An Introduction to Democratic Decision-Making
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Step 1: Division and Delegation

In setting up your cooperative, it will be helpful to first look at what are the different areas of operation, create subgroups relating to each area, and the delegate as much as possible. This will maximize the efficiency and usefulness of the meetings of the whole (or its representatives).
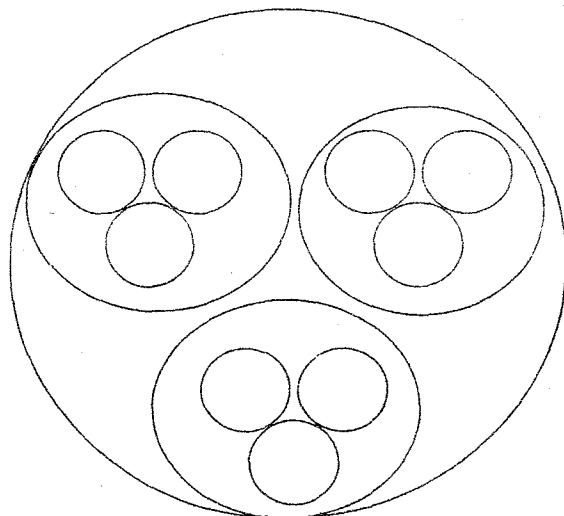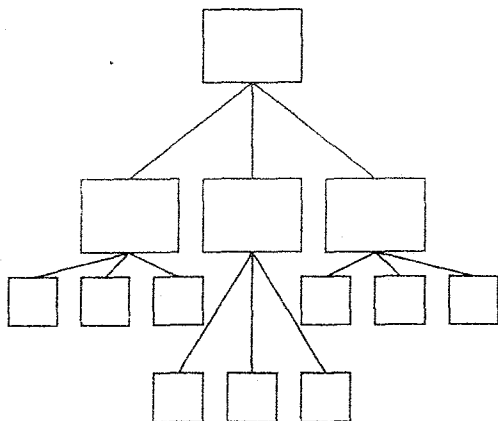
The general principle that I use for democratic management is that the whole group (i.e. the collective) is ultimately in charge of everything. But to have everyone decide on everything is a recipe for gridlock and disaster. Delegation is your friend, and a commonly accepted general principle of democratic structure is this: A decision should be made by the smallest group of people, which still includes everyone affected by that decision.

In delegating, there are a few things to consider. 1) You should balance the desire to delegate with the risk that over-delegation will make a complicated organization that nobody can remember. 2) It is crucial to set up a way for the information to flow both ways – for example, a brief report at each meeting. 3) Don't delegate things that you don't really want to delegate.

Generally speaking, organizations will evolve and grow to include multiple levels of organization, so it is useful to address this early on, so that the concept has been introduced. It is not necessary for these levels to share similar structures, but similarity does help to create an organization that is easy to understand.

The more that your systems are uniform and intuitive, the less you have to work to remember how they work. This frees up valuable and scarce brain cells for remembering procedures and where things are filed and such, which will tend to lessen that chronic problem of wondering where someone put something. You can also now focus on using the systems to meet your needs, rather than constantly trying to figure them out.

Below are two models for how an organization might be structured:

When setting up democratic decision-making, it is important to create a clear picture of how the operation breaks down into parts. I like to think of it as a sort of cellular organization, with multiple levels of organization. In a way, this is similar to the usual hierarchical organization chart; but I prefer to use this different model to emphasize the egalitarian nature of the cooperative. In one way, the following two diagrams depict the same structure; but in another way, the one on the left emphasizes that there is a body at the top which is superior to the others, while the one on the left illustrates a whole that is made up of its equal parts.

Step 2: Decision-making processes

The world of decision-making is a big and blurry one, and any attempt at classification will require arbitrary distinctions. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine some different points along the spectrum:

> Autocracy: very quick and easy, not much buy-in, requires much enforcement
> Consultative: a bit more inclusive than autocracy, less error-prone
> Majority: Most familiar and quite inclusive, but still competitive form
> Supermajority: Provides stronger legitimacy than majority
> Consensus: Shifts to building a solution that is agreeable to everyone
> Unanimity: Great when it happens, but not a tenable decision-making process.

Another dimension to this is whether an organization uses representative or direct democracy. This is generally a question of degree, with larger organizations tending to delegate more power to a representative body (and perhaps the management, with checks and balances, as well as a strong strategic planning process).

Adding to the fun, there is usually some degree of difference between the official structures on paper, and the actual ways in which things happen. This is true even in organizations that are very regimented and hierarchical. While recognizing that some degree of organizational drift is inevitable, it is important to take steps to minimize this. Whenever an organization does not match its understood ideal, there is a danger that someone will pull out the bylaws or other documents, and correctly question the legitimacy of a decision. There are also possibly legal implications.

This drift can be minimized by not pushing too far into unfamiliar territory, such as setting up consensus systems with inadequate training. Nevertheless, the drift is going to happen. Ideally a group should build in some method of re-evaluating its decision-making process and structure in general. This might take the form of an audit committee, although that is a topic of its own.

In order to maximize the chances that a decision-making process will work well, it is important to start with a commonly-understood method. Most often, this is majority rules, which is largely viewed as synonymous with democracy. However, once the group has had a chance to discuss its options, it may wish to move to supermajority or consensus (or, god forbid, unanimity). If that is the case, I use a rule of thumb that the decision to use a decision-making process must be able to achieve that threshold. That is, there must be a consensus to use consensus.