



## Let the Board Be the Board

Terry Hokenson  
May 23, 2019

Alarms have been sounded by certain Seward Co-op staff and their friends over actions taken by

members of the Board of Directors at the April board meeting while reviewing the performance of the General Manager. My bias is that these actions should be taken as normal, but a fuss is being made, even though the conversation is not over.

As a result we urge supporters of co-op union workers and open and transparent governance to attend the board meeting on Tuesday, May 28, at 6:15 pm. Please see <https://seward.coop/coop/board>. Please note, we aren't calling you to battle. We are calling you to witness.

At the April board meeting, board members were reviewing General Manager Sean Doyle's response to a standard board policy governing the GM's relations with employees, called Executive Limitation 2 or EL 2. Part of his response was presented in the form of a report on an employee survey performed by CDS Consulting. The board meeting was open to all co-op members. Four members attended, including myself.

The survey was quite detailed and was generally agreed to be thorough. All employees participated. As one observer in attendance noted, in many areas the responses were positive, with high satisfaction

overall. Most questions got scores that were at or above a level that was in compliance with board-set standards. The results were comparable to other local co-ops. The better scores appeared in such matters as workplace safety, positive relations with the supervisor, and experiencing a link between the work and the co-op's vision.

However, some scores revealed a marked range of experiences among the employees, indicating a "high standard deviation," in survey lingo. This means that while some gave high scores, other employees gave low scores. Some of the areas in which such results occurred were to inquiries on whether the employee felt compensated fairly, whether they were disciplined fairly or comparably with other co-workers, or experienced discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, or gender identity. These topics are what sparked questions and conversation following the survey presentation, according to another observer at the board meeting.

(I should note that I have a slight hearing impairment and was not able to follow much of the softly voiced discussion by the board members raising the questions. At least I can attest to the fact that their queries and comments were carried on in civil-sounding voices and were not raised enough to be audible to me. My information about what they said comes from conversations with others present and Facebook posts by other attenders. I was able to hear the objections by irate staff who raised their voice.)

The board policy manual is available at <https://seward.coop/coop/board>. Board policy EL 2 includes the following language:

With respect to the treatment of staff, the GM will not cause or allow conditions that are

discriminatory, inequitable, unfair, undignified, disorganized, unclear, unhealthful, unsafe, or illegal, or deviate from board priorities established in its Ends Policies.

The GM will not:

EL 2.1 Operate without a written personnel handbook which: (a) clarifies rules, rights and responsibilities for staff; (b) provides for respectful and effective handling of concerns or conflicts; (c) contains a whistleblower policy.

EL 2.2 Allow staff to be unprepared to deal with emergency situations.

Some of the other questions raised about the "high standard deviation" items in the survey related to how scores appeared by department, whether data on race was collected, and how the score numbers for compliance or noncompliance were set. Frustration was evident on all sides, and as the board facilitator (CDS consultant Brian McDermott) noted the exceeding of the allotted time for this agenda item, the board members asking questions seemed frustrated that they were being rushed into voting on the motion to approve without getting their questions answered.

Someone suggested tabling the motion to approve the report so further discussion could be held at the May meeting. However, others urged a vote, including McDermott. Those who wanted more discussion voted not to approve--four voting no and one abstaining---as they were not ready to approve the report without getting their questions answered. This seems like good meeting order, when a majority of board members are not satisfied that discussion has been adequate. The vote appeared to shock the staff

present, and one staff member then rose to their feet and began making accusations that the questioners wanted to "destroy" the leadership, fire the GM, and were disrespecting staff who had contributed to the preparation of the GM's report.

Everyone seemed upset. We could go on at length, but the upshot is that said irate staff member has issued a call for their supporters to attend the next board meeting. We hope the facilitator is buckling down to run a tight meeting that allows board members to do their job without interruptions.

Meanwhile, we ask members to attend the board meeting on Tuesday to show by our presence that we support the board members who have questions about any part of the GM's report that concerns them. Let the questions be asked and answered. Incidentally, not all of the questioning board members and "no" voters were first-time board members elected last fall. Two "no" voters were veteran members of the board. We conclude from the evidence available that the "no" voters were primarily concerned with finishing the conversation, not with censuring the GM.