

A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among the leadership of NCG co-ops

A Study Guide for Co-op Leaders Retreats for Impact!

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Retreats for Impact!

There's a lot going on in Co-op Land these days—lots for board members to learn about, consider, and keep on top of. At the same time, routine board and co-op business can be pretty consuming within time-limited monthly meetings.

What's a board to do?

We think an annual board retreat is the very minimum that co-op boards should consider. While retreats demand a good time commitment, they are a critically important opportunity to step away from regular demands and agendas for thoughtful, considered, and in-depth conversations. Without taking this time, boards are more likely to just be putting on Band-Aids when making decisions.

When given a chance to learn about and discuss key trends or issues in more depth, without the pressure of significant time limitations or the need for immediate action, the board can gain the insight and perspective needed to make better decisions.

Of equal importance, directors simply need to spend time together to understand one another and to build agreements about how to effectively fulfill their shared responsibilities. These goals are difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish within the constraints of a monthly, two-hour board meeting, where there may be observers.

Interested readers can find a previous *LEADer* issue about organizing and planning for a board retreat online. Published in Winter 2009 (Issue 6), it was called [Recharge. Refocus. Retreat](#); it serves as useful background reading for this issue. This time, we offer stories about how two co-ops use retreats very differently to tackle important issues and build cohesion, as well as one reprint from Issue 6 about following up on retreat conversations. Finally, we include two “food for thought” items as interesting topics for a retreat discussion: a high-level overview of national co-op consumer trends from NCG's 2014 shopper surveys and information on NCG's Co+efficient program, which supports improved sustainability in co-op operations.

Be sure to let us know your thoughts on and your board's experiences with this topic. We love hearing what you find valuable, as well as suggestions for changes to or future topics for the *LEADer*.





More about the LEADer

The LEADer is a quarterly study guide designed to foster visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among co-op leaders. The LEADer is a publication of National Co+op Grocers (NCG; formerly National Cooperative Grocers Association) and strives to incorporate experiences and voices from all co-ops affiliated with NCG. Each issue is produced by the Board Effectiveness Support Team (BEST), a voluntary committee made up of board leaders and general managers from co-ops around the country. We welcome those who would like to join us in this project.

The LEADer is available to all interested co-op leaders. This issue and all back issues are [available online](#). Those wishing to subscribe to the LEADer and have issues sent directly by e-mail as soon as they're available should contact [Karen Zimbelman](#).

We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. For more information about NCG, the LEADer, or the BEST, or to send along comments or questions, contact:

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Board Retreat Swoon

by Cindy Owings

Every year for the past 16 years, the Community Food Co-op (Bozeman, Montana) board has held an annual retreat, and directors and staff look forward to the getaway. When asked why the retreat is considered so great, a board member explained, “We spend two nights and two full days in a remote, beautiful location where good food, a well-planned agenda, and respect of others’ strengths reign. Hands down, our retreat is critical for all we do through the coming year.” Here is a little anatomy of the CFC retreat, which may help explain why board members and staff love this valuable time spent together.

The yearly retreat is held at a ranch lodge in the remote mountains of the Tom Minor Basin, about a two-hour drive from Bozeman. The ranch has its own chef, who prepares a wonderful menu, important to those who appreciate and celebrate eating locally raised and locally grown food; the co-op supplies snacks for the weekend. Free time to recreate outside and to socialize over a glass of wine or beer is built into the agenda. The playing of musical instruments is encouraged. Saturday

night is devoted to an interactive game of sorts. These amenities provide the opportunity to build a bond of trust and understanding among board members.

