

# Asking Powerful Questions

*Co-op boards open up possibilities through conversation*

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*“A vital question, a creative question, rivets our attention. All the creative power of our minds is focused on the question. Knowledge emerges in response to these compelling questions. They open us to new worlds.”*

—Verna Allee, “The Knowledge Evolution.”

Quoted by Vogt, Brown and Issacs,

The Art of Powerful Questions (2003).

( See [www.worldcafe.com](http://www.worldcafe.com).)

## **Questions: the foundation of democracy**

What should the cooperative achieve? What should it avoid, and on whose behalf? Cooperative boards use conversations with cooperative owners, to whom the board has a fiduciary obligation, to answer those questions. Conversation in this context should be understood broadly to include not only face-to-face exchange but also dialogue both written and spoken and acted upon by owners participating in the cooperative through shopping, attending meetings, reading blogs, posting comment cards, and in myriad other ways.

At a Consumer Cooperative Management Association meeting in 2004, I heard Michael Hartoonian speak about the role of cooperatives in a democratic economy. Hartoonian described democracy as “the conversation and argument that precedes and follows the choice” between divergent principles. He made the compelling point that retail food cooperatives are one of the few places where this form of democracy is still actively practiced. (Michael Healy discusses this idea in depth in Cooperative Grocer #118, May–June 2005, “Democracy and Cooperatives.”)

It’s not surprising, given these democratic conversations, that many cooperative leaders have been drawn to the work of Juanita Brown, David Issacs and others, using a process known as the World Café. The subtitle of Brown and Issacs’ 2005 World Café is “Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter.” Indeed—for boards of retail food cooperatives, the only conversations worth having are conversations that matter.

John Carver’s description of a board of directors’ role applies to boards using Carver’s Policy Governance™ as well as to those boards using other governance systems. “The purpose of governance is to ensure, usually on behalf of others, that an organization achieves what it should achieve while avoiding those behaviors and situations that should be avoided.” (John Carver, Boards that Make a Difference, 2006).

Brett Fairbairn posits the idea that cooperatives are not only places for economic linkage with the owners—they are thinking entities. How else can an organization “think” but through conversation, broadly defined? And what part of the organization is responsible for designing that conversation? Only the board is charged with the responsibility to govern and lead the cooperative. (See the discussion of “cognition” in Fairbairn’s 2003 booklet, “Three Strategic Concepts for the Guidance of Cooperatives,” downloadable at [www.usaskstudies.coop/publications](http://www.usaskstudies.coop/publications) , and in Marshall Kovitz’ article, “Thinking Strategically,” in Cooperative Grocer #144, Sept.–Oct. 2009, especially the page 39 chart.)

## **Questions as governance tools**

*“ The usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask. Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. Questions can lead to movement and action on key issues; by generating creative insights, they can ignite change. “*

—Vogt, Brown and Issacs, *The Art of Powerful Questions*, 2003.

Boards of retail food cooperatives use questions all the time, whether they are aware of it or not. They use small questions to guide their board work. And they work with larger questions to engage with co-op owners to be sure that the board's decisions will lead the cooperative in a positive direction. At the co-op community level, as part of the Cooperative Board Leadership Development (CBLD) 2010 enrollment process, CDS Consulting Co-op is collecting topics, trends and related questions from boards in order to share this information on a national level. As individual board members, we can dramatically increase our effectiveness by paying more attention to the questions that the board is using to guide its work.

By talking to board leaders, I came to understand that while the process for coming up with the questions may be more important than the questions themselves, the most important thing of all is that the conversations are happening. I don't think we ever know what the consequences of our actions will be; regardless of our intentions, there are always unexpected circumstances that lead to surprising results. But I do know that if we are talking to each other throughout the changes, there is a far greater likelihood that the future we imagine will be the future that is created.

Below are a few stories on ways co-op boards are working with powerful questions. I hope that some of them inspire your own board's work.

### **Whole Foods Co-op, Duluth, Minn.**

*How can we combine our unique resources to assess the food production needs of our community and expand our local/regional food system?*

In 2008 at its annual retreat, the board of directors of Whole Foods Co-op worked to answer the question: What should we study and learn to become able to meet the future needs of owners? The board identified several topics that they then used to prepare a strategy for linkage with the co-op's owners over the following year, using the question shown above. The board held several listening sessions with a variety of groups, including growers from the region, former board members, and local nonprofit organizations. At each session, and at its fall annual meeting, the board presented its question in a World Café format.

According to Lynn Fena, board president, “I think it was a powerful question because it invited creativity—it was like giving the member-owners a palette dotted with several colors of paint and asking them to paint a picture. If we had asked for a painting but had not given them any paint, it would have been harder to glean many ideas from the activity. Instead, every time we met with additional member-owners, we could use previous discussions to inspire more creative ‘paintings.’”

At its 2009 retreat, the board used the results of the outreach activities, including the World Café, as the basis for drafting revisions to its Ends policies. What effect did the question have on the board itself? In Fena's words, “I think it inspired us. I think the listening process engaged us in both discovery and determination to move beyond where we have been. Hence, the new Ends policy.”

