From conflict to co-operation

Booklet 3:
Meetings and decision-making

www.uk.coop/fc2c

Written by:

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Cooperantics

Introduction

The *From Conflict to Co-operation* series aims to help co-operatives not only to deal with conflict when it arises (Booklet 1), but also to avoid unnecessary conflict by:

- Improving communication skills – **Booklet 2**
- Improving meetings and decision-making – **this booklet**
- Managing change caused by organisational growth and development – **Booklet 4**
- Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the board – **Booklet 5**

Effective decision-making is a crucial ingredient for success in a co-operative. This booklet looks at how to improve organisational decision-making, including:

- Three tools which will help make your meetings more productive and enjoyable
- Different approaches to decision-making and a simple guide to the decision-making process
- A set of principles and tools that support a deeper democracy for co-operatives

" It is not easy to stand up for what is right, especially when everyone else is afraid to leave the comfortable path of conformity.

Michael Moore

Why hold meetings?

We hold meetings to harness the wealth of talent, skills and experience found in a co-op to make decisions, and to ensure that those who will be making the products or delivering the services have been able to contribute their thoughts on how best to do it. In this way you build up a strong team with a shared vision and purpose.

Meetings are the crucial tool for democratic management. Effective meetings result in clear, agreed and delegated decisions to which everyone is committed. They should be reasonably short (not more than two hours without a break) and amicable.

> *" Each indecision brings its own delays and days are lost lamenting over lost days… What you can do or think you can do, begin it. For boldness has magic, power, and genius in it.*
>
> **Goethe**

Technology provides a range of approaches for holding meetings including video conferences, webinars and online forums. The tools and techniques outlined below will be useful guides to effective meetings however you hold them. You still need to aim for clear, agreed and delegated decisions, even though the approach might be different.

People often say they don't enjoy meetings, that they are a waste of time, a substitute for 'real' work, and boring. Meetings can be a waste of time if they are used purely for information sharing. For example, if a discussion on progress is due, it's best to circulate the progress report beforehand, rather than present it (or table it) at the meeting. In this way your discussion will be informed and less time consuming.

Meetings can also be a waste of time if they are held for taking decisions better delegated to a sub-group or an individual. In a well-organised co-operative, decision-making power will be delegated to individuals and sub-groups, since not everyone needs to be involved in every decision. The organisation will need to agree policies which clearly identify who can take what decisions and how they will be held accountable. We talk about different approaches to decision-making and the decision-making process later in this booklet.

Other ways of wasting precious time in meetings:

- **Poor organisation** – uncomfortable venue, lack of refreshments, bad seating arrangements, agenda and papers not circulated in advance.
- **Ineffective facilitation or inadequate minute-taking** – everyone speaking at once, some individuals permitted to dominate all the discussions, confusion over what is being proposed, decisions not taken, decisions not recorded, actions or tasks not allocated, meeting runs over time, no follow up from previous meetings, lack of clarity over who is responsible for actions.

Understanding and perfecting the role of the Chair, taking care with the minutes and proper preparation and use of the agenda will help you avoid these problems.

Over time your meetings will become more productive, participants will remain on speaking terms and who knows, you may even end up enjoying them!

Making meetings more effective

Your meetings will be more effective if you encourage participation, understand the role of the Chair and know how to use the agenda, minutes and papers.

Encouraging participation

A familiar problem for many groups is a lack of participation, or uneven participation, where some people are more vocal than others. It will always be the case that some people are more comfortable or more experienced at voicing their views in a large group, but it is the Chair's responsibility to exercise control over the talkative and to encourage the more reticent. Booklet 2 lists a variety of techniques for improving and controlling participation in meetings.