The board recognizes that planning for the retreat puts an extra load on the board secretary, facilitator, and president, so they are supported with extras to make their participation easier. Planning for the retreat includes thoughtful design of topics pertinent to the board’s ongoing work and to the co-op’s current situation. Specific goals are set for the weekend. The board engages an excellent facilitator, who helps everyone focus on thinking freely and participating fully. The board does work that cannot be addressed at monthly board meetings, such as:

- Annual self-assessment
- Annual check-in on burnout
- Quick review of the prior year and the board’s accomplishments
- Review of the co-op’s financial trends compared to national indicators
- Update and review of the co-op’s strategic plan
- Review and discussion of the board’s legal responsibilities

The retreat also includes a “what’s on your mind?” discussion session with the GM. During this time, anyone can ask the GM or fellow board members any question—nitty-gritty operational details or anything else that happens to be top of mind. This session always inspires spirited discussions.

The retreat ends with designated action items as well as a plan for moving forward on important matters. When it’s time to leave, everyone packs up with confidence that the board is on good footing to face the coming year.

The CFC board retreat is a rich mixture of activity and personalities within a gathering that allows for everyone to talk, eat, drink, share, work, and have fun. The retreat allows individual board members to come together to build the cohesion and groundwork for the continued long-term health of the co-op.

“It’s not about how much you do, but about how much love you put into what you do that counts.”

— Mother Teresa



It Works for Us Mississippi Market Co-op's Board Retreats

by Gail Graham

A Mississippi Market director terms out after six years, so our board is always changing. But we can't change directions every time we change directors. Like all boards, ours has to be looking ahead, setting our strategic direction. As a body, we must remain aligned with that direction. We have found that annual board retreats help us stay on track even as our board members change.

"But retreats take time!" you may exclaim. They do. We know there are distinct advantages to being off-site as a group for a couple of days, but our directors are busy people, and we have found it can be difficult for them to commit to a whole weekend. So we take a different approach and break the

retreat into more manageable chunks—two one-and-a-half-day mini-retreats each year.

Over the years, we've developed a rhythm that works for us. We hold our first retreat in November, shortly after bringing on new directors. Since we're nearly midway through our fiscal year at that point, we spend time at this retreat reviewing our performance-to-plan. This gives new directors a chance to hear what we are working on. At our spring retreat, usually held in early May, we take a look at plans for the coming year and often spend time on longer-term strategic conversations. At either retreat we may also focus on a topic that is particularly relevant—for

example, expansion, nominations and recruitment philosophy and strategy, or management succession planning.

Generally we start each retreat with a three-hour session on a Friday afternoon, followed by a board dinner. On Saturday we meet all day, with the management team present for half the day. But we're not stuck with this format. Sometimes we skip the board dinner; sometimes the management team is present a bit longer. We adjust based on what we're doing and our goals for the retreat.

We know that a good retreat requires good preparation, and we have a standard process to help us get ready.



We get the date on the calendar early—months before the retreat—and the board or executive committee kicks around some preliminary thoughts on content. A board subcommittee works with a facilitator, the general manager, and a few key staff (as appropriate) to develop the agenda. A draft goes back and forth between the executive committee and the retreat planning subcommittee and is reviewed with the whole board as the retreat approaches. We work to put out the final agenda and any reading materials and assignments a couple of weeks in advance of the meeting.

What Else Contributes to a Good Retreat?

These factors are a must for all Mississippi Market board retreats:

- **Good facilitation.** We never have a board member or the GM facilitate retreats. At our spring retreat we usually work with an outside facilitator. At our fall retreat we sometimes use outside facilitation, but we have also had success using a management team member with strong facilitation skills.
- **Full participation.** We work hard to have the whole board present. We give board candidates the retreat date and ask them to hold that time on their calendars. Occasionally a new director has a previously scheduled conflict or a director is sick and misses the retreat. This is unfortunate, as we want all voices at the table and there is just no way for someone to catch up by reading the notes.
- **Clear outcomes.** We articulate our desired outcomes as part of the agenda-setting process. Common goals include deepening directors' understanding of industry trends and their implications for the co-op; connecting with each other through discussions; building cohesion among directors and top management; defining and preparing work for the coming year.

