

A Recipe for Good Board Meetings

BY MICHAEL HEALY



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Here it comes again: the monthly board meeting. You've figured out child care for the fourth Monday of every month, that version of parental Olympics where Mom runs out the door as Dad runs in. A fellow director has given up the bowling league because it conflicts with the board meeting schedule.

Each director has made an effort to be present, and the board must honor this commitment by making sure the meeting is well managed, the time well used, and the results worth the effort. In short, we need a recipe for great meetings.

Following is one of those foolproof recipes that works for expert chefs and novices alike.

Step 1: Begin with equal measures purpose and planning

In order to see what makes meetings worthwhile, we must step back a bit and look at why we have meetings at all. The board exists to accomplish something on behalf of our cooperative. Although defining a board's purpose is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to encourage you to look to your own board's statement of purpose to see if your meetings are designed to meet your goal.

Along with clarifying the "why" of the job, boards should have an annual plan. Board meetings do not exist independently of each other; each monthly meeting should get us part of the way toward our yearly goals. This leads us to understand that meetings should be purposeful, and all attendees should understand that purpose. When reviewing an agenda, there should be an obvious connection between each agenda item and the board's annual calendar and goals.

At least once each year the board can review the calendar to make sure it includes all board priorities. The Onion River Co-op (Burlington, Vt.) board actually reviews their annual calendar at each meeting; this habit reminds everyone of the long-term view of their meetings.

Step 2: Add a structured agenda

A meeting without a clear agenda can look like a horse race where every horse starts from a different place on the track, all heading in different directions. Chaos ensues, and rather than finding a winner, the race ends when the horses and

riders just tucker themselves out.

The person responsible for setting the agenda has an important role: to make sure that everyone knows what direction they will be running, the length of each heat, and what will constitute "winning." In order to do this, include in your agenda a clear title, as well as the amount of time allotted to and expected outcome for each item. Because meeting participants listen and respond depending on the nature of the item, the agenda should specify if the board is simply hearing an update report, monitoring policy, making a decision about a proposal, studying an education topic, or something else.

Donna Stroup, board president of Bloomingsfoods Co-op (Bloomington, Ind.), began including a "Board Member Preparation" section on the agenda; directors on this board can now, at a quick glance, make sure they have read all the necessary documents ahead of time.

Step 3: Mix together a meeting packet

An innovation like the "Board Member Preparation" list highlights one of the basic ingredients of good meetings: a complete packet of all documents prepared for directors at least a week before the meeting. Whether in electronic or paper form, directors should find everything they need in one place. While you'll likely find some variation depending on your board's particulars, generally a board member should open the meeting packet and find:

- an agenda;
- minutes from the previous meeting;
- monitoring reports from the general manager;
- monthly check-in reports from the general manager and board committees; and
- readings/articles for study and engagement.

Step 4: Add a good process for decision-making

If meetings are purposeful, and if the decisions we make at meetings matter, then we need a clear and understandable process for making those decisions. Boards typically use either a consensus or parliamentary process. Whether a board uses *Robert's Rules of Order* (or variants like *Democratic Rules of Order*, *Modern Rules of Order*, or *Sturgis' Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*) or one of the myriad versions of consensus process, the best resource I've found for

understanding good process is *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making*.

While some people have philosophical attachment to either consensus or parliamentary procedure, we should recognize that both models for group decision-making are based in a sound set of values intended to encourage full participation, to acknowledge and respect minority or dissenting opinions, and to support the legitimacy of carefully made group decisions. Whichever process your board uses, you will find the meeting works most smoothly if your chair or facilitator is skilled at leading the board through the process. But remember: even a skilled facilitator needs and wants responsible participation from each person at the meeting.

Step 5: Add a dash of this and that

Along with the basics of good structure, there are a few proven tricks for keeping meetings on track and moving smoothly.

Plan the agenda in terms of a meeting sandwich: the layering of "meaty" topics in between lighter, easier items. When planning agendas, I like to begin with a couple easy decisions right at the beginning so that we set a tone of success early in the meeting. And if you tend to never get to those big-picture conversations because your monitoring work bogs down and takes longer than planned, try scheduling the monitoring near the end of the meeting—only the most egregious noncompliance issues turn out to be worth staying late for.

If your meetings are jam-packed with a bunch of committee reports, ask your committees to write these reports and submit them in your meeting packet. You can free up a lot of time just by avoiding long oral reports.

Use your "parking lot" liberally. A parking lot is simply a list of ideas and topics that someone has thought of during a meeting, but the board hasn't yet incorporated into its annual plan or meeting agenda. The board on which I serve designates one responsible director to organize and present our list to us once each year when we are planning our annual calendar for the coming year. We look at the parking lot items in the context of all our goals; some get incorporated into our plan, some linger till our next review, and many we simply scratch from the list

because the particular issue has taken care of itself. We find that this parking lot tool allows us to respectfully acknowledge everyone's ideas, without letting those ideas derail us from the plan we've already set for ourselves.

Never ask the board to make a decision about a new proposal the first time the proposal is presented. Directors need time to digest new information and to think about the wisdom of one decision over another. Let your board hear and ask questions about a proposal at one meeting, and then try to make a decision about the proposal at the following meeting. If you set and follow an annual plan, your board will seldom find itself in a position of needing to make immediate, crisis-management decisions. Boards, by nature, are slow, deliberative bodies. You can't make good meetings in a pressure cooker.

