

Training & Development in Worker Co-operatives

Silvio De Bono

Introduction

One of the greatest similarities between the international co-operative principles and the human resource management and development strategies lies within the training and development field. In theory both domains recognise the importance of having a trained and educated workforce. One of the most basic assumptions on which human resource development is built is that people work better and harder when their potential has been developed, when they feel fulfilled and when their ambitions are realised. In other words, when employees believe that the organisation cares for their personal fulfilment, they are more likely to feel committed to the organisation. Such a commitment should result not only in a more effective and efficient work effort but also in the achievement of that ever elusive goal of nurturing as well as channelling employees' creativity and entrepreneurship potential towards the achievement of organisational objectives.

This role of training and development in co-operatives should mainly address two important aspects. Firstly, it needs to focus on how co-operatives as organic structures need to transform their training into transformational learning for the benefit of their members. Secondly, cooperatives need to ascertain that their ultimate performance objectives are reached for the full benefit of their members.

This paper will assess how worker co-operatives as organic structures need to develop their training and development function in order to ensure that both learning as well as transformational skills are diffused amongst their members.

The paper is structured in three parts. Initially, it sets out to explore the nature of organic management structures and their operationalisation amongst worker co-operative societies. It then explores how Maltese co-operatives need to develop (as against train) their members; and finally it considers how new developments in human capital theory could be seen as a way forward for co-operative development.

Role of Training & Development

Organisations, irrespective of structure and type, should ensure that their employees have all they need in order to be able to perform effectively and to help the organisation reach its objectives. People do not simply need equipment in order to perform; they must also have the necessary level, type and amount of knowledge, skill and the right attitude.

Undoubtedly, training is an important step for the survival and growth of the organisation. Molander & Winterton (1994) emphasise that the competitive edge will be maintained by those organisations that deploy their workforce most efficiently. This implies that training and development is a very important method of improving overall organisational performance.

Contrary to development, training is viewed as a planned process, designed to facilitate learning in such a way that the learner can achieve some pre-defined objectives. When we consider training therefore, we are seeking to develop the person's behaviour pattern by any instructional or experiential means, in the areas of knowledge, skill or attitude, in order to achieve the desired standard or level of performance (Robinson, 1990).

This line of thought is reflected in the way 'Human Resource Development' has shifted away from the traditional collective industrial relations and focuses more on the needs and aspirations of every individual member of staff. In every situation, Human Resource specialists try to align organisational goals with individual goals and aspirations to permit individuals' self-realisation become compatible with the organisation's mission and objectives. One of the most common ways of how this alignment is reached is through the constant assessment of employees' performance and product quality by which the gaps between expected and actual levels of quality and performance can be bridged.

The required competitive edge dictates that an organisation will not survive for long if it does not manage to nurture the development at three interconnected, cumulative levels. The first step would be the development of the individual. This makes possible the development of the organisation as a group of individuals working smoothly together. This in turn ensures that the product is not only of good quality but that it continues to evolve and develop.

One can therefore argue that the very mission of 'Human Resource Development' is therefore intimately connected with training and development as a strategy by which innovation and development in its product continues infinitely, avoiding the natural tendency of development in its slow down or levelling off after the first few dynamic and energetic years of the organisation's life (McClelland, 1994).

This means that 'Human Resource Development' strives to postpone indefinitely the levelling off of the organisation's learning curve thus avoiding product stagnation and loss of market share. When this is achieved the organisation has an ever-rising learning curve and may be called a learning organisation (Calvert *et al.*, 1994).

The Learning Organisation

The learning organisation is a radical set of ideas. At its heart lies the proposition that organisations should fundamentally and regularly rethink their goals, and perhaps, their whole purpose for existing. Peter Senge (1990), in particular, posits the radically humanist idea that organisations should become places where people can begin to realise their highest aspirations. He talks of developing worker commitment not compliance; of building shared visions, not imposing a mission statement from above; of effectively reconciling individual and organisational objectives (see also Hughes, 2000). In relation to a worker cooperative, it may be even better to refer to the 'learning *company*' (Pedler *et al.*, 1991, my emphasis), in order to better extol the more solidaristic and democratic character of this particular type of business structure.