For many people, it's easier to contribute in a small group of 5 or 6, so for larger numbers, consider using small groups for at least some of the time. It's not always helpful to draw attention to somebody who has not expressed their views. There may be a variety of reasons why they have not spoken, and people can feel patronised if the Chair assumes they have not spoken through shyness or lack of confidence. It may be that they take time to think things through before expressing an opinion, or it may be that someone else has just voiced very similar views to their own. It's more helpful to use one of the techniques for increasing participation that are described in Booklet 2.
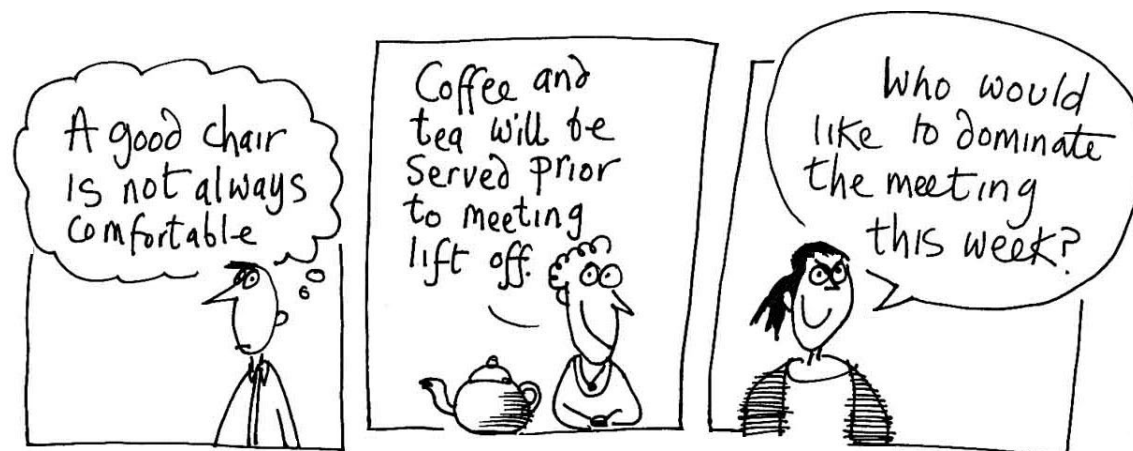
Choice of venue, timing of the meeting, layout of Chairs and tables, lighting, heating and availability of refreshments will all impact on the extent to which people will feel empowered to participate.

People with responsibility for small children may find it difficult to attend early evening meetings. A meeting upstairs in a pub will exclude people who may struggle to use the stairs, but also those who do not wish to enter a venue where alcohol is available.

Depending on the expected length of the meeting and the time of day, it's usually a good idea to offer food and drink (tea, coffee or soft drinks). It's helpful to consider the reason for holding the meeting when it is being organised.

For example, if it is a board meeting and lots of discussion and decision-making is expected, arrange the Chairs around a large table, so that everyone can have eye contact and space for their papers, notepads or laptops.

If it is a meeting where you are about to explain a new marketing strategy or publicity campaign to employees or volunteers, arrange the Chairs in rows so that everyone can see the presentation.

For a strategic planning or training day, a 'cabaret style' arrangement works well. Medium sized tables are arranged in a large room, with 5 or 6 Chairs at each table, so that people can talk to each other and work together in small groups as well as being able to watch presentations and participate in discussions involving the whole group.

The Role of the Chair

The role of the Chair is one of the most critical elements for an effective meeting. This role can be best understood by shadowing the current Chair (or acting as Vice Chair) since practice is vital.

A good Chair understands that their role is to guide the meeting through the agenda, making sure that sufficient time is allowed for important items and ensuring that the meeting ends on time. The Chair should have reviewed the agenda and prioritised agenda items before the meeting, ensuring that important points are given enough time to be discussed properly. The Chair is responsible for checking that everyone has the opportunity to speak and that the meeting is not being dominated by one or two members. It is also the responsibility of the Chair to summarise discussions and suggestions, to help the meeting build on them and work towards a decision. We discuss different decision-making approaches on page 13.

