what it is looking for in a leader before choosing the next board chair. Does or could your board use a shared leadership model? The LEADER is interested in hearing your thoughts on the primary leadership skills needed on your board. Have you tried something innovative in leadership? Let us know what worked for you.

Leadership Reflections

New boards sometimes begin by talking about their expectations of members and the leader. But this work can also be a good refresher for a board in midterm. What does a good board act like? How would this board like to be led? Who is most influential to you? Why? What do others do or say that makes you think their ideas are worth exploring? When you realize you are trying to persuade others, what is your most conscious strategy? Under what conditions does that strategy work or not work? Members will probably have different opinions, but that's useful. Try borrowing from others' strategies to expand your own repertoire of influencing behavior.



Works for Us

Board Orientation Quincy Natural Style

by Linda Margaretic—Board President, Quincy Natural Foods

At Quincy Natural Foods, tucked away in the Sierra Nevada range of northern California, the process of orienting new board members starts well before elections begin. It starts with the recruitment of prospective board candidates.

The recruitment process is a bit like a courtship. Once a viable list of prospective board candidates is created, each current board member chooses several people on the list to contact personally. This initial contact is important because it reflects the cultural dynamic and tone of the board, so it should be personable, cordial, and succinctly informative. Prospective candidates are encouraged to attend one or more board meetings.

In January candidates who are seriously considering running for a board seat are invited to come to a special session with the board. During this session, they can ask questions and explain their particular interests

and potential contributions as board members. At this point, prospective candidates have an opportunity to glimpse the leadership style and temperament of the board. This meeting is a definitive point in the candidate selection process. Prospective candidates are usually ready to decline or declare their interest in a board seat at this time.

Our board elections take place in March. New board members are seated in April. Prior to the April board meeting, we hold a formal board orientation. The board chair and the general manager lead the discussion. The entire board is present to fill in details and answer questions.

We begin our orientation with a brief history of Quincy Natural Foods. The pride we have in our simple beginnings and our history is an important legacy to bestow upon our new board members. Another critical job is reviewing the roles and responsibilities of the board

of directors and of each board member. It's helpful to have written job descriptions for the board as a body and for board members as individuals. We also discuss the importance and function of standing committees, along with applicable job descriptions. Finally, we discuss current "hot" issues facing the board. (See the checklist of items covered in our board orientations accompanying this article.)

In May we have our annual board retreat. This event is often hosted by a board member in the comfortable and informal setting of a backyard. The day is a blend of serious work and play. At this time, the board reviews training needs and plans from the recent self-evaluation process. We evaluate and revise long- and short-term goals for Quincy Natural Foods as necessary. It's a day of relaxed and productive strategic planning. By day's end, a new team is congealed.

See "New Director Orientation Checklist"—Page 8



Quincy Natural Foods

New Director Orientation Checklist

- Provide new directors with a QNF board binder
- Review history of the co-op, including current issues and projects
- Review the co-op's organizational chart
- Explain annual share fees and full vestment, including redemption of fees for those who decide to no longer be shareholders
- Discuss member/owner and worker discounts
- Explain patronage refund system
- Outline the co-op's regional and cooperative affiliations
- Discuss QNF staff/board communication process
- Define *cooperative* and review cooperative principles and philosophy
- Review QNF mission statement
- Discuss roles and responsibilities of the board
- Identify board officers and committees
- Review and sign code of conduct/ethics
- Review and sign conflict of interest policy
- Explain general contents of corporate binder and employee handbook
- Review QNF bylaws
- Discuss current annual report and proposed budget
- Discuss current "hot" issues for the board of directors
- Review board calendar and meeting dates
- Review location of board mailboxes and importance of checking them at least weekly

What's on Your New Director Orientation Checklist?

