



# The Spirit of Generosity

BY BILL GESSNER

**T**he collective progress in collaboration that the food co-op sector has achieved over the past decade has been significant and inspiring. “Cooperation among cooperatives,” through the Cooperative Grocers Associations and other vehicles, is building a strong, powerful momentum. An underlying core value that has supported this collaboration, but has rarely been articulated or recognized, is a strong spirit of generosity.

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The highest level of cooperation is found wherever people work together for the largest and greatest common good. They are “others-centered.” Their cooperative-mindedness is all-inclusive. We can envision our food cooperatives at the early stages of development, coming together out of “reflex” and “instinct.” Certainly there are increasing competitive pressures that might put us currently at the “survival” and the “getting ahead” levels. Yet, even in the founding documents of our food

co-ops we find language about serving and giving to our communities.

It is important to simply be aware of our own motivation, whatever it is—and to not be judgmental about our own or another’s motivation. If we are not clear about our motivation, it becomes difficult to do good work.

If each of us, on an ongoing basis, genuinely examines one’s motivation, purpose, and desired end in working for and with cooperatives, we are likely to find that many of us are motivated by a global goal or end. We wish to make the world a better place for all to live in. The spirit of generosity, then, is more than a value reflecting that end. Generosity becomes a tool.

## Collaboration and generosity

As local food co-ops have moved from isolated entities linked primarily through their cooperative warehouses into a strong network of cooperative grocer associations (CGA’s),

generosity has been key to building trust, support, and accountability in a collaborative system designed to bring increased value and benefits to the consumer-owners of local cooperatives and their communities. Together, food co-ops have a wealth of resources to build upon, and the generous sharing of those resources is allowing them to build a flourishing system of strong locally owned food cooperatives.

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The spirit of generosity that eventually came forth and fueled the development of the CGA system is much different than the generosity that was key to the grassroots effort that created several hundred retail and two dozen wholesale natural food co-ops in the 1970s. That generosity was an outgrowth of volunteerism, which sometimes resulted in instances of martyrdom, self-righteousness, and worker exploitation, leading in many cases to dysfunctional organizations.

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The current spirit of generosity is a more mature form and is combined with broad, balanced organizational commitment and systems of accountability. Effective systems of governance and management have been developed in many of our food co-ops. These systems, combined with peer support and peer accountability ... have resulted in greater accountability throughout the food co-op system.

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### **The gift of generosity**

The spirit of generosity requires individual initiative. We are challenged to give and let go in meaningful ways. In the context of cooperative collaboration, the spirit of generosity helps us learn that each other is not the enemy. We learn to assume that other co-op people are acting and speaking from a place of good will. We may disagree about implementation or details, but we are on the same side and we should treat each other as colleagues, not combatants. We learn to trust

the process.

The spirit of generosity is a gift. To give is to trust. To give is to invest. To give is to receive. Through giving, we learn about the concept of abundance. Our world is not limited. The spirit of generosity helps us see the world as unlimited, with infinite potential, rather than “For you to have more, I have to have less.” If we believe in the values of cooperation—honesty, justice, equity, etc.—and if we believe that the world would be better if more people acted on these values, then we should act on them with each other.

Cooperatives provide service to their members and communities in a generous and balanced manner. The cooperative community, globally, is a growing circle. Give gratitude and thanks to all who have generously contributed to build the circle of cooperation. Let’s practice excellent and inspiring customer service, along with random sustained acts of kindness. What karma!

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The Cooperative Principles provide a sound and basic foundation for a sustainable future for our planet. At the same time, they present us with the challenge and opportunity for a lifetime of learning to truly understand and implement them. We need to collectively plant and nourish the seeds of future cooperation. Cooperation is a practice. Generosity pervades the practice of cooperation. The spirit of generosity, in its bold and subtle forms, broadcasts and cultivates the seeds of cooperation. ■