The Chair is responsible for:
*   **Preparing the agenda**, perhaps with the minute taker, and **prioritising agenda items**, allocating time to each one
*   **Making sure that no one person dominates the meeting** and everyone has the chance to speak, supporting and helping less confident members to get their views across
*   **Building on agreement** and moving the discussion along
*   **Clarifying the issues or positions of various parties** before the meeting attempts to come to an agreement
*   **Summarising what has been decided** and making sure everyone agrees (this helps the minute-taker)
*   **Allocating tasks**, ensuring responsibility for action is clear and recorded
*   **Keeping to time**

Although it is the Chair's responsibility to see that all these things happen, it is equally the responsibility of everyone present at the meeting to support the Chair in their role.

The Chair and the minute-taker should work together – it helps if they are sitting next to one another – to ensure that the minutes are a correct record of decisions taken and action agreed. It is never a good idea for the Chair to take minutes! The Chair needs to be looking around the table to encourage everyone's participation, and listening to their contributions, which is difficult to do whilst writing!

The agenda and papers for the meeting

The agenda is simply a list of items to be addressed during the meeting. For a long agenda, it's helpful to prioritise important issues, allowing most time for these and trying to minimise time spent on less critical topics.

This is because it often seems to happen that a group will spend more time on a fairly trivial matter – such as what colour to paint the shed – whilst important matters such as the budget get nodded through.

There are various reasons why this happens:

- Some people may feel that their knowledge of the topic is lacking, so don't feel qualified to question the report. This is potentially dangerous for the enterprise, and if this feels familiar, then it is a training issue.
- It may be that the report is written in technical language or contains jargon or acronyms. It's crucial that members understand all the reports brought to the meeting. If reports are not generally comprehensible, they should be re-written avoiding jargon and/or accompanied by illustrations such as pie charts, bar charts, or graphs.

Everyone needs to know how to get items on to the agenda. Some groups stick up a piece of paper on the wall or somewhere where everyone will see it, so that everyone can write up their suggestions regarding agenda items; others will circulate an email.

" …the H.A.L.T. method. Never make a decision when you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired.

David DeNotaris

> ## Typical agenda format
>
> **Venue, date, start time and proposed end time of meeting**
>
> **Type and/or purpose of meeting**
>
> **Apologies for absence**
>
> 1. **Minutes of the last meeting**
>   a. To be agreed as a correct record
>   b. Any matters arising from the minutes (that aren't already on the agenda)
>
> 2. **Agenda items 1, 2, 3, etc.**
>   Numbered, to include regular items such as finance report and occasional items
>
> 3. **AOB (Any Other Business)***

* If the Chair considers that an AOB item needs more extensive discussion than time permits, they should postpone discussion until the next regular meeting, or if necessary arrange an extra meeting. Some groups find it helpful to indicate whether agenda items are for information, discussion or decision.

Papers

Papers for the meeting, such as project reports, reports from sub-groups, suggestions for new projects or changes in policy or procedures should be written up and circulated along with the agenda and the minutes of the previous meeting in good time for people to read them, before the meeting takes place. It is impossible to read a paper and participate in a meeting at the same time! In order for good decisions to be taken, participants need to be informed and to arrive at the meeting having read the papers and formed their own opinions.

Minutes

The minutes are a record of decisions taken and the names of those responsible for action, including possible target dates.

Minutes are a vital tool for continuity and accountability, ensuring that what was agreed can be reviewed and the results assessed at subsequent meetings. This is achieved by checking that the minutes of the previous meeting are a correct record and by reviewing any issues remaining unresolved under the heading "Matters arising" – unresolved issues which are not already covered by a subsequent agenda item.

If there is a minority in disagreement with a decision supported by most people, they may be satisfied if their disagreement is recorded as such in the minutes. If not, then it might be best to have a break and return to the discussion once participants have had a few moments to stand back and reconsider. Alternatively, active listening could be used to make sure that minority views have been heard.

Typical Minutes template

- Venue, date, start time
- Names of those present
- Names of those who have sent apologies for non-attendance
- Minutes agreed as a correct record, or with the following amendements
- Matters arising (from the last meeting, and not already on the agenda)
- Agenda items (1, 2, 3 etc)
- AOB (Any Other Business)
- Date, time venue for next meeting
- Time at which the meeting ended

The Chair's responsibility to end the meeting on time will be a constraint on how long such a process can go on for – as we will see in the next section, one of the drawbacks of consensus decision-making is that a vocal minority can slow the process down, and the Chair needs to be alert to this.

