

Working with people per definition can be complex, but it can be doable and even enjoyable

Maastricht, 21st November 2020 by Renato Costa Durand



Photo 2.- Member celebration for 1-year anniversary of GW (Photograph: MalleMuze)

Student exposes the key elements for improving communication and work satisfaction in a cooperatively-ran shop and organization with more than 200 members.

Humans are complex creatures, and in a world with a never-ending search for authenticity and singularity, successful and satisfying human interaction has reached levels of astronomic complexity. Dealing with a small company department of around 8 or 10 people can be challenging, but how do you function in a team of more than 250 people successfully?

This is a challenge presented by a local food cooperative, which is run by a large group of members where all, according to one of their slogans, are welcome to work in their own shop as co-owners. This food cooperative is called Gedeelde Weelde and runs a grocery store in the developing neighbourhood of “Sphinxskwartier” in Maastricht since February 2019.

Participatory grocery store

Gedeelde Weelde (GW) is a food cooperative founded in 2016 by 5 individuals, and up to this date has 267 members. The shop is operated under a participatory principle, which means that members of the cooperative are able to work in the shop as well as have a say in how the shop and cooperative are run. Among these members there is a division between “Entrepreneur Members” (EM) and “Co-working members”(WM), the former having the ultimate responsibility for running the shop and latter take up smaller responsibilities and do a lot of operational work. The WMs have the possibility to work as much as they want by joining any of the work groups conforming the cooperative. The time spent by the WMs while undertaking tasks from the workgroup are retributed by grocery vouchers relative to the amount of time spent, with a maximum stipulated in official regulations, time above those limits is welcomed on a voluntary basis.

More participation needed

While there is no obligation for members of the cooperative to work in the cooperative, there has been periods where the cooperative was running with too few people which created work overload specially among the EMs, according to the latter. It is for this reason that there was the need for GW to get to understand what could be done to attract more members to join workgroups to help running the cooperative.

Material for research

In order to figure out this information, GW externalized this research by commissioning it to Renato Costa Durand (Peru, 29 years), a last year student of Rural Development and Innovation studies at the University of Applied Sciences in Velp. This research took place in two phases: 1) A general survey too all the members of the cooperative in the form of a questionnaire, in order to gain a general picture of the member composition and general characteristic of the group. 2) Focus groups, which were selected from the members taking part on the first part of the research.

Profiling

The first part of the research delivered interesting results. It allowed to understand that the average member of the cooperative is a 59-year-old person, living on its own or with someone else, feeling very identified with the principles of the cooperative, never-the-less, does not know how to get involved in the cooperative activities (See *Chart 1*). The characteristics obtain from these questionnaires, helped to design the second part of the research.

The second part of the research consisted in retrieving information from the members by using focus groups. This information pretended to give a better understanding on what is stimulating members to be actively involved in a workgroup and what is diminishes their motivation to be involved in a workgroup. The groups were divided by 3 types of members: 1)Non-active members, 2) Active members and 3)Entrepreneur Members. The first are members who have a membership but do not take part in any work group, the second are members who take part in a work group and the

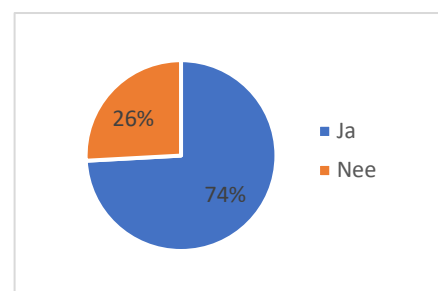


Chart 1.- Member's knowledge on how to get involved in GW's activities

third are the EMs as detailed at the beginning of the article. This division was purposefully done in order to obtain a comparison of perspectives from each group.

Striking results

Despite members showing a great acceptance and support with the existence of the cooperative, the main irritations and frustrations from these three groups had to do with inadequate or insufficient communication mainly between the EMs and WMs as well as institutionally towards the rest of the members and non-members. Never-the-less, members found motivation to actively take part in a work group due to the social interactions they had with other members and this way feeling part of a group, which some of them claim this component as “(to be part of a group) *something essential, even vital*”. The enthusiasm of these members was authentic and appreciation for each other in the cooperative showed to be the strongest pillar of the organization.

We are looking for more “we”.- GW member

Work to do

The research helped to bring lights towards the areas in the organization which need attention. With these results, the researcher presented a set of recommendations which would help GW to tackle their points of attention. Some of the recommendations included elaborating a clear organigram which would be visible in the shop, encouraging members to elaborate working guides per workgroups where clear protocols are included to reduce ambiguities, introducing regular number of information days so member and non-members could have a better understanding of the functioning of the cooperative and get a space where doubts would be clarified, introducing small task possibilities for busy members who are not yet part of a work group, improving the management of information by introducing the use of software such as “Slack”, among a few others. According to the members to whom these recommendations were presented, these are sensible recommendations which when followed, the number of members taking part in workgroups could significantly increase.