<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
_____	_____	_____



Leadership as Influence

—by Marcia Shaw

Getting elected to the co-op board is usually exciting and occasionally intimidating. For some, it's the first time they've ever thought about the topic of leadership. For others, it's an opportunity to put some leadership ideas into practice. If you've ever been in a situation with poor leadership, you probably had a to-do (and a *not* to-do) list in your head. What does leadership look like in the context of the co-op board?

Like every group of people trying to accomplish tasks, your board has a personality or persona. When people rotate on and off the board, the personality of the group changes. It can be surprising how much influence one person has and how the dynamic changes when that person is absent for even a couple of meetings. If you're thinking about leading via the board, you usually don't get the prerogative of building a leadership team from scratch or filling in what's needed in terms of leadership based on your own assessment. Boards are elected—so you get what the voters decide. As a leader, you have to figure out how to maintain your

leadership style and contribute constructively within this particular group of people. What worked with the previous team may not work with a new board at all.

Think about leadership in terms of influence. Influence is interesting because we choose who influences us. Although we talk about a leader as *having* credibility, it really works the other way around. That is, we give leaders credibility and allow them to influence us. We want to work with others who influence us. Having one person in charge might be more efficient, but a board works best when leadership functions are shared. That is, sometimes Sue plays a leadership role and sometimes Sam does. On any given topic, the leadership may shift. One of the more hidden rules of influence is that to have it, you need to give it. To be more persuasive, let others see that you are capable of changing your mind or deferring to

someone with more knowledge, information, or experience.

Although you probably have a chair who runs meetings, he or she is not necessarily the most influential person in the room. On a well-balanced board, all members influence each other. Usually, new board members do not have as much influence as those who have more experience, and a board member who is seen as “out in left field” probably does not influence decisions much, and that's usually appropriate. You'll gain influence as you gain experience on the board and understand more fully the functions of the board. If you are in a designated leadership role (board chair, for instance), your influence is exerted via the agenda and how you facilitate discussions. Since leadership should be fluid, it's important to adapt as subtle shifts take place. Allowing and encouraging different players to pick up leadership roles means that you get the most of each board member's skills—and you're training board members for future roles at the co-op. If you tend to lead in the same style all the time, try to expand your repertoire. If you think you are not the leader of the board just because you're not the chair, don't forget that you are still influencing others around the table.

Try This! Spend some time watching who influences whom and why. What is influential to you? Write the LEADer (askthebest@ncga.coop) and let us know if we're influencing behavior on your co-op board.

Evolving into a Board President

—by Philip Buri



I have yet to meet a born board president. You learn how to do it—in your life and on the job. After twelve years of serving on the board of the Community Food Cooperative in Bellingham, I have decided to take a break from board work and not run for reelection. Naturally, I want to write about what I have learned, if only to get it down before I forget it. I will let you in on a secret: great board members aren't born that way; they are made. And the same is true for board presidents. Leading is an acquired skill.

Board Members Are Like Stew—They Need Time to Cook

The greatest threat to a high-functioning board is high turnover. If a board cannot keep members for more than a year or two, it never develops a core group that has survived more than one crisis. For those of you

who have been on the board for more than one term, think about how different your attitude is now compared to when you began. Remember how nervous you were about fitting in, not appearing dumb, and adding something worthwhile to the conversation? Most of that is gone now. Over time, we find our places on the board—the informal roles that allow the group as a whole to function well.

A therapist once told me that any important relationship is like a hanging mobile: move one piece and the others will move in relation to it. Eventually, the structure reaches equilibrium—until another piece moves. You know you have a golden moment on a board when you feel that equilibrium. Everyone contributes, you trust (and dare I say love) your fellow board

members, and you look forward to discussions about what really matters to your co-op. You have a powerful, primitive bond to the co-op—you protect it like you would your own children.

This emotional investment takes time. I am always suspicious of “overnight” conversions. As quickly as I can adopt a new passion, I can adopt another one tomorrow. The meaningful relationships in my life evolve over time and deepen with each new chapter. If you lose a majority of your board every year, you severely limit what the board can contribute.