Worker Co-operative Structures

The co-operative principles were formulated in Britain by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 and were subsequently adopted, with minor amendments, by many other countries as well as by the International Co-operative Alliance. They have now also been transposed into Maltese legislation as Article 21 of the Cooperative Societies Act (Act 30 of 2001). These principles are:

- (a) voluntary and open membership;
- (b) democratic control by members;
- (c) limited interest on capital;
- (d) fair distribution of profits following adequate provision for reserve funds;
- (e) promotion of co-operative education; and
- (f) collaboration with other co-operatives on the local, national and international levels.

A co-operative may be defined as "an association of persons who have voluntarily joined together to achieve a common end through

the formation of a democratically controlled organisation, making equitable contributions to the capital required and accepting a fair share of the risks and benefits of the undertaking in which the members actively participate” (Munkner, 1991).

Worker cooperatives include those cooperative structures where the member/owners are the coop’s own workers; unlike other forms of cooperatives where the members may be suppliers, consumers or supporters of their cooperatives¹. The first formally registered worker cooperative structure in Malta was the Stevedores Coop (*Koperattiva tal-Burdnara*) in 1974. First Clothing Coop and Kordin Clothing Coop were then set up from two formerly privately-owned textile firms, passed on to their workers in order to attempt to save them from insolvency in 1982-3; the Catering Coop was also passed on to its workers as part of a redundancy package in 1984 (Rizzo, 1994). Over the last decade, the number of worker coops has increased steadily to about 20. They are active in all spheres of local economic life, including media production, archaeology services, consultancy, youth services and transportation, as well as amongst public sector employees (Galea, 2002); they have also moved steadily away from a culture of subsidy and dependence on state support and benefits towards independence and self-help (Baldacchino, 1994).

Organic Structures

The dynamics of the co-operative environment, behaviour and organisation sub-system are at par with organic, ‘just-in-time’ structures which are generally small, loose and more adaptable to their changing environment (Tosi, 1992). This is in sharp contrast to mechanistic structures which are, and can afford to be, more bureaucratic, larger, inflexible and ‘just-in-case’ oriented (Burns & Stalker, 1964).

¹ *As would occur in the case of producer cooperatives, consumer cooperatives or social cooperatives respectively.*

As organic structures, co-operatives are volatile in market and technology segments. Their structure, relationships and jobs are more loosely defined to facilitate the process of adapting to changing conditions. The production sub-system is composed primarily of general-purpose technology. Boundary spanning sub-systems, which get the product or service to customers, vary from one customer to another. Channels of distribution are very often unstructured and liable to change from time to time. Those involved in the procurement function must often seek out different types of raw materials and resources, because both the level and type of raw material inputs will change periodically.

As a general rule, operating systems in organisations adopting an organic character will be different from those operating within a more mechanistic mould. For the organisation, the timing of information that might trigger internal changes will be highly variable. Thus, individual skill is essential to assess the environment and know how to re-direct the organisation, since it is practically impossible to specify in advance what aspect of the environment must be monitored. Generally, maintenance sub-systems will be based on cost standards, since evaluation of performance will be based on forecasted estimates and not on historical data. To some extent, this means that performance control and evaluation will be more subjective: indeed, in co-operative organic structures, the managerial sub-system will be less structured than in other forms of organisation. Few policy guidelines will be used in the decision making process because the variability of the environment will preclude well defined, set policies over time.

Individuals in organic co-operative structures may be moved from project to project as the need for their skill arises, with a different authority structure for each one. They may work for more than one manager, depending on what needs to be done. The matrix organisation in this case represents an attempt to combine the best of both worlds: the manager ensures a high level of functional expertise which is combined with a strong focus on a particular

product, project or market segment coupled with a high level of collaboration between different divisions. Critics of the matrix structure (and, to a certain degree, of organic structures in general) argue that, unless levels of authority and responsibility are clearly defined, there is a real danger of lack of accountability and confused loyalties.

