

Co-op Leaders Comment on "Visibility"

BY CAROLEE COLTER AND HELENA O'CONNOR

According to 2013 CoopMetrics data, 30 percent of member co-ops in the National Cooperative Grocers Association have expanded or opened a new store in the last five years; and many more co-ops are planning expansions and new stores. Serving more customers in new ways is exciting, but it also adds to the workload of employees and their managers. For management and especially the general manager (GM), expansion means extra work that is accomplished largely behind the scenes.

However, data from over 190 workplace-satisfaction surveys that CDS Consulting Co-op has conducted show that senior management visibility is critical to maintaining positive employee morale. The feeling that co-op leaders "know" staff members, and that staff "know" their leaders, contributes to perceptions of openness and trust, and ultimately increases staff willingness to follow.

When the GM and other managers spend too much time in the office, a vacuum is created. Employees fill that void with their own imaginings of how the leaders spend their time and what is happening. This can breed an "us vs. them" dynamic. Furthermore, espousing co-op values of equality, honesty, and openness sets a high bar for leader closeness to and understanding of staff.

Workplace comments

Here are some typical comments from co-op workplace satisfaction surveys:

- My manager is one of the few who works on the floor with us, leading by example. The other managers only sit in the office all day long until they have to go home.
- There's a disconnect between the sales floor and the office. Thus, when decisions are made they do not always reflect the needs of everyday operations.
- Upper management is never on the floor, so they don't even know who is doing good work anyway.
- When it's Member Appreciation Day or the lunch rush and the store is rocking, it makes us feel supported when our managers are out there with us.

To gather advice on how to maintain "visibility," we spoke with leaders at co-ops where

A DOZEN TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Recognize that as a leader (of your department, store, or co-op), everything you do—or don't do—is sending a message to your staff. **Strategically choose your message.**
2. Believe that **being on the floor** will help you make better decisions and avoid problems.
3. Schedule time to **interact with staff**. There has to be a standing "appointment" on your calendar. If not, it just won't happen.
4. If you're not comfortable with being on the floor, **make the effort** to push yourself. If you're an introvert, schedule a shift stocking or clearing the cafe to take the edge off of creating small talk.
5. Develop people under you who **complement you**. If you're an introvert GM, hire an extrovert store manager.
6. **Watch your body language**. Research shows that people believe your nonverbals over your words, especially during times of uncertainty and crisis.
7. When staff approach you with difficult issues, **use active listening** to make them feel heard and avoid confrontation. Be clear about how you will follow up.
8. **For multistore co-ops**, create a base from which you can comfortably work in each location.
9. **Chart a circular route** through the store when walking to your office—then change it regularly!
10. **Don't just work weekdays** from 8 to 4. Work some evenings, weekends, and across shifts.
11. **Use multiple communication channels** to enhance your visibility—employee newsletter, intranet, department meetings, new-hire orientations, all-staff meetings, social events, and service projects.
12. **Manage by walking around**, not sitting down!

staff surveys indicated high satisfaction with their leadership style (see sidebar). From these interviews the following themes emerged.

Understand that the job of leadership is to ensure others can do their job well.

McNeese: The biggest thing the manager can do for staff is let them know you are there for them, you are accessible and supporting the people doing the work. I know my work is important, but my work is not what makes the store function. My most important responsibility is to serve the staff members who serve the customers.

Nance: My job is to support the leadership team who support the staff, who then fulfill the needs of our community. It is very much a servant-leadership focus.

Pugh: When I went to La Montanita, it became clear to me that my success was dependent on staff success. The whole focus of leadership should be on making staff successful.

Everything you do is being keenly observed by employees. Therefore, be strategic about your actions.

Pugh: A leader has to be aware that they're on stage. To be in retail, you need to be in the business of saying hello and smiling. As GM, you can't see time on the floor as an

Managers providing comments for this report

Perry McNeese, recently retired general manager, Good Earth Market, Billings, Mont.

Steve Nance, general manager, Oryana Natural Foods, Traverse City, Mich.

CE Pugh, COO at National Cooperative Grocers Association and former general manager, La Montanita Co-op, N.M.

Kelli Reese, general manager, North Coast Co-op, Arcata and Eureka, Calif.

Liza Tedesco, general manager, Chico Natural Foods Co-op, Chico, Calif.

Kelly Dean Wiseman, general manager, Community Food Co-op, Bozeman, Mont.

interruption to your work and be annoyed. You have to enter into employee interaction with the right mindset.