Why New Board Presidents Should Learn to Shut Up

OK, Mr. Smarty-Pants. If you have been on the board for twelve years, what can you tell me about leadership? Two words: *shut up*. Not you,

Continued on Page 11



Evolving into a Board President

Continued from Page 10

imaginary questioner, but the leader. Being president does not mean you have to talk about every issue. It especially does not mean you have to have an *opinion* on every issue.

Being board president means you create a safe space for your board to identify the right path and then choose it. Leadership does not mean pointing in a certain direction and yelling “march.” It means enabling your colleagues to contribute their best. When I became board president, I felt a strong urge to be a Leader (with a capital L), a man of vision and purpose, taking our co-op to the promised land of workplace tranquility and double-digit growth. I thought that great leaders rode horses, made speeches, and kept their eyes fixed on the destination while everything else was chaos and panic. But such leaders are often just statues visited by pigeons. They are myths created to comfort us.

In the co-op world, board presidents lead by listening, following the discussion, and making sure all voices are heard. Sometimes this takes great restraint, but if a president fails to draw out all sides of an issue, the likelihood of a flawed

decision increases substantially. The more experienced (and confident) I became as a president, the less I said. I knew I was successful when I saw three things happen at our meetings. First, everyone who wanted to speak on an issue did. Second, when the group was stuck on an issue, I could ask the right question to move the conversation forward. And third, at least once a meeting, another board member’s comments changed my mind. Board discussions were fluid, with an innate sense of direction. You accomplish this kind of success by shutting up, literally. The more space your ego takes, the less space is left for the truth.

Try Not to Take It Personally

We are not board members because we are smart. Or because we are handsome. Or popular. Or gifted. We are board members because we are elected.

The minute we feel entitled to be board members, we should quit. No matter how deep our convictions, insight, or commitment to the co-op, we are representatives only, and we answer to our member/owners. We serve at the pleasure of those who elect us, and *they*, not we, have the power. Board members come and go, but the co-op lives on. In other words, a healthy co-op is more important than one person, including you or me.

This might sound harsh, but it is actually freeing. We don’t have to be perfect, all-knowing

philosopher-kings to be great board members. Instead, we have to be faithful to our members’ deepest values and desires for the co-op.

When enraged members come to board meetings and call us incompetent, corrupt, corporate apologists, they don’t mean it personally—even when they say they do. We serve an invaluable role as board members, but it is only that, a role. More than once as board president, I had to remind myself that people were mad at me not because I was a bad person but because I represented their co-op. It truly was not personal. My job was not to defend my worth as a human being but rather to explain why I exercised my judgment the way I did. The owners elect us to make decisions, and they have the right to question our judgment.

Over time, my ability not to take it personally started to falter. I frankly became tired of being in the middle of controversy so often. That is why I chose to step down rather than run for reelection. Someone else needed to represent the members because I could no longer do it correctly or well. I don’t know whether this situation is inevitable for board presidents or applies only to me. But I know that playing the role of president takes its toll. The trick is to recognize the trouble before it interferes with the board’s work.

See “Using Outside Facilitators”—Page 12

Food for Thought: Using Outside Facilitators

The board president (or chair) serves an important function for a high-performing board, especially in planning the board's work and time. Some people assume that one of the president's key functions is to chair board meetings, but many co-ops find value in having an outside facilitator provide that service.



Here are some pros and cons to using an outside facilitator:

Pros

An outside facilitator can:

- Allow the board president to more actively and fully participate in the board's discussions.
- Focus clearly on the board's process and managing the board's time.
- Provide high-quality facilitation skills that board members might not have.
- Help the board deal more dispassionately with conflict—with dissatisfied members or between board members.
- Provide continuity in terms of how meetings are run when there is turnover.