As organic structures, co-operative enterprises are guided by both economic and social principles. Like other firms, they operate in a free market economy. In order to compete successfully, they have to meet the normal commercial criteria of productive efficiency and financial viability; being cooperatives does not exempt them from the imperative of market efficiency and responsiveness (Zammit, 1994).

In essence, the greatest similarity between the organic dimension *per se* and the co-operative structure lies within the training and development of the latter's members. This is evident from the fact that members in a co-operative structure have joined voluntarily to achieve a common aim, while taking pride in the fact that their organisation is democratically controlled. From the economic point of view, members make equitable contributions to capital and share risks and benefits. As a result, it is imperative that members in a co-operative environment develop their skills to optimise their performance.

The fifth co-operative principle, which upholds the need to provide information, education and training provision for members, elected representatives, managers, employees as well as the general public, contrasts with the developmental function of the larger private business world; in the latter it appears to be less of a core feature than in the co-operative movement (MacPherson, 1996:23). From inception, the Rochdale Pioneers saw the movement's aim as primarily to develop and to educate people. Studies show that the first early efforts took on too large a challenge, trying to embrace a wide educator role without giving enough regard to the economic feasibility of their output. In essence, this meant that if co-

operatives could not educate their members in the widest sense, they might as well not exist; as a matter of fact, the earliest attempts did not survive for long.

On the other hand, in the world of conventional private business, the fine distinction between training and development makes it easier for commercial entities to approach training in a more pragmatic way. Training therefore enters the picture as a means to achieve the desired targets; in other words, training – but not development – forms an integral part of the business survival kit. This clear distinction between training and development is also evident in the fifth co-operative principle, which defines training as a process meant to ensure that all those associated with co-operatives have the skills they require in order to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Thus, *training* may be regarded as the imparting of job related skills. It aims at improving job performance in a direct way; while, on the other hand, *education* or development is a process intended to develop the way mental faculties are used for the sake of personal growth. Developmental learning is not used to impart a specific skill or to achieve a specific commercial goal.

Assessing the Maltese Co-operative Experience

A local study undertaken in 1997 revealed that, in the majority of cases, although worker co-operatives were organic in structure, they have not invested enough in either the training or the development of their individual worker-members. These results were once again confirmed by qualitative research carried out during the first quarter of 2003.

The findings are summarised in the form of a SWOT analysis below:

Strengths

- The internal environment within co-operatives is informal and conducive to coaching and to on-the-job learning.
- The co-operative experience itself can be considered as a continuous training course in social and democratic decision making skills.
- Co-ownership and equity implies that it is in the interest of co-operators to help in adding knowledge, improving skill performance and contributing to positive changes in attitude.
- Worker co-operative start-ups are led by and composed of highly skilled craftspersons and professionals keen to secure their livelihood by developing skills, abilities and academic proficiencies.

Opportunities

- Individual workers dissatisfied with normal employment conditions and contracts are looking for innovative ways of working. These could be a source of input of skills, talents and potential into the worker co-operative sector.

Weaknesses

- In most worker co-operatives, training is given on an *ad hoc* basis. This suggests that there is no formal training policy, strategy or plan.
- In most worker co-operatives there is no formal budget allocation for any formal or informal, in-house or out-sourced training.
- Co-operators may have had negative experiences in their formal education and remain sceptical of training schemes and distrustful of training bodies/organisations.
- Being financially restricted, most worker co-operatives and their members tend to think of training as an added cost rather than as an investment.

Threats

- The ever-changing workplace with new technological and procedural development will not permit any small organisation (including local co-operatives) to survive without continuous commitment towards training and development of all employees.

