



Study Guide for Cooperative Principles: Fostering Racial and Economic Equity in Cooperatives

Discussing each principle and value through the lens of racial and economic equity will provide a starting point for promoting a more inclusive and effective movement. This is a resource for boards of directors, management teams, and study groups who especially want to explore the impact of dominant white culture on co-ops, and who want to find a way to create a dialogue to begin change.

Co-ops offer the opportunity for local ownership and an alternative to exploitive business practices. Yet there are historical, cultural, racial and economic barriers in place in many organizations that prevent people from participating fully in the benefits of cooperation. Through a commitment to evaluation and education, coalition-building and making change, cooperatives can create supportive infrastructural systems that lift oppression and allow for greater participation.

Every co-op can benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of their cooperative's role in facilitating racial and economic equity within their organizations. The Cooperative Principles and Cooperative Values are fundamental touchstones for current cooperative identity worldwide, and they intrinsically offer opportunities for reflection and evaluation. What guidance can we gain from further study of the Cooperative Principles and Values as we seek greater racial and economic equity in our cooperatives and our society?

In North America and beyond we are tied to complex histories that need to be acknowledged and challenged. This Study Guide was created in the spirit of “appreciative inquiry” and likewise any dialogue about racial and economic equity needs to be facilitated with respect and consideration. We also invite you to create and consider additional questions based on the cooperative principles and values that could be part of your co-op's ongoing process of self-assessment. This tool is intended as one starting point for your cooperative in the further study of the Cooperative Principles and Values.—*Jade Barker, Carolee Colter, Patricia Cumbie, Bill Gessner and Thane Joyal*

General question to open a dialogue: Which of the cooperative principles do you think would be most important for your co-op to focus on?

Co-operative Principles

A cooperative is an autonomous association of person united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

The cooperative principles are guidelines by which cooperatives put their values into practice.

Descriptions in italics from the ICA website, www.ica.coop.

1. Voluntary and Open Membership

Cooperatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

Discussion questions:

- Is it possible there are members and potential members who don't feel welcome at the co-op? If so, how can we find ways for the co-op to be more open, welcoming and more inviting to more people?
- What kind of learning does the co-op need to do to serve more communities and needs?

2. Democratic Member Control

Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

Discussion questions:

- Do our board elections offer a selection of candidates who reflect the diversity of the communities the co-op serves?
- How do we encourage or discourage participation by historically marginalized groups in our cooperative's democratic processes?

3. Member Economic Participation

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

Discussion questions:

- Is the cost of membership and participation (or patronage of) the co-op accessible to people in a variety of economic situations?
- Does the co-op offer options to increase accessibility?
- [For food co-ops] Do neighbors of the co-op participate economically in the co-op? If not, why not?

4. Autonomy and Independence

Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.

Discussion questions:

- Is our cooperative partnering and aligning with organizations that are working toward racial equity?
- How does our respect for autonomy and independence express itself as a business enterprise in local communities seeking their own autonomy and independence?

5. Education, Training and Information

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public—particularly young people and opinion leaders—about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

Discussion questions:

- How are we educating our communities about the diverse history of cooperatives beyond the dominant culture's stories?
- How do we educate our stakeholders about structural oppression in the systems and markets our cooperative serves?

6. Cooperation among Co-operatives

Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

Discussion questions:

- How are we supporting emerging cooperatives who are working to strengthen communities and people of color?
- How can we be part of a network of cooperatives working toward racial equity and justice?

7. Concern for Community

Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

Discussion questions:

- How do we work in solidarity with groups that work for racial equity and justice?
- How does the co-op define and engage the community in a way that is inclusive?