



LEADer

A publication focused on sharing ideas to improve on and support excellent cooperative governance for NCGA's Western Corridor co-ops

Focus on Board Decision Making

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Garlic and the Universe Are Simple

It's Board Decision Making That Can Be Complicated

— by Cindy Owings

Soil, water, sun, and a little manure are what it takes to grow a healthy patch of garlic. Planting garlic cloves in mid-October ensures a robust bulb harvest by August. A board decision-making process could be compared to growing garlic. Both endeavors require sitting with the elements over a period of time to bring about fruition or desired outcome.

A co-op board is elected by its membership to represent the whole. In other words, a handful of folks are charged with creating, defining, and maintaining the big

picture for the membership's investment. Making decisions in tandem with the general manager is one of the directors' fundamental jobs. When a situation requires directors to make a decision that affects the co-op's future, what is the process by which a board comes to that decision?

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Meet the BEST in the West



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Welcome!

The LEADer is a project of the NCGA Western Corridor designed to complement in-person regional board training sessions. The LEADer provides a forum for continued sharing of ideas and resources, and to support a growing and increasingly effective network of co-op leadership.

In this issue, we focus on decision making. We all think of the board as the ultimate decision-making body for a co-op. But making decisions as a group isn't always a smooth and easy process. We offer some articles and thoughts to help your board be decisive when it needs to be, through a constructive, respectful process.

Also, following up on discussions from our spring board training session in Portland (thanks to all of you who made it a priority to join us!), we have an interview with Martha Whitman from La Montañita that further describes how her board spends its meeting time. La Montañita uses a novel approach, devoting part of each meeting to business and part to bigger-picture topics to help shape the board's larger, forward-looking leadership role.

About the LEADer

- The LEADer is published quarterly and is distributed to enrolled directors and leaders of Western Corridor co-ops.
- We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. Send comments or questions to askthebest@ncga.coop.
- The next issue will be available in September 2009. The submission deadline for that issue is August 10.
- You can find information about the LEAD program and an online enrollment form at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.
- For more information about the NCGA, the Western Corridor, upcoming western regional board training events, or the LEADer, or for contact information for any BEST members, contact:

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Board Effectiveness Support Team

That's a Good Question!

—by Marcia Shaw



When an individual makes decisions for him- or herself, he or she has to please only one person. If Tom decides, then only Tom has to live with and be satisfied with the outcomes of his decision. Tom may *want* a decision that Nick and Mary can live with, but in the end, he decides what the trade-offs are and what constitutes the best choice among competing alternatives.

On the other hand, when we make decisions in a group, sometimes we don't get all the results we want, but we can always feel good about the process. The old saw says that a camel is a horse designed by committee—but who decided that a horse was the best design? A camel may be the best design if the committee wants to transport goods across the desert!

If you are going to make a big decision, how do you go about it? Do you mull it over for a long time, reading reviews, reports, and reflections by others, or do you suddenly land on the right choice? Do you make lists of pros and cons? Do you consult with valued friends or experts? Do you go through a formal problem-solving sequence involving goal statements, criteria, or weighted values? How much does your gut play into your decisions? Have

you ever gone through a formal decision-making process only to throw out the result because your heart wasn't in it?

Reflecting on how you personally make decisions is the first step in improving your board's decision-making process. Understanding that we don't all make decisions the same way will also help you learn to respect different ways of doing things. We all make some thoughtless decisions. They are not necessarily bad ones—but they seemed so obvious that we didn't give much thinking to the process. Sooner or later, you're going to bump into a decision that seems hard or momentous or scary. When the board is the "decider," you'll find out that different people have different (but often equally successful) decision-making strategies.

Good Questions

Being a valuable contributor to your board's decision-making process means having a set of tools that you can call upon when faced with a decision. One set of tools involves asking the right questions (and eventually getting good answers). There are three different kinds of questions, and each kind lends itself to particular strategies in decision resolution.

The first type of question involves goals or outcomes. Policy Governance calls them ends, but we call them target questions.

Examples:

- What are the desired outcomes?
- What would the ideal situation be?
- How would it look if it were perfect?
- What am I trying to achieve here?

Sometimes the answers to such questions are obvious or seem simple. However, decisions are often difficult if there are several different goals. Some of them might compete or seem mutually exclusive.