### **The Community Mercantile, Lawrence, Kan.**

*How do we engage in our local food system? What is an appropriate means by which to improve connectivity and local infrastructure?*

The board of the Merc has demonstrated persistence and perseverance—despite substantial changes in the management of the co-op, as well as the composition of the board—in pursuing two questions identified at its board retreat. Board President Carolyn Micek says, “Those are questions that we started talking about last year, and this year we were going to spend the year building board wisdom around those topics. Many on our board have either attended workshops or read articles about local food systems or sustainability. The board intends to develop a strategy to understand how the board should intersect with those [questions] in appropriate ways, using Policy Governance.”

### **Oryana Natural Food Market, Traverse City, Mich.**

*How should the board be involved in the grievance process? Is it appropriate for the board to review how specific grievances are handled in order to make sure the process specified in the personnel manual is appropriately followed? Can the board do that while distinguishing between that level of involvement and actually serving as a final arbiter of grievances?*

Oryana’s board is working within a narrow scope to use questions to improve its board process. According to Board President Craig Mulder, “This is a powerful issue because it indicates how far the board has moved to paying more attention to issues of mission and vision and ends and less to involvement in monitoring specific store practices. It will also indicate how much the board can trust the monitoring process. This is a very useful question for the board to address as we make the transition to a policy-based board. It clarifies for the board the fact that there is a distinction between which activities are in the board’s purview and which fall under the general manager’s purview, and it clarifies how our monitoring practices can reinforce or violate that distinction.” (Note: resources are now available in the CBLD library to help boards and managers with this topic.)

### **New Leaf Market, Tallahassee, Fla.**

*How can New Leaf Market extend co-op principles and store information to the Hispanic community, as well as to other members of the community?*

When Maria Cobian was elected to the board of New Leaf Market last year, she had a lot of experience doing outreach work within the Hispanic community. At her first retreat as a board member, she suggested forming an outreach committee to increase the presence of the co-op within the Hispanic community. Looking back, Maria wishes that the group had taken more time to establish its goals and be specific about the outcomes. As other board members noted, it can be a challenge for the board to respect operational boundaries and activities and at the same time generate a powerful conversation.

At New Leaf, the outreach committee worked closely with the general manager and her staff to complement the existing outreach program. The committee began by offering support to store staff. It conducted research on the Hispanic community and investigated possible advertising outlets, upcoming community events, and translated the New Leaf Market brochure into Spanish. Having accomplished this much, the committee is working now to bring its

efforts back to a governance level. At its next retreat, the board as a whole will discuss how to work at a policy level to take this up a notch.

### **People's Food Co-op, Portland, Ore.**

*What are cooperative economies? How could our cooperative develop?*

The board of the People's Food Co-op in Portland is working on questions related to its Ends statements. As Board President Todd Wallace puts it: "Our Ends state that we are to help create a thriving local, cooperative economy. However, we realized very quickly that as a board we didn't know a lot about cooperative economies—so our study process began with a really simple exploration: What are cooperative economies? What do they look like? What followed was a cycle of study that began and continues with introductions to various cooperative histories and cultures, as well as examinations of our place in that history. As we go on, that exploration is getting more nuanced and complex—What causes the cycles of co-operative growth? How do co-ops interact with one another? What are the benefits or limits of such an economy? What is really possible (and perhaps, what isn't)? Also, the big one—how can we encourage the development of a thriving cooperative economy in the Pacific Northwest?"

"The second big topic deals directly with our co-op's options on how it could develop. Our management is exploring various ways that our store could become one part of a broader entity (not just a store). Our big question along that subject is: Assuming we're not just a storefront anymore, how does our board structure change? How might it operate in relation to multiple stores, or a farming project or partnership, or a nonprofit wing, or all of these at once?"

Wallace says these questions are powerful because, very simply, "They're open-ended. They keep us exploring and learning, they create a sense of board culture that prioritizes long view perspectives and deep dialogue, they stimulate an ongoing conversation within our community and outside of it, and they force us to challenge our own assumptions. They're relevant and important to the member-owners. Our members are fascinated by these questions and excited about helping us ask them—in this way, they help our board connect with members and their needs."

### **Just Food, Northfield, Minn.**

*How does the co-op add value?*

The board of Just Food has begun blocking time on its meeting agendas to work on questions related to the co-op's vision. Most recently they have been working with this question: How does the co-op add value? According to President Bob Ciernia, the board made a list of "value-adds" at a recent meeting. At a follow-up meeting, they began to discuss how to communicate these values or ideas to the owners and shoppers. Not surprisingly, the board recognized that many of its ideas were operationally focused. How, the board wondered, could it identify a project that would not drain or divert staff resources but would advance the cause and not overburden the board members themselves? The question is still outstanding, but the conversation that followed drew attention to the diversity of local not-for-profit organizations working on related pieces of the values the co-op board members had identified.

At a coming meeting, the board will consider and discuss the possibility of a "sustainability" fair to bring together co-housing, community kitchen organizers, community gardeners, and others to share ideas and possibly create a critical mass that would draw more people into the conversation. The fair may or may not happen; that's almost incidental. But what is clear is that by talking about these issues, the board has mobilized around its vision and values and begun reaching into its own community and the larger community as well. As Ciernia explains, "Each of us is a little voice

that doesn't seem to do anything by itself. But when enough voices come together, the beliefs of a community or an entire culture can—as if by magic—be transformed.”

### **Hints on drafting questions**

- **Constructing questions:** Why, how, and what are more powerful than who, when, where and which.
- **Scope of questions:** A broader scope is more powerful as long as the scope is realistic.
- **Examine the assumptions in a question:** Be sure they are shared by the group.

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