Actions to be taken as a result of decisions should be clearly recorded in the minutes so they stand out. This helps the Chair to identify any Matters Arising at the start of the next meeting. This can be done in different ways, for example an action column on the right hand side of the page, with the names of those responsible, or the same information highlighted in the main body of the text, using **bold**, **coloured highlights** or <u>underlining</u>.

Minutes should be typed up and circulated to everyone present as soon as possible after the meeting. They can be useful as a reminder of tasks agreed by those present, so are not much help if they do not appear until just before the next meeting.
Like Chairing, minute-taking is a skill best acquired by doing it.

Often minutes are taken by the secretary of the co-operative. However, rotating responsibility for Chairing and minute-taking is a good way to share out the tasks, although these posts should not be rotated too frequently as it takes time to acquire the skills and develop the confidence to perform the role well.

It's a good idea to have someone shadowing the minute-taker, so if they are unable to attend the meeting, the shadow can take over and thus begin to get a feel for the role.

Unsung hero minute taker

Online meetings

During an online conference the Chair needs to ensure equal participation by naming individual participants and inviting them to contribute, as it is even easier for talkative or confident people to dominate in an online conference:

- **Find a quiet place.** Background noise can be distracting for other callers
- **Avoid using a mobile phone** if there's poor reception
- **Dial in on time (or even a few minutes early).** Like late arrival at a meeting it is impolite to arrive late and implies you think your time is more important than other people's
- **Not shuffle papers or tap pencils etc** as this can sound very loud on the phone
- **Use the mute button with care** – i.e. turn on when you are not talking but remember to turn it off again when you wish to speak
- **Remember the same rules of respect apply as in a face to face meeting** – do not speak over another caller, as others will not be   able to hear either of you. Be patient; wait your turn and then speak

◼ **Here's some basic teleconferencing etiquette:**

https://blog.gotomeeting.com/7-rules-virtual-meeting-etiquette-every-professional-know/

Decision-making

Taking decisions can be fraught with problems in a democratically run co-operative. Of course you want to be open and transparent, but trying to involve everyone in every decision will waste time and cause confusion.

" A lot of people don't want to make their own decisions.

Marilyn Manson

The answer is to develop processes and procedures that are agreed and understood by everyone, which clarify who is responsible for different areas of work, and which permit you to delegate authority for decision-making to different teams and individuals.

Depending on your co-operative's structure, these people are accountable either to the members in their general meeting or to the board. Once you have confirmed who has authority to decide what, they should be left to achieve agreed targets in whatever way seems most appropriate to them. It's undermining to give someone a task and then be constantly looking over their shoulder to see how they're getting on or suggesting ways in which they might do it better.

Different approaches to decision-making

There are four main approaches to decision-making:

1. Command

Command means that individuals are responsible for decision-making within a specific role or job description. Its advantages are that it can result in quick action, particularly when a deadline is imminent, but it deprives others of responsibility, opportunities for learning and personal rewards of making decisions themselves. It can also result in poor decisions if people working 'at the coalface' aren't consulted or given the opportunity to contribute.

2. Delegation

Delegation means that decision-making is delegated to sub-groups or individuals. Its advantages are that it can improve efficiency by reducing the number of people required for each decision and it enhances responsibility for consequences by those sub-groups or individuals. However, it won't ensure effective decision-making without clear authority and lines of accountability.

3. Democracy

Democracy means that everyone has a vote and proposals receiving more than half the votes will be implemented. Equal access to information is essential for democracy to work. Its advantages are that it can involve large numbers of people in decision-making, it can initiate debate, and a decision is guaranteed, as long as there's a tie-breaker process. However, it is not ideal when the co-op needs everyone to implement a decision enthusiastically, since nearly half the participants can end up on the losing side yet be expected to carry out the decision. Voters may also be swayed by apathy, inaccurate information, or the influence of charismatic individuals.

