Balancing Employers and Employees

Keep sight of the co-op's needs in a sea of individual preferences

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Food co-ops are known for being compassionate employers. Unlike some of our big competitors in the grocery industry who only work to maintain their organization's interests, food co-ops seem more likely to try to accommodate individual interests and preferences alongside the organization's priorities. This is a great thing, something that food co-ops should be proud of.

But do we sometimes go too far? How can we tell when the individual's preferences have taken priority over the organization's needs? It is wonderful that co-ops are flexible and compassionate employers; it is one of our best qualities. But we must also maintain focus on the organization's needs if we are to be healthy and successful businesses in our communities.

When I'm invited to a co-op to help assess its organizational structure and workplace culture, one of the most important things I look for is a clear balance between organizational needs and employees' personal needs. I'm looking to see that the organization is set up for the best chance of success in reaching its organizational goals.

What are some of the signs that a co-op's needs have taken a backseat to individual preferences? The most common examples of imbalance show up in:

Inappropriate store support and coverage, such as in department and store scheduling;

Structural weaknesses, such as team composition or lack of clarity in the chain of accountability.

Appropriate store coverage

Department schedules should be developed to meet the store's needs, and this may mean different things for different departments. For example, cashiering schedules should be based on customer traffic patterns, whereas grocery-stocking schedules should be based on effective receiving systems and preparing the store for peak customer traffic. This sounds simple enough, but often we lose sight of these priorities when trying to adjust for individual preferences.

Sometimes the adjustments get institutionalized into permanent schedules. Once, as a general manager looking over the grocery stockers' schedule, I asked, "Why does the p.m. stocker shift start at 2:00 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but not until 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday?" It turned out that a previous employee always had classes on Tuesday and Thursday and couldn't get to work until 7:00. What was more shocking was that this employee didn't even work there anymore, but his schedule had just been carried forward to the new stocking crew! The result was that each Tuesday and Thursday the store was not fully stocked and ready for the evening rush. Is there a situation like this in your co-op right now?

Overall store coverage is just as important and seems equally vulnerable to personal preferences. Most food co-ops' busiest sales hours are evenings and weekends, yet this is when co-ops typically have the fewest experienced people staffing the stores. Often, managers and buyers who have the most experience at the co-op work 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. on weekdays, leaving our newest and least-experienced employees to staff the store during its busiest times. Implementing some kind of "Manager on Duty" program, rotating evening shifts among senior managers, or staggering manager schedules can help ensure the store is presenting itself well to the customers while fully supporting and helping newer staff gain skills and knowledge about the co-op.

Basic daily and hourly customer traffic patterns can be determined easily from most POS systems. The store should look and be its very best when it is the busiest, so scheduling should reflect anticipated traffic. Once the schedule and available shifts are determined, then individual employees can ask to work shifts that best meet their personal needs. Developing department schedules and storewide coverage plans according to actual traffic patterns rather than individuals' personal preferences will ensure you are putting the organization's priorities first.

Structural weaknesses

Examine your team composition. Building effective teams in our co-ops has never been more important. Many of the marketplace expectations and operational realities in food co-ops today require highly functional and well-integrated teams—but do we unintentionally sacrifice team health for individual preferences?

A productive team needs to plan together, brainstorm together, create action plans together, monitor its progress together, and celebrate its achievements together. Often, however, we have one or more persons absent from the team they should be working with.

In the scenarios illustrated on page 11, staff would function better if all the positions in green had the opportunity to be working together on a team rather than being split apart.

By creating teams where people who are engaged in similar activities and responsibilities work together, we allow for more cohesive planning and more thorough execution of our plans. However, quite often work teams have "orphans" who are working with and reporting to someone else. Many times the reason this
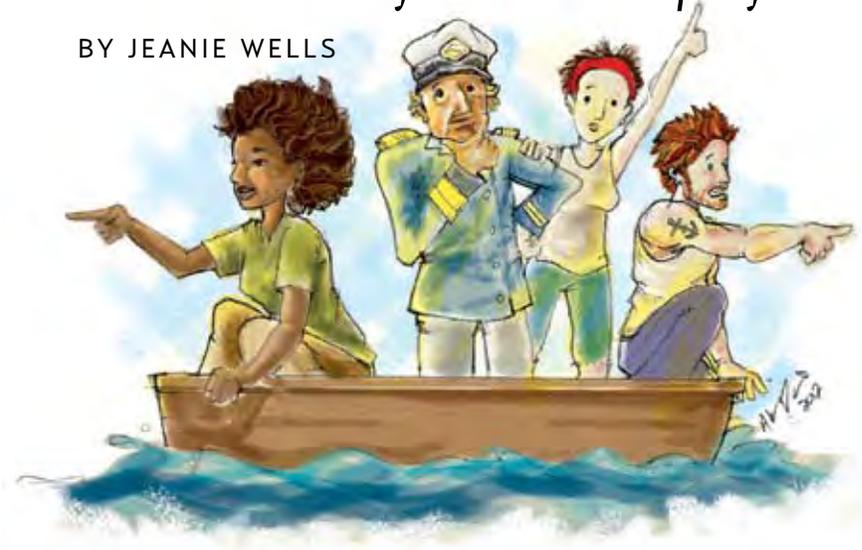
occurs is personal preference, usually one of the following:

