

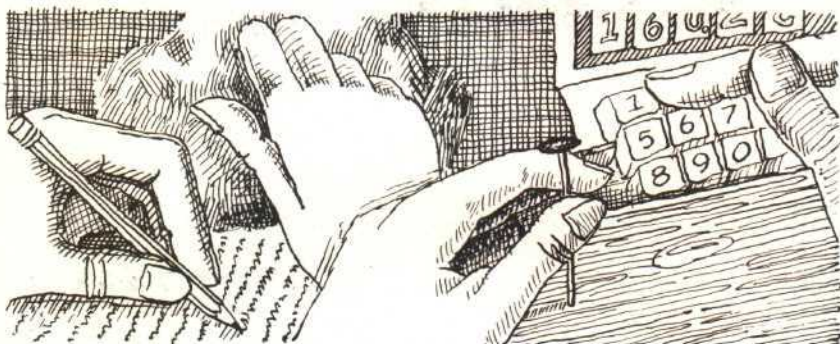
## **Book 6: MANY HANDS**

# **Together For a Change**

## **A Series on Food Cooperatives**



## VI: Many Hands



BY DONNA SWEENEY,<sup>1</sup> LESTER SCHICK<sup>1</sup> and ELIZABETH SCOTT<sup>2</sup>

### *Goal Establishment*

The first step in developing an effective food cooperative is setting goals. This should be done when everyone has time to discuss all the issues at stake. It should not be a hurried process. Also, officers or any other group of influential people should not be allowed to monopolize the discussion and dictate the results. Goals should be decided upon through an open, democratic process. It is important that everyone involved in the co-op clearly understand and accept the goals.

The goals should include both long- and short-range goals. Long-range goals involve ideas such as the reasons the cooperative exists, while short-term goals include practical methods of meeting the long-range goals, such as buying certain types of food.

Goals should be reviewed and evaluated periodically and revised when members agree it is necessary. This need not be a time-consuming or complicated process. At least annually, however, those involved in co-op management and decision making should review the goals with an attitude of:

“How are we doing? Are we still on track? If not, should we get back to our original goals, or should the goals be revised in accordance with

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relevant changes which have occurred?"

This evaluation process will not only help insure the continued health of the organization, but will also serve two other important functions. **First:** the goal-evaluation meeting provides an opportunity for people to express their feelings about the co-op. This is a good time to clear the air of frustrations, objections and conflicts. This, in turn, helps to keep motivation high. **Second:** a goal assessment allows new members to understand the goals of the organization, as well as other members' viewpoints. This will increase their sense of commitment—particularly if those in charge make a point to include the new members in the discussion by asking for their views and opinions.

### ***Member Involvement***

Role definition is another major decision process for an effective food co-op. For some food co-ops, working in the co-op is a requirement of membership. In other food co-ops, members may volunteer in order to gain lower prices on their food purchases. In either case, **the volunteer job should be meaningful and enjoyable** and provide the volunteer with an opportunity to learn useful skills. Every organization needs to set clear lines of authority and to develop job descriptions for each role. These descriptions should be flexible enough to allow for changes as needs and circumstances change.

Here are some key steps to follow in designing your volunteer jobs and recruiting people to fill the jobs:

1. Know the types of jobs you need to have done and the skills needed to do the jobs. Do this by analyzing your operation and interviewing current workers to gain their insights into the types of jobs that need to be done. If you are just getting started you might talk to members of another co-op.

2. Write out a volunteer job description for each job. Include: (a) job title, (b) supervisor, (c) location of work, (d) job responsibilities, (e) work hours and total length of service, (f) qualifications, (g) training to be provided, and (h) any special requirements. Make sure that the job is meaningful, involves friendly interaction with other people, and provides the volunteer with opportunities for personal growth and achievement.

3. Based on the job description, identify people who are likely to be interested in the job. Contact these people personally and invite them to meet with you to talk about the job.

4. Circulate the volunteer opportunities to the co-op members. Have a volunteer job-of-the-month column in each issue of the newsletter. Put a copy of a volunteer job description in each shoppers grocery bag.

5. Be sure your new volunteer receives a thorough orientation to the

new job. Arrange for the volunteer to receive any special training to do the job.

6. Meet at least once per month to find out how things are going. The coordinator or a distribution supervisor should state any problems. Assist the members in identifying new types of work opportunities or in upgrading the responsibilities of their present job. Find out if the volunteer needs additional training.

7. At the end of the member's service (volunteers should be asked to make a 3-month or-6 month commitment) invite the person to volunteer for a new job, or to make a new commitment to the same job.

8. Write up a co-op volunteer manual which includes information on (a) all volunteer opportunities, (b) policy on absences, (c) what to do in case of problems, (d) rights and responsibilities of members, and (e) special procedures and policies practiced by the co-op.

9. Design specific volunteer jobs to meet the unique interests and needs of your membership and your community. For example, low income families may want information on low cost nutritious recipes. Have a volunteer include these in shopping bags. Parents of young children may want child care services while they shop. Have volunteers work with the children. Members may need transportation assistance to get to the co-op. Invite volunteers to provide assistance.

Examples of volunteer jobs are:

Newsletter editing or writing	Bookkeeping
Packaging food for orders	Taking inventory
Purchasing food	Carpentry for shelving or counters
Delivering bulk food	Taking food orders
Child care	Cashier
Maintenance and sanitation	Speaking before local groups
Organizing special events	Organizing fund raisers
Recruiting volunteers	Answering member questions
Recruiting new members	Clean-up
Conducting evaluation of co-op services.	

