

Own, Use, Serve, and Belong

A new paradigm for participation

By Mark Goehring (/author/mark-goehring), Leslie Watson (/author/leslie-watson)

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The Participation framework—Own, Use, Serve, and Belong—has been the focus of presentations and conversations by hundreds of cooperators at the regional Co-op Cafe series produced by CDS Consulting Co-op and sponsored by the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA). In this article, we introduce the key concepts and share some of the thinking presented at the Co-op Cafes. Videos of presentations and roundups of conversations are available in the CBLD Library: www.cdsconsulting.coop/co-op_cafe (http://www.cdsconsulting.coop/co-op_cafe). Additional Co-op Cafes are scheduled this fall in Albuquerque, New Mexico (10/18); Mt. Pleasant, Michigan (10/25); and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (11/01). Find the schedule at cdsconsulting.coop/services/in-person (<http://cdsconsulting.coop/services/in-person>).

What if co-ops are the acknowledged leaders in economic, environmental, and social sustainability?

What if, when people have a choice between shopping a co-op or a non-co-op competitor, they always choose the co-op?

What if co-ops are the fastest growing form of enterprise, multiplying all their positive impacts in their communities?

What if we view participation as a driving force in our co-ops that moves us forward on our goals, demonstrates the power of community-owned enterprise, and celebrates the many different ways people choose to engage with the co-op for both their own and the common good?

These were some of the questions we were inspired to grapple with soon after the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) released its “Blueprint for a Cooperative Decade” in late 2012 (ica.coop/en/publications/blueprint-cooperative-decade). An early epiphany was a simple one: Not all participation is alike. There are MANY ways people participate in a co-op.

This connects directly to a key concept in the Four Pillars of Cooperative Governance (see <http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/2014-03-25/four-pillars-cooperative-governance> (<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/2014-03-25/four-pillars-cooperative-governance>)).

Democracy is a differentiator that sets co-ops apart from other types of organizations.

Through this work, we've come to see democracy in a cooperative to mean successfully sustaining a culture in which people choose meaningful ways to participate for both their individual and the common good. Rather than looking at participation as something co-ops need to convince people to do, we are inviting a shift in thinking to see participation as a strategic way to inspire innovation and leadership in our cooperatives. Participation's new paradigm

Building a shared understanding of the co-op's purpose is critical. Greater participation does not mean figuring out ways to prod owners to "do" or "do more" things for the co-op. Rather, the opportunity is for people to understand the strategic intent of their co-op and how they can contribute to its goals in many ways. All of us can be motivated and inspired by seeing how our participation contributes to the co-op's success.

"Democracy is an active process . . . [in which] each of us as citizens chooses how we're going to participate as opposed to a higher authority telling us how we're going to participate. There are many ways to participate, and each of us gets to choose ways that are meaningful to us. We want to be sure the doors are open and that people in our co-op and community know they are welcome."

—Michael Healy, CDS Consulting Co-op Participation: Going Further <http://s.coop/1uz95> (<http://http://s.coop/1uz95>) (5 minutes)

This and the other videos quoted can be found through the CBLD library at www.cdsconsulting.coop/co-opcafe (http://www.cdsconsulting.coop/co-op_cafe).

The framework: own, use, serve, belong To help realize and manage for the full potential of participation, we developed a framework to characterize different types of meaningful relationships:

People own, use, serve, and belong to their co-ops.

Own

Participation as an owner is key at certain times in the life of the co-op. It might include voting in elections, giving input on the co-op's long-term strategic direction, investing in an expansion project, and keeping informed of the co-op's performance by attending annual meetings and reading the annual report. While important, this type of participation is relatively infrequent.

"Of course, this is a critically important form of participation in that ownership is a fundamental component of cooperatives. But, it's equally important to recognize that participating in the 'owner' role isn't an everyday activity. It has much more to do with the health, direction, and movement of the co-op. Other key areas to be aware of as an owner include choosing qualified representatives to serve on the behalf of all the members, staying tuned in to information provided by the co-op's leaders on shifts in society and the marketplace and how the co-op intends to and goes about meeting member and community needs."

—Mark Goehring, CDS Consulting Co-op Participation and the Cooperative Cafe <http://s.coop/1uzd4> (<http://s.coop/1uzd4>) (16 minutes)

“There is a great opportunity to speak to our members as owners, spending more time talking about what it means to jointly own a business together and educating owners on how USING the co-op has such impact.”

