

Working Together: recording and preserving the heritage of the workers' co-operative movement
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Interviewer's comments: The interviewer Lucy, is a casual worker at Unicorn Grocery.

Summary:

[00:00:00] Debbie outlines how she first came to be involved in Unicorn Grocery. [00:01:21] Talks about how Unicorn has developed during the time she's worked there (14 years), and how her perceptions of being in a worker co-op have changed during this time. [00:04:21] Talks about managing decisions and discussions in a large co-operative such as Unicorn, outlines plans to improve this through sociocracy. [00:07:27] Talks about balance between empowering members in a co-operative, whilst at the same time not overwhelming them. [00:08:46] Talks about different ways of making decisions, discusses consensus decision making, and devolved decision making. [00:11:41] Talks about the future process of applying sociocracy principles in Unicorn. [00:16:49] Discusses transparency within Unicorn, talks about the balance between sharing important information between teams at Unicorn, yet not allowing this to become overwhelming. [00:20:04] Both discuss different experiences that casual workers may have as opposed to members. [00:23:02] Both discuss pre-conceptions people may have about workers' co-operatives. [00:25:20] Debbie outlines what she likes most about working at Unicorn, and what she'd like to see improved.

Transcript:

[00:00:00]

Interviewer¹: Yeah basically if you want to just start by saying, how and when, you got involved in a worker co-op.

Debbie: Ok, so I, I'd actually been part of a small consumer co-op at University like a little kind of wholefoods buying group, but I have to admit I didn't really understand what co-ops were at that point, and it wasn't until discovering Unicorn, which I joined as a casual worker, a couple of years after I graduated, that I really sort of started to understand what a co-operative was, and specifically what a workers co-op was, so that was in, I think I became a casual worker in 2004, and I did that for a year having just thought I'd just, you know work somewhere nice and earn some money for a bit, and then I realised that, I really loved it and, loved the work and loved what it stood for, so I became a member the following year, yeah I think in 2005, and yeah that, again I didn't sort of sign up to that thinking that I'd still be here, whatever it is, 13/14 years later, but there you go [laughing].

[00:01:21]

So, yeah, thinking about when you started at Unicorn, how, have things changed since then, I guess both in the sense of, the business if you want to I guess start with that, and then also in terms of how, your perception of like being part of a worker co-op?

Ok, so, in terms of the business I guess the most obvious thing is that we've grown so much during that time, when I started we'd just gone past 15 members, and the structure had kind of just evolved into a bit of kind of, more of a sort of team based structure, where sort of autonomy was given a bit more to areas of the business to sort of run their own, their own department, so yeah, so there were about 15/16/17 members maybe when I joined, under 20 anyway, and obviously now we're, we've been hovering sort of around 70 for the last few years so, yeah I mean that's different, and that comes with many rewards but also some challenges, especially when growth has been quite rapid during, some periods, especially the

¹ The interviewer Lucy, is a casual worker at Unicorn Grocery.

last few years. For me, personally, I think, your understanding and your sense of what it means to be a co-op member, it kind of keeps developing over time, I suppose particularly in the first kind of, the first sort of 3 or 4 years are like a really intense, learning period you know you do your probationary period, which is under a year, but it, takes I think several, or it took me anyway, several more years to really sort of fully, understand what ownership means, and it keeps changing in a way, as the business changes...yeah, it's like a constant kind of learning process and a reevaluation of what it, means and what it should mean and how it's different to different people maybe and...yeah. But dealing with, working with you know, a much larger group of people, a much larger membership I guess is, quite a big challenge, and, joining the business, you know, now is a very different experience from when I joined, when, I think it was probably easier to get to grips with that sense of what it is to be a member here and to be an owner, so that's something that we, we kind of constantly need to work on really, and for, people that have maybe been in the business a long time, it's probably quite hard to kind of understand the perspective of someone that's joined more recently and how it might be different for them.

