

The Spirit of Generosity

Co-ops need to plant and nourish the seeds of future cooperation

BY BILL GESSNER

The collective progress in collaboration that the food co-op sector has achieved over the past decade has been significant and inspiring. "Cooperation among cooperatives," through the Cooperative Grocers Associations and other vehicles, is building a strong, powerful momentum. An underlying core value that has supported this collaboration, but has rarely been articulated or recognized, is a strong spirit of generosity.

We will look at how generosity has been expressed in cooperatives, examine its key ingredients, and view the potential role of generosity as a change agent for the further development of cooperatives.

Foundation and motivation

The 1995 Statement of Cooperative Identity from the International Cooperative Alliance states: "Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others."

Additionally, the fifth, sixth, and seventh of the seven cooperative principles provide a further foundation for generosity: "Education, Training, and Information," "Cooperation among Cooperatives," and "Concern for the Community."

Emory Bogardus, in his book *Principles Of Cooperation*, published by the Cooperative League of the U.S.A. in 1964, describes five levels of cooperation:

- Reflex level
- Instinct level
- Survival level
- Getting ahead level
- Others-centered level

The highest level of cooperation is found wherever people work together for the largest and greatest common good. They are "others-centered." Their cooperative-mindedness is all-inclusive. We can envision our food cooperatives at the early stages of development, coming together out of "reflex" and "instinct." Certainly there are increasing competitive pressures that might put us currently at the "survival" and the "getting ahead" levels. Yet, even in the founding documents of our food co-ops we find language about serving and giving to our communities.

It is important to simply be aware of our own motivation, whatever it is—and to not be judgmental about one's own or another's motivation. If we are not clear about our motivation, it becomes difficult to do good work. If each of us, on an ongoing basis, genuinely examines one's motivation, purpose, and desired end in working for and with cooperatives, we are likely to find that many of us are motivated by a global goal or end. We wish to make the world a better place for all to live. The spirit of generosity, then, is more than a value reflecting that end. Generosity becomes a tool.

Collaboration and generosity

As local food co-ops have moved from isolated entities linked primarily through their cooperative warehouses into a strong network of Cooperative Grocer Associations (CGAs), generosity has been key to building trust, support, and accountability in a collaborative system designed to bring increased value and benefits to the consumer-owners of local cooperatives and their communities. Together food co-ops have a wealth of resources to build upon, and the generous sharing of those resources is allowing them to build a flourishing system of strong locally owned food cooperatives.

Fifteen years ago there was extensive debate over whether a co-op should share the legal research on by-laws that it had hired an attorney to conduct. They had paid \$150 for that service and were considering sharing it with other co-ops for a \$50 fee. They were hoping to recoup their costs and possibly make some money on their investment. The discussion around this issue took several meetings, yet no one really considered the opportunity and people costs of those meetings. The co-op eventually decided to charge a small fee. In the end, other co-ops chose not to pay the fee, and collaboration was stifled.

This example, mildly altered, repeated itself in a number of forms even as the regional CGAs were beginning to be developed. Some CGAs established annual dues levels of \$25 and considered that an appropriate investment to achieve their goals. The reluctance to invest generously in a collaborative future has been a barrier that food co-ops have had to work through in order to realize the potential benefits of "cooperation among cooperatives."

The spirit of generosity that eventually came forth and fueled the development of the CGA system is much different than the generosity that was key to the grassroots effort that created several hundred retail and two dozen wholesale natural food co-ops in the 1970s. That generosity was an outgrowth of volunteerism, which sometimes resulted in instances of martyrdom, self-righteousness, and worker exploitation, leading in many cases to dysfunctional organizations. The current spirit of generosity is a more mature form and is combined with broad, balanced organizational commitment and systems of accountability. Effective systems of governance and management have been developed in many of our food co-ops. These systems, combined with peer support and peer accountability at the CGA level, have resulted in greater accountability throughout the food co-op system.

Opportunity and challenge

The Cooperative Grocers Association system has evolved to a point of ripening, where the system needs to reorganize. The collective assets and equity of the regional CGAs have been co-created collaboratively by a dozen independent organizations. The National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) board of directors has proposed a plan for reorganization that would bring the regional associations and their members into NCGA as one organization. In the proposed system, the members of NCGA (locally owned retail food co-ops) will work together for the benefit of their consumer-owners. This decision and potential transition, in order to be successful, will require the spirit of generosity at its very best. Now is the time for our food co-ops to come forth with generosity and capitalize a single organization that the retail food co-ops will own and control.