4. Consensus

Consensus is an approach that reflects the ideas and thoughts of all team members, ensuring that decisions are explored thoroughly and strong disagreements resolved. The decision will be one that is acceptable to everyone. It is neither unanimity (the outcome may not be everyone's first choice) nor a majority vote. It requires:

- Time
- Communication skills including listening
- Probing
- Conflict management – seeing disagreement as part of the process
- Keeping an open mind
- Thinking creatively

Its advantages are that it maximizes commitment and 'buy-in' during decision-making and implementation; it fosters a sense of goodwill that increases patience, flexibility and willingness to participate in damage control; and it encourages discussion of potential obstacles, facilitating the development of alternative solutions.

However, consensus decision-making takes time, and is more appropriate for important decisions (such as those involving the future direction of the enterprise, long-term decisions or those involving large sums of money). It may not result in support for any specific course of action, which can be frustrating for those who want to see immediate action.

Finally, and dangerously, it can lead to 'groupthink' (a mode of thought whereby individuals unintentionally conform to what they perceive to be the consensus of the group).
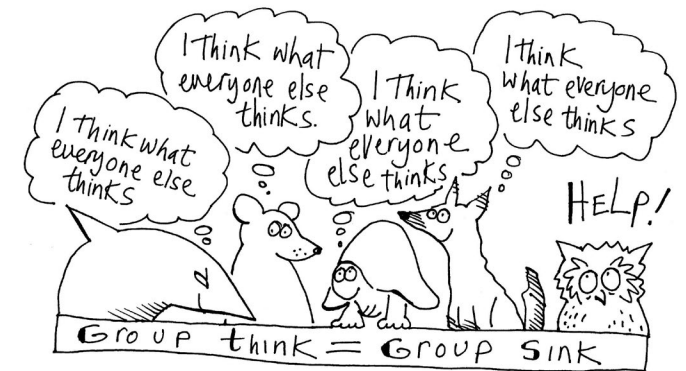
A five-step decision-making process

How often do we find ourselves jumping to a conclusion about the best way forward when we have not looked at all the facts, or even clarified that we all agree what the problem is?

It helps to begin by clarifying the issue or problem to be solved and then to move on to actually making a decision and implementing a solution. Working through the following steps may help...

1. Clarify the issue or problem
- What is the issue or problem?
- When and where is it happening?
- Who is involved?
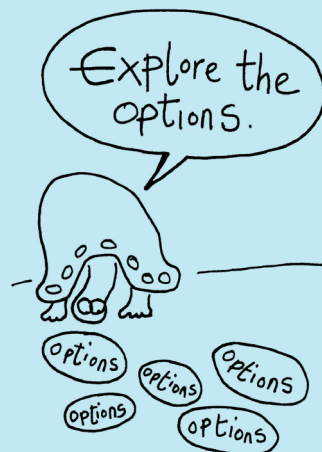- Can someone write down a brief description?

2. Collect information
- What might be the causes?
- How can it be measured or assessed?
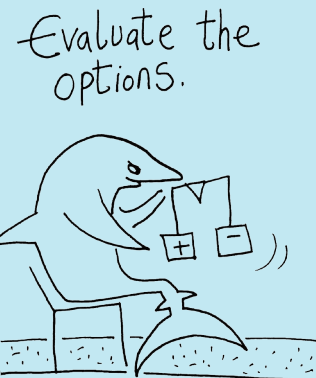- Are there standards or norms that can be used as guidance?

