
Copiers and Originators

by Frank Rogers

There are at least three options open to consumer Co-operatives which come up against trading problems due in part to changes in the operating conditions and the activities of competitors. In broad terms, ignoring possible slight variations in each category and leaving out mergers, they are as follows:

1. No change?

Make no drastic changes. Carry on trading more or less as before while sticking to traditional Co-operative principles and policies as defined by the ICA.

2. Change: Respond to change by copying others?

Supplement traditional principles and policies by copying others as much as possible, particularly those who appear to be operating successfully in the private sector.

3. Initiate change by originating and discovering?

This is the Third Option. It constitutes a fundamental change in Co-operative thought and action. Here we take the initiative and innovate new products and services. We could also devise new methods for making old ones more efficient, thus saving on costs. These are just two of a dozen or so ways the movement could innovate, discover and improve things. Just how Co-operators can do this will be discussed later.

In the meantime how can we answer those who ask, "What harm is there in copying?" There is of course nothing wrong with copying in itself. It is only wrong when we do nothing else. It is only wrong when we deprive ourselves of the mainspring of human progress - when we never dare step outside the constraints of dull conformity.

The Power of the Third Option

The objective in establishing an innovating Co-operative movement is not however to increase turnover or make more profit simply to take on the trappings of commercial success. The idea is to improve our ability to solve members' problems and in that exercise we are their partners not authoritarian promoters and instigators. Neither should we take up innovation as if it were perceived merely as solving the problems of the Co-operative institution itself. The best way to solve those is to keep solving the problems of the members.

The Third Option, to originate and discover for ourselves rather than to be buying in and copying others, is very largely unknown or unheeded in the Co-operative movement nationally and internationally. It is however becoming increasingly clear that the post-war Co-operative recession has arisen to a great extent because of the severe limitations of options one and two.

It is a classic dilemma, since choosing either of those options seems to lead to recession in relative terms and quite possibly to ultimate extinction. As Norman Wood has pointed out, in very frank terms, the extinction of consumer Co-operatives has already happened in many parts of the world and is moving that way in other areas.(1)

The Third Option would help to reverse the downward spiral. Idealistic? Of course it is. But that's the stuff that makes idealism practical. (2)

The Co-operative Commonwealth

The Co-operative Commonwealth is an idealistic picture of our highest wishes and expectations. The idea is enshrined in the terms and objectives on which the Co-operative Union was established. The Co-operative Party maintains its faith in the Commonwealth by asking all applicants for membership to declare they will work to that end. But . . .

If we are ever going to arrive at that wonderful destination we shall have to find and construct the route ourselves. Nobody will do it for us.

We cannot *copy* it from anybody else for the simple reason that nobody has travelled that way before us.

That can only mean one thing. Co-operators will have to learn to originate and discover things for themselves. That's the Third Option - harnessed for the Grand Objective. We all have to become fully paid-up qualified members of the Originating and Discovering Society Unlimited.

Of one thing we can be absolutely sure. The road to the Co-operative Commonwealth will be paved with good inventions. Not just good intentions. (They will of course be ecologically approved inventions!)

Making the Switch

Switching from the second to the Third Option won't be easy. But the effort would not be any greater than the immense amount of energy and capital we are having to expend simply to try and keep afloat at present. It would simply be more positively directed and the effort would be sustained by a more hopeful outcome.

The immediate problem is how best to make the switch. As often happens, when the need is greatest, the means are ready and available to meet the challenge.

In 1981, an American neuropsychologist, Roger Sperry, was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work on the brain's two hemispheres and their highly specialised but separate functions. (3, 4 & 5). The left side (for most people) is responsible for verbal language, numbers, analysis and logic. The righthand side houses our imagination, creativity and intuitive problem-solving ability.

The danger, as Professor Sperry has pointed out, is that too much exercise for the left hemisphere (also known as the intelligent side) starves the other more imaginative and creative side. The result is that our ability to originate appropriately and sensibly can suffer. We can easily lack balance.

– The Good News

The good news is that hemisphere imbalance can be remedied in both young and old (6, 7, 8, 9 & 10). If the art of creative imagination cannot be taught, it can be caught. That is now well documented. It is in fact surprising how all kinds and ages of people blossom under the guidance of enthusiastic and empathetic tutor-counsellors.