The second arena of questions seeks to describe the current situation. These questions are the traditional Who? What? When? Where? How? Examples:

- How does the current situation seem to you?
- How does it seem to others?
- Who is involved?
- Who cares?
- Who will implement a change?
- What exactly are we trying to change or fix?
- How much will it cost?

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That's a Good Question!

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- What material or equipment will we need?
- What forces are driving a change or solution?
- Who can we count on to help or support us?

Answering these questions can give you a broader or more detailed view of your current dilemma. These are factual kinds of questions, and you can often get answers from data collection. If the facts don't seem clear, it's a good idea to get better information. Once you clearly understand the situation and the target, it is much easier to make proposals for action. If you know where you are and where you want to go, it's easier to plan your route or strategy.

The third type of question is about action planning, or how to get from one place to another.

Examples:

- How fast should we move?
- How will we overcome obstacles?
- When will we start to make changes?
- Who will lead and assist us?
- What are some alternative routes from here to there?
- What stakeholders need to be on board to put our plan into action?
- What bumps in our path will we have to avoid?
- How long will it take?

We evaluate such questions in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Will this strategy work better than that one? Will this route be less costly in the long run? How will I know that I'm making progress toward my goals? Answering these questions will help you get rolling toward a proposal that all can support.

The Co-op Way

Remember that not deciding is also a decision. Sticking with the status quo is always one of your choices, and it has its pros and cons. If you don't have much investment in an outcome, you might want to hand off a decision to a team that's better able to decide (because of its skills or experience). Social science research says that groups usually make better decisions than individuals—and cooperatives are built on this assumption. But if you're going to add more people to the process, then you have to add some skills in managing the group.

Board decisions are often weighty, and people feel pressure to get it right. Conflict often starts because members push hard to do the right thing—because they are so invested in the co-op. This good energy can be harvested by guiding the board through the three different kinds of questions as you swirl from idea to concrete action planning. You'll have less stress and more agreement if the board feels it has all the available information on the table.

If you're paying attention at the meta level (talking about how

we talk), you might notice that most groups bump into strong opinions when they jump into action planning before they've explicitly agreed on the situation and the target. Deciding how to get there is not nearly so contentious if you've all agreed on the current situation and where you want to be in the future.

Some of your questions will turn out to be simple, and the answers won't reveal much. Others will spark lots of differing opinions and more questions. Remember that answers to target questions represent values, and differences there cannot be easily changed. Members must compromise with others to reach agreement. Different perceptions of the current situation can be resolved with research and by collecting pertinent information. Action planning is the place where consensus is most useful. When we agree on what's ideal, it's easier to focus on efficiently and effectively getting there. You can start any decision-making process with: What are the questions we need to answer? That's a good question!

Try This! Using an issue your board is currently struggling with, make a list of your own questions in each of these categories:

1. What is the target or outcome we're seeking?
2. How would we describe the current situation?
3. What is our best proposal for action?

Who



Decides?

—by Lucinda Berdon

“Is this a board decision or should the GM make this decision?” “Is this governance or operations?” “Do we need to vote on this?” These kinds of questions come up at many board meetings.

In many instances, the answers are gray areas. One thing is certain, though. Decisions have to be made, and it’s better when they’re made using a systematic approach.

As co-op leaders, we need to take into account many considerations behind what might seem like a fairly simple decision or choice. We need to use all available resources. The board and the general manager need clear, defined roles and areas of responsibility and accountability. Reviewing policies and job descriptions can be very useful in determining who’s really responsible for making specific decisions. It’s the board’s job to develop and understand these policies, and it’s the manager’s job to

implement them. Clearly defined policies will assist the board in its decision-making processes.

Decision Making Happens!