[00:04:21]

I guess, do you find as well, because the size of Unicorn, Unicorn by comparison to a lot of places is, quite a large co-op now and, I know that I was talking to Sam and talking to a couple of other people about how you are managing large discussions, how you facilitate that as the group gets larger, do you find that, there are certain things, in terms of things you might want to work on in the co-op or things that, parts of co-operative working that you kind of gravitate towards?

Yeah, and I think that's fine and its, I mean it's the process that started to happen around the time that I joined where people started to sort of specialise a little bit more, you know you, I mean even from the beginning obviously people had different areas of responsibility, but I suppose the larger a business gets the more that has to, you can't have everybody discussing everything it's just, you know, inefficient and impossible, and I think, perhaps that's something in the last few years we haven't responded to terribly well, like we haven't kind of really, kept, evolving our structure to kind of take that into account, so we've ended up with some very big teams, who, perhaps in my opinion could do with you know, being sort of devolved down again into smaller working groups that have more specific responsibilities so

that, people aren't you know having to, try and make headspace for too many different things, which I think has, possibly has, well I feel like it's definitely happened, over the last few years, so something that a few of us are working on at the moment, is we're looking at this form of governance called, Sociocracy which is something that quite a few co-ops, seem to be talking about at the moment, and it's not, I don't think it's particularly new, it's, we've talked about it before here, but we're kind of putting some time and resources into really learning about it properly and, potentially coming up with a bit of a, a plan to kind of, remodel our governance a little bit to try and, yeah further kind of devolve responsibility to smaller groups, but the, thing we're obviously balancing that with is that we, we really want to multi-task here, we're a multi-tasking co-op, we always have been, and that's really important to most of us as members and it's not something we want to lose, it's very clear every time you know sort of review our, governance and our management that that's not something that people want to do away with, you know we don't want to become, you know, solely kind of admin workers in a specific area, or solely till operators, or solely, you know, veg buyers or whatever, so it's yeah, it's finding a balance between those two things which I think is definitely achievable, but it's going to take some work, to sort of figure out how to, to do that.

[00:07:27]

Yeah, definitely, it's quite hard to envision it isn't it, it's quite...I think it's almost sometimes instinctual to, when a business gets larger and larger and you have these people with different focuses, it is almost, it can very easily slip into departmentalizing, yeah.

I mean the fact that we're all on more than one team, you know people really like that, but I suppose it throws up this challenge of, you know if you're on several teams are you, really, can you really find the headspace and the focus for any of them properly, without completely burning yourself out, so yeah, it's going to be an interesting process I think and personally I feel really excited by it, but also slightly trepidatious about getting it right and not you know, Sociocracy is all about empowering people, and the last thing we want to do is, you know, make anybody feel like power or, control of the business is being taken away from them, but at the same time we want to make sure that yeah, people aren't burning out because they're

just thinking, having to think about too many things, or that areas are being neglected because everyone's spreading themselves way too thinly, so yeah.

[00:08:46]

Yeah, I guess again sort of thinking about that notion of, how you empower each, or how you make each worker feel like they are empowered, and how you make them feel like they're, valued for what their interests might be or what their strengths might lie in, that's one thing I find a big pull towards worker co-ops, and I think a lot of people do, how do you, how does that translate in terms of, one of the big things that people talk about with worker co-ops is decision making, and consensus and things like that, how do you find that as a working process?

Yeah, I think it's really, really, positive, I mean consensus is all about, yeah, trying to make sure that everybody is listened to, and has an active kind of role in decision making and that, as opposed to voting, you're not making decisions where you know potentially 49% of the people involved have actually got the opposite of what they wanted, it's, it can be a very time consuming process, but that's ok I think, as long as the decisions we make are good, you know because that can actually save time if you're making decisions that people feel are the right ones, and that they have had an active role in, you know, they get upheld, and they are, that's an effective way of making decisions. I think what we, what we need to be aware of is, are the right people being involved in the right decisions, and if we're asking, too many people to get involved in too many decisions, it goes back to that thing of like, are we actually making informed decisions you know, we need to have a structure that reflects you know where people's expertise and headspace and focus is, and perhaps devolve some decisions to smaller groups of people, who are actually the ones who, have the in depth knowledge about that, sometimes I feel like I'm being asked to have an opinion on something that I really, I just don't know enough about or, it's not actually going to affect me particularly, or maybe I've got like a whim or an idea, but actually should that have an equal voice to someone that is, very in depth in that area, and has done lots of thinking about it, I don't think that's necessarily democratic just, you know to give us all a say in things where some of us actually have, perhaps a lot more, yeah, focus, or expertise or whatever...so I

