

Member Participation in Retail Societies

1. PRIVILEGE OR RESPONSIBILITY?

by

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For a Chief Executive Officer to wish to encourage member participation may to many seem like a Member of Parliament advocating the abolition of Parliamentary privilege! But, managing a Co-operative Society is about accountability to its members, whose assessment of success is more varied and universal than our counterparts in private enterprise might expect from their principal shareholders. His is a special responsibility, fraught with potential conflicts and diversions from the urgent task of successfully managing a large trading organisation. Faced with all that, it would be easy for a Chief Executive Officer to become cynical about his role in encouraging member participation. However, any good manager should welcome and enjoy challenge and accept conflict as a process by which individual views can be harmonised for the common good. Our challenge must be to create a Movement that is successful, both in the market place, because it meets the needs of its members (and customers), and because they have been involved in achieving that objective.

Commitment from the Top

Commitment for member participation must come from the top - the Board of Directors - and should form one of the central policies for successful management in a Co-operative Society. All too often, the practice of elect-

ing a separate Member Relations Committee provides an opportunity for Boards and senior management to abdicate their responsibility for member participation. In C.R.S., although there are a number of Regional Member Relations Committees, the ultimate responsibility rests with the Board of Directors, through its Member Participation Sub-Committee. Similarly, Member Relations Officers are responsible directly to their respective Regional General Managers. Hence, the Regional General Managers have a regular involvement in the Member Relations function.

If a job is to be done, it should be done well. Poor standards are the enemy of good trading performance and member involvement. It is all too easy in the struggle for higher trading standards, to overlook the poor image that can be presented by an Education or Member Relations department that, for various reasons, may fail to reach the required standards. Often, this is due to the lack of a specialist professional official - an appointment essential in any Society possessing a genuine desire to involve its members. Encouraging member participation is no easy task, and although, in C.R.S., we might boast determination, it would be misleading to suggest that we have found the solution.

Reasons for Low Participation

Let us look at some of the possible reasons for the low level of participation in the Co-operative Movement. I hinted earlier that poor trading standards played a part, and would pose the question, "Who would wish to become involved in a Society whose image is poor?" This is a matter which has been redressed in C.R.S., but that claim cannot be made for all Societies.

The creation of larger Societies has resulted in a loss of local identity, but, as we all know, regionalisation is essential to achieve the economy of scale and management standards needed, if we are to be competitive. This loss of identity has been accompanied by a reduction in the number of opportunities for members to participate, and the concentration of existing committee members into fewer committees has resulted in a high age profile, which, in turn, deters younger members from taking part. All too frequently, we call upon the Movement to face up to this situation, but, really, the only effective solution is for each Society to take action on its own account.

Participation will not come about unless members can see some relevance in taking part. In the past, this relevance stemmed from the fact that each Co-operative Society had a close relationship with its local community, and was seen as caring about consumers in the widest sense. Part of our effort to encourage member involvement must be to rebuild that relationship.

The role of staff in building this relationship should not be underestimated. To most customers, the Co-op. is its staff, and it is clearly the responsibility of management to ensure that they are fully informed about the social purpose of the Co-operative Movement.

It may seem obvious to remark that participation will only come about if we have an informed membership, but it is here that Societies can take some practical action. In C.R.S., we have produced information booklets, video tapes and a quarterly newspaper, all intended to

ensure that members, staff and customers are kept informed about what is going on. The task of publicising ourselves is enormous, and our efforts are often more effectively employed by defining the individuals and groups who are most likely to respond to our approach.

In this brief article, I have deliberately restricted my comments to the general approach and attitude to member involvement, but must stress that success can only come as a result of a clear policy by the Board of Directors, high standards and a determined and planned approach.

2. ASSESSING OUR RECORD?

by

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In commencing this piece I trust that the broad geographical spread of my working life is duly noted, because this may reduce the risk of anyone wrongly identifying areas from which experience is selected.

