



# LEADer

*A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among NCGA's Western Corridor co-op leadership*

## A Study Guide for Co-op Leaders

### Start 'Em Out Right! New Director Orientation

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# Start 'Em Out Right!

If you've ever belonged to a sports team, you know that getting your uniforms is a big deal. When everyone puts his or her T-shirt or jersey on for the first time, it's usually a noisy, happy occasion. There's a sense of cohesion created by seeing everyone dressed up as a team.

What is this sensation? Does the emblem, logo, or team colors make the group a team? Of course not. It's the fact that people share a common goal and work together to accomplish that goal—refining rules, procedures, and plays along the way. A group functioning as a team has a recognizable, ephemeral quality.

Team cohesion is not something you can make happen. But there are things you can do to influence the process.

This issue of the LEADer deals with two aspects of orienting new directors. The first involves things you need to have in place or make happen to make sure your board functions efficiently and effectively. But just as important is how directors go about building relationships with one another—devoting the time and energy to creating emotional connections at a deeper level. We hope you'll find the following ideas on these topics useful.



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## More about the LEADer

A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among NCGA's Western Corridor co-op leadership

- The *LEADer* is published quarterly and is distributed to directors and leaders of Western Corridor co-ops.
- The *LEADer* is now available to all interested co-op leaders at no charge, thanks to the generosity of NCGA's Western Corridor members. You can find information about the LEAD program and an online subscription form at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.
- We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. Send comments or questions to [askthebest@ncga.coop](mailto:askthebest@ncga.coop).
- The next issue will be available in winter 2010. It will focus on the board's role in monitoring the co-op's overall financial health.
- For more information about NCGA, the Western Corridor, upcoming western regional board training events, the *LEADer*, or the BEST, contact:

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### The LEADer Is Online and Available to ANYONE!

The *LEADer* is available to all interested co-op leaders. This issue and all back issues are available online at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>. Western Corridor co-ops can have new issues sent directly by e-mail; contact Karen Zimbelman at [kz@ncga.coop](mailto:kz@ncga.coop).



# New Director Orientation

## Who Does What . . . and Why Bother?



by Martha Whitman

No one disputes that board orientations are important, but between director turnover and time consumed by regular board work, orientations are susceptible to inconsistent practices at best and benign neglect at worst. Establishing who's responsible for what is key in creating fruitful orientations that will survive the test of turnover and all the distractions inherent in board life.

Ultimately, all directors and the general manager are involved in new director orientation. All directors should be encouraged or required to attend—not only because they will learn something but also because orientation is essential for integrating new directors into the whole and modeling board culture. Compared to regular board meetings, the less formal nature of orientations will allow for the development of good rapport between directors.

Yet the orientation session itself is neither the beginning nor the end of the orientation process. Your orientation will ideally begin within the

nominations and elections committee. Imagine all the time and heartache saved if that committee spent time with potential candidates to weed out those who misunderstood the board's roles, responsibilities, and time commitment. A prospective board member might want to influence the co-op in a way that can't be properly achieved through board work, and it would be a service to everyone if this situation were recognized early on. The committee could achieve such clarity through one-on-one interviews, explaining the co-op's policy manual and bylaws, and providing prospective board members with readings on co-op governance. And since nothing clarifies theory like practice, it also makes sense to ask candidates to attend a board meeting.

The rest of the orientation typically falls to the board development committee. If you don't have one, consider forming one, as there is a fair amount of work to be done, and it shouldn't fall on the shoulders of just one person. The beauty of utilizing such a committee is that its

members can consider the big picture and coordinate various aspects of board training and development. The committee can plan the flow of orientations, retreats, and regional trainings and can continually call attention to resources available to directors, such as the *LEADer*, the CGIN listserve, and *Cooperative Grocer* magazine. Rather than leaving learning to chance, the board development committee can help all directors build their leadership and governance skills.

Including the general manager either as a member or adjunct of the board development committee will enhance the committee's effectiveness. The range of the general manager's participation depends on several factors. Does an administrative assistant organize all the logistics of board orientations, such as scheduling and preparing handbooks? Are the orientation agenda and materials already established and deemed effective? Are there enough seasoned directors

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## New Director Orientation Who Does What... and Why Bother?