—CE Pugh, COO, NCGA Why Participation Matters <http://s.coop/1uzd6> (<http://s.coop/1uzd6>) (6 minutes)

Use

People help their co-op to accomplish its goals every time they buy its goods or use its services. As part of using the co-op and helping it to thrive, they can also give feedback about how their co-op can improve. Meanwhile, the co-op can provide its users with information that lets them see how their individual choices add to the collective impact and make a difference. “Let’s make the connection for our owners with the impact that the co-op can have in the community.

Whether it’s supporting producers, staff, or community events, our co-ops have great impact in the community, but it only is possible by using the co-op. How many of our member brochures speak to how we’re counting on members to use and serve the co-op and the resulting impact the co-op has on the community? This is a tremendous opportunity!”

—CE Pugh, COO, NCGA Why Participation Matters <http://s.coop/1uzd6> (<http://s.coop/1uzd6>) (6 minutes)

Serve

People can serve their co-ops on multiple levels. Certainly, a co-op needs leaders: a board of directors, management, and staff who are willing to serve the community. But people can also serve the co-op by participating in an advocacy campaign, by supporting the direction and movement of the co-op, or simply by telling its story to the wider world. Even giving critical feedback can be of service to the co-op. This form of participation may be high or low frequency, and it may be driven both by the interests of individuals and the needs of the co-op.

“There are lots of ways to serve that don’t involve putting your name on a ballot....Using the cooperative is a key way to serve it. So the next time you’re in your store and you buy some ice cream, you can say, ‘I really have to do this because I need to serve my co-op!’... Another way that people serve their co-ops is to tell the co-op story. When people talk about owning and using a co-op and connect it back to their own choices about the kind of world they want to be in, the kind of enterprise they want to be associated with, or the kind of values they have, that becomes a really powerful way to elevate the co-op....When a co-op identifies a broader value or reason for its existence or a component of its Ends policy and tells that out to its owners and stakeholders in a way that they actually internalize and absorb and take for their own, and then adopt and share it in the broader world....that is also a form of service.”

—Leslie Watson, CDS Consulting Co-op Cracking Open the “Serve” Nut <http://s.coop/1uzd7> (<http://s.coop/1uzd7>) (10 minutes)

“One of the things that we do at Seward to help operationalize employees’ involvement in the cooperative values is through education. We have a really strong commitment to that, like a lot of co-ops...But we also commit to having one employee every year in the master’s program (in Nova Scotia). The idea is to build the basic understanding of cooperatives within the staff because, at the end of the day, the ability of for the co-op to meet the cooperative experience

requirement and to have customers feel like they have had a good coop experience, is through the staff. The only way we are going to do that is through staff empowerment, so we need to give our staff the tools not just to be good grocers, but to be great cooperators.”

—Sean Doyle, general manager Seward Community Co-op The Co-op Difference Starts with Staff <http://s.coop/1uzd8> (<http://s.coop/1uzd8>) (10 minutes)

Belong

People join co-ops to be a part of a community with shared values, and to belong to an association that enhances their well-being. Their sense of belonging is reinforced and grows when the co-op meets their needs, when they feel included, and when they understand that the co-op also belongs to them!

“People still want that sense of belonging. We have in our society this yearning for the communities that we all came up in as we were growing up, or just want that affinity when we have these busy lives. How do you get that sense of community in the co-op? How do you get this huge group of people to feel like they’re all on the same track?...Our strategic direction is specifically designed to help people feel that they are part of a co-op even though we are now a large entity.”

—Dale Woodbeck, general manager, Lakewinds Food Co-op, Fostering Belonging <http://s.coop/1uzd9> (<http://s.coop/1uzd9>) (10 minutes) “We’re building community, we’re building on the need for belonging. Certainly a great place to start is in the store itself, creating a welcoming environment with great customer service where everyone feels included, welcome, and appreciated.

“Your co-op creates a sense of community, your co-op meets people’s need for belonging; co-ops do this everyday. And the world is a better place because of it. But just think for a minute about how special that is. How many businesses create an authentic sense of community for people? How many businesses offer people a way to belong? We need to celebrate how special that is. We need to innovate and be creative as we look for new ways for people to feel included, welcomed, and accepted. It’s what the world needs now, and we can do it.”

—Marilyn Scholl, CDS Consulting Co-op Marilyn’s Hierarchy of Participation <http://s.coop/1uzda> (<http://s.coop/1uzda>) (10 minutes)

“In thinking about this I found a quote from Margaret Wheatley, an author who has focused on building community: ‘Belonging together is defined by a shared sense of purpose.’ Staying on the work together is what transforms the tension of belonging and individuality into energetic and resilient communities. A vibrant community is possible when we see what we share...When we think about this call to participation and how we make that come alive in our co-ops, I think the first thing is to issue an invitation.”