In dealing with this subject I will adopt headings of:

The Myth
The Negative Side of Reality
Should we be Surprised?
Is All Participation Now Dead?

A Paradoxical Sign
of Progress
The Positive Side
of the Reality
Conclusions

The Myth

There is widespread belief, (more widespread

geographically than numerically) that there exists a bubbling, pulsating desire by lay members to penetrate the local and national decision making bodies of "The Movement" but that this is thwarted by lack of opportunity, or officials, or other 'dead hands' from above.

In extreme cases there is a vision of Utopia as a thriving Movement controlled by a vibrant Congress in semi-permanent session, filled with eager delegates arrived hot foot from their own matching local society assemblies.

The sincerity of people who hold these views is not in question in the slightest degree by myself and, in fact, I am one of many who regret that the gap between the myth and reality is widening rather than narrowing.

Looking at the overall Movement, even now there are about 207 separate Societies, or CRS Regional Committees; plus still many Education Committees, Women's Guilds, Co-op Party branches, Woodcraft Folk etc. providing opportunity for elected members to permeate through Regional Group Councils and Sectional Boards to the ultimate 'pinnacles of power', the Central Executive, and the CWS Board which latter unquestionably deploys vast economic resources by any standards.

All these organisations have democratic structures and in fact would not continue to receive legal sanction unless they did.

How actually are these channels used?

Do they give the impression of throbbing, active dynamism and life?

The Negative Side of the Reality

Local Democracy i.e. Boards and CRS Regional

Committees. It is not at all uncommon to have unopposed elections or even vacant seats. This fact is masked to a considerable extent by absence of age limits in many societies otherwise this nakedness would be further exposed.

Education Committees. Without doing a thorough survey I suspect that unopposed elections are now the rule rather than the exception, and that vacant seats are commonplace.

Regional Democracy. In the 1981 Sectional Board elections reported in June this year, there were 87 places for retail Society nominees. Of these only 16 places were filled by contested elections and in total there were only 6 (six) unsuccessful candidates in the whole of Britain.

National Democracy-----CWS Board. Without doubt this is the repository of the real power of our Movement. The Co-op. Bank and the CIS are indeed wholly owned subsidiaries, and the CWS Board nominate 8 of the 19 members of the Co-op Union Central Executive.

In theory, therefore, one would expect a real 'clash of antlers' for membership of the elected CWS Board of 35 members. In fact it is now 8 years since there was any contest for a CWS Board seat in the Northern Section, and following the 1981 elections there is in fact an unfilled vacant seat there due to lack of nominations. Similarly, it is 5 years since there was a contest for any of the Scottish seats on the CWS Board.

Congress. Does this 'Parliament of the Movement' give any contrary evidence?

A look at the published 'Proceedings' would show declining delegations and a very modest number of contributions from the floor. No delegate

desirous of speaking has any difficulty of opportunity.

In fact it would not be a gross exaggeration to say that attempts to prolong the business have seemed to be an almost blatant attempt to perpetuate the myth and avoid looking at the reality.

Education Convention. From the published report one can only sense a similar situation.

Should we be Surprised?

The Gaitskell Independent Commission reported the decline in 1958, when it said "Less than 1% of members on average now attend business meetings----". An up to date figure would divide that by 10 at least.

Probably we are only surprised if we are old enough to have been involved when the reality was somewhat different, even if it never lived up to the myth.

It is not too foreign to quote organisations which have some similarity with Co-operative Societies. I refer to the Building Societies and other mass organisations e.g. AA and RAC. None of these are profit-making capitalist commercial bodies. They all have millions of people using their particular services not just as customers but as members/shareholders. These are genuine, alive, very strong mass organisations which are not in any sense in decline. They are owned by their members, but all the evidence would indicate that member participation, other than use of services, is NIL.

Is All Participation Now Dead?

Supporting evidence for such a supposition might be derived from the declining interest in