Cons

Disadvantages to an outside facilitator:

- The cost may be high.
- The facilitator might not understand the co-op, the board's role, and important issues facing the co-op as well as directors do.
- Some directors might perceive an outsider as threatening and charge that "we don't control our own meetings."
- Outsiders (members or other observers) may believe that the board can't manage itself.
- The board may feel less ownership of its work.

Save the Date

The Western Corridor's next board training session will be held on **Saturday, April 18** in Portland. For program information, including a description of workshops, hotel and logistical details, and a link to online registration, contact **Karen Zimbelman**. (This information is also available online to NCGA-member "designated representatives" or general managers.)

Here's what past participants have to say about Western Corridor training sessions:

- *Very glad I invested the time to attend this training.*
- *Great training, valuable information.*
- *The most important thing I came away with was the realization that I have an entire network of knowledge to tap into. It's nice knowing that I can find like-minded people in lots of different cities and states.*
- *It was a great experience to meet other co-op folks, see how everyone else is doing things, and to know that, while we can always strive to do better, we're doing pretty well in the grand scheme of things.*
- *It was one of the best board trainings that I have been to.*
- *What I found most useful from the training was the time I spent talking with other co-op board members. My board had a question about the issue of board compensation. During the non-workshop time we talked with the other directors to get a clearer perception of the issue.*



Board Effectiveness Support Team

What about Executive Committees?

Dear West BEST:

A couple of our board members feel that all board members should have complete access to all information and that there should be no executive committee. Should there be an executive committee, and when should it come into play?

—Cara Henry, Director, Chico Natural Foods

Dear Cara:

The key to your question is whether all board members should have access to all information, and the answer is emphatically yes. If your board is to make sound, informed decisions for your co-op, and speak with one voice, then *all directors* must have access to the same information.

The question about the executive committee and what its role should be is something each co-op will need to answer for itself. Many co-ops have a standing executive committee, usually consisting of some or all board officers. Roles vary, but typical functions of an executive committee include:

- Planning board meetings. The committee meets between board meetings to prepare the agenda. It looks at continuing items from previous meetings, checks the board calendar for upcoming issues and responsibilities, and considers issues that the GM or directors would like to take up.

- Discussing issues that need action at the next board meeting. Examples might include “executive session” issues (about real estate, personnel, or legal matters); member-related issues, such as a letter or call from a disgruntled owner; or fast-moving issues related to a remodel or expansion.
- Coordinating key board activities such as general manager hiring and evaluation, and planning for board retreats or new director orientation.
- Where specifically delegated, making decisions on behalf of the board between meetings, especially in fast-moving situations.

For co-ops that have an executive committee, it's important to make sure that all directors understand the committee's role. Directors should understand that they have access to all the information discussed by the committee and that the committee does not usually make decisions on behalf of the board. To reassure directors:

- Make sure all directors know that executive committee meetings are open to any board member. Make sure they are aware of the date, time, and location of meetings.
- Prepare a brief written summary of each committee meeting and e-mail it (along with any other information provided) to the rest of the directors after the meeting.
- Spell out the committee's role and functions, including responsibility for reporting to the rest of the board, in a committee charter.

Continued on Page 14

What Do You Think? We'd love to get your ideas: articles, questions, thoughts, reactions, and comments. Have a great article from your co-op's newsletter? Tried a new idea to improve your planning process, recruit new directors, or improve board/management relations? Send your ideas, and we'll include them in future issues. Or send a question for the BEST to answer in a future issue to askthebest@ncga.coop. We'll include your name or make your question anonymous, as you prefer.

ask the **BEST**

Board Effectiveness Support Team

Q: What about Executive Committees?

Continued from Page 13

- Explain that the executive committee cannot make decisions *except* where specifically delegated by the board. Board resolutions delegating decision-making authority should be very specific, for example, “The executive committee may finalize the co-op’s financing with XYZ financial institution per the general terms approved by the board” or “. . . as long as the interest rate does not exceed 4.5 percent.”