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to give deeper context to the discussions that will inevitably occur during training? Is the co-op expecting significant projects, challenges, or opportunities that are best explained by the general manager? Depending on such variables, the general manager can provide continuity at orientations by handling the nuts and bolts, giving tours, or presenting agenda items. What you don't want to miss is the golden opportunity for new directors and the general manager to begin their professional relationship in the collegial atmosphere of an orientation.

Given that new directors will receive a lot of information over a short period, the orientation doesn't end at the conclusion of the formal session. Some boards assign a buddy to each new director. The buddy should be available to the new director and ideally also check in with him or her. With each question asked, a great buddy looks for ways to broaden the new director's understanding of

board work. Some boards have the president act as a buddy to all new directors. The president is a logical choice, since ensuring that all board members fulfill their duties and responsibilities falls within his or her job description, but it's helpful to periodically review whether having the president perform this task is the correct decision. The president might already have enough on his or her plate, and someone else might be better suited and ready and willing to track the integration of new directors.

If you look beyond the titles of nominations and elections

committee, board development committee, general manager, and administrative assistant and simply identify their potential roles in creating an orientation program, your team can organize itself to fit your circumstances and can cogently present all the elements of a comprehensive orientation. The event needn't be burdensome. In fact, it can be one of the more meaningful activities of board service. The orientation will allow you to build a strong leadership team that will outlast any one person's tenure. For your co-op, this will be a legacy of immeasurable value.

## Mixing It Up! by Cindy Owings

*Just as a tasty salad could include romaine or elk's tongue lettuce, a new director orientation will vary, depending on the ingredients or circumstances of your current board. Some of the ingredients that can influence orientation: how many directors are new; the experience of continuing directors and the general manager; and the timing (within the fiscal year or relative to big financial decisions) of elections.*

*Suppose four out of nine board members are new. In that case, the orientation will be more important than it would be if only one director were new. A sense of urgency is created when almost half the board must be brought up to functional speed.*

*How fresh are the continuing directors and the general manager? What level of experience do they have? Institutional knowledge within a board lends itself to a rich orientation filled with detail, understanding, and counsel. In contrast, if continuing board members are fairly new, board orientation will depend a lot on notes and materials left behind by earlier directors.*

*Seasonality—or when in the fiscal year new directors come on the board—is also a factor. Remember that even an inexperienced board might need to make a timely decision about immediate financial circumstances.*

*You see, tossing the board orientation salad requires ingenuity and careful consideration—dressed with flexibility. Enjoy!*

# Building Board Cohesion

## The Ongoing Board Orientation

by Marcia Shaw

When new board members arrive, it's important to pay attention to the social dynamics in the room. The first issue of team making is inclusion. To feel connected to the group, we all need to feel accepted. We need to know that others have made a place for us in the group. It's important to set aside time for board members to connect personally with each other. Make sure new board members are not left sitting on the periphery of the board meeting.

Some boards assign a mentor to each new director. The mentor is responsible for introductions and for learning about the newbie's experience and goals. If new directors have questions or confusion during the first few meetings, they can call their mentors for in-depth discussions.

New groups often experience some push and pull around leadership, process, and ownership.

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*Board members  
need to feel  
they have both  
responsibility and  
a role to play.*

When you have new directors, the first part of the agenda is helping them understand their role and how the board goes about its business, and helping them get up to speed on current issues facing the board and the co-op. Beyond that, it's important to think about how you can bring new directors into the team and continue to build a sense of cohesion and teamwork within the board. On a good team, everyone plays his or her own position, but when the unexpected happens (when someone drops the ball), each player figures out what extra he or she can do to support the team. If you know your colleagues' strengths and weaknesses, you'll better be able to fill in and offer help to keep the board running smoothly.



## Building Board Cohesion

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Well-trained groups learn not to expect everyone to agree on each issue (unanimity) and learn that differences of opinion aren't something to fear. This stage in the life of a group is called "storming." The stage is usually brief and mild, but groups can get stuck there and have a difficult time moving on. This period should be handled with respectful listening and a problem-solving attitude.

Board members need to feel they have both responsibility and a role to play. Even new board members can take on specific

responsibilities. Board members with more experience need to know that others are counting on them and expect them to be part of solutions. Although not everyone has the same capabilities, everyone can contribute. Keeping people accountable isn't just good management; it also communicates that you *need* everyone's contribution. Feeling like an important part of the process keeps each person connected to the group.

