Co-operantics

Co-operative skills for everyone

Principles really do matter   **Nathan Brown**

Over the years, I have noticed that many co-operatives I have worked with or known who had suffered some sort of business crisis have had something in common. They had lost sight of the International Co-operative Principles* at the heart of the business and the business problems were a symptom of a failing co-operative organisation.

The Principles imbue co-ops with what is referred to by co-op geeks (hands up!) as "The Co-operative Advantage", a very real but ever so intangible attribute that enables co-ops to succeed where other businesses might fail. In all the focus on this wonderful advantage or in celebrating the benefits that being a member of a co-op brings, it is sometimes easy to forget that they are a product of the application of the Principles. So what can you do to ensure your co-op stays a co-op in deed as well as name? Here are a few tips:

Get back to basics - be clear about your purpose or aims

A co-operative is based around common economic, social and/or cultural needs. It is central to the internationally agreed definition of a co-operative. Clarity about the needs you hold in common and want to address is vital to success. Ignore the importance of shared and regularly acknowledged purpose at your peril. There is a risk that ignoring your purpose can lead to "mission creep" as members with differing needs try to bend the co-op to meet those needs. This can especially be the case if your membership processes require attention. Eventually the co-op could cease to deliver what it was established for, or break into factionalism. Sometimes your co-op may be able to address the developing needs of members, but this should be done as a strategic priority,not by stealth. Sometimes the needs of the membership change but if an individual's needs cannot be met by the co-op they can always leave - and start another one! The open and voluntary nature of co-ops applies equally to leaving as to joining.

Stick to the Principles

It is not that difficult to audit yourselves on how you apply International Co-operative Principles, although sometimes some outside assistance can be useful. It is also a highly educational experience for members both new and old alike. As time, members, the trade sector and the technological environment change we may find better ways to implement the principles for shared benefit.

Take the 7 International Co-operative Principles and examine, one by one:

- How does your co-operative implement the principle?
- How does this contribute to your purpose or aims?
- Do the ways you implement the principle pro-actively put that principle into practice or is it routine and "it's what we've always done"?
- Are members clear about why you implement the principles in that way?
- Is this the most effective way to implement the principle?
- Does the current way of implementing the principle cause friction or resistance among the membership?
- Could this be done in a better or different or easier way?

*If you're not sure what those are, take a look at: http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html