

Case Study: Just Us! Coffee Roasters Cooperative

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Introduction

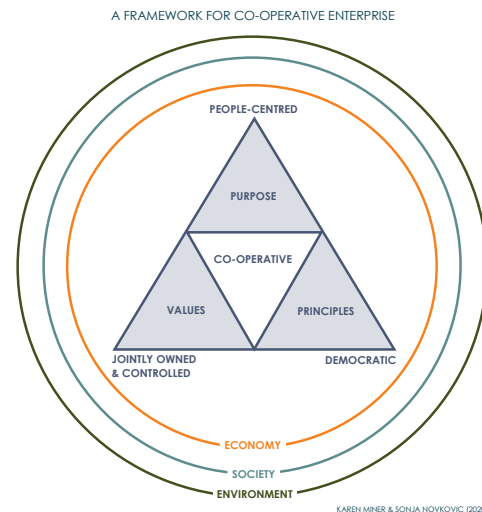
Just Us! Coffee Roasters Cooperative (JUCRC) was established in 1995 as a fair trade worker cooperative based out of Nova Scotia, Canada. Taking inspiration from small producer cooperatives across Central and South America, the founders set out to partner with organic coffee farmers in the Global South through fair trade purchasing, whilst simultaneously providing a democratic and dignified workplace for the labourers in the Global North who process and sell the final product. In the intervening years, Just Us! has registered impressive growth in its revenues and workforce, overcoming numerous hurdles and setbacks along the way.¹ Sales at the Coop amounted to CAD \$7.8 million in 2020.²

A significant, if underappreciated, part of this story has been the Cooperative's willingness and ability to experiment with, adapt, and ultimately change its management and governance structures and processes in response to internal and external contingent developments.

Underpinning the flexibility and openness of this pragmatic approach towards adaptive change is a set of guiding values and principles that align with the cooperative model's basis in joint ownership and control, democracy, and people centeredness (see adjacent textbox).³

“From our baristas and roasters to our managers and administrators, everyone who works at Just Us! can be [worker-members], as inspired by the small producer farm coops we partner with in the Global South. This democratic foundation underpins our social, environmental, and economic impact. . . .

Cooperative Enterprise Model Conceptualization. Source: ICCM, Saint Mary's University



The cooperative enterprise model is a trifecta of purpose, values, and principles coupled with three fundamental properties inherent in cooperatives as peoples' organizations (people-centred, joint ownership & control, and democracy). These three properties, when operationalized, form the building blocks of the cooperative advantage in the context of increased complexity.

People-centred (as opposed to capital-centred) governance and management assumes people are intrinsically motivated social beings, balancing their personal and group interests in accordance with general moral principles.

Joint ownership and control (distributed, rather than concentrated). Joint ownership is a hallmark of cooperative organizations, and it is intertwined with members as owners, controllers, and beneficiaries.

Democracy based on one member, one vote (rather than wealth-based). Self-governance is the underlying engine of cooperative enterprises, with the vital component being democratic decision-making by their members.

“We believe that in business, people and planet should come first – and our success is proof that it can. As we grow, we are proud to return a portion of our profit to our non-member workers, worker-members, and producer-partners.”⁴

Following the retirement of the founding members, Just Us! is now steered by a new generation of cooperative leaders, exemplified by Board Chair Janice Chipman and General Manager Joey Pittoello, both of whom started out as non-member employees and worked their way through various roles within the organization.

Chipman, who has a background studying chemistry, joined Just Us! as a barista in 2010. In time, she took on several coffeehouse management roles and was elected to various governance positions; first on the Oversight Council (see below) and then on the Board. She has been a Quality Control Coordinator in the roastery since 2017,

“We believe that in business, people and planet should come first – and our success is proof that it can.”

and was elected as Chair of the Board in 2020. Chipman decided to commit to membership after five years at Just Us!⁵ Similarly, Pittoello was working full time as an organic farmer when he joined Just Us! in 2009 as a chocolatier. He subsequently moved into coffee roasting, quality control, and producer relationships within the roastery. Eventually he worked his way into management, from the “ground up”, before becoming General Manager in 2017. While Pittoello has also been at the Coop for over a decade, he committed to membership as soon as he was allowed to apply (after two years at the time, though this has since been reduced to one year).⁶

The Just Us! workforce of approximately 50 people is currently made up of roughly 30 permanent full-time workers, 19 of whom are members – i.e. approaching two-thirds – as well as circa 20 permanent part-time workers. Worker-members (representing an even gender balance) tend to be based in the production/wholesale roastery operation, or else in the retail management positions in Just Us! cafés; while non-member workers are concentrated in the retail operation and have historically tended to be less likely to seek membership. This may be partly explained by the often transitive nature of such employment, where workers pursue other opportunities longer term; or, alternatively, real or perceived financial constraints (i.e. the cost of “buying in”).⁷ That said, “for the first time in 10 or 15 years we’ve actually started to get some interest [in Coop membership] at the barista level” – in fact the latest worker-member so happens to be a part-time barista.⁸

More generally, although not necessarily aspiring to membership of the worker coop, non-member workers may still harbor the expectation of greater voice than in a conventional workplace setting. In the past, this has led to some well publicized labour unrest and the unionization of coffeehouse workers in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM).⁹ The experience prompted a rethink and a change of policy regarding the Coop's relationship with non-member workers. The result has been a stronger emphasis on non-member worker voice and benefits, alongside greater encouragement and a clearer financial pathway for baristas to consider joining as cooperative members.¹⁰ As Chipman puts it:

“One of the directions for [2021] is worker wellness...”