—Pat Cumbie, CDS Consulting Co-op Building Belonging, Creating Community <http://s.coop/1uzdb> (<http://s.coop/1uzdb>) (9 minutes)

What’s next?

We invite the entire cooperative community to continue this dialogue about how our movement can harness the power of participation as part of realizing the vision of the “Blueprint for a Cooperative Decade.” Explore the many short videos created for this year’s Cooperative Cafes,

or come to an upcoming Cafe this fall (see page 15 for schedule).

Ask your board and staff to spend sometime considering the questions at the opening of this article. And, of course, bring your owners into the conversation as well—at the annual meeting, in the newsletter, at the cash register, and every other place where they participate in your co-op!

“There are all these different ways people can participate in our co-ops, and we want to be making sure the doors are open, that people in our community, members in our co-ops know that the opportunities exist, and that they are welcome to find a place that would be meaningful to them to participate.

“This all matters because we live in a world, a society, this country where we talk a lot about democracy and whether it’s working or not. We have an opportunity in cooperatives to lead the way...in what a strong meaningful democracy could look like. That’s our role in society. No one else can do that as well as we can. This is our time, this is our decade, to really put thought and energy into that. And it’ll make a difference not just for our individual co-ops and our communities; I really do think it’ll make a difference for our entire country.”

—Michael Healy, CDS Consulting Co-op Participation: Going Further <http://s.coop/1uz95> (<http://s.coop/1uz95>) (5 minutes)

The Cooperative Cafe: Participation comes to life!

At the Cooperative Cafe, we have three main goals:

- Advance our thinking
- Building shared understanding
- Create alignment at our co-ops and among co-ops

These goals exist in three layers: during the session, at our individual co-ops, and among co-ops regionally and nationally.

Our theme for 2014 is “Connecting Co-ops and Community,” with an emphasis on a new paradigm for participation: “Own, Use, Serve, and Belong.”

During the Cooperative Cafe session, we use powerful questions to focus the conversations. For these sessions, we used these questions: How can we begin to shape cooperative democracy and participation as a driving force for the success of our co-ops? What could it look like? What might happen?

To stimulate the Cooperative Cafe conversations, we provide a series of short presentations. Below you will find a list of those from March 2014 Cooperative Cafes, available as short videos in the CBLD Library: www.cdsconsulting.coop/co-op_cafe (http://www.cdsconsulting.coop/co-op_cafe).

At the end of each Cooperative Cafe conversation, we ask each small group to distill the conversations they’ve been having down to just a few words. A person from each group shares their work—we call this the RoundUp. RoundUp videos from each session are also available using the link above.

Special thanks to the National Cooperative Grocers Association for sponsoring the Cooperative Cafes. Plan to join us at one in your region this fall! —MarkGoehring@CDSConsulting.coop (mailto:MarkGoehring@CDSConsulting.coop)

Presentations and presenters, March 2014 Co-op Cafes

The Cooperative Decade and Why Participation Matters —Dame Pauline Green, ICA

Participation: Going Further —Michael Healy, CDS Consulting Co-op

Marilyn's Hierarchy of Participation —Marilyn Scholl, CDS Consulting Co-op

Why Participation Matters— CE Pugh, NCGA

Cracking Open the "Serve" Nut —Leslie Watson, CDS Consulting Co-op

Invitation, Curiosity, Participation —Tom Mattox, Food Front

Participation and Anti-Oppression —Shawn Furst, People's Food Co-op, Portland, Ore.

Theories of Participation —Dan Arnett, Central Co-op

Cooperation: It's all Spirals and Rainbows— E. Kim Coontz, California Co-op Development Center

Preferred Shares: Capitalizing Expansion—Steven Maviglio, Sacramento Natural Foods

What Startups Can Teach Us about Participation—Suzi Carter, Food Co-op Initiative

Smart Growth—Andrea Malloy, Daily Groceries Co-op

Fostering Belonging—Dale Woodbeck, Lakewinds Food Co-op

Building Belonging, Creating Community—Patricia Cumbie, CDS Consulting Co-op

Share Values and Grow Communities—Kevin Edberg, Cooperative Development Services

The Language of Participation—Emily Lippold- Cheney, CooperationWorks!

The Co-op Difference Starts with Staff—Sean Doyle, Seward Community Co-op

People's Expands: A Tale of Two Co-ops—Michelle Schry, People's Food Cooperative, LaCrosse, Wis. and Rochester, Minn.

Other Co-op Cafe presenters (no video available): Marc Brown Gold, Swarthmore Co-op; Molly O'Brien, City Market/Onion River; Beth Tausczik and Doug Walter, Davis Co-op.

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