It takes time and effort to ensure that our retreats are valuable and help build our board's success. We believe our approach does that. Our outgoing board president, Jon Olson, summarized it nicely: "Our retreats give the board time to reflect on past work and at the same time focus on facts, figures, and ideas that can be used to shape the future of the co-op. The time we've built into the retreats to interact with the entire management team helps us to understand the impact our decisions have on the operational side of the co-op."



It Ain't Vegas

What Happens at the Retreat Shouldn't Stay at the Retreat

by Martha Whitman and Paige Lettington

While board retreats are often used as learning opportunities and as a way for directors to bond, they also often include a commitment to a project for the board. Whether the goal is long-range visioning, planning a member survey, transitioning to policy governance, or exploring a second store, these activities require follow-up after the retreat is over. But most board members are busy people with other jobs. How can you ensure that the great ideas you come up with at your retreat are moved forward? Here are some guidelines, followed by a real-life example.

Maintain the Momentum

Remember that follow-up starts within the retreat. Include time in the agenda to plan the next steps. Make sure you

have a plan before the retreat ends. Your plan should include a description of the project, the purpose and desired outcomes, a rough timeline, and assignments for those who will handle the tasks.

Who should be responsible for managing the project? The answer will depend on the scope of the project, your co-op's governance structure, and the talents and availability of board members. You might designate the work to the board president or to new board members. Assigning the work to a committee has many advantages: the committee can be responsible for follow-up, the project will benefit from others' involvement, and staff and members can participate as appropriate.

No matter who does the follow-up work, schedule regular progress updates for the entire board. Such updates will help keep the project on track and focused. As the project moves forward, regularly evaluate its progress, solicit more board input, and be willing to rework the timeline or tasks. Be prepared to revisit the project if it's not meeting the need it was created for or if something else becomes a higher priority.

Make sure that new board members learn about the project, how it was conceived, and why it's important. Keep the membership informed as well. Don't wait for the annual meeting, write a newsletter article or two and let your members know what the board is up to.



For Example: Finding Out What Members Want

For several years, Co-op XYZ did not pursue any large projects that required board oversight, so the board turned its attention to its strategic plan (purpose, vision, values, and goals). The plan had been developed and approved through a long process, with varying levels of input from many members—everything from a dedicated working group to focus groups and member ratification—about 10 years before.

The plan served the co-op well, but some directors wanted to review it to make sure it was still relevant and supported by members 10 years later. Other directors were cautious about starting the long and expensive planning process again, especially since the elements of the plan were universal and long term.

At its retreat, the board decided to do an owner survey to gauge satisfaction with the strategic plan. Directors took this work on mostly themselves. They created an ad hoc committee, developed questions, conducted the survey,

tabulated the results, and reported back to the full board and members through board meetings and the newsletter.

The survey confirmed that members were happy with the existing purpose, vision, values, and goals but were interested in seeing more communication from the board. So at its next retreat, the board developed a plan for a series of facilitated sessions where members could provide input on the co-op and its future.

The board will use these sessions to improve member communications and education and to make changes that owners support. The board expects to take on new projects resulting from these sessions at future retreats.

This example illustrates several principles of good retreat follow-up:

- The board took a general retreat topic related to member linkage and used retreat time to create an action plan for that topic.
- A committee led by a board member took on the assignment. It built regular updates to the board and members into its action plan.
- After the retreat, the board was flexible. It modified the plan to suit the co-op's operations.
- New board members got involved in the project. It will likely result in further discussion and action at the next board retreat.

This article is reprinted from [LEADer Issue 6](#) (Recharge. Refocus. Retreat, Winter 2009).



Stronger Together Survey Says: National Data on Co-op Shoppers

by Kelly Smith

One topic that could be useful to discuss at a retreat is shopper trends and how they affect your co-op. What follows is a high-level overview of the results of NCG's 2014 survey.