All right, it’s been determined that the board is going to make a decision. Remember: the board is held accountable not only for its decisions but also for how it makes them. A couple of questions to keep in mind:

1. Did you consider all the available information before making the decision?
2. Did you exercise good judgment?

Board members do not go into situations intending to make bad decisions. However, a lot of elements of the decision-making processes can influence whether a decision is effective. These elements include how meetings are facilitated, board member preparedness, time allotment on agendas, priorities and other competing decisions, levels of experience and knowledge, and timeliness and availability of

necessary information. Before making a decision, you must ask:

- Is this something that affects or influences our mission, policies, vision, or principles?
- Is this an issue that the general manager is empowered to handle?
- Is the general manager asking for advice or assistance in reaching a decision?
- Who else should be consulted?
- Does everyone have all the data needed to make an informed decision?
- Does the decision have ethical, moral, or legal implications?
- Has this issue come up before and does anyone have experience with it?
- Are there egos or hidden agendas we need to be concerned with?
- Who is this decision going to affect? Members? Customers? Staff? Suppliers? Neighbors?

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We've played out several decision-making scenarios at our regional board training workshops with Philip Buri. One thing that often comes up is that there are a lot of differing perspectives out there. What may seem like a great choice to one person may seem idiotic to another. Therein lies the challenge, since the board needs to speak with one voice.

There's nothing wrong with collaborative decision making. As a general manager, I seek guidance from my board, especially in areas where I don't have expertise or experience,

just as they seek guidance from me. We're a team, partners with common goals. Of course, I also consult with other co-op general managers and colleagues, and I seek advice from other professionals in my community. I also have board members who have specific skills, knowledge, and expertise. When I'm dealing with an issue on behalf of our co-op, I'm going to consult with them as resources—not to decide for me but to help guide my decision-making process.

One thing I've learned is that taking your time in coming to a decision has great benefits. Rushing into decisions can be hazardous. Think it through. Even though the decision may seem like a simple solution, when you consider the trickle-down effects on all involved, it suddenly becomes more complicated. If there's a question about whose decision it is to make, taking your time can often illuminate and define the

answer. Ultimately, the board will decide *what* it wants done, and it's up to management to determine *how*. To quote from an article in *Challenges to the Cooperative Board of Directors*, "debate, decide, direct."

What if you find out that a choice or decision was the wrong one? Roll up your sleeves and get back into the board room and back to the drawing board. Guess what? It's okay to reverse a decision. It's much better to revisit an issue than to live with the effects of a poor decision.

You may not always agree, but the board and management *can* support each others' decisions. Divisiveness sends out mixed messages to your organization, and that can be very toxic. Be informed, stay in touch with your member-owners, and provide your management with clear messages regarding the results you and your members expect.

FYI: Thoughts about Consensus

Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her/his position on the matter was misunderstood or that it wasn't given a proper hearing. Hopefully, everyone will think it is the best decision; this often happens because, when it works, collective intelligence does come up with better solutions than could individuals.

Consensus takes more time and member skill, and uses lots of resources before a decision is made, but creates commitment to the decision and often facilitates creative decision. It gives everyone some experience with new processes of interaction and conflict resolution, which is basic but important skill-building. For consensus to be a positive experience, it is best if the group has (1) common values, (2) some skill in group process and conflict resolution, or a commitment to let these be facilitated, (3) commitment and responsibility to the group by its members and (4) sufficient time for everyone to participate in the process.

— From the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) website
<http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html>

All in Favor?

How Does Your Board Make Decisions?



— by Paige Lettington

Every board must make decisions, and therefore every board has a decision-making process or system. The process may or may not be written down in policy or bylaws. You might simply decide to use Robert's Rules of Order. But hopefully, everyone knows what the process is and supports it.

Even if everyone is familiar with the process, it's a good idea for your board to have a discussion about making decisions and to document your process, which might vary according to the type of decision. Having your processes documented gives owners a better understanding of your co-op's governance, helps orient new directors, and can help you avoid problems if your board gets into a contentious situation or if its culture changes.

Consensus versus Majority Rule

In the world of cooperatives, when we talk about board decision making, most of us think about consensus versus majority rule. These are the two primary ways by which groups make decisions, and we're all pretty familiar with them. If your board is committed to consensus decision making, a proposal does not pass unless all members can agree to support it.

For some, consensus is seen as a more cooperative method of making decisions, while majority rule is seen as competitive. Majority rule tends to focus on proposals developed by individuals (or small factions), and proponents try to garner enough votes to "win." Fewer people are involved in developing proposals or solutions, so the proposals may be less satisfactory overall. (But winning others over

to your point of view shouldn't necessarily be seen as negative; see sidebar on page 8.)

