

Encouraging youth & leadership for the future of co-operatives

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Building Capacity

At Parramatta Council we have been developing a new approach to our work with the community. That work is based on a philosophy of capacity building.

This means we have aimed to move away from silo-driven service provision and planning, away from the “single issues” and “target groups” that were being used to define Council’s actions.

It offers instead a way of working with communities to deliver community-driven social change in the long term, rather than quick fixes. In doing so it recognises that communities are complex and many layered.

So we begin with a whole-of-community approach, thinking holistically, understanding the complex interplay of needs and possibilities.

It is also profoundly empowering to begin by looking at the strengths of a community; its store of actual and potential social capital. By thinking positively, some kinds of issues can be dealt with without “problematizing” or “catastrophising” our communities.

So our approach is to build the capacity of the community. We work directly with residents, with groups of residents, with our not-for-profit sector, and indeed, within our own organisation to build capacity.

Succession planning is an issue that confronts all organisations, but it can be particular serious for not-for-profits and - in a different way - for member-based organisations. It is a classic case where the principles of capacity building can be applied:

Look at your assets, think holistically, act for the long term.

Succession Planning

Despite what you see on the cable channel, the Age of Dinosaurs did not come to an end. A lot of dinosaurs died out in a short time, it’s true, but some endured and adapted and live on.

Nature, with the assistance of the occasional meteor strike, operates a brutal system to select who shall go on and who shall not. It’s called the survival of the fittest. Without emotion and with no respect for history, this severe technique will take perfectly innocent, often very cute little species and grind them to dust, leaving nothing but a few fossils under the mud. And some go on.

This is nature’s equivalent to Succession Planning.

Cumbersome, specialised dinosaurs with awkward reproductive practices and finicky diets went into decline and became extinct. In exactly the same way, co-operatives (and indeed any organisations) with declining relevance, shrinking markets and no plan to renew membership and leadership are heading surely towards the boneyard.



The involvement of young people in co-operatives is one sign of vigour and hope. Young people bring new ideas, new attitudes, new awareness. They are, especially for member-based organisations, simply the best platform for good succession planning.

When young people are already involved with your organisation as members, they have hopefully absorbed the values and culture of your organisation. When succession planning reaches outside the member group for management candidates, those values are inherently put at risk.

Perhaps your co-operative has already got many young members. Sometimes it might happen by good luck; perhaps young people are attracted to what you do, perhaps they see the co-op as an exciting, forward thinking organisation that makes a space for them to become involved.

But more likely than not, your organisation needs to work hard to ensure that young people are becoming active members: contributing, deriving benefits and committing to a long term involvement in your organisation.

Making membership into leadership

For co-operatives, there are special challenges that arise from the unique structure of these organisations. For many service based co-operatives, the customers *are* the shareholders; and the directors *are* the members.

This is often portrayed as a limited talent pool for management. So even if we busily recruited young people now, we do not ensure that in time we will be able to elect good quality directors.

There is more capacity building to do. Young members are an asset, and potentially a highly valuable asset to the organisation if they are nurtured and encouraged; if they stay around, developing skills and experience.

Some long term approaches need to be put in place, aiming to convert the youth membership into mature leadership. Only this way will we escape the fate of the dinosaurs.

Seven Principles

Taking my past work with young and more recent “capacity building” experience with many sectors of the community, I have identified seven principles (and accompanying action points) to help involve young people in co-operatives and create a vibrant, positive frame for that involvement.

1. Openness

In all dealings with young people you must be prepared to be open. Are the doors actually open? Sometimes they never *feel* open. Perceptions are as important as actuality. Young people may not dress or talk like your existing members. They may have different experiences that have formed them.

In your recruitment of members, make sure you have marketing strategies that are based on sound research about young people. And consider carefully: who do you want as members. Why?



If you run member induction programs (which you should) you can create different inductions for younger members, given them opportunities to understand and connect to your unique history from their unique perspective.

2. Inclusion

There is little inclusion in being spoken to. Inclusion happens when you consult and seek their views. But be careful: the bullshit detectors of young people are set to high. They know when they are being conned, or marginalised. They know what it's like when someone says, "what's your view?" and then turns away.

Ensure you have internal programs to seek the unique perspective of young members. If it's different from other members, you have a valuable guide to policy development. If it's the same as other members, you have a valuable consensus on that issue. Make sure you feed back to participants what you have heard.

And only consult if you have an intention to incorporate the results of that consultation in decision-making.

3. Relevance

If you are hoping to get young people involved, you need to offer an experience of the co-operative that has meaning – not just doing the photocopying. Give them a place at the table, a role to play beyond making the coffee, and a chance to speak out.

Consider creating elected or appointed Associate Director roles, where young people can shadow the elected directors, learn meeting procedures and develop management and financial skills, and understands the confidentiality and limits to power.

4. Respect

Some would say that respect is earned, not granted. But your young members have already demanded some respect by making the decision to join your co-operative. They have rights, and therefore they merit respect. You can show that respect underlying all the dealing you have with young people by following these simple steps: *listen, ask questions, listen again.*

By the same token, it shows no respect to demand a response. Young people may not wish to comment. They may require time, assistance and some patience.

Make sure you talk to people about how they like to be consulted; times, places, methods, styles and outcomes for reporting back.

5. Opportunities

In a positive environment we all become learners, and we might get what's called a learning organisation; adapting to change, an internal culture that positive and always on the move. So modern management puts a lot of stress on training.

Make sure that young members have access to all and any training that's being offered. That access might mean you have to offer programs outside a strict 9-5 pattern, or looking for new facilitators.

Devise training specific to your young members. Is this what they want to know? (And if not, why not?) Or are you imposing your ideas of their training needs?

Make participation in training acceptable, rewarded, fun.



6. Collaboration

Not surprisingly, young people like other young people. Beware of resting on your laurels if you have recruited one person under 18. That looks like tokenism. It is.

Young people will often deliver better results and have more positive experiences in the company of their peers. They also need to develop teamwork skills in a professional setting.

Create (relevant) projects which a team of young people can tackle.

Appoint a mentor from senior management to the group, able to comment and make suggestions.

7. Fairness/Justice/concern for others

Many young people are idealistic and willing. The kind of cynicism and boredom we sometimes associate with the young is a response, in my opinion, to the frustration of closed doors, deaf ears and exclusion.

This struggle for a fairer world is something close to the very core of a co-operative, and should be encouraged and protected. Idealism attracts hope, and then young people can recruit more young people, securing the future, for all.