Since 2008 the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls has compiled nearly 25,000 responses from 72 member/shopper satisfaction surveys from cooperatives around the country. Every year, NCG summarizes trends from aggregated data from the surveys. The overarching summary of the data through 2014 is this: Customer satisfaction indicators were down compared to earlier years across a wide number of areas.

We're not able to provide the summary in the LEADer given its public distribution. However, a copy of the report is available to leaders of NCG member or associate co-ops, subject to limited

distribution per NCG's confidentiality policies. This report offers details about:

- Shopping patterns, such as how much shoppers spend at their co-ops versus other stores, what shoppers look for in selecting a grocery store, shopping frequency, and trends in shopper satisfaction. **Key highlight:** In the most recent three years, fewer respondents (about one-third) said that they spent more than half their grocery budget at their co-ops, and about the same number identified a co-op as their primary grocery store.
- Areas where shoppers are most satisfied with their co-ops and where co-ops meet (or don't meet) shoppers' needs. **Key highlight:** Of all factors rated, shoppers are most dissatisfied with prices at their co-ops.
- The importance of the co-op's mission and values (environmental stewardship, community impact, co-op ownership, member benefits) on shopping behavior. **Key highlight:** Generally, respondents ascribe very positive attributes to their co-ops.

- Demographic information, including trends related to shopper age, gender, education, and income level. **Key highlight:** Despite many indicators of high satisfaction, respondents report buying a majority of products at stores other than their co-ops.

In sum, the 2014 national co-op shopper survey results showed declining trends for food co-ops in terms of customer satisfaction, a continuation from prior year trends. To attract customers, co-ops need to focus on providing high-quality and fresh products; a good selection of natural, organic, and local products; competitive prices; a broad selection of products; and a convenient shopping experience.

Kelly Smith is NCG's director of marketing and communications.



Stronger Together: Measuring What Matters

by Sheila Samuelson

Retreats are often a great time to look at the co-op's ends, or mission, statement and to have a discussion about how you're doing in moving those needles. Considering your co-op's impact on the larger world and our planet may be part of those conversations. Here's one way that NCG offers support to co-ops working to increase the sustainability of their operations.

Without a doubt, sustainability is an important value for most co-ops. It's part of the DNA of all co-ops to care about more than just achieving a strong financial profit or generating a good return on investment for member-owners. Supporting local food producers, concern for the environment, and giving back to the community are key aspects of sustainability and are often reflected in the co-op's mission, vision, and everyday operations. This long-standing alignment has positioned co-ops as truly "green grocers" and the places to go for food that is wholesome and healthy for people and the planet.

But how are we doing? Setting goals and then measuring impact is critical to living up to our aspirations. We're seeing conventional and other natural retailers adopting many of the sustainability practices that co-ops once pioneered. As leaders in this area, co-ops need to get better at measuring, managing, and telling the story of their positive impacts. Even if your co-op isn't challenged by a competitor that is "stealing" the co-op's story, there are good business reasons to improve. Tracking key sustainability metrics such as energy and water use,

carbon footprints, local community impacts, and labor practices will help the co-op become more efficient, identify areas for improvement, boost staff engagement, and improve loyalty. In short, managing sustainability helps co-ops operate as better retailers.

NCG's Co+efficient program helps co-ops do just that. This comprehensive sustainability program is designed to help co-ops create measurable improvement in their social, environmental, and economic impacts. Co+efficient offers an online web portal that co-op staff can use to track, benchmark, and analyze a wide-ranging set of common sustainability metrics. Co-ops enrolled in Co+efficient can compare their performance with that of other co-ops, write a comprehensive sustainability

report, or use the data for other purposes, such as applying for Energy Star certification. Most importantly, Co+efficient helps co-ops create measurable improvement that will help them tell their sustainability stories.

Co-ops are putting Co+efficient to great use. With data at their fingertips, co-ops find ways to manage their impact and share their messages, such as these examples from 2015:

- **Driving efficiency:** A Western Corridor co-op reduced water consumption by more than 25 percent in one year by tracking use and adopting more efficient practices.
- **Identifying problems:** Several co-ops have quickly identified issues such as rapid spikes in water use.