“We can really put our money where our mouth is [as a coop] and actually take care of our employees.”

“One of the directions for [2021] is worker wellness. And I think that being a coop . . . we have a lot more say in how we treat our people and . . . [meaningful work is] one of the many values that we have. But I feel like we can really put our money where our mouth is [as a coop] and actually take care of our employees.”¹¹

Living the cooperative ethos

The Cooperative's willingness to face up to and learn from past challenges points to a genuine aspirational and activist commitment towards greater workplace democracy and global equity in trade, as it navigates the contradictions of operating within the wider context of conventional employment relations and capitalist market competition.¹² In this respect, Pittoello describes the purpose of Just Us! as providing “a mechanism for social-environmental change with a global impact. . . . We mean something more authentic when we say that . . . We live it to a higher degree than most companies”. This involves building collective capacity amongst the community of Just Us! members and stakeholders through the worker coop structure, and “the purchase [and sale] of [ethically-sourced] coffee at a better rate essentially”. He further elaborates on the Cooperative's multidimensional purpose:¹³

“The more product we can sell for producers, that's really our goal. . . . We use a lot of levers on our end to cushion what that looks like on the consumers' end, in terms of the price that they're paying. . . . We've got a fairly modest salary structure here [and a relatively equal income distribution]¹⁴ that allow us to buy at these high prices

from producers and sell still at a fairly competitive price to the retail market. So . . . more volume [for] producers [is] really where we see the biggest impacts happening, as well as workers here locally understanding the new role that they play as a worker-member at Just Us! . . . This maximizes our social impacts.”

Chipman explains how the entire membership has “an equal opportunity” to participate and have “a say” in the governance system. “Your voice being heard is the number-one thing that members are really proud of”. This helps them to relate their day-to-day work to the “grand scheme” of things at Just Us!. She thinks that this is “really important to people . . . just enjoying their work [and] feeling the purpose of being here”.

Just Us! describes its overall purpose as follows:

“We promote a system of trade that stands for fair prices and practices, equity and inclusion, environmental stewardship, democratic control, and the building of communities and individual capacity. We don't think of coffee as a mere commodity, but as a great human story that should – and can! – centre human health. We believe economies near and far can transition from being machines of exploitation to relationship-based systems in which producers have autonomy over their own destinies.

“Empowerment. Autonomy. Dignity. Fairness.”¹⁵

Member and stakeholder participation

According to Pittoello,¹⁶ participatory structures and processes at Just Us! are specifically oriented towards “building capacity for worker/member voice . . . at the governance level”.

Regarding Coop governance and management more generally, he states that:

“There's a culture that we're really trying to cultivate here around . . . participating in the right things. I mean, we've gone through periods of worker-owners thinking they should participate in every little thing and . . . that's very difficult given the structure of our coop and who works in our coop. In some coops that might work if you've got [a small group of] people and they're all professionals . . . But if you've got [a larger group of] members and some of them are admins, some of them are managers, some of them [are] in manufacturing, some of them are retail workers, [then] that doesn't work very well.”

“We believe economies near and far can transition from being machines of exploitation to relationship-based systems in which producers have autonomy over their own destinies.”

Conscious also not to create and reproduce the “classist scenario” of an “elite group of worker-members”, Just Us! now “continuously look[s] for new ways of engaging – in the right ways – our worker-members as well as our [non-member] workers”. For Pittoello, this “goes beyond the details of the different structures we’ve put together, because it’s that overarching desire [to participate] . . . it really drives every decision as [to] how we better build capacity and voice for worker[s]/members in appropriate ways”. Indeed, “meaningful work” and “participatory governance” are given particular emphasis at Just Us!, in addition to the general International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) principles and values.¹⁷

The overall evolution of participatory governance at Just Us! has travelled in the direction of effective participation, rather than total participation per se. This recognizes that not every worker at the Cooperative can be reasonably expected to be pre-equipped with the necessary “knowledge and information [and] experience that they can draw from to participate in the conversations” around strategic direction. So, it’s more the people and “not actually the [governance] structure that dictates the participation level . . . We need to talk about appropriate participation depending on the folks involved”. And the structure should reflect this, subject to continuous review and renewal in response to evolving member needs and capacities.

Pittoello feels that it was a mistake in the past to “let a [horizontalist] philosophy rule our decision-making process [at] the governance level”. For the most part, workers are happy if they feel like “they’re listened to on the floor” and “they can engage and help problem solve” at that

The Member Dimension: Ownership, Control, and Benefit

Members are the foundation and heart of all cooperative enterprises. Their motivations will influence and ultimately dictate the way that the enterprise model is governed and managed.

Members jointly own, control, and benefit from the cooperative. Besides their primary type of engagement and patronage, the responsibility of membership includes participation in governance, capitalization of the enterprise, and other forms of support. Membership is a complex set of relationships that affect every facet of the cooperative.

The type of membership will have a profound impact on members’ concerns which will be reflected in the governance and management structures and processes. Why a member joins a cooperative will also determine what types of democratic structures are put in place to represent and protect member interests.

...participatory structures and processes at Just Us! are specifically oriented towards “building capacity for worker/member voice... at the governance level.”

operational level. If they decide to become members then greater opportunities open up to engage in governance decisions. Even then, the Coop has to “provide some guidance and some more knowledge and education and training for those people; and to some extent they’ll take it and it’ll become part of their knowledge base and in some cases it won’t”.