In consensus decision making, the goal is to use group input to come up with the best proposal possible and to keep working at it until the final outcome is something that everyone is willing to support—and ideally is enthusiastic about. In theory, consensus results in better solutions and more community building, but it does take more time and commitment.

Given that co-op boards are expected to "speak with one voice," most co-ops use a consensus-based approach to decision making, even if they do rely on majority rule to formalize final decisions. Some boards committed to consensus also use voting for certain routine decisions (for example,

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All in Favor?

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giving signature authority on the co-op's bank account to the board president). This is a very practical approach. A hybrid approach can also work well. For example, a "voting" board may use a consensus-based approach to develop proposals (perhaps through a committee system followed by board discussion), with a vote on final proposals.

Review and Document Your Board's Process

Your board's decision-making process is likely influenced by your co-op's culture and the style of past boards. It has probably become institutionalized over time and may or may not be documented in policy. It can be influenced by personalities of directors and could change significantly, particularly if a crisis calls into question how the

board has been operating.

However your board chooses to make decisions, it's important to make sure the process is known and understood by the directors (this benefits owners as well). Some ideas to consider:

Your board could have different processes for different types of decisions. For example, most board decisions might end with a majority vote, but you could specify that certain types of decisions require consensus, a unanimous vote, or a two-thirds majority of all directors. For instance, decisions on expansion or hiring a new general manager could require a unanimous vote.

You could incorporate certain decision-making techniques into your discussion or consensus-building process. For example, you could use multi-voting to gauge levels of support and narrow down a list of options the board is considering.

Be sure to note if any types of decisions require member input. How will that input

be gathered? Is the process specified in bylaws or policy, or can the board decide?

Make sure to keep track of decisions that have been made and be able to easily find these records. It's not very helpful if someone has to find the key to the warehouse and search through thirty boxes of moldy old meeting minutes to find the one decision you are looking for.

If things are generally going well with your co-op, and your directors get along with each other, it may not seem so important to have your decision-making system codified in policy. But if at some point you do have a contentious board, or a stressful situation that might lead to contention, it's helpful for everyone to know up front what the parameters are for decision making. Having an intentional decision-making process will go a long way toward ensuring that your board's decisions are the best they can be, and are respected by your owners.

Food for Thought: Are You Influential or Persuasive? *No one likes being talked into something, but we all make better decisions when we have input from others, especially if they are invested in making the same "best decision" that we are—and that's what we're trying to make on a co-op board. For this reason, all board members should work on honing their persuasion skills. To practice, have each director develop his or her own thirty-second "elevator speech" on why a person should join or shop at the co-op.*

When there is a decision to be made, think through everything you've learned that might come to bear. Be ready to make your case to your fellow directors (and owners). But also be ready to change your mind based on the well-thought-out arguments of others. Another exercise to try: When new directors come on board, have each current director talk about a co-op issue or decision that the director has changed his or her mind about, and why. In the process, everyone may learn something about how to be persuasive, and that the board encourages openness and humbleness in the decision-making process.

Garlic and the Universe

Continued from Front Cover



Setting the scene, most of what makes garlic what it is happens underground and out of sight. One clove turns into a bulb over time. The same could be said for the evolution of a board decision. Explained briefly, the general manager or a board committee presents a proposal to the board. The path by which the board arrives at a decision is the result of an interior progression of information gathering. The general manager has already worked with staff to achieve understanding on the matter at hand. Now the board and the general manager must work together to conceive a strategic plan or an approach to arrive at a decision.

Members cannot be forgotten or overlooked in a decision-making process. Board and management must remain open and transparent, seeking input from members as the decision-making process progresses. Remember, however, that directors are elected and, following policy, are charged with decision making on issues affecting the general health of the co-op. Weak management and uninformed boards cannot make bold moves and risky

decisions. Both hasty decision making and hesitant decision making are recipes for disaster. The buck stops in the lap of each director.

Boards are in the unique position to draw management, staff, and members into decision-making processes. In fact, it's the board's key responsibility to cultivate these relationships. Like a mature, multisectioned garlic bulb, the board's decision-making responsibilities are complex.

