

Creating a Member Engagement Plan

Many cooperatives want members to engage more, and seek to increase input, communication, discussion, and “sense of ownership.” The best way to create a plan for this is to reverse the goal, and find ways for the cooperative to engage more with members’ lives and the things that matter to them. To measure an increase, you’ll need to have an indicator – perhaps the volume of ideas contributed – but the indicator is not the goal. The goal is to meet the social and economic needs of the members and improve their quality of life.

The indicator you choose should be based on member activities, and not manager activities. For example, the number of educational classes *offered* is not a useful indicator, while *attendance* at those classes is more useful. Some indicators like voter turnout will reflect breadth of engagement, while others like volunteered hours will measure depth of engagement.

Changing member behavior

Members are everyday people who must choose among competing interests for their attention and engagement. Asking them to increase their engagement in the cooperative is a request for a behavioral change, and needs three elements to converge:¹

1. Motivation: Will it offer pleasure? Belonging? Hope?
2. Ability: Can they do it? Can they be trained? Can it be made simpler?
3. Trigger: What cues them to act? You? Something in their daily routine?

Motivation: design to meet member interests

Engagement in cooperatives is grounded in motivations related to the individual, the community, and society.² To consider which motivations may be best for increasing engagement it can be useful to outline member profiles. Which of these have the strongest representation in your membership?

Individual interest Income Professional development Learning		Community interest Networking Sector involvement Volunteering		Societal interest Leadership development Shaping the future Principle	
--	---	---	--	---	---

If you can align your engagement plan with the places where member interests are strongest, a response is more likely. For example a new market opportunity might attract income-motivated people to engage, while a fundraiser might attract a volunteer-motivated person, and a bold visioning process might attract a future-motivated person. If you need principle-motivated people to work on bylaws, who in your membership fits the profile? Work to match activity with motivation. Keep in mind that for an equitable representation on your committees, you may want to attract people with a diversity of motivations.

¹ Fogg behaviormodel.org

² Van Vugt et al, [Cooperation in Modern Society](#)

In a survey of agricultural cooperatives³ meeting attendance correlated highest with *individual* and *societal* interest, while *community* interests were met elsewhere. A separate report on engaging young members in housing cooperatives suggested that networking and leadership opportunities (both offering a sense of belonging) were strategic to attract younger members' engagement.⁴ Your members' interests may change over time, and so an engagement plan should adapt as well.

Ability: design the simplest path from idea to action

Once members are motivated to engage, they need to be able. There are two ways to increase ability: add skill, or simplify the skill needed for an activity. Both are a form of empowerment. Take, for example, participation in bylaws changes. You can add skill by offering reading groups on cooperative governance and legalese. You could simplify skill needed by wording changes in plain language and offering mobile phone voting. Management has a role in both of these paths.

Habit plays a role in designing for ability. If you discover an intuitive method for electing the board that is well-used, consider reinforcing the habit by using the same method to make other choices, like where to hold the annual meeting. Or, in the opposite direction, if members have well-worn method for an operational decision like scheduling shifts, consider adapting the method for choosing among the cooperatives' strategic options. Building off of habit is a way of leveraging ability.⁵

In the survey of agricultural cooperatives, active participation was positively correlated with additional employees and negatively correlated with spouses having outside jobs. This is a reminder that time is a form of ability. If you can give your members more time (by offering childcare), or if you can decrease the amount of time needed (by facilitating remote engagement) you can increase members' ability to pursue their motivation. For members whose time is limited, an offering educational program to increase ability may appear to work against them, at least in the short-term.

Trigger: design to help people act

With motivation and ability, members will still need to be spurred to action. Actions fall on a spectrum from the 5-minute survey, to organizing and planning a large change in the business. The easiest way to trigger action is to build reminders into existing rituals: "while you are here, do one more thing (that you are motivated and have the ability to do)." Triggers for more difficult actions should be accompanied by some reward: seeing friends, talking about something interesting, expressing one's voice, a beverage.

Committee participation often feels invisible and ephemeral, which can work against even community-motivated members. Showcasing the results of engagement can use anticipation as a trigger: "are you ready to see your name on the member-of-the-month club?"

Managers at cooperatives are often frustrated by having to send reminders to members about engaging. But this service, designed well, can help members quite a lot. The worst reminders are ones that people are not motivated to do, or do not have the ability to do. If your trigger is not working, see if the problem lies upstream.

³ Gray and Kraenzle, [Member Participation in Agricultural Cooperatives](#)

⁴ Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, [Young Member Engagement Strategy](#)

⁵ Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*

Designing a member engagement plan

The following steps are recommended for a member engagement plan.

1

Align with motivation

Choose an interest profile that has the most potential for engagement. List the members who you feel probably to have this motivation.



Choose a measurable activity to focus on that matches this motivation.

For example

Members are motivated by social connection. Let's increase attendance at monthly gatherings by 50% by organizing potlucks at members' homes.

2

Increase ability

Either add skills and capacity or decrease what is needed, or both.



Consider the short term-benefits of simplifying actions and the long-term benefits of educating.

For example

We can increase the quality of each gathering by adding a reading assignment. We can decrease the skill needed by providing dinner and gas reimbursements.

3

Trigger action

Build a reminder into everyday practices and create anticipation of a meaningful reward.



Emphasize how the action will fulfill the members' own motivations.

For example

We will have member payments available to pick up at each gathering (or mailed afterward). Reminders will show pictures of people having fun at the last event.

Conclusion

In general, the recommendation for increasing member engagement is to find an activity that will have broad appeal to members' existing motivations. As a counterpoint there may also be cases in which the engagement needed has narrow appeal like reviewing legal documents. In those cases the structure still stands: find the members whose motivations match, increase their ability, and build triggers toward action, though the people available to recruit may be more limited.