



Co-op Toolbox - Part 5:

Leading a Democratic Community



Serving co-ops in Durham, Toronto and York Region.

Setting the tone

Members look to the board to lead the co-op community. Directors set the tone of the community by the way they treat members, solve problems, make decisions, and deal with conflict. Sometimes the way the co-op makes a decision is more important than the decision itself.

Planning successful members' meetings

Co-ops are democratic communities. They work best if all members feel that they can be involved in shaping the community. Successful members' meetings are essential to this process.

In a democracy, it is not necessary that everyone always agrees. In fact, differences can strengthen a community. They are natural because we are all different and have different opinions on many subjects. Working through these differences often leads to better decisions and a stronger community. What is important is that members take part in the process of making the decision.

Members expect the board to set up a good process for discussing and resolving issues. They look to the board to give balanced information and advice. Members expect the board to organize members' meetings that will encourage open discussion and good decisions.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

The more you communicate, the stronger your co-op will become. Good communication creates trust and confidence. Poor communication breeds gossip and suspicion. It is the root of most conflicts.

You have to work to keep everyone in touch with what the board is doing. Here are some suggestions.

- Create a climate of trust by open, frequent communication between board, staff, committees, and members. Newsletters, reports to members, and presentations at members' meetings are all ways of communicating.
- Try to send a brief, clear summary of board meetings to members every month. Many members will not look at a notice board, but will look at a one page summary that comes in their mail box.



- Respect differences in culture. Make a special effort to communicate with members who may feel excluded.
- Make members feel welcome at board meetings. Let them know that they can speak at the meeting with the board's permission. However, make sure that members are not present when the board is discussing confidential issues.

Presenting difficult issues

Sometimes a board has to go to the members with issues that are difficult to present. Issues such as housing charge increases, evictions, and even parking policies can have a great impact on the community. Strong feelings can divide members. Here are some suggestions that may help you to prepare and present difficult issues.

- Remember that conflicts and disagreements are normal in any community. How you handle them can strengthen or weaken the community
- Do not take disagreement personally. Expect strong feelings around some issues. Disagreement with the board's position is not a personal attack on the board.
- Give members the information they will need and allow them plenty of time to think about an issue. Consider holding a members' forum for some issues. A forum allows members to talk about an issue without having to make a decision right away.
- Keep the focus on the real issue. Do not let unrelated issues, stereotypes, or misinformation take over the discussion.



Encouraging Diversity in the Co-op

Co-ops are diverse communities. They are made up of people with a variety of ideas, skills and experiences. They work best when members appreciate each other and value the diversity in the community. A successful board makes decisions that consider the needs of all members.

Do you see diversity reflected in

- the way the co-op looks for and accepts new members?
- physical access to the co-op?
- events and activities?
- your meeting procedures?
- your policies?
- your board and committees?



Make the most of community and social events. Get to know the diverse groups that make up your community.