

Steps to Sustainability: It Takes Vision

BY ANNIE HOY



The co-op created a vision of a fully sustainable business 20 years into the future.

The founders of Ashland Food Co-op (AFC) in 1972 were guided by the ethics of a budding environmental movement. The impulse to operate a not-for-profit business in ways that honor and nurture people and planet continues today.

As the co-op in Ashland, Ore., approaches its 40th birthday, sustainability has been added to the list of ways the co-op operates as a socially responsible business. This addition has sparked a new commitment to our mission, vision and values in all levels of the organization. It has also forced co-op staff, management and board members to take a realistic look at what we do and how we do it. It has become perfectly clear that we have a lot of hard work ahead to fulfill our vision of becoming a fully sustainable cooperative business by 2030.

In 2005, the board of directors started asking themselves whether AFC was really living up to its mission of “operating a socially responsible business that provides a full selection of natural foods and quality products; emphasizing locally produced, organically grown, and ecologically sound products.” General Manager Richard Katz remembers, “A board member suggested that in addition to having social responsibility goals for the organization, we should form a board Social Responsibility Committee to lead the way. Most everyone was ready to continue the work.”

To ensure our mission statement still had meaning, the board in 2006 did form a social

responsibility committee comprised of at least one board member, the general manager, a department manager, a local vendor, and one co-op owner. The new committee was charged with staying informed about socially responsible behavior related to AFC’s mission and vision as well as the cooperative principles and values. The committee’s primary duty was to recommend policies to ensure that the co-op adopted sound social responsibility practices.

First social responsibility report

In 2005, board Treasurer Joe Golton took the lead in developing the first set of social responsibility metrics for AFC, based on our mission statement. They included employee compensation and benefits; education, training and information; customer service and pricing; local, organic food; and service to our owners and community. It was a good first try at measuring what AFC believed it was doing well, and it started the journey toward improvement. A social responsibility report has been included in every annual report since.

After three years of reporting using these metrics, board members realized there were others that should or could be applied to AFC operations. Conversations with other socially responsible businesses and organizations led to the newly formed Food Trade Sustainability Leadership Association (FTSLA). According to Katz, “The idea of ‘sustainability’ had become top of mind, especially for many businesses. For AFC, it has always been a key piece

of the inception and purpose of this co-op and many others around the country.” It looked like this organization might be a good fit.

FTSLA and The Natural Step

Since FTSLA specifically targets the organic food trade, it is uniquely positioned to help food co-ops make the transition to more sustainable practices. And it’s not only retail operations that benefit. Producers, processors, manufacturers, and distributors can also improve their own sustainability practices and communicate the results using a shared set of metrics.

Ashland is a city with more than a hundred different groups working on “sustainability.” Each one has a different definition for what they are trying to attain and measure. Given such diversity, co-op management was thrilled to find a sustainability framework based on solid principles and practical experience in agriculture, organics, science, business, and social issues. The FTSLA “Declaration of Sustainability” contains not only a proven definition of sustainability, but also an action plan that includes clear benchmarks in the areas of organics, climate change, energy, distribution, labor, packaging, water, waste, animal care, education and governance. Because FTSLA’s membership is so diverse, there is the freedom to adapt the action plan to one’s specific operation.

The real science behind the “Declaration of Sustainability” is the four system conditions of The

Natural Step (TNS). Swedish scientist Karl-Henrik Robert founded The Natural Step in 1989. It is based on first understanding the root causes of un-sustainability before an organization can move strategically toward sustainability. It uses a “backcasting” method of planning, where one starts with a vision of a sustainable future and then works backwards in time to reveal the steps needed to realize the vision. This is no easy process. In fact, it can be frustrating and painful. But it’s totally worth it.

In September 2008, the entire management team and board of directors received a daylong training in The Natural Step. Then in January 2009, AFC held seven two-hour The Natural Step trainings that were attended by almost every one of our 150 employees. HaBA Department Manager Elaine Deckelman found the principles of TNS deeply moving. “It saves a lot of time and a lot of circular discussions, it gives you a clear road map for planning and goal-setting, and it fires people up with inspiring examples of other organizations that have made the commitment to sustainability. It’s worth the money,” she says. Newly armed with way too much information, plenty of inspiration, and a checklist of leading-edge environmentally sound and socially just practices, AFC embarked on a full-blown sustainability mission.

Process and vision

One of the advantages of working with FTSLA is that its member organizations are mostly so-called “early adopters.”

Members join a community of like-minded people who love learning and collaboration. Members further down the path are more than willing to mentor beginners, and AFC knew it could look to Organically Grown Company, our primary organic produce distributor, to help us understand the scale of the challenges and opportunities before us.