As regards evolving member/stakeholder needs, Just Us! has begun renewing the “community-membership relationship”, recognizing that “we’re a worker coop so we’re rooted in the community, and the workers are community members”. Such engagement ranges from

“We need to talk about appropriate participation depending on the folks involved.”

member-initiated charitable donations to funding and/or participating in social events. Care for community is also evident in the Coop’s openness to non-member worker voice. This extends to producers outside of Just Us! through the fair trade movement: Pittoello sits as a Just Us! representative on the Board of the Small Producers’ Symbol (SPP),¹⁸ “the only 100% producer-owned fair trade label in the world” – “an alliance or network of grassroots authentic fair traders and producers”.

Just Us! has a seat at the table of SPP Global as a buyer, but it is the small producers’ organizations who democratically make the decisions within this second-tier cooperative structure.¹⁹ “We have voice but we have no vote”, states Pittoello. Yet these spaces for cross-stakeholder dialogue have a real impact: “We very much are in regular consultation with SPP around certain decisions that we make [at Just Us!] that impact producer partners . . . It’s not a formal or official piece of our governance structure but it is definitely advisory”.

These examples demonstrate that, while wider stakeholder relationships aren’t always necessarily formalized in the Cooperative’s governance system, multiple stakeholders are nevertheless engaged in

Multiple stakeholders are [...] engaged in meaningful democratic dialogue.

meaningful democratic dialogue. More formalized stakeholder engagement in Coop governance also takes place through representative bodies and committee-initiated surveys, for example regarding workers’ benefits; or through board-initiated surveys, meetings and engagement to prepare worker-members for “strategic visioning” sessions.

Greater community engagement from the perspective of evolving worker-member needs is high on the organization's list of priorities moving into 2021. Even recognizing that social and environmental concerns are relatively widespread in this day and age, not all worker-members are “necessarily the social justice people; they aren't always the environmental activists [etc.] . . . So, you've got to find more relevant engagement points for members that really . . . make sense in their life, and that's what we're trying to do”. The organization's emphasis on worker-member education can also help to shift perceived needs, and “there's a lot of that that goes on too” at Just Us!

“The word governance has its root in the Latin verb ‘Gubernare’ which derives from the Greek ‘Kybernan’, meaning ‘to lead, to steer, to be the head of, to set rules, to be in charge of the power’. Governance is related to vision, decision-making processes, power dynamics and accountability practices. The ultimate goal of governance is to effectively fulfill an organization's goals in a way consistent with the organization's purpose. Co-operatives are member owned and democratically controlled organizations. Their governance has to meet co-operative's objectives, protect member interests and maintain member control. Co-operatives are also values-based businesses whose governance and management principles and practices need to reflect and safeguard their values.” (Novkovic and Miner 2015: 10)

The ICA cooperative principles and values (ICA, 2015) suggest that co-operatives institute participatory forms of democracy in their organizational governance and management, which respect and promote human dignity, democratic decision-making, and engagement of members, employees, and other key stakeholders. Further, those members engaged in governance activities focus on total value creation and equitable distribution of benefit.

Unravelling the governance system: structure-processes-dynamics

Organizational structures

“The structures seem normal when it's outward facing. But the more you get to understand how [Just Us!] works, the more you understand how much more impact you have into what happens – maybe not necessarily on a day-to-day basis, but like the actual [strategic] direction, and the vision of the Cooperative.”²⁰

As Chipman's statement alludes, the organizational structure at Just Us! appears quite conventional (at least for a cooperative) at first glance. The membership elects a policy board, which appoints board committees and hires/appoints a general manager (GM), who in turn hires/appoints a management team to oversee operations. Less common in North American cooperative settings (though more so in Europe) is the institution of a member-elected Oversight Council (modelled, in this instance, on Latin American cooperative “Vigilance Committees”).²¹ This acts as a watchdog on the Board and communicates information back to the wider

membership. Members of the Oversight Council attend Board meetings as observers and generally monitor “the integrity of the Cooperative’s triple bottom line [and policy development process] by reviewing” the relevant documentation. They also evaluate the performance of Board directors annually, and investigate all concerns raised by members/workers in this regard. The Oversight Council, in turn, reports to and is evaluated annually by the Member Assembly.²²

Likewise, the Just Us! Board (in consultation with the Member Assembly and General Manager)²³ has established a Worker Benefits Review Committee (formerly the “Workers’ Council”), which undertakes “worker wellness activities” including but not exclusive to workers’ (health and dental) benefits.²⁴ This is a standing board committee alongside the Finance and Nominating committees. There are also Ad Hoc committees established by the Board for particular, time-limited purposes, such as the Policies and Procedures Committee, which led a review process throughout 2020 and into 2021.²⁵

The Board at Just Us! is comprised of no less than five and no more than seven elected directors, plus the GM who sits on the Board as a non-voting member, plus up to two additional non-voting members who provide expertise.²⁶ At the time of writing, there is a majority of women on the Board, though a majority of men in the senior management team.²⁷ The Oversight Council is made up of two elected non-board worker-members;²⁸ while the Worker Benefit Review Committee is chaired by a board member (as are all standing committees), who sits on the Committee alongside another board member, a non-board worker-member, and a non-member worker. The latter ensures a channel of worker voice for non-members at the governance level.²⁹ The Finance Committee is composed of the Finance Manager, General Manager, Board

Governing Complexity

Steering the organization according to the vision of its members, governance includes structures, processes, and their dynamic interplay. Dynamic interaction between processes and structures, one influencing the other, is how change is implemented in organizations.