An example comes from the early 2000 store expansion at Community Food Co-op (CFC) in Bozeman, Montana. After recognizing that expansion was a necessity in 1999, our general manager and board spent more than a year scrutinizing financial projections to create a draft strategic plan. The board then sought input from members and staff through scheduled outreach forums. Various growth scenarios were presented with the hope of gleaning ideas and buy-in on the expansion concept from those present. Eventually, after considering all collected information, management and the board finalized details. The board then made the authorizing decision to proceed with the chosen expansion scenario.

The all-important design and finance committees solicited further board, staff, and member participation. Hand in hand with management, these two committees shepherded the CFC expansion up to the grand opening party thirteen months later.

A co-op's future depends on its board's ability to be the proactive umbrella that oversees and protects the business vision, making informed decisions according to policy and in line with the co-op's values and mission. Board decision making is not performed in a vacuum, just as garlic does not grow in air. The soil surrounding a board is composed of members, staff, and management, all working together for the best outcome. Any grower would say the same is true in a garden.

► **Try This!** *As your board approaches its next decision, try making a map first. Decide what the steps will be and when and how you want to invite input from various stakeholders. You might try including some of the "good questions" on pages 3 and 4.*

Once you've created a simple map, as you go through the process, elaborate on the map or think about what else you'd do if this were a momentous decision. It's helpful to practice on a simple decision before you hit a bigger challenge.

Let Me Help!

— by Michele Adams



When does a general manager want advice from the board anyway? What the board hears over and over is, “That’s operations, so stay out of it!” This is often the case, and the board should let the manager manage the operations of the store, as long as the manager is competent and the store is doing well. Advice and clear direction on goals are different animals, and the board should be clear on this difference.

There are times when it’s appropriate for the board to give advice to the manager—especially in areas where the manager is struggling. This might be the case after an expansion. Perhaps the manager thought all the problems were over because the project was complete, but then realized the hard work was just beginning with personnel and sales issues. The general manager might want to meet with the board

president to ask for advice on how to handle specific issues. Perhaps sales targets aren’t being met and labor is way over budget. The board should then ask for a report on plans for getting things back under control. The board could also recommend or require surveys or help from consultants or other outside resources for further data or assistance.

One area where the board should give advice to the manager, specifically for boards that use Policy Governance, is in interpretation of ends or organizational goals. The manager may want to clarify what the board means by particular statements, and he or she should ask for help with questions. Often, the ends are not specific, and the manager and board may not be on the same page with the direction the co-op should take for meeting the end goals. For me

as a general manager, it’s much easier to figure out a path to the end if the board and I agree on the final destination.

I have noticed that it’s much easier for the board to tell the manager what to sell in the store or do for outreach projects than it is to outline the vision for the organization. It’s more interesting to deal with one owner’s request for something than it is to discuss at length what the future holds for the store. Do we want many stores or one large store? To be in one city or several? Do we want to be inclusive or exclusive in our product selection? What is the co-op’s long-range direction or purpose?

Sometimes I just want the board’s advice on something. There is a fine line here, because once a manager opens the door to getting advice for operational issues, it might not be clear to

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Let Me Help!

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a board member when advice is *not* wanted. Or it might create the expectation that the board will be involved in all future decisions in that area. Each new board member needs to learn where the lines on giving advice are drawn. Trainings for board members are helpful so that current board members can teach new ones how the board defines its role and how it operates in murky areas. This training seems to be lacking with many boards. There might

be a bit of training, but the continuing learning curve can be quite steep.

Advice is a great thing, but the board should not expect the manager to take advice every time it is given—especially when different individuals give different advice. A board might have ten people, all with different ideas on how to

approach something. And these might not be the only people the manager has asked for advice. Department managers and members might also have been asked. But once the manager makes a decision, the board's support is essential for the successful running of the organization.



Try This! Have a group discussion on the question: “How did you decide to join the co-op?” Remember, the question isn’t “Why did you join?” but “How did you decide?” If it was a long time ago, you might

not even remember. Listen for what you can learn about others’ decision-making processes. Think about how they are similar to and different from how you decide. What processes might you want to borrow from others?

Thanks for Subscribing!



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online at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.