3. Explore the options
- Generate ideas using an 'ideas rainstorm'
- Screen the ideas to eliminate the unworkable ones

4. Evaluate the options
- Identify the costs and benefits (or pros and cons) of each option
- Identify risks associated with each option
- The way forward may be a mixture of different options

5. Implementation, monitoring & evaluation
- Finally, implement the chosen option(s), monitor and evaluate progress
- Did the chosen option solve the problem?
- If not, or if only partially, you will have collected information which will help you develop a further option which will be more likely to provide a satisfactory solution.
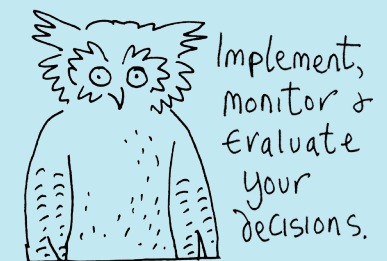
Sociocracy

Sociocracy is a collaborative governance method based on principles and practices that support a deeper democracy and ensure freedom and equality.

A set of principles and tools that ensure shared power. It's based on four key principles. To summarise, they are:

Consent	Decisions are made by consent to proposals. Consent means that nobody is aware of a risk that the organisation cannot afford to take. If each participant in the meeting indicates they do not see any risks, they have made a decision by consent to try out the experiment described in that proposal.
Circles	A sociocratic organization is made up of interlinked circles – semi-autonomous, self-organizing teams that each make their own membership decisions, decide on their own working methods, and manage their own budgets. Each circle defines its policy (and some policies which apply to other circles reporting to it) by consent.
Feedback	Sociocracy uses feedback processes throughout the organisation, and especially in its power structure. 'Double links' connect each circle with the one above it. The leader role provides guidance and prioritisation from the higher circle to the one below it. The representative role provides feedback and guidance from the lower circle to the one it reports to. Representatives and leaders are full members of both circles for the purpose of consent decision-making.
Election by consent	Choosing people for functions and/or responsibilities is done by consent after an open discussion. The discussion is important because it uncovers pertinent information about the members of the circle. Candidates are selected and proposed (not elected), and agreed upon using the consent process.

It's not necessary to implement the whole Sociocracy package, instead you can start using some of the tools, only implementing the structures when you are ready.

◼ **Three tools from sociocracy that you could use right away:**

https://agileandchange.com/3-tools-from-sociocracy-to-use-right-away-plus-magic-phrases-535e908fd060

Summary

These booklets aim to give you the tools and techniques that will improve communication, make meetings more effective, smooth the stresses and strains of organisational growth and development and enhance the effectiveness of the board.

" In true democracy every man and woman is taught to think for himself or herself.

Mahandas Gandhi

We believe that paying attention to the process of working together to achieve your aims will reduce conflict and improve team-working. We also believe that this will make your experience of working together more enjoyable and fun!

- **Booklet 1** outlines the different ways conflict can arise in a co-operative, the different responses and how it can be dealt with
- **Booklet 2** outlines some basic communication concepts and looks at steps we can take to improve communication, including avoiding misunderstandings arising from cultural or gender differences. We discuss the importance of assertive behaviour for good communication and highlight how the enterprise will benefit from maximum participation by members.
- **Booklet 4** explores the tensions that can arise as a co-operative develops and to identify tools, techniques and approaches which will help as the co-operative experiences growth and change. We look at managing change, policies and procedures to address issues such as recruitment, induction and appraisals or personal reviews. We also discuss a participative approach to strategic planning and summarise four strategic planning tools.
- **Booklet 5** addresses the vital role of the board. We look at the different roles that board members can adopt, the relationship of the board with day to day management and what to do if you are a board member as well as an employee – which hat do you wear when?

We believe that if you are willing to try some of the techniques described, these booklets will go a long way towards helping you reduce conflict in your co-operative. In addition, you won't be fazed when conflict does arise, but will recognise it as a symptom of the wealth of ideas, experience and knowledge you have around you.

Above all, these co-operative working techniques will help you work together and help you enjoy working together!

■   **Download pdf copies of all booklets in the *From Conflict to Co-operation* series at www.uk.coop/fc2c**

From conflict to co-operation

Co-operatives UK is the network for Britain's thousands of co-operatives. Together we work to promote, develop and unite member-owned businesses across the economy. From high street retailers to community owned pubs, fan owned football clubs to farmer controlled businesses, co-operatives are everywhere and together are worth £36 billion to the British economy.

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