



## The time is right for participation to emerge as a driving force in the success of cooperatives.

The cooperative model, by design, draws on the strength of people working together in common purpose to meet their economic, social, or cultural needs. Healthy cooperative democracies provide opportunities for meaningful participation. Yet the incredible power of participation is inconsistently realized in all of our cooperatives.

It's a perennial question: How can co-ops encourage people to take more of a stakeholder role, whether they are owners, staff, management, or any others with a vested stake in the co-op? Rather than looking at participation as something co-ops need to convince people to do, let's shift our thinking and see participation as a strategic way to inspire innovation and leadership in our cooperatives. Participation lives throughout the co-op, touching all. It is time to organize for it, plan for it, and tell the story that makes participation come alive.

In keeping with the ICA's goals and themes, CDS Consulting Co-op has developed a new framework for participation: **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 setting the purpose, giving input on long term strategic direction, providing capital, attending annual meetings and voting for the board, and monitoring progress to make sure the co-op is properly benefiting owners. While important, this type of participation typically occurs relatively infrequently, some activities annually, some even once a decade.

**PARTICIPATION:**  
*Own, Use, Serve  
& Belong*

**USE.** The co-op offers goods and services meant to be used. People help the co-op accomplish its goals by patronizing the co-op, working for the co-op, being a vendor, a lender, and, in general, actively participating in what it takes for the enterprise to thrive. This kind of high-frequency participation provides owners and others a chance to give feedback about how well the co-op is meeting its stakeholders' needs and how it can improve. Meanwhile, the co-op helps owners connect their individual choices to the collective impact by articulating its strategic goals and informing people how their use makes a difference.

**SERVE.** Highlighting the co-op's collective impact or common good allows people to see that when they participate as owners and use the co-op to meet their needs, they are also being of service to the cooperative. The co-op provides other opportunities for service as well. For example, a co-op needs people to serve as its leaders. It needs a board of directors, management and staff who are willing to serve the community. At a much broader level, anyone can serve the co-op by telling its story or by participating in an advocacy campaign. Service to the co-op may be high- or low-frequency, and may be driven by both the interests of individuals and the needs of the co-op.

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

**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 purpose is for people to understand the strategic intent of their co-op and how they can contribute to its goals in ways that benefit both their own and the common good. All of us can be motivated and inspired by seeing how our participation contributes to the co-op's success. Together, let's show the power of cooperative democracy.

Feedback welcome: [CooperativeGovernance@cdsconsulting.coop](mailto:CooperativeGovernance@cdsconsulting.coop)