Works for Us

Beyond the Day to Day

— by Marcia Shaw

At the NCGA spring training, Martha Whitman, president of La Montañita's board, made a few comments on how her board functions. She sparked several questions, and people obviously wanted more discussion time. The BEST program adviser, Marcia Shaw, followed up with this interview.

MARCIA: How does the La Montañita board function differently from a traditional board?

MARTHA: We take care of the board "business" in the first hour (using a consent agenda), and the second hour is spent discussing larger issues. While not all meetings are as short as two hours, we succeed more than not because all the legwork is done before the meeting. We have very active committees

serving on behalf of the board; they generate the proposals for board consideration. We have a standing line item on our agenda to continually remind us to monitor how we are doing and initiate changes when something isn't working. We have a professional facilitator to help with the process and a board administrator who helps with preparation. Boards and their co-ops are deserving of such support as a facilitator and administrator, and they are well worth the expense.

MARCIA: How did your committees come to be so active and so much a part of the board work?

MARTHA: Our committees have detailed charters (approved by the board) that help them stay on track. A couple of years ago, two of us more seasoned members shifted from doing the bulk of committee work ourselves to encouraging others to chair committees. We mentor others regarding policy and process while not dominating the agenda. The result is that now most every board member knows they matter and are therefore

eager to contribute and develop their leadership skills. A valuable role of the committees is to help the board whenever we get stuck on an issue or just need more study on a consideration brought to the board. In such cases, the whole board agrees at a regular meeting which committee will be responsible for the task. (Our administrator keeps a running task list naming the committee and the deadline for a report back. The task list is reviewed at the end of each board meeting.) Board meeting time is saved, and the directors' responsibility of due diligence is satisfied by having the committees keep minutes of their meetings and having them included in our monthly board packet.

MARCIA: It's impressive that you can spend fully half of your board time on long-term or big-picture issues. What are some of the things you've talked about?

MARTHA: After a few false starts, we have arrived at our current plan for board study. From our last retreat, we decided to frame our study around the question "What would it

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Works for Us Beyond the Day to Day

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mean to take the cooperative economic model seriously?” From that, a committee created a schedule of topics, and members volunteered to find readings to prepare ourselves for our one-hour discussion time. It made the most sense to begin with co-op history, and we are spending four months to digest it all. So far we’ve talked about the Rochdale Pioneers, the cooperative principles, U.S. co-op history, and now we are looking at international co-ops. Specifically, we’ve talked about the demise of the Berkeley Co-op and what we can learn from their experience. Many ideas come up during board meetings that we want to explore, and we keep separate minutes of these discussions so such ideas don’t get lost. Maintaining those minutes will also help future board members understand what the heck we’ve been up to and what conclusions we have drawn so far. The discussions are very stimulating!

MARCIA: Why do you think the discussions work so well?

MARTHA: Everyone participates, including the GM and senior management. It’s great to see the variety of opinion and how our group mind is superior to what any of us would come up with on our own. Who doesn’t like to talk about ideas? We also took the time to agree on what we would study and how we would do it. In other words, we had everyone buy in to the process. We also take our code of conduct seriously and have created a space where people feel free to disagree.

MARCIA: As the leader of a successful board, what do you think you’ve brought to the table?

MARTHA: I’ve learned that I almost never do anything without making sure I have buy in—and it doesn’t work to rush, because it always slows you down if you find out late in the process that members aren’t really on board with the decision. We use a very detailed calendar to plan so that decisions aren’t urgent. I would also say that you find out right away which board members are willing to put in the time—to work hard. I mentor new board members. When committee chairs are new, I attend every meeting. I write e-mails that summarize coming topics and try to keep board members focused on policy and the future. I interview new board members and ask what they are interested in, what skills they have, and what they want to develop.

MARCIA: It sounds like you work hard too!

MARTHA: It’s worth the effort because the board works well, and I feel very good about us as a team. I also have the resource of a professional coach, and it’s a great place to talk freely about what frustrations I’m having and how to proceed. Sometimes my coach gives me a push to do what I know I need to do.

MARCIA: Any other tips for boards who are not quite where they want to be?

MARTHA: Keep in mind—we’re not “there” either! We’re constantly looking at how we can improve. You have to remember this is a long-term process. We have developed over time—without any expectation that we’ll get “done” or what “done” would even look like. Policies need to change as our environment and business changes. We are engaged in continuing process improvement. We have a quarterly policy review and an end-of-meeting review. Did we follow our process? Did we get at the “right stuff”? Is it timely? Engaging? We’re always looking for that learning moment.