Examples and models

Generosity is infectious and inspiring. To see the benefits of generosity, we can look at a number of examples from food co-ops in the last decade of collaboration.

- Certain larger and financially stronger co-ops investing at a higher level in the CGA system with the goal of strengthening all co-ops through continuous improvement.
- The voluntary sharing of programs and services between retail co-ops and between CGAs—the creation and development of the Cooperative Advantage Program is an excellent example.
- The formation of CGIN (Cooperative Grocers' Information Network) and NCGA, with generous contributions and strategic investments by the National Cooperative Bank and from the National Cooperative Business Association.
- The creation of the Howard Bowers Fund as a vehicle to promote cooperative education and training, and the ongoing funding support provided by retail food co-ops, individuals, and other organizations.
- The creation of the Disaster Relief Fund, funded by and for food co-ops, that grew out of the fundraising appeal at a co-op conference in 1997; significant funds were pledged by food co-ops to Amazing Grains in North Dakota to help it recover from major flood damage.
- The generous offering of time and resources to further peer support and development at the management, staff, and board level throughout the CGA system, including recent donations by CGAs and retail food co-ops to support the development of the branding program and the reorganization plan of NCGA.
- Numerous retail food co-ops offering donation/giving programs to their local communities.

I will cite three other examples that illustrate the spirit of generosity in co-ops:

As part of the funds raised on behalf of Amazing Grains, the flood-damaged, small North Dakota food co-op referred to above, a large contribution was received from Penn South, one of the large limited equity New York City housing co-ops. They didn't know anyone connected with food co-ops or anyone in North Dakota. They made their contribution because it was another co-op in need. An interesting sidebar about Penn South is the many times their members have voted down attempts to convert to a market rate co-op (which would have given the residents a very good personal profit, but meant the co-op was no longer affordable to future generations).

Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund (NCDF) is another example of the generosity of food co-ops. Most of the member investment in NCDF is from food co-ops, and the food co-ops have been very supportive of NCDF's recent work in the area of affordable co-op housing. That initiative was launched with the investment money from food co-ops (www.ncdf.coop).

Ten food co-ops throughout the U.S. presently operate Cooperative Community Funds (CCF), whose slogan is "Give Where You Live!" Sponsored by Twin Pines Cooperative Foundation, the CCF program is replicating the success of the Cooperative Community Fund established in 1990 by North Coast Cooperatives in Arcata, California. Donations are accepted at participating co-ops, including donations of patronage rebates and discounts at the checkstand. By the end of 2003, the combined CCF endowment has grown to \$330,000. Since 1999, donations have been made to 85 nonprofits in the local communities of the participating co-ops (www.communityfund.coop).

The gift of generosity

The spirit of generosity requires individual initiative. We are challenged to give and let go in meaningful ways. In the context of cooperative collaboration, the spirit of generosity helps us learn that each other is not the enemy. We learn to assume that other co-op people are acting and speaking from a place of good will. We may disagree about implementation or details, but we are on the same side and we should treat each other as colleagues, not combatants. We learn to trust the process.

The spirit of generosity is a gift. To give is to trust. To give is to invest. To give is to receive. Through giving, we learn about the concept of abundance. Our world is not limited. The spirit of generosity helps us see the world as unlimited, with infinite potential, rather than "For you to have more, I have to have less." If we believe in the values of cooperation—honesty, justice, equity, etc.—and if we believe that the world would be better if more people acted on these values, then we should act on them with each other.

Cooperatives provide service to their members and communities in a generous and balanced manner. The cooperative community, globally, is a growing circle. Give gratitude and thanks to all who have generously contributed to build the circle of cooperation. Let's practice excellent and inspiring customer service, along with random sustained acts of kindness. What karma!

Cooperation is an energy form with vitality and sustainability at its core. All of us involved as cooperative leaders have the responsibility of nourishing and feeding that precious energy. As a concept, "cooperation" is about as simple as it can get, yet our world is in danger of missing the point altogether of this obvious truth.

The Cooperative Principles provide a sound and basic foundation for a sustainable future for our planet. At the same time, they present us with the challenge and opportunity for a lifetime of learning to truly understand and implement them. We need to collectively plant and nourish the seeds of future cooperation. Cooperation is a practice. Generosity pervades the practice of cooperation. The spirit of generosity, in its bold and subtle forms, broadcasts and cultivates the seeds of cooperation.

Thanks to the many people who provided suggestions for this article, especially David Thompson of Cooperative Community Funds and Margaret Lund of Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund for the stories and information they shared.