In the case of cooperatives, democratic processes and enabling structures also generate the dynamics of change in the organization. Cooperatives differ from other enterprises due to their purpose and the nature of member engagement with the enterprise. Adding external context to the cooperative difference results in distinct governance frameworks.

Organizational structures include the nature of ownership and control, the type of governance bodies, and formal rules and policies.

Processes are defined as the way strategic direction-setting and control is carried out. Formal or informal, these processes are democratic and participative in well functioning cooperatives.

Governance structures and processes change dynamically over time due to evolving internal and external circumstances.

Financial Advisor (an external consultant), and two board members (one of whom chairs); and the Nominating Committee comprises two Coop members. All committees are appointed by the Board,³⁰ and “the Chair [of the Board] is ex-officio on all of the board committees”.³¹

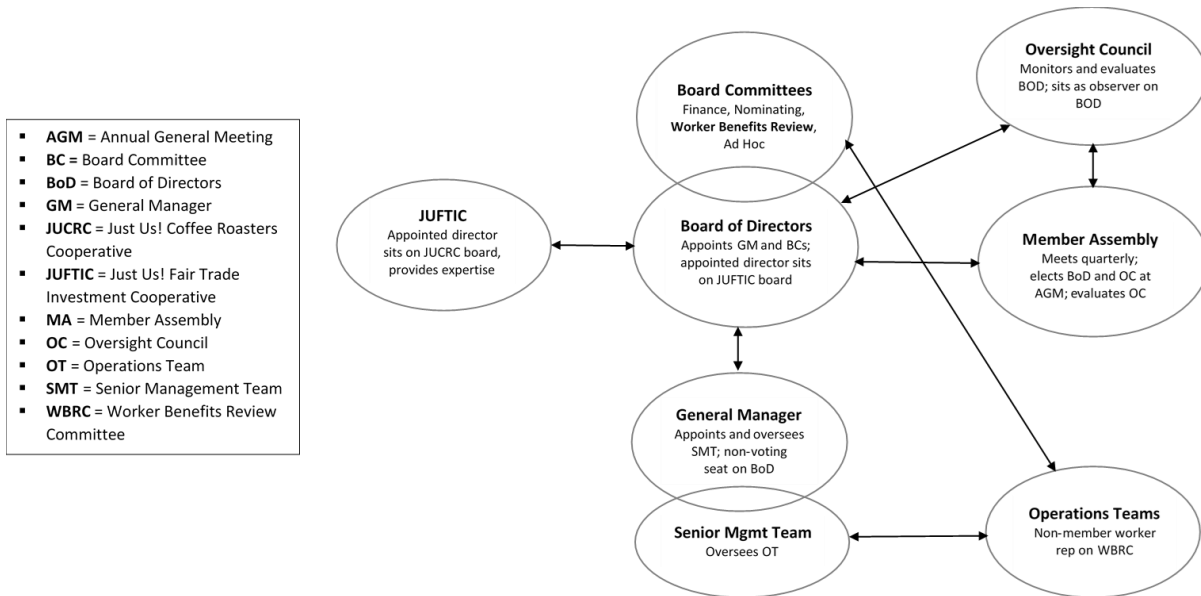
A member-elected Oversight Council acts as a watchdog on the Board and communicates information back to the wider membership.

The Oversight Council does not possess any special powers to obstruct board decisions; though the membership at large retains the power to call an extraordinary general meeting, if democratically deemed necessary. The Oversight Council plays an intermediary role in this situation: “If the Oversight Council is bringing back information to the members that suggested they should do that then they could do that”.³² Chipman clarifies that just 10 percent of members are required to call an extraordinary general meeting.³³

The Worker Benefit Review Committee ensures a channel of worker voice for non-members at the governance level.

Just Us! coopts expertise onto the Board through external consultants like accountants where required. But there is also provision for JUCRC’s sister organization, Just Us! Fair Trade Investment Cooperative (JUFTIC), to appoint a JUFTIC Board member to sit on JUCRC’s Board.³⁴ Chipman tells how this has allowed additional input from investors with a “specialty [and] background in policy and governance”, which probably wouldn’t have been attained externally otherwise.³⁵

JUCRC participatory governance communication flows



The remuneration structure at Just Us! is somewhat complex, given the various roles and responsibilities across the different arms of the organization. This is reflected in “seven different wage ranges”. There is

currently a performance-based wage policy in place, with the Coop’s minimum wage increasing over time towards a living wage. “The maximum wage can only be three times what the minimum wage is. So, the only way for maximum wages to go up is that minimum wages have to go up”.³⁶ Additional member benefits include “a parental leave top-up” and a pension matching program. Worker-members also have 100 percent health and dental coverage, while non-member workers are covered for 75 percent of those costs. “We wanted to create a little bit more incentive for folks to become members”.³⁷ But non-member workers nonetheless receive the wider array of benefits open to all Coop workers.

“The maximum wage can only be three times what the minimum wage is.”

“Everybody gets a 20 percent discount on products at Just Us! Everybody gets a free coffee or tea [or two] . . . when they’re working . . . and they go to the café. There’s also a gift card we give people . . . about \$600 worth [of Just Us! products per] year for full time workers. . . . There’s a lot of smaller ones: [members can book] our delivery van [and space for personal or group use] on the weekends [etc.]”

