

## TOOLS FOR STARTING A COOPERATIVE

Along our journey we have gathered practical suggestions that may be useful in developing a cooperative. One of the first is to build the co-op around something that already exists. We have found that not having done this has made our project more difficult than need be. Having a group that works together before you go to the next step of creating the business helps the process flow more naturally.

### Example

A group of First Nations people picked soap berries and blackberries every fall. When they were finished picking, everyone got together to make jam. Year after year they did this in community. While picking one season, some of them jokingly said they should make a business selling the jam they had made and that's exactly what they did. That same group of people went on to produce jam in the same traditional way they had done it for years and made it into a successful business.

Try out different ways of making the co-op adventure fun. The group described above had a jam tasting night for the whole community and a contest for their product name which everyone enjoyed. Making your business journey a positive experience will probably encourage more membership which is often necessary to carry out the many tasks found in beginning a co-operative.

Be passionate about what you are doing; it will fuel your work and help carry the project along its way.

Be organized. Whenever your group approaches a bank, government ministry, lending agency, etc.. they want to see your plans. You will need to have tangible evidence that the project has been well thought out; how you will do it, what help you already have in place, marketing studies, a business plan, commitment from co-op members, support from other partnering agencies i.e. your band office or tribe economic developers; anything that proves your project is a worthwhile and realistic. Have it all in writing and if the co-op needs assistance, find professional help. **CESO** which is listed in the non government agencies, is a wonderful volunteer agencies that works with aboriginal groups who want to start up a new business. They provide a number of services and are located across Canada. For more information call their toll free numbers listed in the resource guide.

Take time to study the resource guide. Be prepared to phone around to the different agencies who offer grants and other services related to co-op development. Also, have a large pad of paper by the phone to take lots of notes. Keep every bit of information you get and never throw anything out, it may be valuable for future reference. Spin offs often happen during phone conversations; the person you call might not have any useful information for you but will probably send you to three or four other places. Right from the beginning, record it all and build your own resource guide. Dating the calls and who you spoke to often helps too - it is useful in developing good working relationships with the helping agencies when you remember the individuals name and what they can help with - it also saves some frustration!

Spend a few dollars and have business cards available where ever you go. In addition, as long as you don't drive your friends crazy, talk up your project as often as you can. Sometimes names of other people who can help your co-op come out of these conversations.

Along with business cards, have some sort of a portfolio the group can leave with the agencies they are asking help from. Photographs of co-op members and your product if there is one helps the reader to remember your project.

Get your product out to the public in as many ways and as often as you can. Not every co-op has a product, but even a service can be personally advertised in the community, internet, through local businesses, schools, colleges; where ever the people are that might use your product or service have the advertising available.

Brainstorm with your co-op on a regular basis. It can be fun, creative, very useful and helps to bind the group together. This is simply a place to bring ideas and share them in a place of mutual interest and respect. No matter how off the wall some of them are, get it all out on the table.

Because co-ops are about people; how they are interconnected at all levels, there may be issues that come up for folks. Talking circles are a good way of providing a place for them to be discussed and also a way of showing care for one another. what ever happens **DON'T PANIC**, everything gets done eventually, and as one co-op says, "start small, think big". Beginning a co-op is a long process that takes patience and lots of care. It like building a house with a foundation, walls, windows, doors. places to play, relax, contemplate and enjoy. On that note, one more word of advice, don't quit your day job while trying to start up your business unless the co-op has some funding for paid positions.

Networking with other co-ops can be very useful and practical. Sometimes, co-ops share equipment, have workshops together and share expenses related to business. Experienced co-ops can also provide mentorship for newly developing groups.