



# UNTANGLING

Problem Solving for Student Businesses

## ALL SYSTEMS GO: IT TAKES STRUCTURE TO MAKE YOUR BUSINESS WORK

In some businesses the owner takes the lead, acts as a traffic cop, provides direction. When a problem arises, such as who will stay late to work on a last minute job that is essential for your business, she will ask an employee to help out and reward her in some way for stepping up.

In a co-op, you are all the owners; this means you must all take the lead and provide direction. And individually, you each must be self-directed. You must learn to volunteer for jobs when they need doing and step up to solve problems when they need solving. You must avoid saying "it's not my job" because everything that happens in your business IS your job.

How do you do this without creating confusion and simultaneously insure the business achieve its mission?

Like the elephant walking through the strawberry field, not wanting to crush the berries: "...very carefully...." but with determination.

Four structures exist to help you navigate the Strawberry field that is your business:

- All Staffs ( and each other)
- Committees
- Systems
- Handbooks

The first vehicle is the All Staff; this is why it is critical that everyone attend every meeting. Your input is needed on decisions. You miss a meeting and the thread of the fabric becomes looser. You may miss a demonstration of a machine needed for the collective's tasks; or you may miss discussion and voting on an important topic related to the business.



The secondary and subtle benefit of All Staff is that you also learn each other, especially from more experienced co-managers. They may be able to tell you previous history that's critical to elaborating on an issue: why a task is done a certain way. Veteran co-managers may also be able to tell you why an idea might *not* work, saving you some time "reinventing the wheel".

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The second vehicle is the Committee. Every collective divides up the chores that are needed to create a fully operating and well functioning business. From Purchasing to Hiring, from Advertising to Payroll, from Communication Co-Manager to Payroll Co-manger, all these committee roles are needed to define a business. Attendance at committee meetings is also critical because committees are the foundation for success. Envision a 4-legged table with a leg missing. That is the co-op with a committee not doing it job.



Without good systems, the third vehicle, student business co-ops are likely to be inefficient, produce inconsistent results and probably result in disorganization. What are systems and why are they as important as the actual work you perform? It is a way of responding to a recurring problem or task in a way that can be repeated, resulting in habits that produce good organization. For instance, you can get everyone's payroll hours and get them submitted every week and mostly everyone will get paid...at some time or other. But there may be delays, you might forget someone

one week, employees might not get their checks on time. If your Payroll Manager has a system involving timesheets, a deadline for submission, uses the system set up by the CSB in the computer, 99.9% of the time everyone gets their paycheck on time. Pretty cool, huh? No one likes to miss their paycheck.

A system can be as complex as the payroll process, or it can be as simple as an order sheet to keep track of what you have ordered and to verify that the order was all received correctly. That way anyone can verify the tomatoes came in as ordered, as well as slice them up for sandwiches.



Finally, your handbook is the ultimate systems and communication tool, with historical information included. It summarizes what your collective is about. No one should consider themselves a full-fledged member of the student business if they haven't read the handbook.