"Norming" is the process of deciding what the informal (and usually unspoken) rules of the group will be. Most boards have written rules of decision making, but what about unwritten rules? How much joking and laughter is usual and accepted? How late can someone be without an explanation? What are the expectations for follow-through and consequences for not following up as assigned? How much slack do we give leaders in establishing process and priority for meetings? Newcomers especially won't know the informal rules.

They might flounder a bit as they struggle to get on the same page as everyone else.

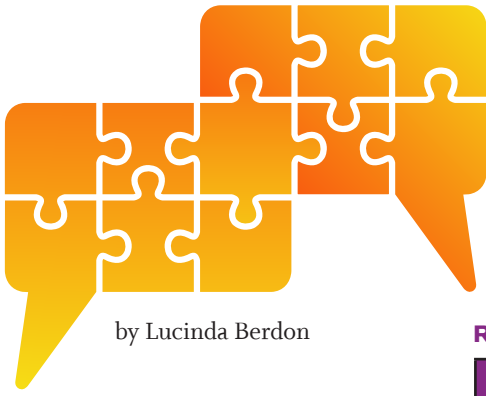
When a group has had enough social time for everyone to feel included, has survived some disagreements with egos intact, and feels comfortable with informal norms, we say the group is "performing." It takes a while for a group to become a team, and you shouldn't expect a newly negotiating group to be up to speed until members have spent some informal time together, as well as time in board meetings.

One of the advantages of attending workshops and conferences is that board members can get to know each other deeply and personally while traveling. That connection can help when a board is struggling with a difficult issue. Becoming a team can be hard work, with somewhat nebulous mileposts, but if you've ever been part of a truly effective team, you know it's worth the time and energy it takes to get there.



## Next Issue: Monitoring Co-op Focus on Financials

Our next issue, which comes out in late 2010, will look at what board members should be paying attention to in order to adequately monitor their co-op's financial health. What should be reported? How often? How do you know if something is just a fluctuation or an indicator of a seriously negative trend? Send your thoughts, questions, experiences, ideas, and tips on this topic to [askthebest@ncga.coop](mailto:askthebest@ncga.coop) or contact Karen Zimbelman ([kz@ncga.coop](mailto:kz@ncga.coop)).



by Lucinda Berdon

# Try This!

## New Director Orientation Survey

**Rate as follows:** 1=Strongly disagree 2=Disagree somewhat 3=Agree somewhat 4=Strongly agree

The best advice on how to shape and deliver a board member orientation comes from those who recently went through the process. Here's a short survey that you can give to new directors. It's best to collect their input three to six months after an election or new director orientation. Feel free to adapt the questions to your co-op.

We welcome any suggestions and comments you have. How can we better orient new directors to the co-op, the board, and the job?

The following topics were presented in a useful, understandable, and informative way	1	2	3	4	N/A
Historical background on the co-op					
What is a co-op?					
Member equity and patronage dividends					
Co-op affiliations: NCGA, CGIN, NCBA, other					
Co-op programs and participation in community events					
Board resources, professional contacts, and support					
Cooperative principles					
Co-op bylaws					
Board policy manual					
Board duties and responsibilities					
Co-op management and staff relations					
Board rosters and contact information					
Co-op website and social media work					
Board calendar					
Meeting process and procedures					
Board committees					
Annual report					
State statutes					
Financial status and information: balance sheet, income statement, cash flow					
Basic retail grocery operational issues					
Long-term strategic plan and vision					
Current co-op projects, challenges, and strengths					

# Check It Out!

## For More Information

Compiled by Cindy Owings and Paige Lettington

### Basic Resource Library

Cooperative Grocers' Information Network

<http://cgin.coop>

After logging in, go to: <http://www.cgin.coop/resources/library/Board%20Orientation%20and%20Manuals>

CGIN's library includes board orientation documents and board manuals, including samples from Wheatsville Food Co-op, Food Conspiracy Co-op, Quincy Natural Foods, La Montañita Co-op, and Weavers Way. Watch for more additions and feel free to submit your materials to this site. You must be a CGIN member to access the site.

