

BOARD STUDY

La Montanita Food Co-op

Board of Directors Meeting – September 15, 2015

Topic – Diversity, Equity, and Privilege: Part 1

Led by: David Hurley, Research Assistant

Description of Topic: This is part one of two. Next month, Pauline Lucero will provide training based on our discussion tonight. Several readings/video were assigned for tonight to stimulate discussion that will provide Pauline with more information on how we see issues of equity, diversity, and privilege affecting the role of the Board generally but also how it will impact our strategic visioning process, and how it's relevant in the day-to-day life of the co-op.

Key Themes in the Discussion

1. *Our context*

- New Mexico is a unique context because of the large Native American populations (Navajo, Pueblo, Apache), and the high percentage of Hispanics, and very small numbers of African Americans.

2. *Increasing Diversity on the Board*

- Board members do a lot of recruitment for the Board. We solicit individuals to consider running for the board or serving in interim and advisory roles. Often the demographics of the people who are recruited reflect the people who do the recruiting – who they know and are comfortable with.
- There is also self-selection in terms of the people who think of themselves as the kind of person who serves on a board of directors. They make themselves available. Recruiting beyond that circle takes a lot of education and effort because many don't know what the co-op is or what it would mean to be on the board.
- There's also the challenge that people in higher-need communities often have many other demands on their time.
- Board work is abstract. It's not the most satisfying place for making social change. It may appeal to older people because of the difference in perspective.
 - Actually, I think it is a way to change the world. But you need to understand how it works.
- Who does the Board reflect? Who do we want it to reflect? How can we make sure those other voices are heard? The board is not what it should be in terms of being representative of the membership. The membership is the group to which the Board is responsible. Who are they?
 - I notice a lot of young families. We need to make sure we reflect the changing membership.
 - We do not have data on the make-up of the co-op's membership.

- How closely aligned are the demographics of the board with the demographics of the membership? We don't know. What if we asked for more of this info on the membership application? Right now, we just request names of all household members, and address.
- Part of encouraging diversity is changing the perception of who is welcome. We need to open the door wider.
- I think part of our strategic vision of the future is that the governance of the co-op not be seen as a lot of difficult work, unattractive to people, but something that people would want to be part of.
 - Also need to make sure potential board members are aware of the amount and type of work.
- Hispanics are underrepresented.

2. *Staff Diversity*

- Co-op's staff appears to be more diverse racially than the Board is. The staff don't really know about the Board. They don't hear about it much other than during their orientation. Staff also vary a lot in their level of engagement with the co-op beyond it being their job.
- I have noticed that having managers of color in recent years has a direct correlation with an increase in the number of shoppers of color in the store.
- Having more leaders who are not white males often results in increased racial diversity in other levels of the organization as well. This is often unconscious. When leadership is all white and male, they are more likely to hire people like themselves.
- One benefit of a diverse staff: Research has found that diverse groups come up with better ideas because differences encourages everyone in the group to think more creatively rather than simply reinforcing similarities. Also individuals are more likely to share an idea that's unique, because of the wider diversity of ideas being shared.

3. *Diversity of our Membership*

- Example: Mississippi Market is opening a store in an inner-city neighborhood and did a lot of outreach and education and work to gain acceptance in the community. It will be interesting to see how they do.
- It is more difficult (but very important) to go out into the community and build relationships than to just open a store and say that all are welcome.
- It's important to co-create with the community, rather than bring the model to the community and educate them about it.
- The medical-cultural humility article talked about the problems with a patronizing approach that says, we know what's best, we will bring it to you and convince you its right for you.
- We do not currently collect any data on the demographics of our members when they sign up. If we have a goal of increasing the diversity of our membership, we will have to start collecting that data so we can measure our progress. What might this entail?
 - We could ask for some simple demographics when they sign up for membership.

- Be clear about why we are asking for the info and make it optional.
- Make it short and quick.

4. *Diversifying our membership = Diversifying our products?*

- This is also relevant to the GM search committee work. We are looking for someone who can be visionary and could see opportunities where the co-op could adapt to better meet community needs. For example: in Gallup where the community is looking for mutton, and there are small local mutton producers. Could the co-op be expanded to have more room for mutton?
- Products at co-ops in certain communities might be unique to that community. For example, if the co-op opened a store in the South Valley, it might be important to carry a different mix of products than at the Nob Hill store. Even if this food is not natural/organic, it creates a bridge for different groups of people. There are some co-ops that have a bit of a hybrid model, where the store carries food the community wants, even if it means carrying Coca-Cola alongside its local and organic products.
- Would it forsake the co-op's mission to serve a greater variety of food?
 - But an important portion of our customer/member base are those who shop with us because they trust us to sell food that meets their standards. Would we lose them if we diversified our food?
 - You have to know the local conditions.
 - Selling the variety of food gets people into the store, and then gives you the chance to educate. People don't become "organic" overnight.
 - Then there's the practical side of it: If we start selling Cheerios, then we're competing with stores like Walmart.
- There is a perception that you can't shop cheap at the co-op, but it is often possible to get good food at the co-op for the same price as at Walmart.
- Whole Foods goes into neighborhoods only with high median incomes. That affects who shops there.

5. *Natural Tendencies and Increases in Consciousness*

- At UNM library, patrons tend to approach the librarian who they feel most comfortable with—often someone of the same gender, race/ethnicity, age, and even dress. Librarians are encouraged not to dress up too much because it creates a barrier.
- The tendency to identify with people from your region, village, and family is very natural and has been happening for hundreds of thousands of years. The nation-state is a relatively new and artificial concept.
- Becoming more conscious of our differences and inequities in the U.S. is something that many people don't want to do because it is difficult to acknowledge your own biases.
- The Google presentation: With some practice you can step outside and watch yourself think. Also move slower. Don't make snap decisions.

- When you find yourself having an opinion about something, ask yourself how you know that? If you don't have empirical evidence, then you don't know it. It's a feeling. It's a bias.
- Be very explicit about what you are looking for in your hiring process in order to minimize unconscious biases against people groups.
- The physical work space can influence whether different people feel welcome.

6. *How should Pauline come prepared for us next month?*

- We are interested in expanding the diversity of our shoppers/members, but we're concerned about what this might mean in terms of food identity.
- Discussion of misperceptions about the co-op that hurt our efforts to be diverse and welcoming, and how to change them.
- How to increase diversity on the Board, and to ensure that everyone on the Board feels welcome.
- Issues of equity as they relates to food access.