



# Growing Leaders from Within

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**A**s co-ops evolve and expand and our industry continuously changes, it's important that we have mechanisms in place that enable employees to see career pathways within our organizations.

Opportunities to learn new things and grow within the organization are important for everyone on the co-op staff roster. If their training ends after 90 days, you probably have some less-than-satisfied employees.

Sometimes staff training and development is as simple as providing information about a new product line or local producer that the co-op is working with. Sometimes it means ensuring that employees are trained on how to pull reports from the POS system or use other technology at the co-op. At other times, it involves providing long-term, strategic opportunities to help employees grow into the future leaders of the co-op.

## Development plans for everybody

Individual development plans can be an important tool for improving performance when employees struggle. In addition, high-performing employees and those who have expressed interest in moving up within your organization should have development plans in place to ensure they are getting the opportunities for growth that they seek.

Too often when conducting employee surveys I hear from co-op employees that, "The co-op doesn't promote from within." Or, "There's no room to grow here." More often than not, this is far from the truth. Most co-ops do actively promote from within. However, what many co-ops are lacking is a systematic approach to growing leaders from within.

Lacking formal development plans, co-op employees can become frustrated by a perceived absence of forward motion. Unfortunately, a perceived lack of growth opportunities can lead to your best people looking elsewhere for advancement.

With that in mind, it's important to know the aspirations of your employees. Have you asked your staff members where they see themselves two years down the road, or whether they are appropriately challenged in their current position? Holding performance-evaluation meetings, or utilizing "stay interviews," provides an opportunity to ask these questions and to engage in conversations with your employees to learn what their long-term goals are.

## Interviews: stay!

The brilliant concept of the stay interview may not be new, but it is intriguing. Why wait until the exit interview to learn what departing employees found frustrating about the workplace or what opportunities they were looking for at the co-op? What if you found out before they started looking elsewhere? Asking employees what will keep them with your company before they decide to leave, rather than after they have given notice, can lead to raising employee satisfaction and reducing costly turnover.

Some sample stay-interview questions:

- *What do you like most about your job and work in our co-op?*
- *What do you like least about your job and work in our co-op?*
- *Do you feel that you are part of a bigger vision and mission? Why or why not?*
- *Is the co-op providing you with opportunities to grow and develop as a person and as a professional? What would improve your opportunities?*
- *What type of feedback would you like to receive about your performance that you are not receiving now?*
- *Are there career opportunities that you would like to pursue within our co-op?*



*Those who have expressed interest in moving up should have development plans in place to ensure they are getting the opportunities for growth that they seek.*

Read article on variable pricing strategy (finish by end of August)  
Conduct a margin audit of the grocery department (during September)

## 2. Labor Budget

Work with Janet on writing the weekly schedule at least twice per month (start in September)

Review monthly department financials with Susan (begin in October)

Be sure that, once development plans and goals are in place, there is follow-up. Employees will become discouraged if goals fall by the wayside, or if management fails to follow through on commitments for training opportunities. Make agreements with employees about where the responsibility lies for taking the next steps in the plan, and do your part. Set a schedule for checking on goals.

## Thinking bigger: co-op careers

Looking further at career advances, what about within the collective food cooperative sector? Thinking about all the ways in which we are similar, all the best practices that we share, and all of the opportunity that exists among food co-ops is exciting. Our “virtual chain” offers many opportunities for career growth, not unlike career pathways in private corporate settings. I can think of many examples of employees who have followed a career path that included two or more co-ops.

There certainly are some potential barriers to cooperative career pathways. However, there are also many benefits. In addition to the obvious positive of keeping high-potential employees engaged, challenged, and satisfied, other benefits might include:

- cross-pollination of best practices and great ideas;
- stronger connections among stores, possibly leading to more collaboration.

## Opening our doors to new talent

Investing in training and development not only strengthens current operations, it also helps to ensure that strong cooperatives are sustained over the long term and that your employees are appropriately challenged and engaged for years to come. Finally, why not promote your own co-op’s success with internal development and promotion?

Many employees in the current workforce are looking for companies that actively train, develop, and promote employees. When telling your co-op’s story, be sure to include its commitment to employee training and development and to promoting people from within. □

## Be creative

Development opportunities come in many forms. Perhaps it is a chance to attend a leadership training or seminar of interest, or to attend a trade show or industry gathering. Other opportunities are as simple as visiting a local competitor to check prices and peruse endcaps, serving on a task force, or managing a small-scale project or a reset of a store section.

Development can also be experiential. Offering employees a chance to shadow a co-worker for a few hours or pick up one shift a week in another department can pique interest and help people gain additional skills and experience. Such internal cross-training also serves to “strengthen your bench”—making it easier to cover absences, planned or unplanned, and easier to fill vacancies when people in mid-level positions either move on or move up. Just as you should always have a candidate pool of external applicants interested in joining your staff, you also want a pool of high potential employees who are preparing for promotion.

## Creating a development plan

When drawing up a development plan, be sure goals are specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic. Goals should also have a timeline attached.

For example, “Sam will begin cross-training in the produce department one shift per week on July 15. We will assess how the training is going at the end of August and potentially add a second produce shift at that time.” Or, “Sam will prepare a 10-minute informational training about XYZ Farm and will present at the all-staff meeting to be held on Sept. 10.”

A larger, long-term development plan for a person who is interested in promotion might include several goals that look something like this:

### Goal: Learn more about key financial indicators

#### 1. Margin Control

Participate in Retail Basics 102 (begins Aug. 1)