### Basic Guidelines and Sample Agenda for Board Training Sessions

Free Management Library

<http://www.managementhelp.org/boards/brdtrain.htm>

### Board Orientation

BoardSource

<http://www.bridgestar.org/Library/BoardOrientation.aspx>

Includes discussion of settings, participants, and tools

### Board Orientation: It Begins with the First Conversation

Leading by Design: A Resource for Nonprofits

<http://leadingbydesign.blogspot.com/2009/07/board-orientation-it-begins-with-first.html>

### Board Orientation Strategies: Tips, Tools, and Resources Designed to Get Your Board into Top Gear Quickly

Department of Wellness, Culture, and Sport

<http://www.gnb.ca/0131/pdfs/bosdoc.doc>

### "Board Orientation, Training, and Education"

Candace Dow, *Cooperative Grocer* magazine

<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=629>

### Create the Future

Creative Information Systems and the Center for Public Skills Training

[http://www.createthefuture.com/board\\_orientation.htm](http://www.createthefuture.com/board_orientation.htm)

### Governance Matters Archives

Canadian Co-operative Association

<http://www.coopscanada.coop/en/orphan/Governance-Matters-Newsletter-Archives>

Articles focused specifically on board governance for cooperatives

### Ongoing Board Education: Ensuring Board Members Have the Knowledge They Need

Community Driven Institute

[http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NPLibrary/NP\\_Bd\\_OngoingBoardEducation\\_Art.htm](http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NPLibrary/NP_Bd_OngoingBoardEducation_Art.htm)

### Tools You Can Use

Creative Information Systems and the Center for Public Skills Training

[http://www.createthefuture.com/board\\_orientation\\_tools.htm](http://www.createthefuture.com/board_orientation_tools.htm)

Includes a sample board handbook table of contents, sample board member orientation outline, and parliamentary procedure overview







# BOARD ORIENTATION

## Checklist and Assessment Tool

A LEADer STUDY GUIDE

*Use this checklist to assess the completeness of your board's orientation process.*

### WHAT TO COVER IN THE ORIENTATION

The following topics are key to a comprehensive board orientation, but they need not be covered in one session or by the same person. In planning your orientation, review this list and note where each topic will be covered (at a retreat, a formal board meeting, an informal board meeting, or an individual meeting) and who will provide the information (the board president, general manager, or someone else).

TOPIC	SETTING	WHO WILL COVER
Conduct and ethics		
Board and management roles and responsibilities		
Board culture		
Expectations for board members regarding committee service, meetings, preparation, and community involvement		
Meeting structure and conduct		
Contents of board manual (see checklist on next page)		
Current issues facing the co-op and the board		
What committees are currently working on		
General manager/operational goals for the year		
Board goals or initiatives for the year		
Natural foods and grocery industry trends and issues		
Financials: current situation and bringing newcomers up to speed		

# BOARD ORIENTATION

## Checklist and Assessment Tool

A LEADER STUDY GUIDE

### MATERIALS TO PROVIDE (BOARD MANUAL)

After elections but before the first board meeting, new directors should receive the following materials, which may or may not be part of a board manual. Use this checklist to assess the quality and completeness of your materials.

MATERIALS TO PROVIDE	MISSING	NEEDS WORK	GOOD TO GO
History and background documentation about your co-op			
Membership system and key membership statistics			
Vision, mission, and values statements			
Board policies			
Code of conduct and ethics			
Bylaws			
Plans presented by the general manager to the board (strategic plans, marketing plans, business plans)			
Committee charters, including description of duties and committee makeup			
Board job description, including expectations regarding committee service, meetings, preparation, and community involvement			
Job descriptions for board officers and other special board positions			

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# BOARD ORIENTATION

## Checklist and Assessment Tool

A LEADer STUDY GUIDE

### MATERIALS TO PROVIDE (BOARD MANUAL)

Continued from Page SG2

MATERIALS TO PROVIDE	MISSING	NEEDS WORK	GOOD TO GO
Board contact information, including that of board members and officers, the general manager, the board administrator, the facilitator (if any), and committee chairs			
Board calendar (regular meetings plus conferences, regional workshops, scheduled trainings, member-owner meetings, and other co-op events)			
Board agendas and minutes for the previous six to twelve months			
Key financial statistics			
Most recent financial statements, budget, audit, or review			
Program brochures and fact sheets (on ownership, discounts, community assistance, and fund-raising efforts)			
Job description of general manager			
Job description of board administrator and/or facilitator			
High-level organizational chart			
List of resources: <i>LEADer</i> , CGIN website, books, <i>Cooperative Grocer</i>			

