

CREATING STRONG, RESILIENT & INCLUSIVE BOARDS: Two Case Studies

NFCA Annual Meeting, 2018

Lessons learned from Brattleboro Food Co-op (VT) and Willimantic Food Co-op (CT) Board Members featuring tales of how to overcome challenging Board dynamics & tools for your co-op to improve your Board culture, communications, and overall impact.

Alice Rubin, General Manager, Willimantic Food Co-op
Kathleen Krider, Board President, Willimantic Food Co-op

Background to How Willimantic Food Co-op Board Ended Up In Hole of Gloom

- Willimantic Food Co-op Board began using policy governance in 2001
- In 2005, had a very strong board who used policy governance to get us through a successful expansion
- After expansion, most of board left
- New board was not strong, appointed new members including a disgruntled ex employee & their partner
- Board decided to suddenly drop policy governance with no discussion
- Board became dysfunctional and behaved as if they were trying to get rid of GM
- GM (Alice) actively recruited new board members who she knew had the best interest of the co-op in mind rather than their own agenda

Steps They Took to Dig Out:

- Actively recruited board members that were supportive
- Rewrote Policy Governance so that it was a useable document
- Had a “healing” retreat with CDS consultant –took the time to listen to what happened, parsed it out into manageable actionable steps
- Has a CDS consultant who was good at “healing” boards
- Got a new CDS consultant who was good at doing other things (creating new goals, leaving the past behind and refocusing us in the direction we said we wanted to go in, held us accountable in a positive but firm way) with boards
- Invested in Board Training such as CBLD 101, Co-op Cafes, NFCA gatherings, and all other opportunities to learn from other boards and orgs. Encouraged Board training and made sure to budget money to spend on trainings. Talked about it as a part of recruitment strategy.
- Emphasized and recommitted to Policy Governance
- Focused on recruiting more Board members who have a deep investment and commitment to the Co-op and the GM team
- Supported the GM team restructuring
- Tested comfort with “consciousness” – recognized ebb and flow in cohesiveness and understanding and that the better way to do that was to acknowledge that and create a culture where we can drift a bit, and if we do it with awareness/consciousness, we allow for natural learning without sacrificing board process.
- Proactive about Board succession planning—used Policy Governance to help us define leadership roles, made those roles desirable, and made being on the Board a more transparent commitment so that folks who stepped up weren’t blindsided by the commitment.
- Developed Board Ex. Council Roles
- Codified documents for succession and training and meeting purposes
- Started giving a shit about each other - followed up with calls and emails, going out for beers afterward. Getting into spirited conversations that ended in hugs and laughter, having retreats that felt expansive and productive, enjoying our CDS consultant, looking forward to traveling to conferences together, appreciating what someone else had to say even if it was challenging. Really and truly respecting each other’s skills and knowledge

Brattleboro Food Co-op Activities, Processes, Resources

Beth Neher, Board President, Brattleboro Food Co-op

Emilie Kornheiser, Board Member, Brattleboro Food Co-op

Guiding words: intention, transparency, self-awareness

Changes to the agenda

- The agenda setting meeting:
 - It used to be done with the GM, board president and our CDS consultant. This lacked transparency and caused suspicion. We opened it up to include the GM, board president and vice president, CDS consultant and any other board member who wanted to come. Everyone is welcome to contribute to the final meeting agenda.
 - We discuss more than the agenda at the meeting, time permitting. It is also a time for the GM, board members and CDS consultant to talk about issues or concerns such as our role in the community, what *conflict of interest* means and can involve, etc.
- Icebreakers/opening questions as a means of bringing us all together as people.
 - For example: *In no more than 3 words how was the holiday season for you? What I want for Valentine's Day... How is board service benefitting you? What is your favorite spring flower? What success have you had in the past week? What is your hope for this meeting? What is your opinion of (Amazon's acquisition of Whole Foods)? Name something unions bring to an organization. What are you bringing to this meeting?*
- Ending meetings with two short closure activities (5 min each):
 - For example: *What would you tell a shareholder about this meeting?* and then *What went well in tonight's meeting? What would you change?* OR *How are you feeling at the end of the meeting? Can we do anything differently?*
- Including preparation for the following month's monitoring activity on the agenda
- Strategic conversations, board education conversations

