

## River Valley Market

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River Valley Market is a community-owned, retail food cooperative whose mission is to create a just marketplace that nourishes the community.

Everyone is welcome!  
We are open 7 days a week,  
from 8 am to 9 pm

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# POWER WITH VS. POWER OVER:

## The challenge of cooperative leadership

by Jade Barker, River Valley Market Board President



AS WE begin another Board election cycle, my reflections on leadership bring to mind a recent New Yorker cartoon. It shows a family lost in the jungle. The father, scratching his chin, says, "OK, I admit it, we're lost.

But the important thing is to remain focused on whose fault it is." Assigning blame seems to be a default position for us humans, and is certainly a major way we currently try to effect change. Though our co-op has overcome enormous hurdles since incorporating in 1999, our greatest challenge may be learning to master "power with" or collaborative problem-solving versus "power over," with its tendency to blame and shame.

For many the word "power" provokes a negative reaction, mostly based on our past histories. Yet power simply refers to the energy we use to get things done. "Power over" (also called win/lose) is a concept we're all intimately familiar with since it's used throughout our society and economy. In court a plaintiff wins a judgment, in war a good nation announces victory over an evil one, at work a supervisor barks commands at her employees, in the economy a new business bankrupts a competitor. Yet the use of "power over" creates an interesting problem—it typically invites a counteraction. A defendant appeals what she considers an unjust decision, the so-called evil nation plans a counter-attack, the employee finds a way to undermine the supervisor, and a newer business out-competes the first. Since "power over" continually pits people against each other, unless you enjoy fearfulness and fighting, it's a hard system to like.

"Power with" (or win/win) is the paradigm cooperatives are based on. Each party supports the other to be its most effective, to put its full power behind achieving a mutual goal. In our co-op, member-owners empower the board, which empowers the general manager, who empowers the staff, which ultimately manifests our goals in the community. While our co-op structure superficially resembles other business hierarchies, crucial differences include our democratic nature (one member, one vote) and our recognition of every participant's critical role. Not only could we not function without each other, full empowerment of each results in increased benefit for all. The fifth cooperative principle states that co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected

representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. This principle intrinsically recognizes our partnership and shared goals. In addition, the cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility and equality illuminate the importance we place on everyone in our cooperative being powerful—sharing power even while we ask some among us to use that power on our behalf. (Search ICA Statement of Cooperative Identity to learn more.)

Unfortunately, co-ops don't always work the way they were designed. At any point in the equation, "power over" can creep in. Someone may come to believe that achieving their goals requires working against one or more; communication and trust break down and are replaced by control and suspicion. For example, a Board might try to control rather than govern, seeing itself as more police than partner of the general manager and thus abandon its unique responsibility for empowerment, accountability, and visioning.

Co-op activist, farmer, and business professor Art Sherwood outlines unhealthy co-op leadership stances taken from real life examples in his article "Power Triggers, Seesaw Battles and Handcar Cooperation" (*Cooperative Grocer*: 154 May-June 2011). He believes that our default view of power as "us vs. them" rather than mutual cooperation is at the root of these problems. While Sherwood lists a variety of triggers for "power over" interactions, ultimately, most are caused by fear. Can we trust this group or that person to honor our shared values? Can we be sure we are headed in the right direction?

The first step in living our co-op vision seems to me to let go of "power over." To abandon shame and blame as tactics since they do more harm than good. To practice seeing each other as potential partners and teachers. To listen and appreciate everyone's unique perspective. To educate ourselves about leadership and followership, best practices, and good governance. "Power with" requires faith and trust mixed with vision and vulnerability. These attributes, though praiseworthy, are not much modeled in our culture. Most of us are rank beginners. Ultimately though, practicing "power with" leads not only to increased effectiveness but is also a lot more fun.

We are entering a new era; educating ourselves about compassionate and effective leadership is a must. You might consider joining the River Valley Market Board, not just as a way to serve your community but also as a chance to practice "power with" —ultimately a satisfying and mutually enlivening way to be.