

Appraisals and personal reviews in worker co-operatives

The issue of how to carry out appraisals and personal reviews comes up as a common theme among worker co-ops. Reviews can help us to:

- ensure that our worker-members are adequately skilled, suitably trained and capable to perform their duties
- identify issues that are making life difficult for members so we can provide support or training
- identify opportunities and untapped skills/potential within our co-ops
- ensure that the day to day job role reflects what people want to do with their life or ties in with their career progression so we don't lose members
- identify weaknesses and risks within the team

Personal reviews should be able to feed into or draw upon a “global view” of the whole co-operative, enabling it to assess whether or not it has sufficient skills, and spread of skills, among its worker-members to provide the goods or services that produce its income, and where risks to the business lie (such as reliance upon the skills of one member). Reviews can also reveal weaknesses and gaps such as the jobs that are being carried out that aren't actually anyone's responsibility but are crucial to success

One important thing to bear in mind when choosing an approach is whether or not it will produce the desired outcome and how the process itself fits with the culture of your co-op: what works in one co-op might not transfer to another!

Here are a few approaches that we have come across, all of which involve a regular (usually annual) follow up:

Person centred worker-member personal review

1. You take your job/role description, or someone else does. Identify the key elements of it and skills involved. This may be different from a wordy job description and it helps if we can distill it down to the essence of what the job really entails.
2. Carry out a preliminary reflective review on your own using a scoring sheet. The scoring methodology can vary. e.g. scoring Competency and Confidence for each aspect of the job can either using a score of 1-5 or Low/Med/High). The “scoring” should also be accompanied by open questions such as whether you feel underworked/under utilised or whether you feel overworked/overutilised; Which bits of the job do you find difficult? Why? Which bits of the job do you enjoy? why? What would you like to be doing more/less of? Any training needs you can identify. What are your overall happiness levels as a worker member - why is that?
3. Once you have carried out your own review you work through it with a colleague whose purpose is to challenge you and help you to clarify your answers. This might be the same person for everyone, or a different person for each member. You identify personal improvements, training requirements and personal targets which is used to create your personal development plan.
4. When everyone in the co-op has been through this process you should have a set of score sheets that can inform individual personal development plans, the co-op's training plan for the year, changes to the way the co-op allocates roles etc. Depending on your culture and the way you organise this last stage may be carried out by one person, a sub-committee or by the whole member meeting.

Core member competencies appraisal

1. The co-op separates out competency to do the job from competency to be a member. A standard list of competencies is drawn up that every member needs to be able to fulfil in order to be an active member of the co-op.
2. Members and probationary members are assessed either by an appointed individual or sub-committee. Where competencies cannot be displayed, this should inform training plans for individuals and the co-op: in line with the 5th co-operative principle of training, education and information, and working on the basis of helping people meet minimum standards rather than creating a barrier to membership or participation.

This approach can be used to measure progress through probationary membership.

A core member competencies appraisal should be used alongside another process that addresses job competencies. Being great democratic members does not make a successful business without the trade skills and attributes.

The “Buddy system”

1. Each member of the co-op has a “buddy” whose role it is to support them – a bit like a personal HR worker.
2. Similarly to the person centred approach above, the worker-member carries out a self assessment review using a form they have been provided with. The buddy discusses the review.
3. The buddy presents the review and their recommendations to the co-op/management committee/sub-committee without the member present.
4. Action points are developed and agreed by the co-op and the buddy has to monitor progress.

This process puts more of the onus on the co-op deciding improvement actions than the member.

KPIs/personal targets

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are a means to identify and measure business objectives and the desired social outcomes that matter to the business.

1. Each worker-member is allocated Key Performance Indicators that relate to their job role and also any other responsibilities they undertake for the co-op.
2. Once a quarter (or at any other frequency) a review meeting is held to assess performance against KPIs and discuss related issues. E.g. difficulties in achieving targets or reasons for exceeding them.

KPI based systems work very well in “planned” businesses that can predict how the business will perform in outcomes or outputs or have targets that relate to specific contracts e.g. number of sessions delivered. There is a danger that KPI based systems can become purely about meeting targets and may not address underlying issues that have an impact on the co-op such as interpersonal communication or lack of skills until they start to impact on the ability to hit targets. By this time it may be too late to address the damage.

Team reviews

The whole team regularly spends time with flipcharts and other visual aids to identify problems and successes the business has had, encouraging each worker-member to identify their own strengths/weaknesses and how they contributed to the co-op's performance.

This approach, while apparently democratic and cohesive, actually carries a high risk of missing key issues that individuals want addressing. There is a risk of developing "groupthink"* and relying too much on having the right person in the room to identify that the emperor is in fact wearing no clothes at all.

*Groupthink is a name we give to what happens when a group of people say what they think is expected of them, or what the majority appears to support - perhaps because they do not want to "rock the boat" or upset people. When groupthink develops, individual voices are not heard, problems can remain hidden, critical challenges are lost, decisions may be reduced to the lowest common denominator and the group's approach or performance may often be mediocre or substandard.

How we can help

Cooperantics provides consultancy & training to co-operatives. We can help your co-op in its approach to appraisals and reviews in a number of ways, including:

- Helping you to choose an appropriate review process
- Drawing up competencies or criteria for reviews
- Designing review processes, forms etc
- Delivering communication skills training to members so they can carry out reviews more effectively
- Carrying out reviews with your members
- Delivering induction sessions
- Assisting with strategic or governance reviews of the whole business