- **Launching a Green Team:** One participant sought advice from peer co-ops that had employed a staff group as a co-op Green Team to improve in specific areas.
- **Strategically targeting waste:** After evaluating its landfill diversion rate, one co-op used Co+efficient data to work toward diverting more material from the landfill.
- **Reporting on impacts:** Co-ops are using Co+efficient data to document impacts on social, environmental, and economic measures in ends reports to directors and in newsletter articles for members.

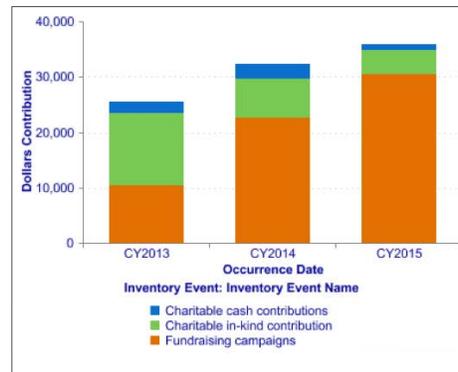
Co+efficient’s dashboards are designed to help each co-op deeply understand its own sustainability performance, make improvements, and share the story of that positive impact with member-owners and the community. Pictured at right are a few of the dozens of charts and graphs in Co+efficient.

Co-op staff can get more information about Co+efficient or sustainability metrics from the NCG website or by contacting Sheila directly.

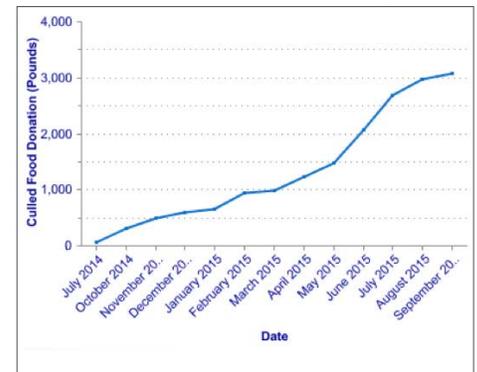
Sheila Samuelson is NCG’s sustainability specialist

Sample Co+efficient Dashboards

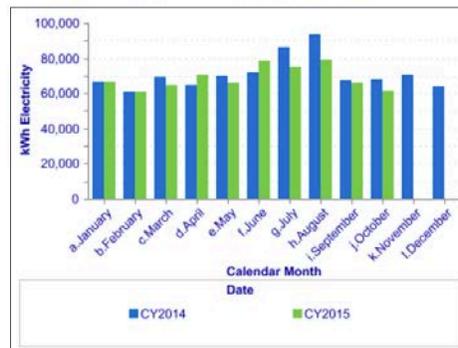
Annual Corporate Giving



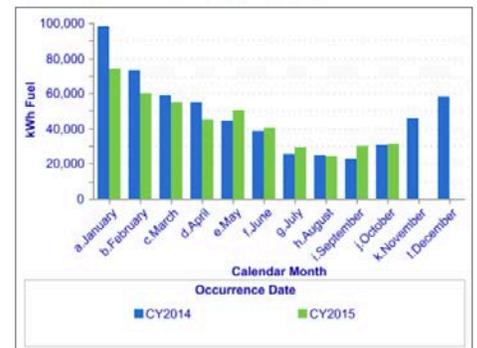
Cumulative Donations of Food to Collection Agencies



Electricity Use Year Over Year Change (kWh)



Fuel Use Year Over Year Change (kWh)



“As a GM I really appreciate the role of Co+efficient. Sheila and her team have worked to make it easy and useful to participate. And as a result, every time I need to write a monitoring or ends report about the environment, I can look to the super-easy tools they have created to support my data and make my task less stressful. The tools, the webinars, and the support are something that I use regularly and are well worth the relatively small investment of our time and resources.”