A fixed proportion of any financial surplus generated is also shared amongst coop stakeholders. As Pittoello describes:

“Although membership should be about [control] ownership and engagement, you have to have a little bit of financial incentive there, we found, in order to give people that extra push to do what they need to do to invest in their organization. So, we have profit sharing of course. We share currently 20 percent of profits with worker members; 5 percent with workers, whether you’re a member or not; and 10 percent with producer partners. . . . We don’t have any indivisible reserves. [The remainder of the surplus] all goes back into organization”³⁸

Participatory processes

Central to the promotion of participatory governance processes and practices within Just Us! organizational structures is the value placed on worker/member education and learning development. This has been an area of particular focus during Pittoello’s tenure as General Manager, with the embedding of “a whole Training Program here at Just Us!”, alongside “our First Crack Innovation Program. They are separate, but both build capacity in our workers”.³⁹ In the spirit of participatory education, he alludes, “multiple [experienced worker-members and non-member workers]⁴⁰ are the instructors for it and they design the modules themselves”.⁴¹ This naturally feeds into recruitment and onboarding practices at the Coop, where the “requirements of work” are communicated through “probationary orientation . . . and required training”.⁴² Pittoello elaborates: “So, something very values-based [such as] Coops 101 would be one of the required trainings”.

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Central to the promotion of participatory governance processes and practices within Just Us! organizational structures is the value placed on worker/member education and learning development.

Beyond the basics of working and relating within a worker cooperative, he states that there is also “a lot [of focus on] fair trade and how we think about fair trade [at Just Us!]”, alongside

“more occupation focused stuff [e.g.] Office 365 [and] drink making”. Worker-members are encouraged to take training modules of interest even if they are not strictly required to.

“Lifelong learning is encouraged . . . Even external training courses if somebody comes across something they’re interested in, the goal is that they should be able to bring that to a supervisor . . . or if you want to go visit producers at origin on one of the trips that we do . . . As a worker-member we want you to do it because it gives you a better perspective on the values of the organization and why we do what we do. [They are] often lifechanging kind[s] of trips. So . . . we have money in the budget for worker-members to do that kind of work, as well as where maybe an external governance course is being offered that board members may very well [benefit from].”⁴³

Education of external stakeholders about fair trade and workplace democracy is also an important aspiration of the (non-profit) Just Us! Development Education Society (JUDES)⁴⁴ – for example, community education through the Just Us! Coffee, Chocolate, and Fair Trade Museum.⁴⁵

Education of external stakeholders about fair trade and workplace democracy is also an important aspiration.

Yet, thus far, none of this has been formalized via the governance structure. As Pittoello explains:

“We don’t have a committee that governs all that [education, training, and learning development]. It’s worked . . . I mean we’re just fortunate right now I think [that] there’s a fair amount of trust and a fair amount of engagement so it [has] worked fairly well. If that [wasn’t] there then a committee might be the way that they would manage it.”⁴⁶

The recruitment and hiring practices at Just Us! are “fairly standard”, with internal hires prioritised through training and work shadowing – Chipman and Pittoello are cases in point – but the Coop is also willing to go external if needs be.

“Our goal is that . . . every supervisory role including management are members. But . . . if we hire somebody new and they’re not eligible for membership yet and they’re a manager, we’re not going to not hire them and we’re not going to fast-track membership. . . . I mean if a manager decides they’re not going to become a member . . . [even if] it’s unlikely that will be the case because it’s obviously a [worker] coop . . . it’s not going to preclude them from the position.”⁴⁷

Chipman speaks to the importance of the General Manager's (non-voting) seat at the Board table. "We have a Board meeting monthly which the [Board Chair] runs . . . A lot of reporting is done by committee chairs, but most of the new business and financial/operational updates are brought by the GM".⁴⁸ She expresses that these "overarching financial questions [are] the most difficult part of being a co-worker-member on the Board". Board members have their own policy work besides, but "if the members want a [specific] policy, [the GM] can get more of a feel for encompassing everyone's thoughts in one". She clarifies, however, "that the Board and/or Member [Assembly decide on] the final approval of any policies" brought forward. "We usually task the GM with creating them as he has more expertise in policy writing and access to external experts in the [relevant] fields".⁴⁹ If members disagree with the GM on any big governance policies, they are encouraged to build a certain consensus before approaching the Board, rather than the GM directly, to have the issue dealt with.⁵⁰ Chipman describes the policy process for board committees as follows:

"Any policy recommendations or changes that the board committees make go to the Board for approval, then the Board approves and communicates to members *or* brings their recommendation to members for approval, depending on what type of policy it is."⁵¹

More broadly, worker-members are encouraged to participate meaningfully in governance through the usual channels. "All members participate in the AGMs [and quarterly meetings], unless they're on leave [etc.]". This doesn't mean that worker-member participation always runs smoothly, however: facilitating deep engagement in matters of coop governance is an ongoing struggle. Outside of meetings, workers and members are kept informed on policy and governance by way of a daily morning report. The GM also holds virtual "Town Hall" updates every two weeks. These bidirectional information flows are useful for the Board and wider membership alike.⁵²

Change management dynamics

The present governance system at Just Us! represents a departure from previous experiments with both conventional control-oriented hierarchy and also flatter collaboration-oriented total participation. The Coop has shown a willingness to learn, adapt, and evolve in response to internal and external pressures and developments – yet without sacrificing its core mission, purpose, ethos, values and principles as a fair trade worker cooperative along the way.

