



Co-operative Leadership

Notes from the Co-operative Innovation Project — November 2015

What are the characteristics of a successful co-operative leader?

The Co-operative Innovation Project

From 2014-2015, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan led the Co-operative Innovation Project, to examine the possibilities of co-operative development in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.

We asked those who work with communities to develop co-operative enterprises: what are the characteristics of a successful co-operative? A key answer: leadership. Co-operatives require a distinct leadership style. And that style is different than conventional business leadership.

Commitment to Community

Co-operative leadership requires a visible commitment to community. It's a strong pull. By placing their energy and ability into creating a co-operative business, rather than a conventional business, co-operative leaders embody a fundamentally different perspective. As one co-op developer phrased it, "Find their primary motivation to get the co-op going and it's not just to have a co-op, it's to meet a real community need."

Others added: "There's a personal connection to the community, and they talk community very strongly. It's 'our community,' 'our business,' it's 'we'. There's a strong sense of collectiveness around that." Co-op leaders are "people who want their community to survive and thrive."

Shared Leadership

A second characteristic of co-op leadership is that they accept shared leadership. A co-op leader "leads from the middle" instead of leading by command and control. A co-operative leader values the democratic aspects of a co-op, where every member is equal. Leadership responsibilities, successes, and failures are shared: "You have to feel part of it." Co-operative leaders believe that there is strength in

numbers, and that they will "by working together... have much better success."

Part of the shared leadership model is learning to be comfortable with not knowing the answer – the shared answer might be different than what any one individual thinks. Moreover, a co-op leader must be comfortable accepting opinions and direction from the whole co-op membership: "it's a different kind of leadership, because you're giving up some of your power as leader to those on the ground."

Working Together

Co-operative leaders have specific skills related to people, and to getting people to work together. These skills are about people management and building and maintaining relationships. "In a co-op setting you don't try and be the person in the room that everybody looks at. What you do is, if you are going to be successful, is you get people talking together. You get people animated and having conversations all around you in which you're included."

Group facilitation, keeping meetings moving forward and managing the multiple different personalities and pasts in a room, are critical skills for co-op leaders. Typically, good co-op leaders are able to identify and match roles and responsibilities to the people in the room: matching skillsets and interests to the tasks required to build and grow a co-op.

Co-op leadership is also a matter of shared respect. "Probably most key is that they have to have a lot of respect for people, in the sense that they have respect for the players at the table. They get people to speak up and stand up. They can't be doing all the talking. They have to be able to encourage and support, particularly in cooperatives, the perspectives of all the people around the table."

Business Acumen

A critical piece of co-operative leadership relates to business acumen. It's not necessarily about being a major business owner – almost any kind of business experience, from farming to running a non-profit to owning a retail or any other kind of business, counts. Rather, the acumen is a certain kind of entrepreneurial spirit, a desire to create something new that meets a need.

When a co-op leader has some business background, it builds their personal credibility; community members may then have a higher level of trust in the co-operative idea: “if you don't have that business background and can't speak intelligently and with confidence about the business plan, then it's very hard for you to represent, and convince people to go the next step.” Yet, business skills are learned skills. In some cases, the co-operative enterprise might be the first place a co-op leader flexes those muscles.

Shared Vision

Vision, or having a clear idea of what the co-operative will do and what issues it will solve, is a key driver in co-operative leadership. Vision is closely tied to passion, drive, and commitment. Potential co-op members should all be on the same page for what the co-operative is going to do, be, and accomplish. Without that shared vision, a co-op can lose direction and sometimes dissolve, either before it ever gets to incorporation, or soon thereafter.

If a co-operative leader has a strong vision and commitment to the idea, they often use their charisma and influence to bring others alongside. While such leaders are integral to co-op development as a source of energy, drive, and passion, a co-op can be derailed if that leader withdraws. On the flip side, a true co-op leader accepts that a growing or changing co-op membership may develop a different shared vision.

Quiet Leadership

Co-operative leadership is often quieter than other kinds of leadership. “They're often the quiet ones who are in the background, they've seen the work, they're not there for the ego, co-ops are not the best ones for ego leaders.” Personal characteristics related to a quieter style of leadership are calmness, thoughtfulness, and empathy. There is charisma and ambition and energy, but it's dedicated to the project, rather than personal gain.

There is a sense that co-operative leadership goes against our cultural norms and understanding of leadership, of a person standing at the front of the room, driving others to

their will. In fact, co-op developers watch out for groups where one person is dominating the decision-making and the ideas – that's not a co-op.

Project over Politics

Co-op leaders come from all directions of the classic political spectrum, from left to right: “Co-ops are never a right wing solution or a left wing solution, it's an up solution.” There isn't a direct connection between co-operatives and any particular political party. Co-op leaders prioritize project over politics. That said, co-op leaders know community dynamics and barriers, and address them. They “want to work behind the scenes, they just want to make it happen in the community.”

Social Awareness

A co-op leader is often highly socially aware of larger societal issues of poverty, injustice, or inequality. Often, co-ops grow “in an underserved community or potentially a marginalized community in some way.” Whether the co-op serves a city neighborhood, or in a rural, remote, or Aboriginal community, a co-op may have a connection to larger issues of fairness, equity, and balance.

Yet, co-op developers urge caution: too much idealism can derail a co-op. As a business enterprise, a co-op must be built with an eye to practicality, level-headed business practices, and pragmatism. Those characteristics inspire confidence and investment, which is critical.

Controlled Energy

A co-operative can take a long time to move from idea to incorporation, and from incorporation to launch, and from launch to sustainable success. A co-op leader requires a deep well of strength, energy, to be able to commit to a project from concept to operation. Clear targets, celebrating milestones, making decisions and moving a project forward are all part of the controlled energy required by co-op leaders. Confidence, self-motivation, independence, persistence, patience, and adaptability are all part of that sense of controlled energy.

Leadership: what's your style?

It can help to know if your style of leadership suits some, most, or none of the above points. Use it to ask yourself: are you a co-op leader?



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