Elections Field Guide
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Available online in the CBLD Library

Was your last Board election a thoughtful exercise in democracy in which members chose a well-qualified set of directors that add value to the Board and to the co-op? More than anyone else in the cooperative, the Board itself is responsible for ensuring that the answer to this question is "Yes!" Elections should be neither mundane nor contentious, but should honor and reinforce the democratic foundations of cooperatives.

Three fundamental principles underlie election procedures and processes:

- ☆ ***One member, one vote***: The Cooperative Principles tell us "cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members," with members having "equal voting rights (one member, one vote)."
- ☆ ***Member engagement:*** Board elections are an important way that consumer co-op owners and their Boards engage with each other.
- ☆ ***Excellence in governance:*** The Board, which bears ultimate responsibility for the affairs of the co-op, must ensure that elections meet basic standards of fairness and create strong leadership for the cooperative.

What makes an election both fair and beneficial to the co-op?

- ☆ An informed electorate or membership. Owners understand the leadership role of the Board, the ongoing work in which the Board is engaged, and the current issues facing the cooperative.
- ☆ Voting processes that are open to all, easily-understood and monitored. There is a concise and clear set of election procedures that follow all applicable requirements (including state law, your co-op's bylaws, and Board policy). Elections are monitored and overseen by objective persons to make sure that the procedures are followed.
- ☆ A voting process in which each vote is sacred. Each person casts their vote without undue influence from anyone else; ballots are secret. In addition, ballots are kept secure from the moment they are cast until they are counted.
- ☆ An outcome that all owners have confidence in and are able to support regardless of personal views.

Some suggested "best practices"

- ☆ Establish a set of criteria for fair and democratic board elections. Write these criteria as a governance process policy, or as a committee charter, or as a limitations policy to direct the GM.
- ☆ Require that the person or committee responsible for supervising the election process report back to the board following the election. The content of the report should clearly indicate how the process met the board's pre-established criteria.
- ☆ Create an application packet for candidates to (1) educate them about the Board's role and (2) give them an opportunity to reflect on and explain their qualifications.
- ☆ The Board should present members with more than enough qualified candidates. Contested elections are an important aspect of true democratic control. (See the "Perpetuating a Strong Board" workshop materials for more discussion about identifying qualified candidates.)
- ☆ Unless your governing documents provide otherwise, only the Board itself should have power to place candidates' names on the ballot. While a committee dedicated to recruiting candidates may be helpful, authority granted to nominating committees can easily conflict with authority the members have given to the Board.
- ☆ On the ballot itself, distinguish "Board nominated" candidates from "self nominated" or "petition nominated."
- ☆ Allow members to cast ballots over a period of time, rather than solely at the annual meeting itself. This is a simple way to encourage greater participation.
- ☆ Remember the election itself is just one part of an annual cycle of Board recruitment and development. After a bit of rest and celebration – jump right back into the Board development work so that your members will have another great crop of Board candidates next year.
- ☆ Don't forget to orient and train your new directors. Remember the 5th Cooperative Principle: "Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives."

Some pitfalls to avoid

- ☆ Any person or group (ex: nominating committee, individual director, employee) having undue freedom to put *their* preferred candidates on the ballot or to influence members' votes.
- ☆ A process that allows small but vocal minority of members to overpower the right of all members to have a balanced conversation about the merits of various candidates.
- ☆ Candidate statements that are not vetted for factual accuracy.
- ☆ Balloting process that is too restrictive, making it hard for members to participate.
- ☆ Balloting process that makes it easy for an individual or small group to "stuff the ballot box."
- ☆ Proxy voting, or any other practice that undermines the "one member, one vote" principle.
- ☆ An overemphasis on increasing voter participation without an equal or greater emphasis on increasing voter education.

Some specific process suggestions:

- ☆ Clarify the board nomination process.
  - Include specific provisions for how to consider incumbents for nomination, and for incumbents to recuse themselves from the decision-making process as appropriate.
  - Include specific provisions for addressing potential candidates' conflicts of interest; the board should not nominate anyone who has a conflict of interest.
- ☆ Clarify any rules for campaigning.
  - Do not allow employees to campaign for themselves or other candidates while they are on the job.
- ☆ Decide in advance what happens in case of a tie. While you could have a run-off election, something as simple as a coin-toss could suffice to break the tie. Just don't wait until after the election to figure out your preferred process.
- ☆ Make sure ballots clearly indicate any special circumstances in the election. For example, if members are electing 3 people to full terms and 1 person to a partial term, with the 4th-ranked candidate filling the short term, clearly explain this on the ballot.
- ☆ Count ballots in a location that allows for observers to be present without interfering with the process.

Excellent boards ensure excellent elections.

Throughout the election cycle, from the nomination process, to the balloting period, and on to the vote count itself, the Board ensures complete integrity. Make decisions based on your controlling documents, set and alter policy and procedure as necessary, delegate and monitor carefully. Because democracy matters, elections matter; because elections matter, your Board must fulfill its duty on behalf of your co-op's members.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the controlling (source) documents guiding your elections?
2. Does your co-op have well-documented procedures, monitored and revised as necessary before and after each election cycle?
3. Can you show that procedures are aligned with requirements set out in source documents?
4. Do you believe contested elections are important? Why or why not? What difference do they make for your cooperative and your members?
5. What systems could you implement to make it easier for members to participate, while still ensuring they are making informed choices?
6. Do your co-op's board elections follow the three underlying principles laid out at the beginning of this article?

Resources:

- Perpetuating a Strong Board, CBLD online recorded workshop: http://cdsconsulting.coop/cbldlibrary
- "Democracy in Cooperatives." by Michael Healy. Cooperative Grocer, May 2005 http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=595
- "Putting Your Best Slate Forward," by Mary Hooten Lee. *Cooperative Grocer*, Nov 1990 http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=81
- "Turnover or Tenure: Should Directors' Terms Be Limited?" by Karen Zimbelman. *Cooperative Grocer*, Sept 1990. http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=84
- "Co-op Election Process and Improving Turnout." CGIN listserve discussion, Jan-Mar, 2008. www.cgin.coop.
- Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections, Inter-Parliamentary Union. http://www.ipu.org/Cnl-e/154-free.htm