



RESPONDING TO ARTICLE ON SECRET GOVERNANCE AND NON- DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, STAFF CALL AUTHOR 'CRAZY MAN' AND 'PARANOID'

by Terry Hokenson and Betsy Barnum
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Early responses to our article on secret governance and the proposed Non-Disclosure Agreement indicate that some office staff people feel that the Rooster crowd is paranoid. Paranoia is the fear of something that isn't real. So let us look at how that diagnosis fits our actual situation.

What is driving our anxiety about the direction of the co-op is a long series of changes and developments in practices and attitudes at the co-op that is marked by

- o an evaporating sense of community,
- o an increasing sense of the co-op's departure from co-op values,
- o practically nonexistent democracy, featuring an annual election where members vote for people hardly any of them know and have scant chance to learn about, followed by a training process which indoctrinates the new board members in the policy

governance model resulting in their avoidance of contact with member-owners; and

- forms of member participation that are limited to some classes and a passive role as recipients of one-way management promotions and communiques.

No wonder so few members vote. It's as if the co-operative avatar is so far away that you can see their lips moving but can't hear their voice. Are we turning into another Costco?

There has been a persistent call for greater transparency in governance, but it goes unheard. We conclude that we must build a bigger megaphone--build a more effective organization among co-op members to give them a voice. That is what we who gather around the Seward Rooster are up to.

There is a lot of frustration out here in the hinterlands. The board members we elect don't even try to communicate with us; in fact, we have gotten the distinct impression that they are discouraged from doing so. No contact information is available for individual board members. Messages sent to the board are almost never answered by a board member and most often are not answered at all.

So it's almost as if we must be deliberately deceiving ourselves if we don't see that they don't want to hear from us. What kind of democracy is that? And like the employees before they got their union, we have no way to talk with each other and compare notes. If we see practices in the co-op that concern us, our elected board members will not discuss them with us. If we are rebuffed by a representative of management, we have no recourse.

Our elected representatives have had policy governance drilled into them and feel they must not engage with us over practical concerns about how the co-op is being run. They have become like zombies to us. This is probably normal for large for-profit corporate entities, but doesn't befit a co-op.

If some folks think that what we have just published concerning secret governance and the proposed Non-Disclosure Agreement is based on paranoia, that just shows that they don't recognize the factual basis for our concerns. It's just a comment on their limited understanding of our experience. And maybe that's not surprising, since co-op management is in charge of all the means of "communication" with membership and it's all a one-way street; no back and forth allowed.

We members are clearly forced to build a means of communication of our own, on our own time, and with no salaries or budgets to support us. No wonder we have such a struggle to make our case. All that exists, to our knowledge, that allows members to talk back to management is the comments posted on the bulletin boards. Those comments are effectively limited to concerns with products, not policies.

Speaking of policies, we understand that the board has had a longstanding practice under policy governance of yielding all power over co-op store practices to the general manager. So when we try to communicate with the board about practices that we have concerns about, first we are told that we have no right to speak in the board meetings, and then we have no other options. We are dismissed.

So we must work to establish our power in order to, as it were, "take back the co-op." Now, dear staff people, does our perception begin to make a little bit of sense? If you

read through the whole piece Terry wrote and the comment by Betsy, you will see that we are in varying degrees reluctant to think in terms of takeovers and conspiracies. Betsy finds it helps her make sense of what is going on, although she too desires corroboration through testimony and eyewitness reports.

But there are objectively observable things happening (and not happening) in the co-op that are very concerning, and with all the secrecy shrouding what the board does, topped off by the recent move to impose a Non-Disclosure Agreement on the members of the board, you can hardly blame some observers for suspecting the existence of a capitalist conspiracy to take over the co-ops to make sense of what is happening. The cooperative hallmarks of democracy, community and co-operation are being left in the dust of the past.

We would be willing to get together with those who think the Rooster crowd is paranoid, and using quiet and relaxed voices, explain further details of actual things that are happening or not happening, that give us cause for great concern. That would demonstrate the opposite of paranoia, which is a word that mis-diagnoses and dismisses our concerns, just as capitalist conspiracy is a term that may misdiagnose the cause of our concerns. We will be happy to focus on facts.

Co-op member-owners who share our concerns about the direction the co-op is being led should express their opinions in a civil manner by calling the co-op (go to <https://seward.coop>) and by emailing the board at board@seward.coop. If you have questions or comments about our statements or arguments in the Seward Rooster, by all means email us at sewardrooster@gmail.com.