



## Daily Operations: Fostering Staff Empowerment and Accountability

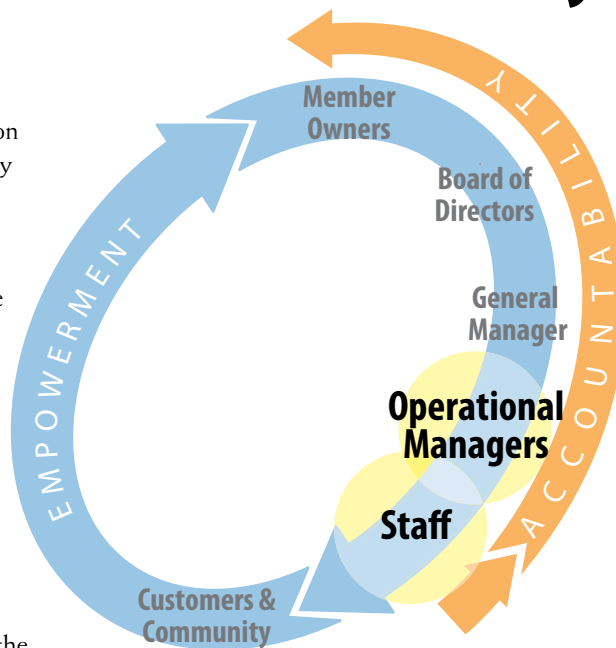
BY PATRICIA CUMBIE

As we continue our year-long examination of the empowerment and accountability stream in food co-ops, the point in the sequence where the rubber really hits the road is in the day-to-day functioning of the co-op's operations. This is the stage in the cycle where the vision gets implemented in myriad ways: through customer interactions, workplace culture and operational systems development. It's the intersection between intention and action, and involves the people who have a direct impact on sales, labor and margin goals, as well as the fulfillment of the co-op's ends. A tall order, for sure.

That's why it's critical that all staff understand the co-op's goals and how their work impacts the outcome. According to Carolee Colter, CDS CC human resources training and consulting expert, empowerment and accountability go hand-in-hand, and having clear expectations is the first step in creating a fully-functioning empowerment loop for department managers and their direct reports. "In order to hold someone accountable certain conditions have to be met," she said, and these include:

- Understanding and agreeing on expectations
- Training to do the job
- Follow up and assessment of performance
- Ongoing feedback and consequences

For co-ops seeking growth of both its sales and mission, creating a consistent culture of accountability and empowerment is about giving people adequate information to do their jobs. "This starts with both hiring and promotions," Colter said. It's often easier to agree to expectations when some-



*Clear expectations are important in creating a fully-functioning empowerment loop for department managers.*

one is newly hired—there are usually systems in place for that. But if an employee is being promoted from line staff to supervisor, often this step is neglected (resulting in a potential lack of empowerment and muddled accountability) because there's an assumption that the person already knows what the expectations will be. "This is especially important if you are hiring from within. You need to take the time to discuss what's involved. As peers move into a lead or supervisor role they have to understand and agree that their new role will include a different relationship with their former peers," she said.

Most any new role should involve some kind of

### Co-op Is Number One

*It's a simple and elegant concept: The co-op comes first. This is Diedrie Lang's approach to decision-making that has helped her create a work culture at Kootenay Co-op that is based on mutual respect and transparency. If everyone understands that their number one priority is the continual improvement of the co-op on behalf of its members, then the co-op will achieve a fully-functioning empowerment and accountability stream that will benefit all of its stakeholders.*

*When you think about the criteria for decision-making based on the co-op's needs to grow and sustain itself, the concept pretty much takes care of everything. How you answer the telephone to whether or not to expand are already covered—what's in the best interest of the co-op? That's not to say the work is not challenging or there won't be disagreements, but knowing up front what your number one priority is goes a long way toward agreement and collaboration.*

*Our CDS CC consultants have a strong systems approach to their work that helps foster efficiency and communication.*

*Their approach is to make your co-op number one, to help you find the resources and means to implement all that your co-op's owners want for a sustainable future.*

—Patricia Cumbie



## Our Mission

CDS Consulting Co-op is dedicated to building and strengthening cooperative businesses by providing consulting, training and development services.

CDS Consulting is a network of independent professionals experienced in developing cooperatives. Our consultants have worked on over 500 projects and will tailor our services to fit your needs and provide solutions.

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- Human resource systems—assessment, planning and training
- Supervisory skills and training
- Produce merchandising and management

## Fostering staff accountability continued

training. “Giving people training, making sure the tools you are giving them work, and taking the time to find this out is important. Otherwise it’s not fair to staff if you are holding them accountable for specific tasks without giving them a means to be successful,” Colter said.

Regular check-ins with staff can be a powerful motivator, although busy department managers might be tempted to skip this step, reserving feedback for performance evaluations. Colter said this can be a misstep that could cause problems in departments. “It’s really empowering if you are hearing frequently from your manager. Being in regular contact helps each party keep the agreement of expectations at the forefront. I’d consider the annual performance review the ‘super-check-in.’ It’s not something that can stand alone,” she said.

Accountability comes with consequences as a result of poor performance, but Colter argues that it can be equally, if not more effective, if accountability results in rewards and praise for a job well-done. “If accountability is all about critique, that’s not full accountability in an organization. You also have to find what people do well and reward it.” She also noted that this appreciation should extend to those who improve on poor performance. “Notice the effort,” she said, “It makes people more motivated.”

Mark Mulcahy is a CDS CC produce department consultant who does management and staff training for grocery retailers around the country. He works directly with department managers and co-op line staff to address issues of empowerment and motivation that lead to meeting department benchmarks. Like Colter, he agrees that expectations are key. Not only that, having them leads to growth and more satisfied staff. “Expectations allow managers to take things off their plate and allow others to step up. This allows managers to take on new responsibilities and give staff a greater stake in the functioning of a department,” he said.

