

Signs of life: Have you checked your co-op's education pulse lately?

Education is a lifetime endeavor for cooperatives, not a special event. Is your cooperative's education pulse beating strongly? Is it engaged in important educational initiatives?

If not, then it's clearly time for a renewal of your co-op education effort. Even if your education program appears to be running smoothly, it still may be time to check the pulse to make sure that its scope and resources are sufficient for maximum benefits.

The adage that "education is the lifeblood of a cooperative" has always had credence and it continues to ring true today. Cooperative leaders attuned to their environment should be able to clearly see the need for coop education endeavors.

If not, reflect on some of the recent negative factors that are impacting cooperatives, their members and potential members: major business and co-op failures; ethical meltdowns that have rocked the business world and hurt the public perception of all businesses -- co-ops included; co-ops struggling for effective leadership; rising competition from multinational corporations with seemingly endless resources; etc.

We should also reflect on positive factors: cooperatives expanding into new markets; mergers are creating synergies; co-ops developing new value-added products; renewed focus on the producer-owned nature of cooperatives as a marketing advantage, etc.

Both the challenges and opportunities create a critical need for a greater understanding of cooperatives. As far back as the 1920s, cooperative leaders and the agricultural community developed an extensive program of education -- the American Institute of Cooperation -- to expand knowledge of cooperatives. Even at a time of diminished resources available for cooperative education, the need and importance for it has not been lost today.

Multiple initiatives needed

Like a brilliant diamond, cooperative education needs to be multifaceted. Educational initiatives should address directors, members, employees and the public. A good overall education program should promote understanding of the cooperative's character, governance, finances, policies, structure, operations, strategic efforts and market position.

Education efforts will vary, depending on the audience. The outline below defines cooperative education audiences and provides some examples of the type of training that each audience may require or benefit from.

- Directors -- specialized training; leadership institutes; director workshops; seminars/conferences.
- Members (including young cooperators) -- initiation to cooperative basics; basic cooperative instruction; seminars/conferences.
- Employees -- basic cooperative instruction; specialized position training.
- General public (including youth) -- special conventions; agricultural camps; vocational agriculture; cooperative promotions.

Cooperatives should make a point to review educational initiatives in greater detail and scope on a regular basis. Let's take a snapshot.

Director education possibilities are vast

A recent USDA report, *Agricultural Cooperatives in the 21st Century*, says that to develop competent directors for the 21st century, co-ops must provide them with the type of specialized training needed to succeed in an increasingly complex marketing environment. This training could include special financial or business training or courses at local colleges or schools. They should also be supplied with appropriate reading materials to enhance their knowledge of both general issues impacting their business, and co-op-specific issues.

Directors should attend leadership institutes, which are highly valuable for increasing the understanding of "big picture" issues and which allow for face-to-face networking and learning from others. *The Graduate Institute of Cooperative Leadership* (GICL), held annually at the University of Missouri, is one such institute. A number of national and state cooperative associations sponsor leadership institutes, as do some cooperative centers.

Directors should also have the opportunity, or even be required, to attend director workshops. These provide a unique learning experience that exposes directors to a variety of crucial topics -- both basic and advanced -- that are specific to the challenges faced by co-op directors. Many state and regional co-op councils and associations put on high-quality director workshops and are honing the programs every year to make them even more relevant. For example, the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (<http://www.wisc.edu/uwcc/>) sponsors a number of workshops for cooperative directors. Large national seminars and conferences sometimes include director workshops as well.

Even when they do not, attendance at such events can be highly educational and useful for directors. They often provide cutting-edge presentations on important issues or studies and create a kind of open-air venue for networking among cooperative professionals. The Annual Farmer Cooperatives Conference, sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, is one such event. Others include annual conventions by national and state cooperative-related associations.

Resources and opportunities for director education demand the attention of cooperatives. Cooperatives should look to cooperative centers, state cooperative councils, universities, departments of agriculture, national associations, among others, for information on where and when such special programs are scheduled.

Whenever possible, cooperatives must encourage their directors to participate. If budget limits do not permit sending the entire board, they should at least send one or two directors, who can report back to the full board on what they learned.

Communication of significant information between management and directors is also essential.

Management must keep directors tuned in to issues and circumstances the cooperative faces.

Education tune ups for members, staff, public

Members, employees and the public all need to be continually educated on the attributes of cooperatives.

Included among members are young cooperators -- a group that deserves special attention given that they are the key members of the future and will often become directors. They should be provided the opportunity to attend and take part in various state and national seminars or conferences. Group interaction will broaden their perspectives, exposing them to ideas and solutions being used by other coops that might work for their own.

Employee co-op education— extending beyond normal job training -- must also be a priority. Cooperative employees must understand their cooperative's unique structure and operations, how it fits into the community and business environment, and how it is positioned for future success. Employees should be provided with materials that clearly explain the cooperative, and they should be allowed opportunities (at workshops, conferences, institutes) where they will learn more about cooperation and the issues facing cooperatives.

The general public is best reached through cooperative-related promotions, special events and advertisements. Some cooperatives do an effective job in educating the public about how they benefit their communities and/or region. A number of farmer cooperatives gain recognition from their branded products or producer relationships. Many rural electric cooperatives and credit unions have aggressive advertising programs that tout the benefits of the co-op in their operating areas.

Cooperative presence at special regional, state, or community events provides further communication opportunities. Employees and members can also be good resources for educating the general public about the co-op and its special human aspects.

Also included in the public group are youth. Young people need to be exposed to and taught about cooperatives, their unique business structure, member orientation and how they fit in the marketplace. Many youth will have opportunities to become members, directors and employees of cooperatives and early exposure to cooperation will enhance the potential for future relationships.

Vocational-agricultural schools, state cooperative councils and state and national organizations such as FFA and 4-H expose youth to cooperation. Many cooperatives provide funding and opportunities for members' children to attend youth camps or national association institutes. Reaching as many children as possible with information about the cooperative model will pay dividends in future years to the cooperative community. The annual National Institute of Cooperative Education (NICE) for youth is an example of a national learning event with significant participation.

Cooperatives must invest

The numerous cooperative education opportunities and programs discussed throughout this article all have one thing in common -- they require an investment. The investment necessary is financial as well as human. The financial investment comes in the form of developing education programs and materials and/or paying for people to attend programs that others have already set up and are operating.

The human investment extends to developing enthusiasm and positive energy for programs and as well the time investment needed for development and participation.

Cooperatives must continuously assess their education initiatives and then allow for appropriate investments to maintain and improve them. The unique nature of the human interactions necessary for strong cooperative efforts makes multifaceted cooperative education an imperative.

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