



COOPERATIVES: A Sustainable Model for a New Culture

You can actually do better for yourself by being cooperative and altruistic than by selfishly refusing to cooperate with others. It's not that you do as well. You actually do better. - Helena Cronin, London School of Economics

By Ed Democracy

Cooperation vs. Competition
Should our culture be based on competition or cooperation? All other ideological systems aside, isn't this what it all comes down to? Do we choose "survival of the fittest" or "survival of the kindest"? But what if they are ultimately one in the same? What if it all comes down to who has the most sustainable organization? Who can both survive in their local community-based economy and survive effects of the larger economic system - hostile takeover, big-box "category killers", malls, sprawl, etc..

Ultimately, whoever is kindest to their employees, workers, volunteers, customers, community, and environment will survive. Therefore, if the cooperative model is the model more conducive to being the kindest, does this not mean that the kindest is the fittest and that cooperation out "competes" brutal, vicious competition?

Coopetition vs. Cooptation
"Coopetition" is a term referenced in a February 2005, "CorporatePR" blog-post entitled, "Cooperation vs. Competition". When corporate PR professionals are restructuring their entire practices based on the shift toward cooperation that's real change. But nice words and good intentions are one thing. Organizational structure, process, and culture are the real gauge. Cooperatives are designed for cooperation. Corporations are designed for competition. As corporations and cooperatives compete to see who can be the most cooperative, we may be witnessing a paradigm shift before our very eyes.

Cooperatives: THEORY vs. PRACTICE
In practical terms, cooperation means helping people get what they want or need as conveniently, efficiently, inexpensively, and pleasantly as possible. In short, cooperation with people's wants, needs, and experience is what counts the most. A well-intentioned cooperative might be inconvenient, inefficient, expensive, and unpleasant. At the same time, a greedy competitive corporation might be able to deliver an experience which is much better. Some people will make allowances to tolerate a certain level of lower quality experience to benefit a locally-based, well-intentioned co-op, but, only to a point. Ultimately, people vote with their feet, but, the cooperative model starts off with a huge advantage in being able to offer people an experience which is local, organic, fair trade, convenient, cruelty-free, and pleasant. However, corporations may have an advantage when it comes to efficiency and expense. Corporations have, historically, been focused on systemic efficiency at the expense of humanity. Finding the optimal

balance is the key to sustainability.

An Ironic Series of Unfortunate Events
For example, here, in Portland, Maine, the health food market over the last 30 years has seen the following ironic series of unfortunate events:

- * the Good Day Market & Cooperative, a local cooperatively-owned enterprise, failed;
- * the Whole Grocer, a local for-profit privately-owned retail business, succeeded for over 20 years only to see Wild Oats, a national retail chain, move in right next door;
- * Whole Grocer sells out to Whole Foods Market, according to their website, "Whole Foods Market is the world's largest retailer of natural and organic foods, with over 155 stores throughout North America and the United Kingdom" and is opening a 45,350 sq. ft. store in Portland, Maine. (PLEASE NOTE: WFM may have labor problems: www.wholeworkersunite.org)
- * Whole Foods Buys out Wild Oats for over \$500 Million.
- * Former owner of Whole Grocer is now a Manager for the local Whole Foods and is overseeing the closure of the local Wild Oats.

Ironically, when the Good Day Market & Cooperative closed, the Whole Grocer, then a relatively new store, spoke proudly of their "business regimen". Their balance of efficiency and humanity allowed them to survive longer than the Good Day Market & Cooperative, but, only until larger economic forces came to bear.

But wait! There's even more irony!
Sophia Collier once managed the Good Day Market & Cooperative! According to CNN Money, "years before she founded a \$1.2 billion mutual fund company, Sophia Collier ... between the ages of 16 and 20, Collier lived on a Hopi Indian reservation and fixed boats in Arizona; and then ran a construction company and a food co-op in Portland, Maine. She published an autobiography of those years, called "Soul Rush," at 20, and moved to Brooklyn in 1976. She and a childhood friend founded SoHo Natural Soda in her Brooklyn kitchen when she was 21. [She later sold SoHo and acquired a majority interest in Working Assets before founding Citizen's Funds, one of the nation's largest families of socially responsible mutual funds.] ... The state of New York recently chose Citizens to manage \$250 million in pension assets, which Collier said is the largest amount ever awarded to a socially responsible management company." Had she stayed with the Good Day, she probably would not have made so much money and become one of the

world's top leaders in socially responsible business and investing. Certainly, this column not have been able to bring you these, **navigational aids to sustainable organizing from George Soros via Sophia Collier** and CNN Money: "Collier likes to quote billionaire investor George Soros, who once said it's not so much that he is right more than the average person -- he just can recognize that he is wrong more quickly. 'He recognized more quickly that he was wrong and he could change courses,' Collier said. 'You need to identify if you're on the wrong course and correct it - and not give up.'"

Organizing a Portland Food Co-op
There is a group of people meeting

regularly who have not given up on a Portland Food Co-op. (FMI: www.can-so.org/foodcoop) Portland's history offers lessons to be learned about sustainable organizing and finding the right balance between efficiency and humanity. This is an exciting opportunity to write the next chapter in the history of Portland's health food market.

Please share your thoughts on sustainable organizing, links, or column ideas on our website at: www.can-so.org/chartingdemocracy or call 615-3744

Helpful WEB Links for Sustainable Organizing:

Cooperative Maine
www.cooperativemaine.org

Maine Foods Network - Fresh from Field to Fork
www.mainefoods.net

Cooperative Grocer Online Magazine
www.cooperativegrocer.coop

REGINA - Regional Index of Cooperation
www.find.coop

Cooperative Life
www.cooplifecoop

Cooperative Development Institute
www.cdi.coop

Local Harvest [online coop]
www.localharvest.org/

The SuperMarketCoop [online coop]
www.supermarketcoop.com

MAP of Technologies of Cooperation
www.iff.org/docs/SR-897_Techs_of_Coop_MAP.pdf

COOPERATIVE - Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative>



John Profenno
Associate Broker
Owner
japro_1999@yahoo.com • www.regencyme.com

Regency
Realty Group
762 Main Street
South Portland, ME 04106
Office: 207-253-1500 x 112
Cell: 207-712-0595 • Fax: 207-253-1616

BUYING OR SELLING? WE PUT EXPERIENCE TO WORK!