- In certain instances, local co-operatives are slowly gaining the image of guardians and promoters of traditional crafts and skills.
- The collective wealth, financial and human, already present in the co-operative sector, can be used to promote training and development through inter co-operative co-operation.
- Due to small size and diseconomies of scale, co-operatives are often unable to meet the financial outlay required to keep abreast with new skills and innovations. This may erode their competitive edge. Their competitiveness is also challenged by eventual EU membership. Any restructuring may require hefty investment.
- Financial restraint may usher in a vicious circle where training is not affordable and the identified training gap widens. Efficiency and profitability, once reduced, will in turn tighten further the financial stranglehold on the organisation making training even less affordable.

Source: De Bono & Zammit (1997).

The SWOT analysis above suggests that the local co-operative movement is in dire need of establishing or upgrading its human resource development strategies in order to beef up its economic security. All the more so when local co-operatives tend to be perceived as commercially inferior to other business organisations; especially they are led and managed by non-professional teams who have never considered training as a core component of long-term, business strategy.

The existence and relevance of worker cooperatives in an economic scenario which is increasingly becoming liberalised and globalised

may depend on the development of a transformational learning culture. This is best understood in relation to two main pillars. At the individual level, co-operatives must ensure that each member constantly develops his/her skills in the relevant trade and/ or profession. At the second level, it is likewise critical for co-operatives to develop a transformational management culture which is congruent with the co-operative's organic structures.

Addressing Transformational Learning

Transformational learning is related to social skills and to a person's ability to interact, firstly with others and secondly with the organisation as a whole. This does not mean that if there are no formal developmental initiatives there can be no development. This is because skills-oriented training may itself help enhance a person's self-confidence. A skilled person performs a better job and this will develop self-esteem, which is probably the cornerstone of a person's social skills. Therefore, provided that there is already a positive social environment with an organisation, skills training can itself lead to personal development.

a) Training at Individual Level

One of the main unsubstantiated criticisms levelled at local co-operatives is that they are not competitive and need support in order to survive because their products are inferior to those produced by conventionally owned organisations. A product may be uncompetitive either in quality or in price. Untrained workers will produce at a lower quality level and this product or service will cost more because of inefficiency and higher rate of defects. On the other hand, a highly trained workforce may produce efficiently but this does not ensure that the product or service will be competitive in price, because the final price will also reflect the efficiency and effectiveness of management techniques and decisions.

In this respect, if one is to analyse the reasons for the success or failure of a number of Maltese co-operatives, it becomes essential to see at what point the product or service is failing, whether it is quality, price or both. If it is both, then training at the individual operational level is required in order to improve quality. This may in the short run be considered as an overhead cost. Indeed, a very limited number of worker co-operatives have a training policy or training strategy in place. Furthermore, those worker co-operatives that have an inferior product/service and thus require more training to upgrade the skills of their members and level of their service, are more likely to consider training as an added cost. These conditions are not restricted to worker cooperatives but are also reflected in other, small and medium scale, private enterprises.

One must also point out that, even in Malta, a number of well-trained and dedicated co-operators have left the co-operative world. Gamson & Levin (1984) describe this phenomenon as a "natural exit trend". They claim that talented members will themselves seek other job offers or else are offered job and/or partnership offers from conventional firms. This generally leaves co-operatives with the less skilled workers, which in turn means that new members within the co-operative structures have to be re-trained to achieve the necessary competency levels. Brain drain and poaching are a serious double threat to all small enterprises which cannot afford the more rewarding remunerative packages and more challenging business tasks offered by larger firms. However, worker cooperatives must additionally also contend with their democratic structures: these may promote equality at the price of threatening the career paths and material aspirations of ambitious individual members.