- Use another committee name. If the term *executive committee* has negative connotations for your co-op, just call it something else. Coordinating Committee? Board Planning Committee? Gang of Four? Glorious, Exalted Board Team?

Many boards find value in using an executive committee. If your board chooses to do so, the committee shouldn’t be seen as an exclusive club that’s privy to special information but rather a team that puts in extra time to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the board as a whole. Other board members should be made welcome at executive committee meetings, and the whole board should be informed as to what happens at those meetings.

You can review the roles and responsibilities of the Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op executive committee at <http://www.sacfoodcoop.com/PDFs/execcomm.pdf>.



Thanks for Subscribing!



The *LEADer* is available only to Western Corridor co-ops that subscribe. Annual subscriptions cost \$100. Subscribers have access to issues online, and new issues are sent by e-mail directly to all individuals designated by the subscribing co-op. More information, as well as an online enrollment form and back issues of the *LEADer*, is posted online at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.

For more information— Check It Out!

More information of potential interest

Looking for articles and websites about board leadership and orientation? Here are some suggestions:

“Building a Productive Board” by Jody Padgham

<http://www.uwcc.wisc.edu/info/governance/builbord.html>

Complete Toolkit for Boards

<http://managementhelp.org/boards/boards.htm>

New Director Orientation

<http://managementhelp.org/boards/orient.htm>

“Nine Keys for Reinvigorating Board Leadership” by Paul Connolly (June 2003)

http://www.tccgrp.com/pdfs/per_art_boardkeys.pdf

“Diagnosing the Effectiveness of Your (Co-op) Board” by Debra Brown (March 2007)

<http://www.coopscanada.coop/NewsLetter/Governance/march2007/>

“The Leader within You” by Katey Walker (February 2001)

<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/LEADS/FACT%20Sheets/EP81.pdf>

Cooperative Grocer magazine has an extensive online archive of past articles and issues at www.cooperativegrocer.coop. Articles along the theme of board leadership and orientation include:

“Board Orientation, Training and Education” by Candace Dow (January–February 2006)

<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=629>

“An Agreement for Disagreements” by Karen Zimbelman (March–April 1998)

<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=229>

“What Is the President’s Job” by Wendy Stafford (November–December 1992)

<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=129>

Be sure all your directors know about and are encouraged to participate in CGIN’s specialized listserv for co-op directors:
<http://www.cgin.coop/listserves/board>



Your Leadership Style



Leadership is a broad concept. The term is used loosely and its meaning morphs depending on the situation. It's not easy to define, and leadership skills are not easy to teach. Personal leadership styles are highly individualistic and difficult to describe. Nonetheless, it's useful to reflect on your own leadership persona as well as to understand and get feedback on how your own personal influence plays out in a board setting.

Although amorphous, a co-op board serves an important leadership role as a group—by setting policy, influencing how the general manager does his or her job, and speaking to members, staff, and the public. Even the act of “speaking with one voice” is an important indicator of the board's commitment to working together to fulfill its role. In this issue, we've tried to tackle this complicated topic, but we recognize that we haven't covered everything.

To help you better understand your own leadership style, as well as the leadership approach of your co-op's board, we offer these questions for your reflection:

1. What is your personal style of leadership? How would you describe your influence on others? What feedback have you gotten from others about your leadership style?
2. What do you like about your style? What don't you like?
3. Who are some leaders you've really admired? What aspects of their leadership styles would you like to borrow from them?
4. What do you notice about effective leadership styles from watching others interact? What techniques could you borrow and try to adapt for yourself?
5. How would you describe your co-op board's leadership style? How does your board's leadership style reflect the co-op's mission, values, vision, or ends statements?
6. How have you seen your board's group leadership style change over time? Has your board ever discussed its leadership role or what tone you're trying to achieve?
7. What does your board do to cultivate the kind of leadership style you would like it to use?
8. Who most strongly influences your board's leadership style? How would you like to see the board's leadership style change?