Volunteers in your food co-op are important, but don't expect them to do what paid staff wouldn't like doing under any circumstances. Don't ask them to do only the 'dirty' work. If there is unpleasant work to be done, try changing it into a fun, group activity—bring in music, people, humor and diversion.

Volunteerism and the cooperative spirit go hand in hand. Use the same good judgement and sensitivity to others in your volunteer job development as you use in the total operation of your cooperative.

## **Officers**

In addition to the many jobs that need to be done, you will also need a number of officers. These are a coordinator (or president), treasurer and secretary. The officers may be members of a board of directors which have responsibility for the co-op meeting its long-range goals.

You should reach a mutual agreement on the terms of office for the board. Officers need a long enough time in office to be able to accomplish particular goals, but not too long in case they are not successful in their role. Generally, two-year terms are advantageous. However, a one-year term, with opportunity to repeat one term, may also work out well. One-year terms are of limited value because it usually takes almost a year for an officer to function most effectively. No one—neither the individual in his growth nor the organization itself—really benefits by too short a term. Needs and particular circumstances in each co-op should determine what works best. If in a few years it becomes obvious that different arrangements for terms of office would be beneficial, then changes should be made. Just because something was begun does not mean that it need never be changed! Board members can profitably serve two- or three-year terms. Until the co-op is well underway, and organizational “bugs” are worked out, a two-year term may be the wisest.

It is common practice to rotate terms of board members, so that an organization never has a totally new, unexperienced board. Initial appointments varying with one year for half the board and two years for the other half may be wise. Some co-ops may want to appoint one-, two- and three-year board terms to ensure even less traumatic changeover periods.

## **Contrasting Organizational Structures**

There are two diverse organizational styles which should be considered in structuring food co-ops. One is the developmental (or democratic) style; the other the directive (or autocratic) style.\* The developmental style is group/task-oriented and its leader is a coordinator and facilitator. The directive style is oriented to the individual in a formally defined role; the group is closely supervised with a leader in an enforcer role.

The directive style is the traditional, commonly used model we are all familiar with. It includes putting people in competition with one another to gain higher productivity, while discouraging them from innovation or previously untried creative efforts. It holds a view of “one brain and many hands”. The philosophy in the directive is that people need to be

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\* See: *NCR Extension Publication, Unit II, Number 26-2, College of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*

told what to do and need to be closely supervised. In this system, the people are there to support the organization. The directive style encourages productivity and order, but often seems hostile and repressive to members.

The developmental style is being increasingly used and is structured so that people work together in mutual reinforcement. The group is the nucleus, not the individual, as such. The leader often functions as a group member, but also facilitates process and clearly has the final authority for the whole organization. The developmental style has a philosophy which acknowledges that everyone in the group possesses intelligence, creativity, initiative and motivation. The feeling is that the organization exists to support its members. It clearly encourages openness and creativity; however, without skillful facilitating leadership, it can bog down in too much talk and not enough action.

Which style is best for a food co-op? The title itself determines much of the answer: "co-op" indicates a predetermined bent toward the developmental. However, organizations generally need some elements of the directive too. The directive style can be beneficial in role definition, handling of finances, adhering to regulations, etc., and in handling routine affairs in board meetings. However, the developmental is valuable to the planning and people-oriented parts of a food co-op, and can largely be used with the board in its decision-making processes. A blend of both styles, with emphasis on the developmental for the maintenance of the "cooperative" part of a food co-op, should foster a healthy organization.

### *Effective Meetings*

An effective meeting is carefully planned, yet moves easily with flexibility of structure and content. Officers should plan the agenda with input from all members involved, arrange physical details in advance, and develop and regularly use an effective announcement system.

Whenever possible, begin and end meetings on time, and follow the agenda as closely as possible while still allowing for flexibility. Routine "housekeeping" chores should be handled as effectively as possible, with the majority of the time allotted to the business at hand.

All members present should feel included. They should be encouraged to participate and respectfully listened to when they do participate. Leaders need to be sensitive to the needs of the group, considering the group first and themselves second. A few members should not dominate—be they officers, board members or general members—or commitment to the group, and therefore motivation, will diminish. The best guiding principle for co-op leaders is that "people support what they help to

create". When members are respected and included, it "feels like" **their** organization, not someone else's. If it is theirs, they will do far more to support it than they will if it "belongs" to the officers or a few active people.

### *Evaluating Your Co-op*

A major principle of effective organizations is that the inputs should be justified by outputs. Are you getting more out of it than you're putting in? A co-op should set aside regular periods for self-evaluation to determine whether outputs are indeed justifying inputs. This periodic, regular evaluation is like "preventive medicine" because it helps to prevent ill health in the organization. Self-evaluation can be done along with the yearly goal-evaluation process and should involve officers, board members, other staff and even members when possible.

In addition to general open discussion to determine consensus, there are a variety of organizational evaluations available. One excellent tool is called, "An Organizational Health Check List,"\* and can be used for feedback in several ways. It is best to have everyone involved complete such a check list without discussion, so as to avoid influencing. If the group is encouraged to give thought to their responses and to feel free to be candid, this can provide excellent feedback for discussion and possible changes.

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