



Gatekeepers: The politics of community

Notes from the Co-operative Innovation Project — September 2015

All communities have gatekeepers. A gatekeeper is anyone who works to allow, refuse, limit, redirect, support, or hinder initiatives in a community. Community gatekeepers are critical when building and strengthening co-operatives.

Whether they have formalized power as part of the laws and culture in a society, or they simply play an informal role, gatekeepers exist in every community. Gates are both an entrance point and a barrier; a gatekeeper decides when to open and when to close the gate on a new idea. Working with gatekeepers is an important step in the co-operative and community development process.

The Co-operative Innovation Project

From 2014-2015, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan led the Co-operative Innovation Project, looking into the possibilities of co-operative development in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.

Through on-line and telephone surveys and open events in communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, the Co-operative Innovation Project asked: what are the needs in your community? And, what do you know about co-ops?

The Co-operative Innovation Project found that there are gatekeepers in co-operative development, both within communities and within the larger co-operative environment.

Community gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are members of a community and as such, understand its cultural and political environment. Their deep connection to community is acknowledged either by a formal position, such as an elected leader, or a person to whom the community turns to 'get things done.' Either way, a gatekeeper is a person of influence.

When a new idea or potential project comes forward, a community must ask: Is this the right project for us? Is this the best way to address this need? What have we missed? Typically in co-operative development, these discussions

happen after a community has decided to explore the possibility of building a co-operative enterprise. The community has, in essence, conducted its own gatekeeping around the idea of co-operatives, and is now willing to have a further discussion.

We found in our study that active co-operative development starts *before* a community comes forward on its own. Instead, active co-operative development inspires the co-op conversation, bringing co-ops into the discussion as a solution to community needs.

Engaging gatekeepers

To inspire a co-op to form, those interested in developing a co-op must create a space for a discussion about community needs. In rural communities, these *inspire* events do not need formal permission from gatekeepers. However, obtaining informal permission is a good way of engaging gatekeepers to build momentum as the co-op initiative grows.

In Aboriginal communities, consulting formal gatekeepers before hosting an open inspire event is a crucial first step. The initial formal point of contact is the elected leadership. This engagement piece sets the stage for future work with that community.

In either case, if the gatekeeper(s) finds that a co-operative has merit and may have traction in the community, he or she may use his or her influence to transition the idea from outside to inside the community. By inserting it into the community conversation, the gatekeeper works to open doors and persuade others to get excited and get involved. In essence, they use their social influence to validate and legitimize co-operative development as something that has potential, something that could be useful to the community. If the gatekeeper feels that the co-operative does not have merit, she or he may be able to shut down the con-

versation and deprive the initiative of the legitimacy that it needs to progress.

Pitfalls and potential problems

The common trait shared by all gatekeepers is that they have power in their communities, often through large networks of influence. Some are willing to share this power and influence, while others want to keep it for themselves. There may even be factions within communities, with those who support one gatekeeper and those who support another. Having one gatekeeper support your idea may mean that another will not. If there are strains between gatekeepers, new ideas may unwittingly unleash old feuds or divisions.

Gatekeepers also differ in their support or resistance to ideas. A supportive gatekeeper tends to mix well with many people. Often, he or she can be very entrepreneurial and a social risk taker, curious and willing to reach out for new ideas.

A resistant gatekeeper tends to be sceptical, conservative towards change and protective of the status quo. Change can be problematic for a community, and a resistant gatekeeper, through a desire to keep things calm, may reject change. Change may also be rejected if it is disadvantageous to the gatekeeper and those that are connected.

Working with gatekeepers is ultimately about creating open and extended relationships and interactions. The longer a co-operative developer works with a community through its gatekeepers, the more it is likely that the balance can shift from gatekeeping to networking and facilitation, building stronger relationships across more members of the community.

Gatekeepers in the co-operative environment

While community-based gatekeepers are obviously present, those who work in co-operative development pointed to the many other gatekeepers of co-operative conversations. Typically these gatekeepers act to restrict the use of the co-operative model.

For instance, co-operatives are a business, and as such, require legal incorporation. There are gatekeepers within provincial ministries, such as corporate registries, that actively discourage emerging business groups from considering the co-op model.

Since co-operatives are legal entities, it will usually be necessary for a developing co-op to speak with a lawyer to make sure the co-op is designed well. There are few lawyers across western Canada trained in or practicing co-operative law.

The lack of legal expertise also means that when governments are setting up new business policies, they may inadvertently create something that has an adverse impact on co-ops, particularly if they don't take the time to understand the co-op model. Moreover, there are few legal experts who can advocate for change and innovation in taxation or other policies to encourage growth and innovation in the co-op sector, given its unique differences.

As a business, co-ops also require accounting expertise. Few accountants are trained in the co-operative model, with their different needs, outputs, and reporting and dividend structures.

In all of these cases, business schools and places of higher education act as gatekeepers, restricting and limiting co-operative knowledge and training. If students go through business, accounting, or law school and never hear of the co-operative model, they will not be equipped to help communities build co-operative businesses that are sustainable and resilient.

Going forward: why co-ops?

Co-operative enterprises, with their focus on solving community needs using the tools and people at hand, are often a defining feature of strong, independent communities. But to be successful, co-operatives need to find ways of meeting the challenges posed by gatekeepers resistant to co-operative formation, while working with those supportive of change.

Engaging gatekeepers both within and across communities and the broader co-operative sector will be a critical part of sustaining and growing co-operatives as a major contributor to Canada's social and business capacity at the community level.

Are you a gatekeeper?



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