Tedesco: I tend to the introvert side. When I'm "on," I'm performing and putting out energy to connect. I have to think, "What tone am I setting for the store today?" Leaders need to know themselves, know what's expected of them, and put the two together in one whole.

Wiseman: I counsel managers to keep their

eyes up off the floor and make eye contact with staff. I tell them, "You have to consider your impact on others all the time. Everything you do sends a message." I noticed that if I was scowling when I walked the store, the word would go out, "Something's wrong." That's not the way I want to inform people if something is wrong!

Your staff want to see you and to be seen by you. You need to relate to your employees as individuals.

Pugh: Feeling that the GM knows that you exist is important to line staff. They want to feel that the GM has a common experience with them. It's hard to create that if you're not down there every now and then.

Reese: Every day, I try to walk through and say hello to everyone working. We have pictures in the worker bulletin when we welcome new staff, and I concentrate on learning the faces and the names.

Nance: I love to meet folks; I love sharing moments and learning about what they're doing. This is important to me, and it energizes me. I am interested in them as individuals. Our co-op is successful because employees bring their best self and energy to work. By "managing by walking around," I acknowledge and honor that.

Wiseman: It's very helpful to me to work ▶

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◀ regular shifts on the floor. We have 195 employees, and I know about all of their names. I can stick my head in the dish-pit and say hello to the disher by name. It breaks down the barriers between upper management and the rest of the staff. It's great for morale.

Walk the talk. Model the behavior you want your staff to show customers.

Nance: If I model positive energy, a certain communication style, and openness for our leaders, they will follow. Then staff model it back to me, and it keeps my energy up. It's an "energetic" circle.

McNeese: If I'm in first in the morning, I shovel the walks, I plunge the toilets. Demonstrate that you're making the store a better place. It's important to set an example. The first thing I did every day was put on my apron and nametag and wear them just like everyone else. If management has entitlement, they can't be on the same level as the frontline employees.

Wiseman: Get your hands dirty. Don't just cherry-pick the easy jobs.

By working in the store, you learn from customers, employees, and your own observations what is working and not working.

Wiseman: I see areas where our systems could be more efficient. I see ways to improve the POS system, stocking, receiving. I like cashiering. I see the customers and hear complaints, even the nonverbal responses. I hear frequently, "I'm proud to be a member of an organization where the top dog works the front line."

Pugh: You should work in the store at least one night a month and a Saturday or Sunday. It is powerful. The GM should be facing, talking, or running a register and saying hello. Sunday after church is a great time. I could see for myself the kind of experience we are providing to our customers. I am responsible for making important decisions like approving new equipment. If I have firsthand knowledge of the value an investment is delivering or could deliver, it becomes easier for me to make good decisions.

McNeese: It's incredible what a manager learns by being out on the floor. Even if you're the GM of a \$28 million store, in the early morning, you should walk the floor and again before lunch and dinner rushes. While you're inspecting, you're also available to help.

Visibility on the floor is especially important in times of stress and crisis.

Reese: In tough situations or when there's a lot of change going on, it's important not to hide. During union contract negotiations, I wanted to be seen.

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Tedesco: The times of highest community engagement are key. I open the door for shoppers, bag, do cart runs, handle special orders. I serve the staff who are serving the customers. When things get really intense, I see the look of gratitude on employees' faces.

Pugh: During times of uncertainty and adversity, you can provide a sense of security and stability. Everyone wants someone to tell them that things are okay. It is the leader's job to do this.

McNeese: If there is an accident in the store, it important for leaders to be present and calm. People look to their leaders to be in control.

Wiseman: When we had to lay off some staff, I worked on the floor just to be visible. I'd ask people how they were doing. Some were sad to lose a friend. I gave people a chance to have access to me even to express negative feelings.

Find alternative venues and channels to maximize contact and visibility.

Reese: I write articles for our worker bulletin encouraging input. If an issue is going on in a department, I'll sit in on the department meetings. I try to send the message, "We're all involved in what's happening."

McNeese: I had my own new employee orientation. I'd spend about an hour with each new employee during their first two weeks. I'd cover co-op history, philosophy, and purpose, and I'd spend time on the importance of customer service. Then the next day when you see them on the floor, you can say, "Hi."

Pugh: I think it is important to time visits for greatest effect. Be on the store management team agenda for 10 minutes. Or at a front-end meeting. All-staff meetings are a good way to be visible, too. The GM should host them at least once and preferably twice a year. But, the demands on the GM are relentless. Schedule what is important, or it never will get done. ■



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