Step 6: Evaluate

While your board may already evaluate its meetings, have you considered evaluating according to some preset criteria? Your evaluation can both guide your planning for the next meeting and serve as part of your ongoing self-monitoring work. The Outpost Co-op (Milwaukee, Wis.) board uses a "Monthly Meeting Monitoring Form on Director and Officer Expectations." One question they ask themselves at the end of each meeting is: "Did we emphasize future vision and strategic leadership?" Another is: "Did the board adhere to its decision-making process and rules?" By compiling and reviewing the answers to these questions, the Outpost board ensures that their meetings are as productive and effective as possible.

Step 7: Season to taste

In the movie *Like Water for Chocolate*, the cook found that her culinary creations tasted not only of the ingredients she used, but also of her emotional state. When the food was cooked with love, eaters experienced that ■>



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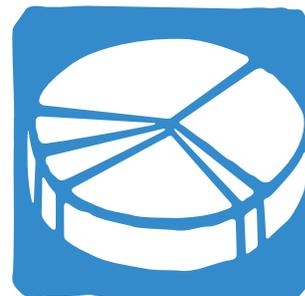
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**General Manager
First Alternative Co-op**

First Alternative Co-op seeks an experienced general manager to manage its recently expanded, two-store operation in Corvallis, Ore. Candidates with proven leadership, managerial and planning capabilities; extensive financial background; experience in the grocery industry; and a positive record of people and personnel skills are encouraged to apply.

The GM will work with a cohesive and experienced board of directors and seasoned staff of 150 to build the business and ensure continued financial success and fiscal responsibility. We value experience in cooperatives, the natural foods industry, multistore management and policy governance.

Located in the beautiful and fertile Willamette Valley, Corvallis is a short drive from ocean beaches, the Cascade Mountains, and the city of Portland. First Alternative currently serves 7,000 owners and generates annual sales of about \$15 million. For more information about the co-op, a complete job description, application process, and contact information, visit <http://www.firstalt.coop> and go to the Employment tab.

**General Manager
GreenStar Cooperative Market**

Are you passionate about real food and real community? GreenStar Cooperative Market in Ithaca, N.Y., seeks a general manager who will collaborate with and support our council, membership, and staff as we strive for the next level of values-driven retail success. Our mature, financially sound cooperative (over \$13 million annual sales in two locations, more than 140 employees, more than 6,000 members) has a strong network of local suppliers and will provide the right person with the opportunity to be at the forefront of the natural foods industry.

Our GM should be a community builder and a good communicator, someone who shows strong leadership and is committed to building consensus. Our ideal candidate has comprehensive knowledge of the organic and local foods marketplace, excellent writing skills, financial skills and three to five years of related experience in a food co-op or equivalent. Competitive salary and full benefits.

Go to the GreenStar website and follow the GM application process: www.greenstar.coop. We will start reviewing applications on Jan. 1, 2010. EOE.

**General Manager
Cleveland Food Co-op**

Cooperative grocery seeks general manager, or interim, with proven industry experience and management skills, commitment to quality, service to members and growth in sales.

Send resumé to Joyce Roper, Chair, GM Search Committee Cleveland Food Co-op 11702 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, OH 44106.

**General Manager
Friendly City Food Co-op**

The Friendly City Food Co-op has a downtown storefront, a lease and over 600 committed members. We just need YOU to bring the store to life. This is an exciting chance for someone with great energy and the right experience to build a cooperative grocery store from the ground up.

Never heard of the Friendly City? Harrisonburg, Va., is located in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, surrounded by scenic and productive farmland, close to the Blue Ridge Mountains and Skyline Drive, and two hours from a major metropolitan area. It's home to two universities, some of the most diverse public schools in the state, a successful downtown revitalization movement and a thriving farmers' market.

The general manager joins a fun and dedicated team that has been working with FoodCoop500 and CDS to make the venture as successful as possible. The GM is responsible for hiring and supervising staff, and for all aspects of operation of the 6,000-square-foot store.

A successful candidate will possess industry and product knowledge, merchandising abilities, and have strong leadership and financial skills. Experience with project management, new businesses or expansions would be very useful. This position is a great fit for someone with experience and passion for connecting consumers with local and regional producers.

FCFC offers a competitive salary and benefits. Submit cover letter, resumé, references, and salary requirements to Ben Sandel, president, Friendly City Food Co-op at ben@friendlycityfoodcoop.com. More info about FCFC at friendlycityfoodcoop.com.

<■ love; when cooked with anger, eaters felt the anger. This may not actually happen in your kitchen, but it definitely holds true in board meetings.

Structure forms the basis of this recipe. Too much structure can harden into rigidity; too little structure can become too easily molded to serve the needs of particular individuals over the needs of the board. By mixing all these suggested ingredients in a kind, loving, and lighthearted manner, meetings can be productive and enjoyable. Knowing they've got such an evening ahead of them, directors might just have an easier time giving up that bowling league or a couple hours with their family. Let's do everything in our power to make it easy for our co-op's member-owners to serve in a leadership position; let's make meetings purposeful and a pleasure.

RESOURCES

Sample board agendas and year-long calendars can be found accompanying this article on www.cooperativegrocer.coop

Kaner, Sam et al. *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, second edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

"Board Self-Evaluation," a CBLD online workshop, available at: <http://cldsconsulting.centraldesktop.com/cbld/Library>

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