

Tools for Good Governance

Ongoing business strategy

While implementation of strategy takes over daily life, the members meet less often to review strategy and revise plans. Unicorn uses annual Away Days to build consensus within the co-operative and update our three-year plan, always keeping in mind our principles.

While some participants may be drivers of ideas more than others, all members must stand behind the eventual agreed plan and objectives. Consent and consultation are vital, as are cost-effective timescales and meeting the pressures of commercial life. Although the time we want to plan and operate at a human pace is often not available, striking this balance can be a great learning experience.

Reading and reviews

As we have grown, required reading has increased. All members read the weekly newsletter, Forum and members meeting minutes, financial reports and forecasts, members meeting preparation materials, plus agendas, proposals and minutes for any other meetings that individual may attend. Annual member reviews and assessments of new members of staff are also mandatory. These administrative duties generally fall outside work time (amounting to around half an hour each week), but are vital links connecting the member-directors to the business.

Meetings

Effective meetings rely on basic bureaucracy such as concise and available minutes, punctual attendance and briefing papers where necessary. Basic ground rules help to get the business done, e.g., hands up to speak if more than six participants, welcoming newcomers, critique of actions not the individual, curtailing anyone off the immediate subject.

Chairing meetings is something most people have not done, but new people may build confidence in small, convivial settings. We cannot overstate the value of a well-trained chairperson who helps to build consensus and encourage full active participation!

Good practice in meetings always provides an advantage, especially as an organisation grows (see Meetings Guide and Agenda/Minutes Template for details). At the same time, minutes are merely a record; it is the actions and accountability of members that run the business.

Policy List

Policies are the rules and regulations that ensure consistent practice and a voice of 'authority' in a co-operative. Unicorn policies aim to (a) shape and develop the co-operative, (b) protect members or Unicorn, (c) define workers rights or entitlements, or (d) put a specific area of ethics into practice.

A policy should be written as concisely and clearly (even out of context) as possible, with the exact wording agreed at a members meeting. A full Policy List should be kept up to date, easily accessible, and available for reference during meetings. (See appendices for Structure, Regulations and Finance, Personnel and Benefits

policies.)

Budgets

Agreed budgetary limitations reinforce Unicorn's structure and decision-making processes. See Regulations and Finance policies for examples.

Reporting and communication systems

Smaller working groups need less formal systems due to the greater proportion of time they see and hear one another. However, diaries, rotas, task checklists, noticeboards, blackboards, pigeonholes, minutes and filing cabinets have a role in businesses of any size (see Communication Systems Appendix for details). Good scrutiny is essential in joint enterprise. Everyone really does need to know the sales, top sellers, new products, out of stocks, new procedures, overspends, lateness, sickness, visitors, press coverage, etc.

Mandatory reading must be agreed, complied with, and allowed to change over time. Unicorn's now-essential weekly staff newsletter is one of many examples of how the 'economy of scale' advantage of a larger co-operative may be reduced by increased administrative demands (that is, the proportion of time spent in meetings or reading/writing communications tends to increase with a larger group). E-mail communications – easy, fast, and accessible to all – work best when limited to realistic amounts. We try to keep to the point and get home on time!

Good informal communication (where most innovation and creativity takes place) is rooted in good formal systems. Hierarchy can emerge if reading is not shared and meetings are not well reported, and good decisions require an awareness of background information and the methods of implementation. To ensure business security and trust amongst members, financial data, business activities and planning must be transparent *and* well understood.