

product of a structured approach to recruitment, training and methods of support and discipline that honestly acknowledge the basic right of each individual to be treated with respect.

It is a sad reflection on society in general that good employment practices have to be safeguarded by statute and that people at work have to be trained to be courteous and humane to others, but it is reassuring to bear in mind that Co-operative societies not only survive but thrive in such an environment. "Treating others in the way in which you would like to be treated yourself" is not a new concept to Co-operators but it may be well to remember this maxim when considering employment policies and practices to be adopted within the Movement.

Views from the Bridge: 3

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A mere 20 years ago it would have been considered inconceivable that anyone seeking employment, almost at any level within their "very local" Co-operative Society, would not have previously shared in the ideals and beliefs of Co-operative principles or at least would not have certainly experienced a very quick conversion exercise in those principles. The thought of a "non-Co-operative manager" playing any effective part in the administration of a Co-operative society would have been unthinkable.

The Need for Principles

Principles, aims, rules, doctrines, codes, standards, "mission statements" (whatever they might be) - how can we, or anyone else for that matter, personal or body corporate, exist without them? Has it to be accepted as a sad fact of life that the commercial pressures of competition and the onward march of regionalisation are to go down in history as having robbed us of the very principles and aims upon which we were founded? Are principles and trading successes therefore to become alternatives? Surely not!

The hardliners of course will maintain that these principles are secondary to everything else and in answer to the question "what part should they play in present day employment policies?", they will say "none at all", (or to be kind to them, they might say, "very little".) What matters to them more than anything else is pure commercial success and that we simply survive at any cost. Not *how* or *why* we survive, or indeed what form in our survived state to assume, but simply survival, survival, survival.

Of the Owenites, Pioneers and the Christian Socialists, Bonner says "All were opposed to the prevailing system because it promoted social evils, selfishness, the exploitation of man by man, bad character, and consequent unhappiness".

Heard those words somewhere before? Fairly recently? Greed, greed, and more greed! Principles no more? Never more appropriate!

So, is the Co-operative Movement's survival without a strong belief in its principles no survival at all? For whom ultimately is to benefit from this huge survival exercise?

Co-operators - Employees?

I would suggest that today, more than ever before, the Movement is perhaps sadly, not employing "Co-operators" at any level and what we are appointing are highly skilled and highly trained employees, including professional managers, who are being employed to "manage a Co-operative Movement" on behalf of Co-operators.

It is clearly quite absurd to believe that everyone employed by John Sainsbury or Ian McLauren is an ultra right-wing believer in the capitalist system (or that all Robert Maxwell's employees are left wing loonies), so why do we Co-operators tend to assume the opposite for Co-operative employees? Or, like them, are we earnestly hoping and believing in a rapid conversion to the faith? First and foremost, and above all else, what our present-day movement is urged to seek is highly skilled, professional, fully trained employees of no matter what ilk, and is not there already plenty of evidence (some may say sadly) of this practice being employed in some of the Movement's largest and more successful parts today.

So where does this leave us, especially in our fight for "an economic system based upon common ownership and mutual aid" and do Co-operative principles have any place in modern day Co-operative employment policies and practices?

If we accept that the common denominator running through all Co-op principles (whether Rochdale's, Owen's or anyone else's) is the search for a system based on pure and complete reciprocal honesty between man and his fellow man, then which employer in his right mind would not wish to adopt that as his first and most important employment policy - and then live in hope that the policy became an effective reality in practice?

Additional Principles Needed?

However, to be practical I suppose that we should ask ourselves what

principles of Co-operation would be if we were starting the British Co-operative Movement in 1989 rather than in 1844. Clearly the open voluntary membership, democratic control and political and religious neutrality would have survived the test of time but one has to ask where in the 19th century principles are the safeguards for equality of women's rights in employment and, except for a vague inference, where is the defence of the rights of the ethnic minorities?

Some cynics will maintain that all of the aims and objectives of those early 19th century Co-operators have already been achieved, in some cases, through Government intervention and by changes in the law of the land, that they may have no relevance in today's commercial environment and that the Movement has in fact achieved everything that it set out to do in those early days.

Oh, if only that were so! Surely the economic environment based on greed in which we find ourselves in the late 20th century proves beyond all shadow of doubt that there is a greater need today for the principles of Co-operation (perhaps slightly modified) than there has ever been.

A Responsibility of Members - and Employees

So, in trying to reach a sensible conclusion to the initial question where do I find myself? Am I to be regarded as a hard liner, a professional manager who sees in my own job and those employed by me, no need nor necessity for a belief in the principles for which this great Movement stands, or are we rapidly reaching the situation where by far the majority of active Co-operators in this Movement are employees who in fact form the majority of the only real Co-operators left? There is surely a place for both, for without effective "Co-operative" management supported by a strong belief in "an economic system based upon common ownership and mutual aid" this movement might end up surviving and succeeding for absolutely no distinctive reason whatsoever. As we approach the 21st century, belief and loyalty towards our principles have to be revived and shared by everyone involved - loyalty and belief not only from our "member" Co-operators, but perhaps even more importantly, from our "employee" Co-operators.