

Human Resource Management in Co-operatives: Theory, Process and Practice
By Peter Davis

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Reviewed by Bob Quinney, former Management Tutor, Co-operative College.

The first question I asked myself when I was invited to review this book was, "Why on earth would it be necessary to write a book arguing the case for the Human Resource Management (HRM) or any other strategies of co-operatives, to take into account the distinctive co-operative identity and purpose?" Surely it is obvious that any organisation whose strategies and identity are contradictory will not survive. Imagine "Good Food Costs Less" at Harrods or liveried commissionaires outside the local Aldi!

Well, some time ago I visited the personnel and/or training officers of most retail co-operatives in Britain. I asked them all if they included in their management and staff training programmes anything specifically co-operative. By far the most common response was a puzzled (in some cases incredulous) look, followed by, "I've never really thought about it," or "What exactly do you mean?"

Only two answered unequivocally. One personnel manager was in no doubt that the less his employees knew about co-operation the better! He wanted them to know about "successful companies" like Tesco, Sainsbury's and Asda. The other, probably the last serving first generation co-operative training officer, and certainly the last to learn his co-operation at the feet of Arnold Bonner, said he would never run, organise or commission a training programme without including in it relevant aspects of co-operation.

While there are people in the co-operative movement, especially people with HRM responsibilities, who are unaware of the benefits of a co-operative attitude and approach and while there are people imported from the private sector with no induction whatsoever into anything co-operative, there will be a case for books such as this.

As I read the book I constantly asked myself two further questions. "If those personnel and training officers had read it, would their response have been more positive and would they have found anything in the book to help them develop a distinctly co-operative HRM

strategy. The answer to these questions is much less certain.

First of all they would have to have finished reading the book and I think some would have found it too hard-going. I felt when I was reading it as if I were on a literary roller-coaster. There were some level plateaus of clear, concise, stimulating exposition, some unexpected descents into routine summaries of other writers' theories, familiar to anyone with an elementary knowledge of management training, and rather too many precipitous launches into a stratosphere of esoteric concepts, rendered more complex and obscure by the unnecessarily tortuous, occasionally pretentious language used to explain them. Time and time again I put a marker in the book to remind me to return to a passage that seemed contrived, or that I was not sure I had understood. Try this short paragraph:

The HRM function can both develop and use to gain leverage: line management, training and development programmes, culture and the quality of relationships across the co-operative business. This in turn informs and qualifies the content of the structures and functions, role and task configurations and reconfigurations in the formal organisation operating in a flexible framework based frequently on cross functional interdisciplinary project teams. The technical, plant, process and research resources further facilitate the effective co-operative human capital.

The book primarily targets "co-operative managers, board members and all those concerned with the development of co-operatives." Most of those I know would want to take a break and a stiff drink after negotiating a few passages like that. Many, I fear, would not return.

The problem, I think, is that Dr Davis insists on over-stating a good case and over-embellishing what is essentially a relatively simple concept.

Having said that, for those prepared to stay

the distance, the book is both thought-provoking and rewarding. It selects, adapts and moulds elements of old and new HRM concepts, including Intellectual Capital and Learning Organisation theories, into a novel strategic framework referred to as Co-operative Social Capital Management (CSCM).

Those personnel and training officers who said they had never really thought about it or were not quite sure what it meant would be required to do some very hard thinking about their abysmally limited knowledge and assumptions, not only in relation to the co-operative practice of HRM but to HRM in general. If they thought hard and long enough their eyes would be opened to a radically different, co-operative approach to their job.

The answer to my second question is, therefore, also a qualified Yes.

To the third question I adopted a "today we are going to ..." approach. I learnt this many years ago from an old military officer turned trainer who had attended innumerable briefings by senior staff officers. As he listened he would imagine himself addressing his troops the following day: "As a result of yesterday's briefing, today we are going to ...". In the overwhelming majority of cases there was no more to be said. The briefing was of no practical value. My experience of most business meetings and many academic textbooks is the same.

The book is divided into three parts, Theory, Process and Practice but, leaving aside the mismatch between the contents page and the actual division, this separation serves no purpose. Every chapter of the book contains elements of all three and each concludes with a list of Action Points. Although many of these are rather obvious, they are nonetheless valid.

It would be difficult to envisage any co-operative enterprise that would not benefit from the application of some of them. The book also contains a number of highlighted "reflections", which would make some very good discussion points, and two detailed, useful Diagnostic Survey Questionnaires. What would have improved it immeasurably, I think, would have been the inclusion of examples to illustrate some of the less obvious points. Apart from the excellent and informative Co-operative Bank case study, to which a whole chapter is devoted, I can recall only one example (of bottom-up innovation) and it adds considerable weight to the understanding and impact of the point.

Almost certainly, some of the action points and practical ideas outlined in the book would be taken up by my focus group of personnel and training heretics, but I have grave doubts as to whether any of them would take on board and implement the Co-operative Social Co-operative Management package as a whole. The HRM function was one of the last to evolve in the co-operative movement and in many societies it has not yet progressed beyond the 'personnel' stage. CSCM is a radical, challenging concept and its successful implementation would, in most societies, demand fundamental changes in attitude and culture.

Logic would suggest that only the largest, most successful and innovative societies would have both the will and the resources necessary to bring about those changes. Experience, on the other hand, suggests that more fertile ground might be present in those smaller societies that have not yet outgrown basic co-operative values and where CSCM could be left to flourish unimpeded by the intervention of HRM and training professionals.