Literature suggests that the particular internal structure of worker co-operatives may both enhance and inhibit training at individual level. If one compares the position of co-operative members with the position of self-employed entrepreneurs, cooperative members can be said to be in an advantageous opposition in that the supporting solidaristic structure allows members to specialise. A

self-employed person has to handle all aspects of his/her enterprise, thus taking up a lot of time and effort in management and planning.

b) Enhancing Management Training

In addition to individual training, organic structures need to adopt a more commercially oriented management culture. In the course of the past few years, there has been a positive shift from conventional management to professional management; yet, it remains overtly clear that the majority of co-operatives – as with other small firms - are still run by untrained managers who may still consider training, development and other ‘overheads’ as an added cost rather than an investment (Theuma, 2003). Taking on specialist managers will ensure that the organisation does not lack basic management skills. This argument was developed by Cornforth *et al.* (1988) who argue that, while it is possible for co-operatives to maintain democratic management, as they grow and develop, they require to recruit more ‘professional’ managers until almost inevitably the decision making process become dominated by the professional managerial elite. However, it must be pointed out that, in the majority of cases, this scenario remained a theoretical concept. Most local co-operative structures recruit managers as consultants and not as full time members or employees. As a result, the role of these “consultative managers” is merely to advise; as a result, the implementation of any of their advice is subject to a democratic process.

Where a dual (democratic/elected & professional/recruited) executive management structure exists, members tend to become less interested in training to attain further skills and to develop themselves. Yet, with the exception of newly set-up co-operatives, management tends to be rejected because members may have opted for the co-operative option precisely because of a history of poor industrial relations and mistrust in management grades and incumbents. This attitude is very damaging to the lifespan of the co-operative (Baldacchino, 1990:92-3).

The possibility and feasibility of training at the level of specific management and skills development is dependent on the size of the organisation, its type of operation and the members' prior experiences and educational backgrounds. The major stumbling block is generally the attitude that many co-operators adopt in relation to management and its functions. One can safely state that, locally and internationally, the difference between viable and non-viable co-operatives is often explained by the readiness or otherwise to accept the value of management and to 'defend' the exercise of this expertise from democratic interference or excesses.

Another possible solution towards ensuring transformational training and development within local co-operatives is by establishing close links with specialists or consultants on a part-time, 'on call' or retainer basis. According to Chukwu (1990), the great advantage of such a system is that members get the opportunity to get informal training, be exposed to more specialised functions while learning to appreciate their value. Throughout my experience with local co-operatives, it is evident that there are a number of examples of strong mutually beneficial relationships between co-operatives and a network of consultants who are usually willing to delegate as much as possible of their functions to co-operative members, thus transferring skills to the co-operative's membership. The most important aspect of this consultative approach is that the nature, timing and amount of advice and training (generally through skills transfer) are left entirely up to the co-operative. Clearly, local co-operatives, like their foreign counterparts, may be very sceptical of the effectiveness of such a model. Harper (1992) confirms that 'outsiders' often exaggerate the impact of training, perhaps deliberately so in order to increase revenue; worker co-operatives with liquidity problems have been obliged to turn down work in order to attend training courses. It is also easier to train people in general skills than to advise them on their particular needs.

Promoting Human Capital

In an organic worker cooperative environment where the workers are the bosses, the actual co-operators constitute the organisation's human capital; this is even more clearly and legally so than in conventional firms where 'ownership' is ultimately part of a human resource management strategy and has no legal basis. In most co-operative cases, co-operators have not only invested their savings in the co-operative, but most of all they have (or should have) also invested in themselves to ensure that their personal development would enable them to reach the desired personal and business targets of their firm.

Broadly speaking, human capital theory in relation to human resource management can be analysed from two distinct but inter-related perspectives:

- (i) The first refers to the economic value of education and training as a means to increase organisational as well as individual wealth.
- (ii) The second examines the contribution that such expenditures on human beings (called investment) make to the economic growth and development of the organisational structure. This is directly related to optimal expenditures, warranted by the desired rates of economic growth.

These perspectives in turn embody two, ever present, underlying factors: commitment to the organisation; and the resultant commitment in job engagement.

