



University Courses for Managers

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Relatively few co-operative officials as yet, have had the experience of taking part in University courses designed to assist them in their jobs, and the majority tend to be rather sceptical in their approach. This attitude is fair enough, and every busy official is entitled to ask:

Could such a course be of benefit to me?

Would it help me do my job more efficiently?

Would the time involved be used to better advantage than I am now using it for?

In the eighth continuous year of participation, I can state that the value of each year, and the accumulating value of the series, has made me unhesitatingly ask for more next year, for my own sake. The improvement I have seen in departmental managers after participation in a suitable course increases my conviction of the real value of this kind of work.

Conditions

To achieve this value a university course however must be organised on the right lines, which can be briefly summed up as follows:

1. The syllabus must be dealing with the real problems facing the managers comprising the group.
2. The group must be well led by a tutor knowledgeable of management problems in the commercial world at large, and skilled in drawing active response from all members of the group — and equally relies upon the body of experience, and clash of thought arising from an alert group of officials, whose attention to the problems under discussion has been directed and developed in a planned progression.
3. The group must not be a passive listening audience.

The Need for Such Courses

All management today is involved in a state of change, and caretaker management of things as they have been, is doomed to failure. The capacity to foresee the need, and to conceive and introduce change requires open minds. A University course of the right type unfreezes minds, and permits the radical re-appraisals of objectives, habits and methods which must precede change.

In particular, chief officials have a most important function which is almost entirely their own special responsibility, and if not conscientiously performed by them will be neglected at great cost to the society. It is their chief responsibility to watch the changes developing in the external commercial and social environment within which the society operates as an organisation, to interpret the impact of those changes in advance, and to introduce the changes in policies, and methods, which are needed to adjust the society in time to reap advantage, or to avoid disaster.

WARNING — The chief official's constant danger is of being immersed in daily routine, and not making time to assess the external changes which will demand the response of change within his [sic] society. The man [sic] who is always in the thick of it can truly be unable "to see the wood for the trees".

A University course, properly conducted, lifts him [sic] out of his office to take such a view, and to argue the pros and cons with colleagues which clarifies and improves his [sic] own thinking.

Are Such Courses Possible?

The answer is yes, if any group of officials really wants one. The Universities are quite ready to do their part if the group is in earnest. At Leeds, at least, over a number of years co-operative officials have been led to think deeply on prime managerial problems, which in the bias of a group of co-operators have, to quote examples, emerged as below. They are practical, down-to-earth, and in no sense academic:

- The objectives of a co-operative society — what we think they are — what should they be?
- The relationship between board and official: official and managers. The function of the board, of the official, of the managers.
- Introduction of change, of methods or structure.
- Management of staff-recruiting, interviewing, training, promotion motivation, incentives, delegation, development.
- Capital, supplies, and employment.
- Inter-firm and inter-society comparison of efficiency. Cost centres.
- Dividend and all its aspects, including feasibility, and the impact of removal of price maintenance on cigarettes.
- Problems of amalgamation, national integration, regional societies.
- The pamphlet on Aspects of Dividend published in 1966 was based by the tutor Mr. T. E. Stephenson on the group studies of 1963/64 and 1964/5 and illustrates very well the advance realisation of trends, which is achieved in such work. Many officials reading it today would understand more of its message than they did in 1966.

Conclusion

One of the greatest needs of the co-operative movement today is the improvement of the standard of management. Universities offer at minimum cost and inconvenience, the opportunity for the present officials and managers to achieve more with their own abilities, which are considerable.

Active participation in a University course pays real dividends of improved efficiency, with bonuses of group contacts which alleviate the weight of responsibility in isolation, and incidentally gives relaxing periods of intellectual enjoyment.

The Author

At the time of publication Mr. Clarke was the secretary and chief executive officer of Bradford District Co-operative Society Ltd. The original article was published in the *Society for Co-operative Studies Bulletin* No. 3, in 1968, pp. 16-17.

At this time, Leeds University was one of a number of higher education institutions (universities, further education and technical colleges) working in association with co-operative societies in the UK. Others included Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham, Sheffield, Hull, Strathclyde, Herriott Watt, Scottish Woollen Technical College Management Section, Derby College of Technology, and the College for the Distributive Trades.