

# Itching!



# Redprint makes the difference

Many associations, including cooperatives, have a members council. How should we view a members council, who are eligible to sit on it and how far should the powers of a members council go? As a cooperative expert, Ineke Duit, director of NICE (Netherlands Institute for Co-operative Entrepreneurship), knows all the ins and outs. Reason enough to ask her a number of questions about the functioning of the members council.

## HOW DO YOU SEE THE MEMBERS COUNCIL?

By setting up a members council, the executive and/or supervisory board can intensify the relationship with the members. With a growing number of members it turns out to be a difficult task to keep in touch with the members and to know what is going on among them. A members council has a limited size and a relatively stable composition over time. Because people usually stay in it for a few years, you can build a relationship. This way, you can include the council members in the development of the organisation, you can outline the reasons for decisions and you can show the progress made. At the same time, a members council provides the organisation with a good sounding

*'Radiating that you enjoy it.'*

board. The members council can be seen as a bullhorn: by maintaining intensive contact with a small group of people, you can get a good impression of what is going on among the members. That does set requirements to the composition. The most tempting thing is to ask only enthusiastic, involved people. But it's important to include many different flavours, or you'll miss the point.'

## WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT STARTING THE MEMBERS' COUNCIL (PARTLY) WITH FORMER DIRECTORS AND SUPERVISORS?

'Look before you leap, I'd say. The advantage, of course, is that these people are involved and have a warm heart for the organisation. That's often the reason to do it. But these people are also used to having an intensive look behind the scenes and will probably want to continue doing so initially. This runs the risk that the members' council will tend to shift towards an executive orientation due to their influence. It will then require extra alertness on the part of the board to ensure

that the Members' Council comes to a proper implementation of its role.'

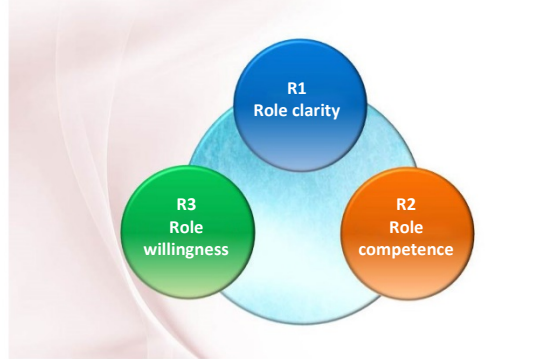
## WHAT IS YOUR MAIN EXPERIENCE WITH MEMBERS COUNCILS?

'A members council does not function well on its own and definitely requires maintenance. It's important to get off to a good start: in addition to time for getting to know each other, I would like to see an (introductory) programme in which the council's role is properly explained. This will have to be repeated regularly over time, and not just for new member council members. If this attention is not there, experience shows that the council will develop in the wrong direction over time. Either the members council becomes apathetic, the council members don't see what their influence is and quit mentally. Or the members council is constantly shifting and sees its role becoming increasingly heavy, i.e. more executive.'

## DOESN'T THE LATTER MAKE SENSE?

'Usually, council members get the feeling that they are representing a large group of members and that they are performing their duties on behalf of this large group. In their perception, therefore, a heavy responsibility rests on their shoulders. If, for example, they approve the annual accounts, they do so instinctively on behalf of and for hundreds or thousands of members.

Their supporters, they even call it sometimes. But that is not and cannot be the intention, because members sit on the council without mandate or obligation. If that sense of responsibility starts to dominate, a members council will ask for more and more information. Symptoms of this are that, in addition to the annual figures, a request is also made for the quarterly figures, or an explanation per activity or an interview with the accountant, etc. It is therefore important to continue to pay attention to a balanced role structure and to ensure that the council members are able to perform their council position properly.'

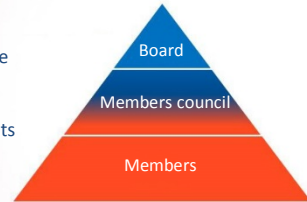


## Members council

Is a cross between a 'Bullhorn' and a Plug Adapter

Plug adapter to bridge differences in:

- Time horizon
- Balance of interests
- Commitment



## THE MEMBERS COUNCIL SHOULD REMAIN AT A 'SAFE' DISTANCE?

I can certainly imagine that a board wants to build up a close relationship with its members council and wants to reflect that. But I would prefer to realise that in the informational sense. That's what I call the difference between blueprint and redprint. The blueprint

*'The members council as a bullhorn.'*

is what you formally arrange with each other. I'd keep that to a minimum. The redprint is how you deal with each other in practice. I'd go all out on that. This way, for instance, if the blueprint does not stipulate that the members council must approve the policy plan, you are still free to discuss it with them intensively.'

## DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS?

'A members council is an excellent tool for actively giving substance to member involvement. But it requires time and attention. Also: show that you enjoy it and ensure that the agenda has and continues to have content. It is important to keep coming together on a regular basis to prevent the commitment from waning. Also show what has been or is being done with the discussions in the members council. The latter is important to make members of the council feel that they do matter and have influence. If you do all this, you're guaranteed to get a lot in return.'



## Blueprint and Redprint

- Blueprint is the formal side, described by law and statutes
- Redprint is the way to deal with each other. This differs per organisation, due to the people!!

## Composition: average Amersfoort



## In summary:

- Lazy job;
- Without mandate or obligation;
- Composition requirement: reflection



### Disease symptoms:

- For meetings;
- Desire to reach 1 point of view;
- Wanting second opinion from external accountant;
- Creating an additional administrative layer

# Itching!

*When the beautiful weather arrives, the horse carriages come out again. For an outsider, carriage driving may seem like a calm sport. But insiders know that it is even more challenging than riding on horseback. The risk of equestrian sports is mainly in the fact that a horse can stampede. In fact, if a horse knew its strength, it would always go its own way.*

## JEUK

A well-trained horse is attentive, provided that its attention is called for. Riders on horseback are in close contact with the horse. Carriage drivers, on the other hand, literally takes distance and have to make do with reins, whip and their voice. That's why they are even more alert to their horse. The driver wants to keep their horse attentive, to prevent it from choosing its own path. In the process, the driver regularly uses their reins to stir the side of the horse's mouth: this is also known as itching. Especially on long, straight stretches, it serves as a reminder to the horse that its driver is still there.

## METAPHOR

This itching by carriage drivers can be seen as a metaphor for the function of the members council. In principle, the members council replaces the general assembly. As a rule, the members council has no more powers than the standard powers attributed to the general assembly. In this way, the members council mainly forms a platform for the board of directors and the supervisory board, to which these administrative colleges are accountable. For organisations with large numbers of members, a members council can be seen as the combined energy of the members. This makes it easier to maintain intensive contact than it would be with all members. If the members council is also a good reflection of the member base, the board of directors and the supervisory board will have a reliable view of what is going on among the members after a meeting with the members council. In addition, this smaller group offers directors and supervisors the opportunity to build up a relationship with the members council, because it has a stable composition for a longer period of time. Extra investments can be made to inform the council members about developments in the organisation and train them in

developments in the organisation and train them in terms of competencies.

Council members sometimes experience their position as meagre. They would like to have more say or act as a shadow supervisor.

But to stay with the metaphor of carriage driving: that would mean taking over the horse's work. So a council member is allowed to be lazy: let others do the work. But stay alert: what are those others doing? And *jeuken*: always reminding the board of directors and supervisory board of their presence and continuing to draw attention to the interests of the members.

*'A council member  
may be lazy  
and be themselves.'*

## THE SILENT FORCE

The fact that there is such an alert accountability platform more or less casts its shadow ahead. The board of directors and supervisory board know that they will have to present themselves to the members council again at the next meeting

and prepare themselves for this. This preparation is invisible to the members council. But it is perhaps its most important moment of influence. The *jeuken* has done its job.

So the only thing council members have to do is to basically just be themselves. Taking note of the presentations of the board of directors and supervisory board and then giving their own opinion. Consultation of members is therefore not necessary. Moreover, this would be an almost impossible task given the large numbers of members. If council members feel the need for pre-consultation, this sends a powerful signal to the board of directors and supervisory board that there is a risk of a gap between the two worlds: that of the management on the one hand and that of the (members council) members on the other.

So, much like the carriage driver, the members council has a lot of influence with limited eloquence and power, provided they properly understand the rules of the 'sport'.