

# Change in Motion: Diversity Work at Community Food Co-op

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In the fall of 2017, the Community Food Co-op in Bellingham, Wash., decided it was time to move from talking about diversity and inclusion to taking actionable steps to change our co-op's culture. Community Food Co-op is a \$34 million business with approximately 260 employees spread over three locations. As a cornerstone of our larger community, we believe that by focusing on diversity and inclusion in our business operations, this work will ripple throughout our area and positively impact our employees and customers (including gender-nonconforming, white, and people of color), now and into the future.

Our journey so far has included cultural responsiveness trainings, reviewing new hiring practices, and creating board-level policies that support our end goal of being a co-op where truly everybody feels welcome.

## Cultural responsiveness training

Staff training on cultural responsiveness and unconscious bias is essential to a diversity and inclusion program. These trainings help build awareness, skills, and knowledge that support an opportunity to explore an individual's personal and cultural blind spots. We believe the development of self-awareness and appreciation of diverse viewpoints are the foundation to changing how we interact with our customers

The goal is to lay the groundwork for delivering better customer service and communication, for both shoppers and fellow employees, through understanding how we may unconsciously impose our personal values and biases onto others.

Engagement is key to moving the dial on diversity and inclusion. The consultant who built our program, Dr. Breyan Haizlip, has been instrumental in developing our initiatives. Dr. Haizlip's pedagogy is rooted in empathy and cultural responsiveness through interpersonal development. This foundation created trainings that allow people to show up, be vulnerable, and acknowledge their own personal and cultural biases.

Our department managers, diversity and inclusion teams (consisting of staff at all levels), and senior management

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recently spent four months attending four multi-hour sessions on cultural responsiveness. By the end of 2018 we hope to have over half of our staff attend a three-hour customer training, with an emphasis on cultural responsiveness, and to include the entire staff in trainings by summer 2019.

Since we began hosting these trainings, our staff has experienced a deeper sense of empathy and community.

*"Our diversity and inclusion work has created a stronger sense of community amongst my peers, because we've had to be more open and vulnerable in front of each other. We can celebrate, honor, and see each other's differences."*

– Melissa Arbiter, meat department manager

*"This program has been eye opening for me because I've had to come to terms with my privilege as a white male. Since doing*

*these trainings I feel more empathetic and now look at people with a new set of eyes, to try to truly see their story."*

– David Sands, produce department manager

## Hiring practices

One area in need of a system upgrade was our hiring practices. For years we've emphasized hiring for availability to ease scheduling. But what do we miss (and who do we leave behind) when we prioritize availability? By changing the values used in hiring practices and creating a hiring matrix that values cultural awareness, we hope to create a diverse workforce that truly serves our community.

*"Diversity helps us see what we cannot see in ourselves. When we just look for availability, we're missing opportunities to get new skills and perspectives that will improve our department."*

– Neko Wolf, deli department manager

We are striving to create a workforce that values different perspectives and backgrounds. To gauge future applicants during the interview process, we will take a deeper dive by asking questions such as:

- *Please share an example that demonstrates your respect for people and their differences; how have you worked to understand the perspectives of others?*



• *What have you done to further your knowledge of diversity and inclusion?*

The applicant's answers will be weighted on our hiring matrix under the "diverse experience" section. As with any organizational change, this transition will create some stress in hiring by managers, because they will need to make concessions on scheduling concerns in balance with diversity goals. We see this as a necessity. Our consultant, Dr. Haizlip, reminds us that "problems cannot be fixed on the same level that they were created." If we have the power to change systems to create more equitable outcomes, why wouldn't we?

### **Board-related change**

Our internal work has been momentous this past year, and we still have leagues to go. To support the operational-level work, our board of directors, in partnership with management and Dr. Haizlip, is developing policies and metrics that reflect our values around diversity and inclusion that support the work being done. This board-level work is fundamental to ensuring that diversity and inclusion is a pillar of our business practices.

Our longstanding general manager will be retiring in the fall, and the board is in the process of hiring his replacement. The board has posted to job boards beyond our normal networks for this position, and candidates are being screened for their diversity and inclusion comprehension. We believe the new general manager should be willing to align with and support the goals that we are establishing.

### **Change in motion**

Food co-ops, at their essence, are more than natural food grocers—they are businesses that inspire others to do business differently. This edge requires us to examine the impact of our blind spots and make appropriate changes. As we continue with our diversity and inclusion efforts, I hope to see other co-ops take the actions needed to truly become vehicles for social change.

"Co-ops have historically had a commitment to social justice, yet failed to recognize our blind spot regarding the lack of diversity and equity in our operations," says Jim Ashby, general manager.

I believe that our future has the potential to be one in which our stores and community rooms are spaces where everybody is welcome and customer service is central. This cannot be done until we start developing awareness and understanding of the personal and operational biases that we have all inherited, developed, and maintained. Then we can take the steps to develop new responsive approaches around how we serve as employers, grocery stores, and models for the cooperative business structure.

For more information concerning diversity and inclusion in food co-ops, see the case study published in *CG191* (Sept. - Oct. 2017), titled "Everybody Welcome?" •