—Kenna Eaton, general manager at Port Townsend Food Co-op, Port Townsend, Washington

STUDY GUIDE

Planning Your Retreat and Some Important Topics to Consider

by Martha Whitman

This issue's study guide is in two parts. Part 1 is a repeat from [Issue 6](#) and is designed to help you plan your retreat. Part 2 offers questions for your board to discuss at your next retreat.

PART 1. PLANNING YOUR RETREAT

Here are four questions for your board to discuss in planning for a retreat. These questions apply to all retreats, held annually or more often, regardless of the purpose. We hope they help you create a high-powered, energizing, and effective event for all involved.

1. **Purpose.** What is the purpose of your retreat? What are your desired outcomes for the whole retreat and for the issues you'll be discussing?
2. **Resources and participants.** Given the purposes you've identified, are there any key resource people who might be good to invite? Other management or staff? A presenter? Key business partners or local business resources? What other resources might be useful in preparing for your retreat? What should all retreat participants read or review in advance? What reference materials should be on hand during the retreat?
3. **Getting it done.** Who will plan the retreat agenda? Who will prepare and distribute the materials? Who will make logistical arrangements? One person doesn't have to do it all, but it's wise to identify coordinators for key elements of the event.
4. **Follow up.** How will your retreat outcomes be integrated into the board's ongoing discussions and work? How will key results be communicated to other co-op stakeholders, including staff and members? Who will make sure the outcomes get followed up on, inform future decisions, and get communicated as needed?



PART 2. TOPICS FOR YOUR RETREAT

Looking for important topics for your board to discuss at an upcoming retreat? Co-ops nationwide are experiencing challenges that weren't around 20 or even 10 years ago, and the landscape is changing rapidly. Here are three topics worthy of your time and attention.

1. Succession planning. The general managers are retiring! Many food co-op GMs are nearing retirement age. The huge brain drain will affect every co-op as management turnover happens or as new, younger talent moves from one co-op to another. Here are some questions to prompt discussion at your next retreat:

- How can your board and co-op be prepared for this change?
- What is current management thinking and doing to best prepare the co-op?
- Does the board's GM evaluation process provide management respectful, productive, and effective feedback?
- What agreements might the board work on now to be prepared for a thorough and successful hiring process?
- What values and skills will be important to the health of your co-op and how will the board identify them in potential GM candidates?
- Given that it's quite possible that the co-op's next GM may not be from the co-op world, what could help the board allow for a broader vision of recruitment?

2. Expanding the circle. The shopper base that food co-ops have built their success on is also changing. Longtime co-op shoppers and members are getting older, and those interested in natural and organic foods have many more options to source those items. How can your co-op expand its reach and attract members from the wider pool in its community? How can the board's practices and the co-op's strategic direction support the goal of serving more members and meeting more needs in your community? Do board members, member-owners, and staff reflect the diversity in your community? What needs to happen for the co-op to be relevant for more people? How does this goal affect the co-op's current and future operations?

3. Strategies to survive, and thrive! We're all pretty familiar with the fact that co-ops are operating in an increasingly competitive market. (See "Your Co-op's Competitive Landscape" in [Issue 29, Dealing with a Downturn.](#)) Regardless of whether new competitors are opening or existing stores are offering more natural and organic products, co-ops are facing increased pressure to:

- Lower prices and margins—to be competitively priced with retailers and outlets with larger volume and to make it less attractive for new competitors to enter their markets.
- Decrease costs—to increase efficiencies, operate sustainably, and continue to have positive impacts in the local community.
- Consider expanding the product line—to be more attractive to a wider base of the co-op's market.
- Innovate and provide even more services with less—to keep up with trends, such as online ordering, delivery, and more signature offerings.

What changes will need to be made for your co-op to survive these current challenges? What is your co-op doing now to make sure it will be relevant and vital to its members and local community for the next 10, 25, even 50 years?