

On a Mission to Create Committed Members

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In my last newsletter I discussed a recent research study examining the factors associated with the continued participation in a cooperative. The members' trust in the cooperative leaders, which had several dimensions, was strongly related to membership commitment. Another important factor is the members' understanding of and support for the cooperative's mission. The members' support of the cooperative mission was measured by multiple questions which determined if the member understood the cooperative's mission, whether they supported the stated mission and whether the cooperative remained focused on its mission.

Not surprisingly, a member's understanding and support of the cooperative's mission is highly correlated with the member's trust in the cooperative leaders. Both factors are also associated with continued membership and participation in the cooperative. Members who understand and support the cooperative's mission are also more likely to participate in governance.

Most cooperative leaders review the cooperative's mission statement during strategic planning sessions. A board of directors may occasionally tweak their mission statement and are generally satisfied with the current version. That leads to the question of how well members understand their cooperative's mission. Most boards spend considerable time pondering the nuances of the cooperative's mission. Communicating that mission to members may take more than simply listing the mission statement on the web site or newsletter. It appears that the better members understand and support the cooperative mission, the more likely they are to remain in the cooperative.

Members also need to be convinced that the cooperative is remaining true to their mission. There are numerous examples of Fortune 500 companies straying from their mission statements either by diversifying outside of their core expertise or by not living up to promises of integrity, customer value or environmental stewardship. Agricultural cooperatives are less likely to deviate from their overall mission although some have had painful lessons in taking on unrelated business opportunities. Cooperatives can also stray by failing to act on the "member-benefit" and "member-controlled" parts of their mission statement. All of the moving pieces of the cooperative including how you retain and allocate equity, what portion of the membership votes at the annual meeting and whether you have competitive board elections reflect on your focus on the cooperative aspect of your mission statement.

Do your members understand the reason your cooperative exists? Do they perceive it operating as a "true cooperative"? If so you are on a mission to create committed members!

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