Joe Staniszewski, produce manager at River Valley

Market in Northampton, Mass., found that by developing systems and across-the-board expectations his department sales went up double digits. Additionally, the department’s culture is one that reflects pride because staff have a stake in the results. “Once our systems were in line we were able to enjoy the benefits of a more empowered and efficient staff,” he said. As an example regarding the benefits of this approach, their department has grown to stocking an 8’ value-added cooler that includes cut fruits and vegetables, veggie trays and salsa and guacamole sold at a 70 percent margin. “Improving our fundamental systems gave us time that was never there before, and we didn’t have to hire any new people to do

it. By empowering employees and giving them clear expectations employees were able to take ownership and go the extra mile in making the department a success,” Staniszewski said.

One of the things Mulcahy has learned in his work is that often underperforming departments have what he calls “a culture of entitlement.” That might look like empowerment in the workplace because staff “do what they want,” but because there are no standards or accountability they tend to be the departments with high turnover or conflict. “It holds the

whole store back,” he said. Resolving this issue is a combination of expectations and systems that support accountability and empowerment.

“What you want is for ‘stepping up’ to be an expectation. You want people to grow in their jobs and department managers need to look at ways for others to be promoted. As you master what you’re doing, it gives someone else an opportunity. That’s how you fuel constant growth,” he said. At River Valley Market, by instituting this cultural shift, Mulcahy said that the manager has more time to negotiate deals and keep tabs on department goals. “It creates a domino effect,” he said about a fully functioning empowerment and accountability stream in individual departments, “Everything changes in that environment. It allows people to be part of decisions and actions that affect the whole department.”

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—Mark Mulcahy



## CASE STUDY

# Where the Co-op Comes First

The Kootenay Country Store Cooperative, colloquially known to the community as Kootenay Co-op, has long been central to the vitality of Nelson, British Columbia, a small town in the southern interior region of Canada. About 10,000 people live in the town, which is known for its vibrant arts scene and strong cooperatives. The area boasts a cooperatively-owned radio station, arts co-op, car-sharing co-op and numerous housing co-ops. Nelson was also named Best Small Arts Town in Canada. The Kootenay Co-op's trade area is about 50,000 people within an hour's drive of the co-op. It's a special place because it is also beautiful—surrounded by mountains and on a lake. Quite simply, people love living there and the co-op contributes to the quality of life in the area.



### **Kootenay Country Store Cooperative**

Nelson, British Columbia, Canada  
 Founded: 1975  
 Number of members: 10,000  
 Equity investment: \$50  
 Number of staff: 68  
 Retail square feet: 4,800

From the perspective of Diedrie Lang, the general manager, knowing that the co-op is such an important part of daily life in Nelson is a big reason why it is so important that her management team and staff function well. It is a responsibility and a pleasure to serve the community, and everyone is expected to contribute to a work culture where she said, "the co-op comes first."

"We're here for the co-op, it's the only reason we are working here," Lang said, and this message is manifest in countless ways throughout their operation. Employees are given clear expectations not only through training and orientations, but in the ways department managers and staff communicate through their staff newsletter, department meetings and all-staff meetings where the co-op's operations plan is shared with everyone. Additionally management team and board meeting minutes are posted for all the staff to read. At Kootenay Co-op, transparency is a big part of showing staff the co-op's expectations, and also a method for soliciting feedback from staff in departments. Sometimes this can be achieved simply by having lunch with staff in the break room. Lang thinks that the personal touch does a

lot to build credibility and trust, and encourages her department managers to be a part of the operation's daily rhythms.

Decisions along the empowerment and accountability stream are made on criteria that prioritize what is best for the co-op.

"The co-op's needs have to come

first," Lang said, and this includes little things like everyone wearing a name tag, to developing management and staff to advance in their jobs. "The skill progression needs to keep up with the co-op's need progression," she said. "The name tag may seem like a trivial issue, but it's all connected. If you're not wearing it, it becomes 'all about me' and individual expression rather than the co-op customer's need to identify you as an employee."

Lang also recognizes the challenges to managers in running their departments and promoting a vision of cooperation in the community. "They have to do a lot, the details to attend to in some of those departments can be huge. They have big jobs."

"We do have to have rules," Lang said, "and sometimes make tough decisions." Lang knows how demanding it can be when decisions made by department managers for the benefit of the co-op can be unpopular, but she is a firm believer that when decisions are made in the co-op's best interest, the benefits are passed on to customers and staff tenfold.

## **CBLD 2012 Enrollment Open**

The Cooperative Board Leadership Development (CBLD) team is thrilled to welcome board leaders to its eighth year serving boards. The program has proven results for boards all around the country, helping them continue to develop their skills for governing their local food co-ops.

"Our goal is to continue to help co-op boards strengthen their fundamentals AND support the strategic leadership work that is emerging all across the country," said CBLD consultant Mark Goehring. The program is piloting two new in-person events that offer directors the opportunity to build valuable leadership skills and engage in strategic conversations with other directors from other co-ops.

**CBLD Leadership Training** is a new in-person, one-day, multi-co-op training designed to help board leaders incorporate the strategic process into their board work plans, strengthen group effectiveness and build individual leadership skills. Two sessions will be held in 2012 with four to five per year starting in 2013.

**Strategic Co-op Seminars** are regional conferences for whole boards to come together for strategic conversations. Four will be held in 2012, focusing on the cooperative model, cooperative development, and themes connected to the International Year of Cooperatives.

**For more information or to sign up**, contact Mark Goehring: 802-380-3824 or [MarkGoehring@cdsconsulting.coop](mailto:MarkGoehring@cdsconsulting.coop)

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