Organically Grown Company shared its course of action, and AFC tailored it to our needs. First up was the formation of a framework committee, a core team of sustainability learners trained to be trainers. All managers, this group developed the plan that led to creating the sustainability committee. This is where the bulk of the work is done.

By March 2009, the sustainability committee was up and running, composed of eight–10 staff members, including managers and regular staff, from a broad range of departments. As the department manager representative on the board’s social responsibility committee, it was natural for Elaine Deckelman to take the reins of the new sustainability committee. Staff and managers applied to be on the committee, and the framework committee reviewed them and chose the first group. The

general manager, HR manager, outreach manager, and Deckelman represent management, with staff members coming from the deli, produce, grocery, and front-end departments. The original plan was to have the committee change annually. But after one year it was apparent that longer terms were needed, because the learning curve seemed steeper than expected.

Our first project was a staff survey to gather ideas from as many people as possible. Then, with a committee in place, a list of ideas, training under our belts, and seasoned mentors, we began our visioning process under the guidance of Natalie Reitman-White, Organically Grown Company’s sustainability coordinator and FTSLA executive director. We hammered out a vision of what a fully sustainable AFC would look like in 2030, 20 years into the future.



Sustainability Committee

By the year 2030, Ashland Food Cooperative will be a living model of cooperation with the laws of Nature.

We will have achieved:

1. ZERO WASTE - including water
2. CARBON NEUTRALITY • CONSERVING ENERGY • UTILIZE RENEWABLE ENERGY
3. ELIMINATION OF PERSISTENT MAN-MADE CHEMICALS
4. WE WILL BE A MODEL OF SUSTAINABILITY, IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMPLOYEES, VENDORS AND OUR COMMUNITY.

We felt a little like science fiction writers and had to work hard at suspending disbelief. Reitman-White coaxed us to trust that technology would catch up with us, leading the group through a series of exercises about how we might meet our customers’ needs differently or how we might deliver current services in alignment with sustainability principles. The vision has AFC achieving zero waste and carbon neutrality; eliminating persistent man-made chemicals in all aspects of the co-op; and modeling sustainability in our relationships with employees, vendors, and our community.

Backcasting

The next step was “backcasting” where we tried to figure out how to achieve the vision by working backward one year at a time. The committee continually asked itself, “What is the last thing that needs to happen before we achieve X goal?” Seasoned project managers would probably have no problem with this, but working out 20 years rather than 20 weeks is a whole new experience.

Committee member Brandon Liebert found the process very natural. “For me, it was like

reverse engineering. You start at the end and work backwards to get to the specific actions needed to replicate something,” he mused. Liebert admits he applied for the committee to change his lifestyle. “I wanted to learn about setting aside convenience and distraction to prepare for the future. We’ll be the ones to manifest the change needed in society.” Once we made it all the way back to 2009, the group had an extensive list of projects that seemed achievable in the months remaining in the year, plus a pretty big list begun for 2010. Each one moves AFC closer to one of the visionary goals.

Without any time to waste, the management team refined and ratified the vision and 20-year goals. Work groups formed, assignments were made and projects were accomplished. Our plan was to go after the low-hanging fruit first. In 2009, AFC gathered baseline metrics for energy and water use,

improved recycling, purchased carbon offsets for conference travel, eliminated single-serving plastic water bottles from store shelves, and conducted a staff survey on alternative commuting. We replaced the compressors in our freezers, received \$13,000 in energy rebates and saw a significant reduction in our electric bill. Deli Manager Michelle O’Connor took on significant projects. “We reduced our laundry use by buying organic cotton shirts for the deli workers to wear instead of chef coats. We made a lot of changes in our packaging choices, and we are currently working on having durable plates and bowls in the department so customers will have a nondisposable option for eating at the co-op.” She says the deli’s

original design did not have sustainability in mind. “Now we have to fix things and break habits and try to bring new changes to the table in the most sustainable way. This is challenging, to slow down and care enough to make the changes necessary.”

AFC’s efforts have continued to move forward with a new set of 2010 goals as we approach mid-year. A few of the 2009 goals still have our attention, and in September, planning begins for 2011.

At times the whole process can feel overwhelming, with obstacles around every bend. It’s easy to be impatient. The deli’s O’Connor puts it into perspective: “It is a vision, and without the vision there would be no change. So, the biggest challenge is to stay positive, embrace the change, cultivate hope, remember to breathe and take it one goal at a time.” Sustainability Committee Chair Elaine Deckelman adds, “I’ve been here 26 years, and I’ve never seen so much enthusiasm. People stop me on the streets, at church, just about anywhere, to thank me for what we are doing and to contribute their own ideas and passions. We’ve achieved a lot of tangible goals already, but it’s the intangible, the community building and joyfulness, that keeps me going.” ■