

Questions, Answers - and Action?

by Peter Davis

This article brings together the ideas and questions posed by a Conference on Co-operative Management held in May 1988 (see Journal No. 63) and by a second conference jointly sponsored by the International Co-operative Management Unit (Leicester Polytechnic) and the Society for Co-operative Studies held on 9th/10th September at the Co-operative College. The latter's 43 participants were drawn from Chief Executives, Directors, Trainers, Personnel Officers and general Co-operative management as well as from Member Relations Departments and centres of academic interest in the consumer Co-operative movement.

The second Conference was addressed by Mr Keith Darwin, Deputy Chief Executive of Lincoln Co-operative Society on "The Co-operative Context for the Practice of Management": Mr Frank Dent, National Member Relations Officer CRS Ltd., on "The Member Relations Officer - Part of the Management Team?": Dr John Butler, Senior Liaison Officer with the Co-operative Union Ltd, on "Developing Co-operative Directors": Mr Dennis Flexney-Briscoe - Consultant with the Institute of Marketing, on "Marketing Questions for the Co-operative Movement" and Sir Dennis Landau - Chief Executive the CWS Ltd, on "Challenges and Prospects for Co-operative Management into the 1990s". Mr Geoff Wade took the Chair on behalf of the SCS.

Posing the Questions - and Answering

The May conference reflected on the problems posed by the Co-operative context for the practice of management. By contrast, in September participants and speakers were more concerned with managing Co-operative growth. In May, we posed some of the right questions - in September we saw a modest movement in the direction of solutions. Sir Dennis Landau reminded us that there were no easy solutions. The Co-operative revival had commenced but we must manage the Co-operative turnaround by starting from where we are as a movement - not where we would like to be. Sir Dennis' words of caution are well made and should be remembered by the reader. As I tried to bring together the ideas considered by these two conferences, I was aware of the danger that in attempting to communicate essentials the threat of over simplification of the issues was ever present. Despite the risks, however, I decided to present these issues in a question and answer format: first, the question and, then, the answer that seemed to be emerging from the conferences and particularly from the second.

Question 1:

What is the Co-operative context for management?

There was little disagreement in September with the answer of the May conference to this - the membership base, the democratic institution and processes and the inherited business structures were ably presented by Keith Darwin. This presentation, however, did more than provide a useful link to the issues discussed in May. Keith reminded us of a further dimension to the Co-operative context in terms of the roots which Co-operative trading organisations and membership have within the community.

Answer:

A membership based, democratic, commercial organisation rooted in the community in which it trades and for which it provides services, that is part of a consumer movement rooted in the ethic of improvement.

Question 2:

What kind of managers do we need to manage Co-operative societies?

Again there was no disagreement with the need for general and functional management experienced and competent in the same skills as those found in the private sector. The need for a commitment to Co-operative values and practices had been emphasised in May and was further rehearsed in September. In September the latter point was given more concrete expression, however, in terms of the need for a team building approach combined with a participative style of management. The idealism and democracy present in the Co-operative Movement led Sir Dennis Landau to conclude that leadership skills became of key importance for the practice of Co-operative management.

Answer:

Highly competent professional managers who, accepting the Co-operative vision, are capable of leading their societies as a team effort, uniting from the top of the organisation down, management, staff and membership in building the Co-operative enterprise.

Question 3:

How do we attract the right people into Co-operative management?

In both the May and September discussions the importance of home grown management was stressed and Sir Dennis underlined the point David Thirkell had made in May - that to recruit top management from outside risked

destroying the movement when that top management had no sympathy for our Co-operative vision.

Answer:

We recruit young talented and idealistic people who can be developed as managers whilst having their idealism channelled into the Co-operative cause.

Such people will be attracted to the movement if we stress the benefits and satisfactions to be gained by accepting the challenges of Co-operative management and leadership in our service to the community.

Question 4:

How do we motivate and develop Co-operative management?

Both conferences recognised that the trends towards management shareholding were neither suitable nor desirable within a Co-operative society. All agreed with David Thirkell's emphasis in May on the importance of giving managers the space and opportunity to practise their skills. In September, John Butler helped us recognise that a properly developed lay board of directors was an important ingredient in ensuring that an enterprising management was encouraged. It was too easy for managers to be stifled by a board whose lack of expertise made them over-cautious and insufficiently challenging in a positive sense. Co-operative Management Development, like Management Development in general, needed a clearly articulated culture within which the practice of skills and general competencies could be developed.

Answer:

Revitalising Co-operative culture and introducing it into our induction, training and development programmes at all levels within the organisation.

Question 5:

How are we to manage member involvement?

In May this question had been discussed in terms of past failures and the lessons to be drawn. On this issue a rather different emphasis emerged in September where Frank Dent led the discussion into the area of line management relationships and practices. The somewhat isolated and, in terms of remuneration at least, low status of Member Relations Officers (not manager, please note) was emphasised. In May the problem was stated in the traditional mode of a juxtaposition between the social and commercial objectives of the