MARCIA: It’s great to have some role models out there who really have a handle on how the board should be working. Thanks for sharing your insights.

You can contact Martha Whitman to follow up on these comments by e-mailing her: marthawhitman@comcast.net.



Board Effectiveness Support Team

When Is It Time to Decide?

Dear West BEST:

How do you know if a board is making a decision that is hasty? What about hesitant? When should we go back and reconsider a past decision?

—Anonymous co-op board member

Dear Anonymous:

To begin with, having a clear process regarding how your board will make decisions is important. Most boards find that requiring a motion and a second at least provides sufficient indication that a proposal is “ready for action” and has enough support to merit further discussion and decision making.

Finding the right time to make a major decision is a balancing act. It’s important for all board members to have enough information to feel comfortable making a decision, while understanding that you simply cannot wait for every last bit of information to be known.

Recognize, too, that some people need to think things over after information is presented while others are more comfortable with deciding quickly. If you know major decisions (such as an expansion or relocation project) are coming up, give the board as much information as possible in the early stages. Finally, take the time to lay out the decision-making process so that all stakeholders know what will be decided, when, and when their opportunities for influence will be.

Once a decision is made, it’s useful to know what might trigger reconsideration. While it’s impossible to lay out all

the factors, here are some that might cause a board to consider reevaluating a decision:

- New or important information that the board didn’t have when the decision was made
- Changed conditions, such as economic or market conditions, interest rates, or access to capital
- A change of mind or support on the part of major stakeholders
- Realization that the earlier decision-making process was seriously flawed
- Reservations about the decision or the process on the part of several board members

Keep in mind that various individuals and constituencies will never agree on every decision. That’s okay. Most important is that the board really listens to and considers concerns and perspectives. Document input and viewpoints, and your decision-making process. Then be prepared to decide, and stand by your decision. If you invest the time and effort, you’ll know it’s right, and others will respect you for it.

What Do You Think? We’d love to get your ideas: articles, questions, thoughts, reactions, and comments. Have a great article from your co-op’s newsletter? Tried a new idea to improve your planning process, recruit new directors, or improve board/management relations? Send your ideas, and we’ll include them in future issues. Or send a question for the BEST to answer in a future issue (askthebest@ncga.coop). If we print it, we’ll include your name or make your question anonymous, as you prefer or indicate.

Check It Out!

For More Information

Here are additional resources that might be useful in thinking about decision making for your board:

“Introduction to Decision Making,” Robert Harris

<http://www.virtualsalt.com/crebook5.htm>

“Decision-making Styles and Techniques,” University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

http://www.co.washoe.nv.us/comdev_files/cab/cooperative_extension/fs9856_decision_making_styles_and_techniques_series5.pdf

“Decision Making Skills and Techniques,” Time-Management-Guide.com

<http://www.time-management-guide.com/decision-making-skills.html>

“Improving Decision-Making Skills,” Kansas State University Cooperative Extension

<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famec2/mf873.pdf>

“Basic Guidelines to Problem Solving and Decision Making,” Authenticity Consulting, LLC

http://www.managementhelp.org/prsn_prd/prb_bsc.htm

“The Fine Art of Decision-Making,” Monica Enand, ZenHabits.net

<http://zenhabits.net/2009/03/the-fine-art-of-decision-making-%E2%80%93-7-tips-for-getting-decisions-made-easier/>

Cooperative Grocer magazine articles related to decision making or referred to in this issue:

“Building Controversy in Bozeman” by Kelly Wiseman (March–April 2003)

<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=441>

“Democracy Works” by Paul Cultrera (January–February 2003)

<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=422>

Challenges to the Cooperative Board of Directors

is also available online at: http://www.cgin.coop/toolbox/challenge_pub.

Let Us Know . . . if or when you have new directors, or you have directors who no longer want to receive the LEADer. Send names to be removed and the full names and e-mail addresses of those to add to Karen Zimbelman, kz@ncga.coop.

LEADer Online All back issues of the LEADer, plus this issue, are available online at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.

