



## **Study Guide for Cooperative Values: 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 values do you think would be most important for your co-op to focus on?**

## Cooperative Values

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.

Cooperatives are based on the values of **self-help**, **self-responsibility**, **democracy**, **equality**, **equity** and **solidarity**. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of **honesty**, **openness**, **social responsibility** and **caring for others**.

*(The text that follows in italics is from the article by Sid Pobihushchy, Cooperative Values, Meaning and Practical Significance <http://library.cdsconsulting.coop/the-cooperative-values-their-meaning-and-practical-significance/>)*

### **1. SELF-HELP**

*This value has a dual referent. On the one hand it refers to the individual person "self" and on the other it refers to the collective "self" such as a co-operative, for instance. Self-help as a value obligates/encourages the individual person to satisfy her/his own needs and obligations through personal effort to the extent reasonably possible under the circumstances. An important need and obligation is the contribution to the realization of a healthy sustainable community. This is a very important element in achieving personal human fulfillment.*

*As a corollary, this same reasoning/logic applies to the collective "self" such as, for instance, a co-operative. This value obligates/encourages the collective to satisfy its own collective needs and obligations through its own efforts to the extent reasonably possible under the circumstances. It is from this value that the idea flows that each individual.*

*member/owner of the collective, i.e., co-operative, share the responsibility for the success of the co-operative.*

Discussion Questions:

- What is the relationship between self-help and the fact of our mutual interdependence in the context of our work towards racial justice and healing?
- How do the co-op's activities support the community's self-sufficiency and dignity (versus acting as a "savior" in the community)?

### **2. SELF-RESPONSIBILITY**

*This value has a dual referent. The individual person is obligated and encouraged by this value to be responsible for her/his own well-being and to take responsibility for any consequences that flow from whatever he/she does in pursuit of personal need satisfaction. The corollary to this is that the collective "self" is responsible for its own well-being and for the consequences that flow from that pursuit.*

Discussion questions:

- [For food co-ops] The current food industry often contributes to a system of oppression of workers, producers and consumers. How does our food co-op take steps to ameliorate the consequences of participation in the grocery industry?
- Nearly every industry and system in our society includes institutionalized racism and bias (food industry, banking and credit, housing, agriculture, transportation, education, energy, etc.) How does our co-op take steps to ameliorate the consequences of its participation in those systems?

### 3. DEMOCRACY

*Democracy is a philosophy/practice of governance in which the people are collectively the repository of authority. **The exercise of that authority is democratically legitimate only if the people who will be affected by that exercise are consulted openly and freely.** Popular elections in and of themselves do not a democracy make. Free and open discussion, deliberation and consultation are essential preconditions to elections as democratic elements. Of course, that means that the people/members have reasonable access to all the information relevant to the decisions respecting the exercise of the authority of which they are the repository.*

Discussion questions:

- Does the co-op take the time to engage people, to be actively inclusive, to encourage participation in decision-making?
- Does the co-op use a process to constructively deal with conflict or criticism that will be effective and helpful for everyone regardless of their background and culture?
- Does the co-op have a fair election process?

### 4. EQUALITY

*Equality as a value flows from the traditional wisdom that each person, irrespective of talent, skill or appearance, possesses an intrinsic value and thus as a human is of no greater or lesser value than anyone else. Each person is intrinsically valuable, without the attachment of inferiority or superiority. While certain skills and talents may be of greater importance to the well-being of a collective, be it a society, community or co-operative, each and every person as a human being within that collective is of equal value. This value is particularly pertinent to decision-making and governance of the collective requiring that each person in that collective has a reasonable opportunity to participate in that decision-making and governance. This value is particularly and peculiarly relevant to democracy and democratic governance.*

Discussion questions:

- What is the role of our cooperative in fostering a more just society?
- What organizations are using the best practices to promote equality? How do we know? What systems and structures do they use?

## **5. EQUITY**

*This value has two distinct but related meanings. One meaning of this value is as an END. The other meaning is that of a MEANS to that END. Equity as an END refers to FAIRNESS in the relationships between and among individuals and the manner with which authority is exercised over persons. Equity as a MEANS refers to the ownership of property/assets with which persons can protect themselves against exploitation by others, mainly corporate interests. In the co-operative, that ownership gives the owner/member the right to participate in the decisions of the co-operative which, along with the participation of all the other members/owners of the cooperative, assures each and all of them fairness in their relations with each other and the collective, i.e., the cooperative. It is the equity which provides the owners with the right and opportunity to structure the decision-making and governance process that will assure that fairness is an essential characteristic of the co-operative.*

Discussion questions:

- Equity investment creates an ownership interest in a cooperative. How do we structure that investment to move our organization toward racial justice and equity?
- How do we keep prejudice, stereotyping and other forms of cognitive bias from driving our governance, hiring and management decisions?

## **6. SOLIDARITY**

*Solidarity as a value refers to the respect and dignity with which the individual persons of a community relate to one another. It is a relationship that grows out of each person seeing the other as valuable as the self. Solidarity also encompasses the concept of interdependency which is so critical to the health and vitality of the collective/co-operative. Community is an important product of solidarity, or as a corollary, solidarity is an essential characteristic of the successful community/co-operative.*

Discussion question:

- How is solidarity relevant to our efforts to use cooperatives to work toward racial justice?

## **7. HONESTY**

*This value has the quality of both end and means. Honesty is a good in itself and is a means to other goods. Honesty is an important prerequisite to continuing good relations among persons and within collectives such as co-operatives. Honesty is both a quality of, and a means to, human fulfillment. Truth is a critically important component of rewarding community and collective life. Honesty is the [sine qua non?] for the individual and the collective of individuals experiencing and benefiting from the truth.*

- Owners rightly expect transparency and honesty from their co-op. How do we demonstrate this responsibility on behalf of our community?
- How do we acknowledge the truth about our business' unfair practices and use that awareness to work to transform the system?

## **8. OPENNESS**

*This value refers to the structured and reasonable availability to the membership of information and knowledge relevant to the successful life of the organization/ collective. This value presupposes that the governance of the organization is a democracy, hence the membership collective is the repository of the authority exercised in that governance.*

Discussion questions:

- Does the cooperative assess and respond to the needs of the community through an open and transparent dialogue?
- How do we ensure that information about the co-op is accessible to all?

## **9. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

*This value is most relevant to the public image which the co-operative enjoys/suffers in the community which it serves and beyond. On the one hand, it refers to the cooperative accepting responsibility for and ameliorating the negative consequences for society stemming from its actions and operations. On the other hand, social responsibility refers to the co-operative's acceptance of the responsibility to work towards the betterment of society and towards the amelioration of oppressive conditions in that society.*

Discussion questions:

- What evidence do we see of our co-op's sense of social responsibility?
- How are we walking the talk?

## **10. CARING FOR OTHERS**

*"Caring for others" is closely related to principle 7 it continues to be the prime mover in the establishment of successful co-operatives throughout the world. This value refers to the obligation that each individual co-operator, each co-operative and the co-operative movement as a whole must act in such a way as not to cause harm or difficulty for others either of today, tomorrow or of the distant future. Additionally, this value imposes the obligation and requirement on every element of the co-operative movement to be pro-active in leadership towards rectifying the structural and social causes of oppression and indignity. This value flows out of the ancient, but nonetheless relevant, dictum: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you."*

Discussion question:

- How do our acts of caring—public statements, donations, partnerships—address structural and social causes of oppression?