After the initial period of struggle and sacrifice establishing the Coop, the operation took off and began growing quite rapidly. Given the founders' lack of experience and expertise in business and cooperative development, they searched for guidance from conventional business schools and eventually decided to hire an external Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to manage the business.⁵³ Mainstream corporate governance and management practices, however, proved to be a poor fit for the basic cooperative model of ownership and control. In particular, there was “an uncertain role for the general membership in governance” decisions.⁵⁴

The Cooperative decided to part ways with the CEO after a short period around 2012/2013 and returned to their roots in workplace democracy. The membership resolved not to hire a General Manager (though one of the founders effectively took this role on informally), implementing a team-based system of operations to encourage worker voice; and a flat governance structure was established through a so-called “Board of the Whole” (i.e. the general membership engaged in all key governance decisions). But this ultimately resulted in a lot of meetings with “a lot of talking [and going around in] circles” – no doubt in part due to the larger membership. Similarly, in terms of operations, the elected “team leads” (there were no managers at this stage) met daily, resulting in a “nightmare” of complex interaction.⁵⁵ “There was also something called ‘The Common Grounds’ where all team leads met weekly to discuss issues and supposedly make decisions – which seldom happened”. All of this was in an effort to avoid a formal CEO position (which itself hadn’t gone very well). Something else was needed, less stringent in approach – more of a cooperative mediation between top-down and bottom-up governance.⁵⁶

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Pittoello succeeded the (effective) General Manager, first as co-Managing Director (from 2015/2016) with another worker-member, and then eventually flying solo (from 2017). At the outset of this succession period, the Board of the Whole was scrapped; a decision initially seen as taking power away from the wider worker-membership (and hence it met with some resistance). “This is when the Oversight Council and elected Board were reinstated with a

decision matrix to support the transition”. The Managing Director(s) reported to this more conventional Board of Directors, and decision matrices were drawn up for both the Board and the Operations Teams, with fewer meetings required all around.⁵⁷

2016 was a bad year for Just Us! financially. Pittoello was hired officially as General Manager in 2017 and the Board set about formally developing its governance policies and processes.⁵⁸ This was somewhat of a top-down affair, with the membership at least approving the resulting proposals by vote. To offset any perceived dilution of worker/member participation, Pittoello was central to establishing the member-elected Workers’ Council outside of the Board. This short-lived experiment failed to fulfill its envisioned governance role as a communication channel between the Board and the shop floor, however, degenerating into an outlet for unofficial grievances which members were ill-equipped to handle. The Workers’ Council in turn was eventually stood down in favour of a more conventional board committee mandated to focus on worker benefits. The Oversight Council was likewise established as a clearly mandated supervisory board to take up some of the resulting slack.⁵⁹

The reform program enacted since 2017 has generally led to better performance and more stability at the Cooperative, according to Pittoello. The reality for Just Us! was that many worker-members were often most interested in realizing ongoing day-to-day participation in operations rather than governance per se – preferring to participate in the latter more periodically. Given the nature of the workforce then, more of a balance was ultimately sought between a collaboration- and control-oriented governance model. Experiments too far in one direction or the other resulted in organizational dysfunction, so a compromise was sought.⁶⁰

Internal pressures

Regarding internal pressures for a more conventional governance structure, the organization found in practice that a horizontal approach resulted in too many unproductive meetings and poor dissemination of information. Even after the introduction of a formal board and various governance-focused councils and committees, the Cooperative still faces the common issues associated with personalities dominating meetings. Relatedly, Chipman discovered that the problem was not simply an issue of the number of meetings within these structures, but also the *format* of meetings. Experimentation with smaller (and virtual) meeting groups since the

coronavirus pandemic disrupted proceedings in 2020 appears to hold future promise. As Chipman alludes:

“We did find when in small groups – not that the dominant personalities weren’t there – but . . . it didn’t matter as much . . . Everyone, even the people that we weren’t expecting to have too much to say [had] a lot to say . . . It was kind of a stark contrast. . . . So, everyone participated, over-participated even . . . And then we went back to a members’ meeting not even a month later and everyone was just silent, waiting for someone else to say something. So . . . it’s not [simply] an engagement problem [per se], it’s [as much an issue of meeting] format.”⁶¹

There are also pressures towards professionalization, with the Coop responding by training up a new Finance Manager internally, so as to rely less on external accounting consultancy. The in-depth analytical and communicative work of the Finance Committee and GM in this regard also avoids

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“bogging down people who are on the Board who have other specialties, because not everyone is going to be great at finance . . . You’re not going to get more baristas and very skilled task people to want to be on your board [without a delegation of financial expertise] . . . Then people who don’t have expertise in financials can be like, ‘Okay, I trust that you two Board members, plus our internal finance managers, plus an external accountant really understand what you’re doing’. Then I feel like I can vote on this budget and approve it. . . . A big problem that we used to have was assuming that everyone on the Board could just do everything. Then everyone will leave the board because they can’t . . .”⁶²

On the flip side of increased hierarchy and specialization, a perceived lack of non-member worker voice and/or a clear pathway to membership at Just Us! pushed aspects of Coop governance in a more fundamentally collaborative direction. The aim was to make worker participation more inclusive and effective overall, whether through innovative or more traditional decision-making bodies. The Workers’ Council was introduced partly in response to the unionization of two Just Us! cafés in HRM. Pittoello recalls that:

“It was really disappointing when unionization happened; because it was obvious to us that . . . we had failed as a worker coop. . . . It’s just [that] it created an ‘us and them’ kind of scenario, which is the last thing that we ever wanted . . . So, the Workers’ Council was a means to allow for any complaints [and] any issues workers

or worker-members were having – to create a space for them to [be heard] . . . The thing is it didn't really get used. And it got confusing for people because then it bordered on grievances and HR-type stuff, and nobody on that council had HR experience. So, we got worried that well now we're going to get into legal issues; we're probably going to do things wrong or we're going to screw something up. And so, we kind of stopped using it.