Positions have evolved over time to become something different than when they began, and the person in the orphaned position believes he/she will be most comfortable with the "old boss" and fears a new boss. A common example is someone who used to be responsible for creating grocery endcaps and is now responsible for "store merchandising." The person's responsibilities have increased to include all the sales departments, but he/she is still reporting to the grocery manager rather than coordinating at the store level with the branding team and with a new boss.

Someone has previously reported to the GM or a specific high-level manager, and changing the reporting structure may be perceived as a demotion—therefore, that change is postponed to avoid rocking the boat.

Incomplete teams often don't fully meet the needs of the organization—plans aren't as fully developed as they could be or executed as they should be. Allowing our employees to "choose" which team they want to serve on is a disservice to the organization and often leads to more unsatisfying and dysfunctional work environments for everyone. In co-ops, there is usually ample opportunity for cross-department and cross-team collaboration, and if someone is moved to a new team, that doesn't mean they won't still have opportunities to collaborate with others around the store.

Clarity in chain of accountability

Look at any staff survey or any publication on staff satisfaction and you can see how important having a clear, easy-to-understand organizational structure is to employees. It makes sense—we all want to know how things work and where we stand in the organization. But sometimes we find that unresolved and difficult personnel issues seep into our organizational structure and begin to weaken it from the inside out.

When I visit co-ops and see orphaned positions or strange reporting structures, it is usually due to some lingering personnel issue. These are often initially visible in things such as:

- A key manager has left the co-op, and now all that position's former direct reports are reporting straight to the GM because they don't like the replacement manager.

- A long-term employee is reporting to the GM, even though there is no logical reason for the position to be a direct report to the GM other than tenure.

- A manager feels pressured to pay certain people a higher wage and invents positions to "promote" them to in order

It's easy to end up with incomplete teams, as in these two examples:
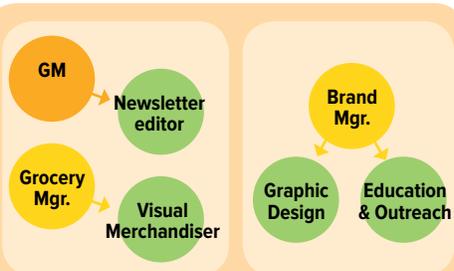
Staff would function better if all positions in green had the opportunity to work together on a team rather than being split apart.

to justify a higher wage. These created "moons" often are in their own orbit and don't really bring strength to the department or the organization.

Our organizations have a complex set of needs as well as important visions and goals. We create our structures and chains of accountability to help us build the organizational capacity to accomplish our routine work and to reach our long-term goals. Employees benefit from seeing clearly how the information and systems flow through the organization. If we can see and understand the structure, the staffing plan, and the goals, we can all row together.

But when we start making random exceptions and adjustments to the framework or switching around the "seating arrangement" because of an individual squeaky wheel, our employees (and managers, too!) lose clarity on how things work and where they are in this complex organization. And when we lose clarity, we lose confidence in the organization itself.

Often we don't perceive these slight adjustments as they are being made; usually we are just making what seems like an isolated decision based on a particular situation and may be looking for the easiest way to "fix" a problem when it comes up. But, over time, these "exceptions" build up and make it appear there is no system at all. A lack of clear rules and clear structure can cripple an organization's ability to accomplish even routine work, not to mention progress toward its long-term vision. We all need to be able to trust the systems we create and commit to keeping them strong, or else we

risk wasting our energy, going in circles rather than moving forward.

The bottom line

The solution to a weak or fragmented structure may not be as hard as you think it will be, but sometimes it takes courage to take the first steps. Start by taking an honest look at how the co-op is organized for the work at hand. Often we find that the structure hasn't kept pace with the co-op, and that it has become fragmented and weak in certain areas. Committing to a strong process for reorganizing the co-op (evaluating and assessing, exploring options, and carefully planning for implementation) can be liberating and invigorating for everyone. Even people who seem skeptical or anxious about any structural changes will come on board if they see a fair and strong planning process.

Co-ops are doing a great job of creating positive work environments that allow our employees to grow and thrive. But this does not mean that we must put certain individual preferences above the organization's needs. Our role as leaders in our co-ops is to continually strengthen and improve our organizations, so that they can be healthy and vibrant resources to our local communities for years to come. This should always be our primary focus. ◾