It has been my experience that Co-operators, be they officials, activists, employees or members, are not without imagination, far from it. The main trouble is that they have not been asked to exercise it enough; their great ideas have not been appraised or rewarded. We must repair that gap in our system with little delay.

Exactly what detailed measures we should adopt, following acceptance of the general principle, would be a matter for discussion and consultation among the widest possible representation of the membership.

New Principles - and Practice

My own initial contribution would be to suggest that we should adopt a new principle, The Principle of Co-operative Innovation. To keep that within bounds it should be accompanied by the Principle of Co-operative Ecological Responsibility. These new principles would give the Movement a new ethos and form the basis of subsequent constructive measures. Here are a few lines for practical exploration.

Suggestion Boxes

We could for example start a national suggestion box scheme. (11) Every shop, office, warehouse, factory, meeting hall and college common room

should have a suggestion box. There is a vast fund of new ideas waiting to be tapped within the Co-operative Movement.

Courses

For those who felt they would like to polish their creative imagination there would be special courses up and down the land run by trained tutor-counsellors (3 & 10).

Awards

There ought to be a system of expert appraisal of all ideas with suitable monetary awards for every idea adopted. It would add interest and help to sustain the flow of ideas if there were titles of honour for people with outstanding ideas and for those with unusual fluency.

I look forward to the day when all those pictures of lucky draw winners, often featured in the Co-op News, will take second place to the winner of say, the John Jacques Cornucopia for the best new or most improved product or service of the year.

Priorities

Once again it is a question of priorities. Would it be better to go all out for the *Third Option* now rather than opt for a long and arduous campaign to achieve total integration by forming one national society? Biologists and ecologists have been warning us recently about breaking the natural law relating to biodiversity. If a single representative species happens to fail it means total extinction. There is no way back. Edward O Wilson who is Professor of Science at Harvard says, "In one sense, the loss of diversity is the most important process of environmental change." It is the only process that is wholly irreversible in biological time (12).

By taking up the Third Option we now have a way forward in biological or any other time. We could still save Co-operation by our effort while saving the wider Movement by our example. I am sure William Pitt would agree. And so would Lord Graham who wrote a very perceptive article in the Co-op News (5th June 1990) in which he said that Co-op know-how could be the icing on Labour's cake. If we adopted the Third Option we could be making most of the cake!

Notes and References

- 1 *Struggling to Survive*; Norman Wood, a former director of the CWS, writing in The Guardian, 2nd May 1986.

- 2 *New Life for Co-operative Structures*; Robert Briscoe, Journal No 62, May 1988.
- 3 *Whole-Brain Thinking*; Wonder and Donovan, Wm Morrow, N York, 1984.
- 4 Professor Roger Sperry in *The Psychophysiology of Thinking*, Academic Press N. York, 1973.
- 5 More on Professor Sperry's epoch-making discoveries can be seen in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, OUP, 1987.
- 6 *The Brain's Other Half*; Robert Ornstein (interviewed) New Scientist, p606, 6th June 1974.
- 7 *Mind Skills*; David Lewis, Grafton Books.
- 8 *Creativity and Intelligence*; Getzells and Jackson, N York, 1962.
- 9 *Creativity*; Liam Hudson in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, op cit.
- 10 *Conceptual Blockbusting*, James L Adams, Penguin, p/b, 3rd edition, 1987. This is one of the best modern "how to" books and would be very useful for those wishing to become tutor - counsellors associated with the suggested courses on creative imagination and intuitive problem-solving.
- 11 *Successful Suggestion Schemes*; The Industrial Society, 1986 and 1989.
- 12 *Threats to Biodiversity*; Prof. Edward O Wilson in the *Scientific American*, p 60, Sept, 1989.

The Author

FRANK ROGERS completed at the Co-operative College, 1959-61, the University of Nottingham Diploma in Political, Economic and Social Studies and has since contributed to a wide range of Co-operative journals. He has worked with a London firm of management consultants and reports that from his engagement with literature "to encourage creative imagination and intuitive problem-solving ability" he has been "hooked on the subject ever since".