think that's where consensus for us at the moment, perhaps needs a bit of work, its finding you know the right people to have in the room ,to be involved in that consensus process.

[00:11:41]

And thinking about, how your, your kind of reforming that or changing that a little bit, who, thinking about Unicorn's structure, who kind of, oversees that change, would it be HR, would it be...?

No, so in this case, we, we developed a structure team about two years ago and that was open to anyone to apply and then, the personnel team kind of made the decision in the end about who was going to be on it, although it has shifted a little bit since then, some people have left and some other people have joined. So it's the structure team who are kind of working on this, plus myself, and Dan, who were drafted in for different reasons, and we will do the bulk of the work, so going away and learning, looking at other best practice, working with these, this organization called Sociocracy For All, who are kind of guiding us through the process, but it's a constant, process of kind of bringing it back to members at intervals and saying you know, 'this is what we're doing, does it sound alright, does it sound interesting, does it sound like something we want to pursue', and then going away and doing a bit more, and anything that we come back with in terms of a kind of, proposed, restructuring, would absolutely come to the whole membership, you know there isn't one, body within the organization that has the power to make those kind of changes, apart from the annual, well the one of the general meetings where all the members are present, or can be present, so yeah, the kind of, I don't think well, any kind of worker co-op that is democratically organised I think would bring a decision like that to the entire membership, it wouldn't be right to impose that on people, but it, also wouldn't be right to just bring it out of nowhere, you know, the need, it's a big change, and there needs to be a lot of sort of back and forth between us and the rest of the membership to, to make sure that, we've kind of developed it with the participation of lots of people rather than just bringing it out of nowhere and saying 'hey, how do you like this brand new structure we're suggesting', you know we need to involve people right from the get go really, so hopefully that, that is happening. So it's by no means certain whether it will happen at all, you know if people don't feel happy with it, then, it wouldn't happen, but I think, something needs to happen, so, yeah.

[00:14:25]

What would that, what would it kind of look like on a, I guess in a physical sense, would it be, fewer general meetings, would it be more sort of focus groups that kind of thing?

I think it would, yeah, so Sociocracy as we have been learning about it is based on these kind of working groups or circles of, sort of 5 to 7 people, so no, no sort of team or circle would be much larger than that hopefully, and that's, yeah based on the idea that that I suppose is a, is a group in which you can have real detailed discussion and focus and analysis and, when it gets much bigger than that, that starts getting a lot harder to achieve, yeah, members meeting, I don't know, it's still to be worked out, but they would probably become, perhaps more, more focused on really sort of strategic, you know long, decisions that have sort of longer term repercussions and that are really about the direction of the business, and quite fundamental things like that so we might cut out some of the stuff that currently comes to them, and devolve that to, to a smaller group or, I think, the way Sociocracy works you kind of have, you have these circles with links into, more like overarching circles so... I think I'm not explaining this very well [laughing] you kind of have sub-circles that link into like a circle of representatives from each of those so, yeah. There would be lots of circles on a page [both laughing] that would be the map, but yeah, we're quite early on in the process of looking at this so I don't know yet really, but I know there are some things that presently come to members meetings that I know I sit there thinking, I don't want to have to think about this, I don't know enough about it, it's not my department, you know, somebody just decide for me and tell me it's fine [laughing]. But there are other things, where if somebody, took the power to make decisions to make decisions away from me on, I'd feel quite like 'oh, I'm not sure about that', so we have to be really aware of, yeah, of how we manage that.

