

Retail Food Co-ops as Servant Leaders



Listening. Empathy. Healing. Awareness. Persuasion. Conceptualization. Foresight. Stewardship. Commitment to the growth of people. Building Community. These are elements of servant leadership, a concept developed by Robert Greenleaf and others following in his footsteps to help people and organizations identify the central role service plays in being effective leaders.

When we think of leadership, we quite naturally think of individuals as leaders. We may even consider how to cultivate the qualities of leadership within ourselves. But consider for a moment, how might a cooperative association manifest the qualities of servant leadership in its community?

The International Cooperative Alliance statement of cooperative identity contains this rich definition: *A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.*

At a CCMA conference years ago Michael Hartoonian provoked thoughtful discussion of how retail food co-ops can optimize their expression of democracy—which could, he suggested, be described not merely as the act of deciding, but more fully in reference to the conversation that precedes and follows the decision.



"How can we be more attentive and thoughtful about the intersection of leadership and service?"

Thane Joyal,
CDS Consulting Co-op

In Brett Fairbairn's now nearly classic essay "Three Strategic Concepts for the Governance of Cooperatives," he posits that "The key to a cooperative is the *relationships* that it cultivates and embodies."

Fairbairn goes on to describe in detail the complexity of the relationship of the consumer food co-op to its owners as follows: "The difference in a co-operative is the closeness and multidimensionality of the relationships with members: they are customers as well as owners, part of the governance structure as well as the focus of operations."

When a cooperative serves its community, it is leading its community. How can we be more attentive and thoughtful about the intersection of leadership and service? What are the intended and unintended consequences of the myriad choices made throughout the co-op on behalf of its cooperative owners and consumers?

The retail food co-op is clearly serving the community as an agent in the supply chain, providing consumers with food. And it also serves in the quality and character of its democracy. We are so accustomed to the phrase "voting with our dollars." But what if, as some are proposing, the real social evil in the world are those institutions that put dollars before people? Cooperatives present an alternative—but only, I suggest, if we invest them with the qualities of servant leadership.

Brett Fairbairn's essay (See the link at the end of this article) invites us to consider cooperative leadership more deeply. *"The idea that objectives are "social" or "economic" is a reductionist and simplistic idea. It provides little guidance to co-operatives in deciding which social or economic tasks to focus upon; and it suggests trade-offs and dispersals of energy when synergies may be called for. There is a more integrated and helpful way of thinking about strategic direction in co-operatives: to pursue an integrated approach, in which social goals are accomplished through economic activities, and in which the membership of the co-operative is the place where social and economic functions come together."*

Think about it. “The membership of the co-operative is the place where social and economic functions come together...” Applying the principles of servant leadership, we see that in the cooperative we serve one another, and in doing so the cooperative serves the community.

Changes in the retail food market are driving adjustments to business strategy in an effort to achieve and maintain financial viability. It may appear on the surface that some of those business strategy changes challenge the strength of the cooperative association. And yet these stresses call forth the need to focus more broadly and creatively on the actual needs of our community. Indeed, many co-ops are taking the opportunity to redefine their conception of community, and their own role within it.

The food system highlights so many issues related to fundamental inequities within our society. Food production conflates a host of social and environmental issues, political philosophies and lifestyle choices. Consumers make choices that implicate fair labor practices, ethical treatment of animals, land stewardship, home economy, and more with every purchase they make.

How can cooperators integrate all of that conflicting input and move forward in a democratic cooperative association, using beautiful, welcoming stores that meet consumer needs and aspirations in an efficient and sustainable way? This, I think, is the challenge of servant leadership for retail food cooperatives today. As we continue to grow together and deepen our practice of cooperation, it may be helpful to take a fresh look at how we think about the impact our co-ops have in our communities.

In community and cooperation we have an opportunity to listen. To rebel and reconcile. To learn. We sell products we love and sometimes products we dislike or disagree with to meet neighbors’ needs. We listen to people at the checkout line and in our communities and we know what we know: we own it. We REALLY own it. If we are to serve our community, and to lead, we need to recognize that it may mean stepping out of our comfort zone

Perhaps it’s time to embrace all of the tenets of servant leadership broadly throughout our co-ops. To allow ourselves to persuade and be persuaded. To allow ourselves to heal and be healed. To see our cooperatives as a transformative tool within our communities—and use them to grow and transform the food system and our communities. We can step up and engage with each other, and with the market we operate within. And we can re-imagine our cooperatives as servant leaders.

For more information about Servant Leadership here are more resources:

“Servant Leadership and Cooperation,” by Joel Kopischke, July/August 2013 *Cooperative Grocer*

“Democracy in Cooperatives,” by Michael Healy, July/August 2005 *Cooperative Grocer*

“Three Strategic Concepts for the Governance of Cooperatives” by Brett Fairbairn, January 2003

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