

Worker-Ownership Still Alive and Kickin'

Leslie Schaller

Weirdly enough, I have had numerous questions posed to me on worker ownership recently. Maybe cooperatives are becoming trendy again! So in celebration of the Worker Owned Restaurant Corporation's 18th anniversary as of June 10th, I thought I would share a little Casa Nueva backstory.

How It All Began 18 Years Ago

Back in the spring of 1985, I was one of a group of eight recently unemployed restaurant workers who decided to form a worker-owned cooperative. We had never run a business before, but amongst us had over 100 years of restaurant experience and the determination to create our own livelihoods. Fortunately for us the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (then Worker Owned Network,) had recently formed to promote community-based economic development in the region. Through their staff's tutelage, we developed a business plan, secured financing and created the foundation of our cooperative structure.

Our lack of financial assets was one of the largest barriers we faced as entrepreneurs. Through ACEnet's assistance, we approached community members supportive of the cooperative concept to become lenders. Many small, unsecured loans and food barter arrangements provided the start-up capital for the business. Worker-ownership was a very new idea, rather inconceivable at that time in our community in 1985. So it took a little convincing, but we also secured a bank loan as well. That combined with a lot of coop members' sweat equity and a two "risking taking" landlords, we launched the Casa Nueva as a Mexican-American restaurant on October 8, 1985. With the passage of time, Casa Nueva has expanded to include the Casa Cantina and our Casa Nueva Salsa and Limited Harvest manufactured product lines.

No Bosses, Really

The question asked most frequently is, "So who really is the boss?" Certainly, many wonder how it is possible for so many different individuals with so many different points of view to own a business and actually operate it in an efficient and profitable manner. An explicit system of decision making parameters and relatively conventional management structure determines who decides "what, when, how and how much." Similar to any corporation, Casa Nueva's Board of Directors is the legal entity, which oversees the operations, governance and finances of the business. The day-to-day management is implemented by a team of Coordinators (coop-speak for managers.)

The governance and financial structures of Casa Nueva are based on established models, including those developed by the Industrial Cooperative Association in Boston, and in the larger sense, the Mondragon system of cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. However, our success as a cooperative rests firmly on our ability to adapt these models to the goals and needs of the business and the individual coop members.

Throughout our history, we have consistently maintained a commitment to ownership opportunities for all our employees. Every employee of the corporation has the

opportunity to also become a shareholder. Before employees are accepted into the cooperative, they are required to attend a number of workshops focused on cooperative and financial education to become fully aware of both their rights and responsibilities as owners. To a large extent, membership's initiative to provide input on policies and procedures has paved the way for our overall development as an innovative, well-managed business.

Communicating our mission and core values to our fellow owners, customers, suppliers and community in tangible ways is extremely important to us; as well as being good collaborators, learners and listeners within the economic system. Although Casa Nueva or "new house" isn't so new any more, as owners stay committed to creating "what's new" both as a business and cooperative. I hope Casa Nueva's continued longevity demonstrates that worker co-ops can be an effective economic development strategy. At Casa, we feel that our efforts are part of a larger movement in which owners can provide direction and vision to create a workplace in which all individuals are treated with equality, respect and compassion.