

Deepening the Work of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

BY LADONNA REDMOND-SANDERS

Seward Community Co-op (Minneapolis, Minn.) began its equity work in the fall of 2013. Seward's second store, Friendship, and its first restaurant/commissary production facility, the Creamery Café, both opened in 2015. Building the Friendship Store in an historically African-American community required taking a closer look at the co-op's commitment to equitable relationships as stated in the Seward ends statement.

Taking a deep dive into diversity required the co-op leadership to look closely at the culture of the co-op. How could a co-op whose staff was 86 percent white begin to hire more people of color? The first thing was to understand the co-op practices and policies that were in place that allowed the co-op to be 86 percent white in a community that was roughly one-third white.

What diversity are we seeking? Is it just race, class, gender or gender expression? The answer is diverse from the standard dominant narrative, which in most cases supports systemic oppression—that is, predominately white, gendered, middle class, and heteronormative. Diversity would mean not just diversity in products or the ethnicity or gender expression of staff—it is a deliberately different way of conducting business.

The goal of increasing sales is directly related to hiring more people who represent a variety of ethnicities and genders. Logic might say that the focus would be on getting more people to shop in the store and purchase products, but this perspective is short-sighted. It ignores the history of the cooperatives at the same time that it perpetuates the co-op's foundations. The role that co-ops play in the larger society is evident in its founding principles and values. The 1844 Rochdale pioneers organized a cooperative to address the impact of the industrial revolution, wage exploitation, and starvation. Pointing to the pioneers and why they formed a co-op recalls that the meaning behind the motto "Everyone Welcome" was the effort to address and ultimately escape systemic oppression.

The co-op's commitment to creating self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity requires that it do more than just offer more products—it requires a system that will build common wealth. Wealth creation for communities of color will not occur through shopping. Wealth creation doesn't occur



THE SEWARD FRANKLIN STORE - PHOTO: COOPERATIVE GROCER NETWORK

through higher wages. Wealth creation will occur through equity investment. The mechanism for wealth creation in co-ops is ownership: ownership as workers and as members. Co-ops offer an opportunity for both, but rarely emphasize ownership as wealth creation.

Shifting the co-op culture

The "Everyone Welcome" motto is directed at the retail operation. Owner-members are looking for products, and they are looking for a retail space where they see themselves. "Everyone Welcome" extends from the sales floor to human resources to product selection. Cooperatives that are in expansion mode externally

must take on the corresponding role of cultural competence and development internally.

At Seward Community Co-op, efforts to shift the culture began with training. Training helped the organization identify patterns in hiring and develop skills that helped our hiring managers become more culturally competent. The path forward was not random—it was based a specific set of circumstances: Expansion of the co-op meant meeting the expectations of a new community. Those demands seemed in conflict with the perspective that the co-op had of itself, and that narrative conflict had to be resolved within the co-op to facilitate change.

"Deep-dive" issues along the journey are just that: deeper issues of reform bring up other issues. The journey is not easy. The successes of being able to have more diversity are often hampered by the mistakes that are inevitable. Retention of staff both staff of color and staff who are not in alignment with diversity as a goal can make for a rocky road.

Following are a few issues that diversity and inclusion efforts uncover. There are no easy answers for these issues; the co-op will need assistance. Seward Co-op retained the services of our diversity consultant and began to train staff internally to work through these macro diversity issues.

Long-term co-op leaders not in alignment

Most of the change necessary to sustain a more inclusive environment lies in the hands of those who are the position to hire and supervise staff. Policies help support the decisions of this group of leaders. The investment in skills development, specifically intercultural communication, is extremely important. Misunderstandings that are not addressed can quickly turn into

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disciplinary actions. When the misunderstanding is based in an interpretation that the cooperative has not been explicit about previously, problems arise. Cultural assumptions become explicit when challenged.

Co-ops will find that attitudes are biased among some leaders of the organization. There may be strong resistance to changing hiring practices or product selection. There may be a subversive counter-narrative that forms, creating conflict among staff. When leaders undermine the diversity and inclusion efforts, more training will not help.

The co-op must make the culture of diversity inclusion explicit in the way it holds leaders accountable when they are not in alignment. This may mean that long-time staff will transition, voluntarily or involuntarily, from the co-op.

“Other” priorities

There are a host of reasons to become a more inclusive co-op. There are an equal number of reasons not to focus on being more inclusive. The ones most often uttered are, “How does this fit into other priorities?” or “My team is already over-extended by tasks, and this is more work.” While it may seem like these statements are tone deaf to the issues that co-ops are facing, the reality is that the leadership of the co-op comes from the dominant society, and they have not been socialized to see race or racial identity as an important focus.