[00:16:49]

Do you make, I guess...there are so many bits of information that like you said when you have a members meeting there are things that you might hear and think, I'm not interested, and other things you hear and think, why didn't I know about that sort of thing, do you try generally to make information as free and accessible as possible?

Yeah, god we get too much information, this is the thing, you can almost like, because we have before a members meeting there's a lot of information to read, and that is actually being streamlined at the moment and I think we're doing a little bit better with it, but there is still a lot, a lot that you need to take on board, and all the teams minutes are available, you know, we, there's a fortnightly report that goes around from every single team that kind of collates their minutes from that fortnight, which really we're all supposed to read but it's very very difficult to keep on track of that, and again do I really need to know all of that information, because those minutes are produced for the team as a record of their meeting so they're quite detailed, do I need to know every[thing]? You know, and it's hard to pick out, the stuff that is, really sort of strategically important, or that I, that it matters if I know it, as opposed to the stuff that is really just for that team so, and again in terms of transparency it's almost less transparent if you flood people with information like that, you can actually quite easily hide very crucial bits of information that might, I mean nobodies doing this deliberately, but contentious things don't necessarily get anymore scrutiny because they're kind of hidden in this mass of information that we're supposed to deal with, and I think that, that needs to improve, so that we really, are sharing amongst ourselves the stuff that, that is important, or that people might have strong feeling on, because I think it's just a bit overwhelming the volume of information we have access to and are really supposed to consume.

[00:18:57]

Yeah, yeah that does seem like an almost, especially because everyone here is, well lots of people are very involved with like the practical side of actually running the shop and everything, yeah, I think also that kind of comes through when, this is maybe a little bit off topic but, when me as a casual here² when a customer asks me a very specific question about like 'when we're going to put 5 more carparking spaces in or something like that' it's sometimes hard to, get that through that, there are so many things that need to be done [both laughing] that like, there's no one there to write a planning application to the council [both laughing].

If we could write a planning application for 5 more parking spaces we would actually, but there are no more car parking spaces, but yeah I think probably communication with you guys³ suffers as well because, there's just, so much information flowing around and we're not

² Casual worker as opposed to a member

³ Casual workers

necessarily that good at sort of picking out the stuff that...yeah that people actually need to know.

[00:20:04]

Yeah, I think, I don't know, again this is I guess like a little bit off topic as a casual here I find that after that initial I guess getting used to the work structure and the working environment and everything, I think after a couple of months or so, you really do get a lot more familiarised to it, and a lot of the time it's like, whether or not you want to take more of a, a bit more of an interest in things here, or whether you do just see it as, because it is just such a base line function level job, but at the same time yeah, I'm really interested in worker co-operatives and particularly in Unicorn and what, what we do.

Yeah that's the thing, different people who have done casual work, respond to it in such different ways, and it doesn't you know, it's totally fine, it is just casual work if people want it to be, and they don't have to have an interest in it, you know we don't, we can't expect them to, but then it is really nice when casuals like you come along and you do feel like you're part of something a bit different and you're interested in it, and yeah, and it is a fascinating place, I mean it's endlessly fascinating, well I think it is anyway, it can be incredibly frustrating but it's never dull [both laughing] that's for sure.

Yeah, it's very far removed from I think anywhere else that I've worked, in so many different ways, and it's quite, it like, I imagine it must be frustrating, but it's also quite nice I think, that, for almost every little nuance you can think about, somebody's there thinking about it and like doing something about it, I think that's how we get all these little offshoot things that we do, which is nice.

[00:21:56]

Yeah, it is the sum of it's members really, a co-op, in a way that I don't think all businesses are, and it is a beautiful thing that, when it's, yeah, when you look around you exactly and you see how somebody's passion for art is expressed in the shop, and somebody else's passion for, writing or, you know, somebody else's for like making things really efficient and you know it's, yeah, there is a lot of freedom to kind of, make the job, what you want it to be, it, within the kind of limits of what the business needs, and what's actually you know useful and efficient for the business obviously but I've found it like an amazing place to develop new skills and kind of, yeah, sort of explore the things, certain things that I was interested in,

and that are a good fit with the business and, yeah, and different people's jobs, they're so different depending on their interests and their skills and what they enjoy, you know there's no such thing as a kind of typical co-op member really here, there's so much variety.