Commitment arises from an emotional or intellectual bond linking the individual to the organisation (Perrin, 1995). Commitment implies acceptance of an organisation's goals and direction, a strong desire for membership and the tacit agreement to reject other investment tracks. It comes in several forms, each with different implications for the relationship between individual

and firm. Such a commitment can be attitudinal, programmatic or loyalty-based (Flamholtz, 1985). Attitudinal commitment implies that employees feel motivated to work for a particular organisation rather than any other; programmatic commitment is more reactive and thus leads people to work in the organisation because they cannot afford to leave; while an individual with a strong, loyalty-based commitment feels tied to the organisation by a sense of obligation.

The twin concepts of organisational commitment and job engagement are the foci of human capital investment. When researchers study the two, they find that low levels of one (commitment) tend to increase turnover, whereas low levels of the other (engagement) leads to higher levels of absenteeism (US Bureau of Census, 1996).

In this instance, one can argue that both commitment as well as engagement in the job will result in strong performance. In this sense, it is not hard to believe that highly engaged people will be task-oriented and focused, performing the parts of the job they love most. After all, they identify with their work, care about its outcome, and consider it as part of their definition of themselves (Caulkin, 1997).

There are many examples of investments in training, skills and knowledge being rewarded. Investment in human resources is not indiscriminate spending on training or on employee benefits. It is about recognizing where people are the key to profitable change and timely selective investment at the point of major impact. Just like any other investment, timing and targeting are the priorities for short-term benefit and clear nurturing strategy is the key to long-term growth.

The skill and knowledge embodied in an individual can be defined as human capital. All individuals attain a certain stock of human capital and this level is primarily influenced by education and training. Investment in human capital increases productivity. Adam Smith (1776) was the first to suggest that an educated worker

could be likened to an expensive machine. The skills embodied in a person can be rented out to employers. The higher the level of skill a person has, the higher this rent is likely to be. As a result, the expected returns on investment in human capital are a higher level of earnings and greater job satisfaction over one's working lifetime. Theory suggests that the better educated are generally more flexible and more motivated, adapt themselves more easily to changing circumstances, benefit more from work experience and training, act with greater initiative in problem-solving situations, assume supervisory roles more quickly and in short are more productive than the less educated, even when their education has taught them no specific skills. To succeed in shaping an organisation's future, one must develop an organisation that learns well, efficiently and constantly. Such learning is critical because competing in rapidly changing environments means your organisation must be able to track the environments, identify changes and adjust to these changes. In the course of time several studies have indicated in particular that employer-provided training has higher returns than off the job training from other sources (Blundell *et al.*, 1996). As to training type, managerial training shows the most significant impact, followed by professional and technical training and semi-skilled training.

Conclusion

By adopting Senge's (1990) definition of a learning organisation and super-imposing Handy's (1996) assertion that organisations are made of and from people, one can conclude that a learning organisation is a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create personal and organisational wealth.

Therefore, the current view of co-operative organic structures is based on adaptive learning, which is all about coping. Senge (1990) notes that increasing adaptation is only the first stage; organic structures need to focus on generative learning or double loop

learning (Argyris, 1977). Generative learning emphasises continuous experimentation and feedback in an ongoing examination mode; generative learning is about defining and solving problems. In Senge's (1990) view it requires personal mastery, team learning and a creative tension between vision and current reality. On the other hand, adaptive learning is a single loop learning process, which focuses on solving problems in the present without examining the appropriateness of current learning behaviour. Adaptive organisations focus on incremental improvements, often based upon the past track record of success. Essentially, they don't question the fundamental assumptions underlying the existing ways of doing work. The crucial difference lies between being adaptive and having ingrained adaptability.

To cultivate and maintain ingrained adaptability, co-operatives need to operate as experimenting or self-designing organisations, meaning that they should maintain themselves in a state of frequent or nearly continuous change in structures, processes, domains and goals. This is only ensured if the co-operative structures adopt a dynamic approach, which places training and development initiatives at the top of their list of priorities. If co-operatives, like all other commercial entities, fail to anticipate those resources and skills which may be required, they may easily face the stark option of redundancy. In a nutshell, those co-operatives that fail to adopt an anticipatory management style in ensuring that they have both the right and sufficient skills to meet future needs, run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

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