Changes to board culture and practice

- Working *collaboratively* (all of board; board and GM; Board, GM and CDS consultant)
- Knowing each other as people (during our annual retreat; during dinner; tabling)
- Making space for people to like each other - softening, laughing, slowing down
- Setting norms (to ensure our work is carried out in a respectful and safe atmosphere that environment for dissenting/alternative points of view to which we have all agreed via an activity in which we all participated)
- Using active listening skills
- Permission for curiosity
- Utilizing different tools: e.g., the hats we wear (conflict of interest), putting ourselves in shareholders' shoes
- Increasing our understanding of what our role is, involves and what expectations:
 - Redesigning board recruitment material
 - Shifting view of being on board from service only to a period of personal growth
 - Linking what we do explicitly to the BFC Ends (pointing to them as we raise, query or discuss something)
 - Requiring committee charters approved by the full board at the first meeting after our annual retreat
 - Requiring committee meeting notes be included in the board packet
 - Establishing a mentoring system for new board members
 - Taking time to clarify our monitoring role

Resources

Setting Norms

Norms are the rules or guidelines that a group establishes to guide the interaction and behavior of group members. Norms typically address time/punctuality, listening, confidentiality, decision-making, participation and expectations; however, the group can decide the areas for which they wish to create norms. There is a multitude of ways to establish norms, and if you Google 'setting norms' or 'norm setting' you will find a huge number of ways to do this.

Suggested activity:

- Materials: flipchart paper, pens/crayons
- Time: 30-45min

The facilitator asks everyone to visualize the best meeting they have ever attended. Give everyone a minute to think. Then the facilitator asks the group to think about what made it such a positive experience. The facilitator asks everyone to form small groups and then discuss and generate a list of qualities/characteristics of positive meetings. The facilitator elicits the qualities/characteristics and notes them on flipchart paper; if there are glaring omissions, the facilitator should add them to the flipchart paper. The facilitator then asks what the expectations are for this group and what everyone would need to do as individuals and as a group to meet these expectations. The group discusses the qualities/characteristics in the context of the two questions and what they agree become the group norms, which should be recorded and distributed.

And an adaptation of the activity above:

Once groups have discussed and generated a list of qualities/characteristics of positive, productive meetings, the facilitator displays a flipchart page with headings on it: time, listening, participation, confidentiality, decision-making, expectations. The facilitator poses the two questions: *What are the expectations for this group? What would everyone need to do as individuals and as a group to meet these expectations?* The facilitator gives groups post-it notes and asks them to write qualities and characteristics related to the headings from their list on the post-its. Groups put their post-its under the headings. After whole group discussion, the group agrees on what the norms will be. The facilitator should write up a final list and share it with everyone.

Strategic Conversations

These are often conversations about issues facing co-operatives in general and/or your co-op in particular. They can be educational, lay the groundwork for later decisions and/or a means of getting a board to begin thinking and talking about an issue. The hallmark of strategic conversations is that they *do not* involve making decisions. They are conversations only. They can be based on a video everyone watches together, a reading, or a topic of discussion, guided with questions or unguided. They can be 30-60mins long. They can be organized as a whole board discussion or the board can work in smaller groups before coming together to share their thoughts.

Use the CDS Consulting Library; search for 'strategic conversation' and you will find yourself [on this page](#). There are things to read, a video series, and the readings move into strategic leadership. [Link to one article in the CDS Library](#) – strategic conversation re growth

Active Listening

There are many accessible readings you and members of your board can do about active listening. Here is a link to [an article in the Wall Street Journal](#). Here is another, [10 Principles of Listening](#), which offers a way to structure a strategic conversation that could build awareness. Put the principles on paper and ask board members to read and discuss the principles and to offer thoughts about how these principles might affect board interaction and/or effectiveness.