“It existed for a while as a council but nobody was on it and we just didn't know what to do with it until this more recent version [at] the committee level . . . The idea being that we've got people with more ability to kind of formulate the issues as they come up that are on that committee, so that it still would act as an opportunity to bring suggestions to the table. But we're really trying to just build better relationships operationally so that [the grievances] stuff doesn't happen. [We're trying to] be more participatory . . . Structure was never the [underlying] issue; it was trust [and] relationships.”⁶³

One unionized café in Halifax eventually broke away, with support and assistance from Just Us!, to form an independent unionized worker cooperative, the Glitter Bean Café,⁶⁴ in line with the values and principles of the union cooperative model.⁶⁵

External pressures

Recent events surrounding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have prompted Just Us! to reconsider and reformulate their recruitment and hiring policies to advance greater Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI). Pittoello communicates that:

“We've been doing a fair amount of work around anti-racism [and] anti-oppression [etc.] . . . One of the relationships we've built is with [the] Valley African Nova Scotia Development Agency (VANSDA). . . . We've been doing some anti-oppression work with them; we trained everybody. . . It's not the typical kind of training . . . it's pretty emotional . . . we're really trying to get at people and really talk about the issues that are going on . . . [This is] some real impactful kind of work that's led by the VANSDA Executive Director . . . who's African Nova Scotian himself.”

Recent events surrounding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have prompted Just Us! to reconsider and reformulate their recruitment and hiring policies to advance greater Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI).

This has prompted further ongoing conversation within the Cooperative. “There's certainly a lot of decolonization-type conversations going on within our organization; both from the perspective of producers as well as the perspective of our own backyard and [indigenous] reconciliation”.⁶⁶

“There's certainly a lot of decolonization-type conversations going on within our organization”

Ecological stresses are naturally also of major concern to Just Us! and the fair trade movement.⁶⁷ So far, however, the Coop has managed to navigate the coronavirus pandemic – itself rooted in the nexus of industrial agriculture, deforestation, and global warming – reasonably well. While the disruption has hit the retail operation hardest, the Coop had already diversified into stocking grocery stores in recent years. The organization hasn't had to lay anyone off or adjust wages. “It seems like there's a bit of a light at the end of the tunnel now. We haven't had any [issues] other than converting everything to [working] online. We haven't had to change our board practice as much”.⁶⁸

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Conclusion

All business organizations face unprecedented challenges in the face of contemporary environmental, social, and economic dislocation. The proven adaptability of Just Us! when faced with such internal and external change should serve the Cooperative well in looking to the future. Indeed, such resilience in the face of crisis is inherent to the democratic and participatory cooperative model.⁶⁹ It appears that a new generation of cooperators are well placed to steer their organization towards its cooperative advantage in the pursuit of justice at home and abroad.

¹ For a history of the origins and development of the Cooperative, including its aspiration towards the ideals of the global fair trade movement and workplace democracy, see Byrne, S., & Sharpe, E. (2014). *In Pursuit of Justice: Just Us! Coffee Roasters Co-op and the Fair Trade Movement*. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.

² According to Byrne & Sharpe (2014, p. 37), total annual sales grew rapidly from CAD \$441,138 in 1998 to CAD \$7,019,273 in 2009, with the rate of growth slowing significantly after the 2008 global financial crisis.

³ Novkovic, S., & Miner, K. (2015). *Co-operative governance fit to build resilience in the face of complexity*. International Co-operative Alliance. Retrieved from: <https://www.ica.coop/en/co-operative-governance-fit-build-resilience-face-complexity>

⁴ <https://justuscoffee.com/pages/our-co-op>

⁵ “I never really thought this would be my career, so I didn’t really want to settle in until I was ready to, which I think could be a shared sentiment [with] a lot of baristas” (Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020).

⁶ Interviews with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020; and Joey Pittoello, October 14 and December 4, 2020.

⁷ Ibid. “An employee needs to have two years of full-time status (i.e. working an average of 30 hours per week), to have good performance reviews and to invest [CAD] \$2,000. (Just Us! contributes [CAD] \$200 for every [CAD] \$800 contributed by an employee, so the employee contributes [CAD] \$1,600)” (Byrne & Sharpe, 2014, p. 84).

⁸ Interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020; and personal communication, April 30, 2021.

⁹ See Byrne & Sharpe (2014).

¹⁰ “We are currently creating savings plans so that workers who are interested in ownership can save directly off their paycheque . . . We have done work to provide regular sessions on how to become a member, how to plan things out so that it will happen”. Joey Pittoello, personal communication, April 30, 2021.

¹¹ Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

¹² See Byrne & Sharpe (2014).

¹³ Interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020.