Answering the questions should point out that inclusion is right up there with more sales. Missing any opportunity to grow more sales or grow the co-op’s customer/owner base is not an option. This is not extra work. It is the work. And there will always be “other” things to do. It is important to stay clear of the horse-trading mentality, which will compromise your long-term efforts towards inclusivity. Diversity or inclusion is a both/and proposition, not either/or.

Culture eats strategy for breakfast

All co-op staff will not be in full alignment with the strategic goal of becoming more inclusive. This may come as a surprise. Generally, we think of co-op staff as being open and welcoming. However, we discover that some of our staff may be less welcoming when they are presented with differences that are unfamiliar to them. When co-ops state their values, generally there is an assumption that social justice and equity are included. This may be true to a great degree—but the truth is that those who identify with the dominant culture have no idea what racial equity is.

When one thinks of racism, images of the Ku Klux Klan arise. While these are often seen as defining images of racism, there is a more pervasive form of racism within co-ops. It is a refusal to see cultural differences and an insistence that we are all the same. This subtle form of racism can keep leaders from applying tools that they are given during diversity training.

Change the culture of the organization. Otherwise, the strategy of inclusion, the hiring, the product selection, will fail.

Retaining staff

Seward Community Co-op used an assessment tool called the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI). The assessment was extremely helpful. The assessment results created a baseline that gave the organization a place to begin diversity and inclusion efforts. The IDI measures the capacity to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities. The value of this assessment is when it is used to develop a well-thought-out and executed training curriculum, followed up by coaching sessions. The assessment alone is not enough: training must closely follow the assessment. The training should focus on helping the co-op develop an anti-racist, anti-oppression framework as a part of its business model.

Giving current staff the tools they need still may not be enough to support diversity efforts. Once new staff are on board, legacy staff must now learn how to manage different cultural clues and to shift when necessary. This shifting will help new staff feel more supported. It is difficult for people of color or people with non-conforming gender identities to join work environments where they are the first or only. Each person in the employer/employee interaction will need support. They will be challenged on every level. A strong coaching plan after training and assessment will assist leadership in continuing to build skills that support diversity and inclusion as the way forward for the co-op.

You get what you pay for

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work requires a commitment of time and resources. Money. A general manager explained to me, when thinking about the cost of diversity and inclusion training: “When I add up the costs of lost sales, attorney fees, internal investigations, staff turnover, hours of meetings to discuss issues, I realized that the investment in diversity will require more than \$100,000.” But if you have \$50,000 worth of problems related to poorly handled diversity issues, the co-op would be well-advised to consider investing in diversity rather than crisis management of diversity issues.

In the sustainable food and agriculture world, we know that monoculture degrades soil, requires large amounts of water for crops, and contributes heavily to climate change. In short, monoculture agriculture works against nature. If that’s true, then we must accept that monoculture co-ops work against humanity. Systems of oppression—whether environmental, social, or economic—must be eliminated. The change we seek in the world is the change we must have in our co-ops. •

DEFINITIONS

Diversity: Different from the standard – *Count people*

Inclusion: Inclusion is involvement and empowerment – *People count*

Equity: Process and outcome count – *Addressing structural oppression to address historic inequity*

IDI – Intercultural Developmental Inventory: A 50-item questionnaire available online that can be completed in 15-20 minutes



Seward SEED Program Supports Community Health

Seward Community Co-op's SEED program is supported by tens of thousands of customers' "round-up" contributions at the register, generating thousands of dollars that is donated to a different community organization each month.

One SEED recipient in 2017 was Southside Community Health Services, with the funds supporting classes offered to any participant in Southside's "prescription CSA" program. Many of the patients who were in this CSA program in 2016 had requested cooking classes—they were not used to cooking with fresh foods, and they felt they needed some help.

The Southside Community Health Services classes were taught by a bilingual instructor (English/Spanish) from the Cooking Matters Program run by the University of Minnesota Extension Department. Two-hour classes were held once per week for six consecutive weeks.

The class works with the instructor and a guest chef to learn nutrition education, cooking tips, and how to prepare a healthy recipe. The instructor also purchases groceries for each participant in advance, so that participants can take the groceries home after the class and again make the recipe that they learned that week.

Thanks to Karah Barr, Seward Community Co-op marketing manager, for images (including our cover) and information.

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