Tools for Good Governance

Ongoing business strategy
Implementation of strategy is a key component of day-to-day operational work and decision making. The membership inputs into Unicorn's strategic planning at our annual Away Day and through General Meeting discussions. Our Principles play an important role in setting strategic priorities.

A small group of members, selected to represent key areas of the business, meet more frequently to ensure strategic planning remains an ongoing active function with the co-op. This group takes responsible for:
- An annual business audit
- An annual commercial strategy presentation for all members
- Updating our rolling Business Activities Outline Plan

All circles produce a short Annual Plan, setting out what they will be working on to help meet shared strategic priorities for the year ahead.

While some participants may be drivers of ideas more than others, all members must stand behind the eventual agreed plan and objectives. Consent and consultation are vital, as are cost-effective timescales and meeting the pressures of commercial life.

Reading and Reviews
As we have grown, required reading has increased. All members are expected to read the weekly newsletter, which alongside co-op announcements always features a weekly summary of business performance against the previous three years and any new products introduced.

Members are also expected to read the fortnightly Circle Updates document, which contains a short update from each circle on its current work, with a link to each circle's minutes. Other required reading includes Forum and General Meeting agendas, proposals and minutes, financial reports and forecasts, plus agendas and minutes for circle meetings that individuals may attend.

Annual member reviews and assessments of new members of staff are also mandatory. These administrative duties generally fall outside work time (amounting to around half an hour each week), but are vital links connecting the member-directors to the business.

Meetings
Effective meetings rely on basic bureaucracy such as agenda documents shared in advance with any preparatory reading, and concise and available minutes clearly stating decisions taken and agreed action points. Basic ground rules help to make meetings participatory and efficient. In our circle meetings this includes speaking in rounds so everyone is actively heard, and the use of intentional agendas that state whether an item coming to the meeting is for information purposes, to be explored, or for decision.

As an organisation grows, good practice is crucial to ensure General Meetings remain participatory and effective at taking collective decisions within the available time.

We cannot overstate the value of a well trained facilitator who helps to build consensus and encourage full active participation!

Policy List

Policies are the rules and regulations that ensure consistent practice and a voice of 'authority' in a co-operative. Unicorn policies aim to (a) shape and develop the cooperative, (b) protect members and Unicorn, (c) define workers' rights or entitlements, or (d) put a specific area of ethics into practice.

A policy should be written as concisely and clearly (even out of context) as possible, with the exact wording agreed at a members meeting. A full Policy List should be kept up to date, easily accessible, and available for reference during meetings. (See appendices for Structure, Regulations and Finance, Personnel and Benefits policies.)

Budgets

Agreed budgetary limitations reinforce Unicorn's structure and decision-making processes. See Regulations and Finance policies for examples.

Reporting and Communication Systems

Effective scrutiny is essential in joint enterprise. Everyone really does need to know the sales, top sellers, new products, out of stocks, new procedures, business performance, press coverage, etc. Mandatory reading must be agreed, complied with, and allowed to change over time to meet the needs of the business and its members.

Good informal communication (where most innovation and creativity takes place) is rooted in good formal systems. Hierarchy can emerge if reading is not shared and meetings are not well reported, and good decisions require an awareness of background information and the methods of implementation. To ensure business security and trust amongst members, financial data, business activities and planning must be transparent and well understood by all.

Diaries, rotas, task checklists, noticeboards, emails, minutes and shared documents are essential (see Communication Systems Appendix for details).