¹⁴ Joey Pittoello, personal communication, May 7, 2021.

¹⁵ <https://justuscoffee.com/pages/our-values>

¹⁶ Statements and quotations in this section are drawn from our interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁷ Just Us! Coffee Roasters Coop. Board of Directors Policies. Internal document. “We cultivate a workplace culture of gratitude to promote empathy, dialogue, mutual respect, passion, celebration, pride, and personal and collective capacity building” (ibid.). See also <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity>

¹⁸ <https://justuscoffee.com/pages/small-producer-partners-spp> and <https://spp.coop/?lang=en>

¹⁹ “If you’re an independent small producer [then] you’re not a member [of SPP Global]. If you’re member of an association or a democratic organization that’s a producer organization then your organization is a member and an owner of that particular network and that label [which adopts fair trade] standards [etc.]” (Interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020).

²⁰ Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

²¹ Interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020. “The group that worked on this new model of governance was [composed of] the managers, founders, and Project Equity—an organization in USA. It was then recommended to the Board for adoption” (Pittoello, personal communication, May 7, 2021). See <https://project-equity.org/>

²² Just Us! Coffee Roasters Coop. Board Processes Manual. Internal document.

²³ Joey Pittoello, personal communication, April 30, 2021.

²⁴ “The Worker Benefits Review Committee used to be called the Workers’ Council and it was a council of the members [separate from the Board], but it didn’t really function well that way. So, it was reborn as a . . . committee within the board level” (Just Us! Coffee Roasters Coop. Board Processes Manual. Internal document.)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “The Board is elected at the Annual General Meeting for a term of two years. At the end of two years they are eligible to be reelected for another two years. After six years, they are not eligible for reelection for one year” (ibid.).

²⁷ Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

²⁸ The Oversight Council is elected for a “two-year term (rotating)”. Just Us! Coffee Roasters Coop. Board Processes Manual. Internal document.

²⁹ “Mandate: To assist the GM in developing or revising employee benefit programs and to suggest new employee benefits to the Board” (ibid.).

³⁰ “Standing committees will have a one year term” (ibid.).

³¹ Janice Chipman, personal communication, May 10, 2021.

³² Interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020.

³³ Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

³⁴ This investment coop exists to raise (mostly non-voting) capital for JUCRC. “The JUFTIC Board is a policy board made up mainly of Just Us! coop investors who are either workers at Just Us! or interested community members” (Byrne & Sharpe, 2014, p. 37). A worker-member of JUCRC also sits on JUFTIC’s Board. Janice Chipman clarifies that “every worker-member of JUCRC is also a member of JUFTIC as we are investors” (personal communication, May 28, 2021).

³⁵ Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

³⁶ Interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020. There are “extenuating circumstances” where allowances can potentially be made outside of this ratio – e.g. “an accountant position”.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Joey Pittoello, personal communication, April 30, 2021.

⁴⁰ Janice Chipman, personal communication, May 10, 2021.

⁴¹ “We try to have at least two instructors for each module and we run [a lot of] those on a regular basis” (interview with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020).

⁴² Ibid. Orientation is carried out during “the first few weeks”; probation lasts for “the first 10 weeks”; and required training is undertaken “within the first year of employment”.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ JUDES’s operation is being “completely reworked for 2022” (Joey Pittoello, personal communication, April 30, 2021).

⁴⁵ See Byrne & Sharpe (2014). A “revamp of the museum” is planned, according to Chipman (interview, December 9, 2020).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Janice Chipman, personal communication, May 10, 2021.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

⁵¹ Janice Chipman, personal communication, May 10, 2021.

⁵² Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

⁵³ See Byrne & Sharpe (2014).

⁵⁴ Interview with Joey Pittoello, October 14, 2020.

⁵⁵ “They were elected members from the Board of the Whole. [The team leads were collectively] called the ‘Executive Committee’ at the time, but [they were] effectively a management team” (Joey Pittoello, personal communication, April 30, 2021).

⁵⁶ Joey Pittoello, personal communication, May 7, 2021; and interview with Pittoello, October 14, 2020.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “The reality is that our energy was all being spent on [devising] governance models and different structures of operations. We were neglecting our business and so we needed to restructure the whole business and get back to financially stable ground. That’s why I was asked to be GM” (Joey Pittoello, personal communication, May 7, 2021).

⁵⁹ Interview with Joey Pittoello, October 14, 2020.

⁶⁰ Ibid. See Sundaramurthy, C., & Lewis, M. (2003). Control and collaboration: Paradoxes of governance. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(3), 397-415.

⁶¹ Interview with Janice Chipman, December 9, 2020.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Interviews with Joey Pittoello, October 14 and December 4, 2020.

⁶⁴ See <https://www.glitterbeancafe.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/HalifaxWAC/videos/933193223876252>

⁶⁵ Cooperative College (2020). *Union Coop Solutions: A Manifesto*. Retrieved from <https://www.co-op.ac.uk/event/union-co-op-solutions-a-manifesto>

⁶⁶ Interviews with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020.

⁶⁷ <https://www.fairtrade.net/issue/environment>

⁶⁸ Interviews with Joey Pittoello, December 4, 2020.

⁶⁹ Billiet, A., Dufays, F., Friedel, S., & Staessens, M. (2021). The resilience of the cooperative model: How do cooperatives deal with the COVID-19 crisis?. *Strategic Change*, 30(2), 99-108. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/jsc.2393>