[00:23:02]

Yeah, I think that's something else that I kind of, that you learn when you work here as well is like, there are very, very much a set of perceptions or, pre-conceptions about people who, I don't know like, thinking about, again this is not directly relevant, thinking about some of the worker co-ops that I was looking at, and people who had been interviewed, other members of co-ops, had said a lot about this, old refrain about like, the fact that if they were operating in the 70s considered that they were hippies or heads or something like that, when actually they weren't, because they were being progressive and productive members of the business so.

And somebody said something really nice recently when, we had a visitor from a, she lives in Stockton in the North East and she really wants to set up a worker co-op up there, a much smaller version, but she came here for a day to work alongside us and sort of get a feel for how it all works in practice, and she said, something she said quite early on was, 'oh my god you're all so industrious, like everybody's just like really busy and focused' and it was really nice because I think one of the pre-conceptions people have of, of co-ops is perhaps that everyone just kind of wanders around doing what they feel like and you know, it's not very efficient and not very sort of business like, you know, and at the end of the day we are a business, and we're operating in a very, very competitive, kind of market, of food retail, and yeah, the, that kind of efficiency and just, getting our heads down and getting on with it is, it's very important, and it was nice to sort of see that was sort of evident to a visitor, and I think yeah, the motivation that comes with being an owner and, or working for a business that you feel aligns with your values, it definitely plays a big role in that, I think it's good for our motivation, our morale and our work ethic and, yeah.

[00:25:20]

Yeah I guess like, thinking about being a worker owned business, ultimately if you're, not working hard [laughing] you're only disadvantaging

Yourself.

[laughing] *Yeah I guess that's very true. And I guess then, we kind of touched on a few things but, thinking about, just as a kind of round off, what you, most like, and then it's totally optional, whether you'd want to answer this [laughing], maybe something that you, that you might dislike, it's totally up to you.*

There's so many things that I like [both laughing], and I think, it's, it, it's good to have a chance to reflect on this actually because I haven't, I've spent the vast majority of my working life here, so I don't, I don't really have that much to compare it to, I mean I did work in another business for a year before here, and I obviously had jobs at university and school and stuff, but I think, I think if I went and worked for a conventional [incomp] in a food business that wasn't a co-op for a year, and then came back I'd be like walking in the air most of the time, it's, so yeah, but without that perspective I still feel incredibly lucky to, to feel that sense of ownership really, of a business that I'm just so proud of, you know I'm so proud of Unicorn for so many different reasons, and, to feel like I've played a role in that, you know, as part of this team of people that I just think are wonderful and, who I love working with and, you know share values with and share like a sense of how business should look like and...and that sense of you know working with people, like we talked about, people that have all sorts of different skills and, you know, areas of expertise, but who are all valued equally, both in a kind of cultural sense, and in a pay sense, all members being paid the same hourly wage, no matter what task we're doing, or what responsibilities we have, yeah, that as a package, is pretty special really. I mean I, yeah, when I started here, I didn't think I would stay, just because I was so young, and I just didn't think, I don't know, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I knew I wanted to do something that, made a, you know, it sounds a bit tripe, but sort of made a difference and was, you know, was in line with my values, and Unicorn just, ticked every box, and more really, and that's not to say we're perfect, there are many, many things that we do and have done that, I'm not so proud of, and that you know I want us to do better on, but overall, yeah, it's, I feel really really lucky to be here. Things that I don't like...[both laughing], I, it kind of goes back to what I was saying about the, sort of structure at the moment, I think I am finding it quite frustrating and, there are, I don't think, we're necessarily governing ourselves in a very efficient way at the moment, and I just keep going on about smaller groups, smaller groups, you know, more focused responsibility, yeah, so that, that's my hope really that Sociocracy may provide a way to make that happen.

Cool

Is that it?

I think so

Great