

Anti Oppression Workshop

Coops are political spaces. They are about recentering us as social beings.

One of the principals of cooperatives is to have an open and voluntary space, but there are things that are keeping us from doing that.

Looking and being able to step back and see different slices and dynamics that are going on. Not just internal, but outside/around the coop as well. For example, what kind of relationships do we have with our neighborhood?

Important to distinguish prejudice and oppression. Prejudice is a mindset, an action. Oppression is a broader structural issue in our social fabric, beyond our individual lives. In our coops, we can see a system of oppression and transform it into a system of anti oppression.

If you have monthly meetings, maybe one out of three should include an outside training. It is important to be constantly engaging in education and awareness.

Your coop doesn't have to be a perfect rainbow of people. You need to look at the people in your neighborhood and sort of try to reflect that. The people in the community know their own needs better than an outsider would.

Question: I agree that it doesn't have to be a perfect rainbow, but now, in whatever co-op, what is the mission and how do you accomplish this?

Response: Take for example, a coffee shop. The goal is to provide a social space and caffeine. What do you need to do to accomplish this? You can incorporate anti-oppression into this. Who do we need here to be effective? Do we want to use some form of affirmative action?

Question: Yeah, but what if there is no racism in your workplace? If things just flowed...

Response: Right, but actually racism is everywhere.

Two case studies:

1. Food co-op in Olympia, Washington
Initially, all the workers were white. Then, they hired some minorities, but didn't have a plan for how to deal with this new workplace composition. After a couple of years, they created an anti-oppression committee, but the minorities were the only ones in charge of these trainings. People involved in the committee started feeling like, "I still want to work here, but I can't be bearing the whole burden of doing all the trainings." This shows how we need to work to keep the anti-oppression committee going and keep the

committee jiving with the whole organization. Also, it shows that it is important to think in the long term.

2. NASCO

8-9 years ago, the annual conference was very white/hippy/groovy, but not addressing racism/oppression. There were some rumblings from minorities about being dissatisfied with this. There was a “colored caucus” and a “queer caucus” at the conference that started addressing these concerns. It was good that NASCO had this safe space for people to air their concerns. That year, some minorities got elected to the board. They created a “plan for inclusion” that was kind of like Martin Luther King Jr’s theses. This plan said that there should be a keynote speaker of color, for instance. It included long term and short term goals. The NASCO leadership didn’t really understand this whole minority movement, but at least they let the people do their thing and at least they took it seriously. They didn’t just give the minority groups’ concerns lightly; they actually went along with their plan.

Group work: the room divided up into people who were interested in starting a co-op, and people who were already part of a co-op.

Questions for each person to consider:

What resonated with you about the presentation?

Have you tried any of these strategies?

Have you come up against resistance to change?

Rainbow Grocery member #1: Around the year 2000, Rainbow started having anti-oppression trainings. So far, they have trained 80 people who work there. The training has been somewhat successful, but the workplace is still somewhat “ghettoized.” The board is still mostly white, straight males. It is exciting that the committee exists, but it is difficult to get everybody on board about the trainings.

Suggestion from Fac: Create a sub committee in charge of strategies to create more anti-oppression related policies.

Rainbow Grocery member #2: The problem is that we’re so large. We’re busy, we don’t have time. We’re dealing with issues like members who have repetitive stress injuries. Anti-oppression is simply not on the radar, not a priority. It feels like we’re losing our democratic focus; we’re more money driven than we used to be, not just because of greed, but also because of the way the economy is these days.

Suggestion: You need to have a call to re-democratize the workplace, first and foremost. Included in this is taking action and doing anti-oppression trainings.

Rainbow is struggling to manage its own growth. In that struggle, it has lost its prior political edge/orientation. New members are not properly trained.

Suggestion: Step 1: Step back and see what's going on. Maybe have a staff retreat, or just a report about this workshop to the whole group. You may want to pose the question: "How are we doing?" It is important to try not to be in crisis mode anymore; you need to take care of yourselves as people. You need to create safe spaces where particular groups can vent their concerns. (queer caucus, for instance.)

Step 2: Figure out what we need and be able to be supported by other people.

Question: Should be we thinking of this on an interpersonal level?

Response: We need to think about the interpersonal, but also the structural/systematic/institutional oppression and look at how we can reconfigure that.

Rainbow concern: there is a fear of "policing" people at the grocery.

Response: There are some issues of entitlement, there. You need to write things down and show people what you're feeling. It can be helpful to bring in some external voices. External voices will be listened to differently. It won't be like, "Oh, that's just her again; she always complains."

Rainbow's response: Bringing up issues is very sensitive. We don't want to compare different kinds of oppression, and we end up watering down our concerns.

Caucuses:

Some people feel like they fragment people, but they're important spaces to have. It is also important to have spaces where everybody can come together and talk about a single issue. NASCO has a diversity congress with representatives from each caucus to discuss commonalities and non-common priorities, for example, promoting trans leadership within the organization.

Arizmendi concern: There is so much racism in our workplace, I don't even know where to begin.

Suggestion: A good strategy to try if you think the group will not be responsive to you bringing up the issue is the "Trojan horse" approach, whereby you get an outside person to come in and bring up the issues you're concerned about.

Closing remarks:

Do an inventory of resources in your organization and in your region. You might want to organize service exchanges with other groups that are capable of coming in and doing trainings.

If you're looking for an easy way to bring up anti-oppression issues, you might use a discussion about power and privilege to do this.