CO-OPERATIVES UK

THINK PIECE 2

Learning the skills of co-operation

Building our capacity to work together

Geoff Mulgan

> "The skills for co-operation can be learned. But they need constant topping up and relearning, and some of them are quite subtle."

The skills of co-operation

We're all born with the ability to co-operate, just as we're all (or nearly all) born with the ability to sing or to run. But as with singing and running, our innate abilities also need to be cultivated and trained if we are to become good co-operators.

Some of those skills are fairly obvious. You're not much use as a co-operator if you're not reasonably good at listening, and not just to what people say but also to what they don't say. Equally you're not much use as a co-operator if you can't communicate and explain why an idea is good or why an apparently attractive option could go horribly wrong. Both overlap with the ability to co-ordinate – helping a group to share out tasks and get them done.

Other skills are less obvious. One of the most valuable skills to have in any group is the skill of stopping disagreements turn into bitter conflicts: helping people to climb down without losing face can save an extraordinary amount of grief. On the other hand, being a good co-operator doesn't mean just agreeing with everyone all the time. Sometimes we have to challenge others to get to better solutions; we may serve others best if we surface uncomfortable truths and face up to difficult facts. And we may serve our colleagues best if we help to stop someone else from hogging the limelight or pushing their own ideas at the expense of others.

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Look closely, however, and it soon becomes apparent that all of these skills – unlike running and singing – aren't just skills: they are intimately bound up with morality and with our fundamental relationships with the world around us. Seen through this lens the morality of co-operation is about both what we do and what we don't do. On the plus side it involves the ability to empathise with others, putting our egos in their proper place, and feeling a sense of connectedness and responsibility to others. Empathy is the root of much of our moral sense, and much of what makes it possible for people to get on.

The converse is that to be a good co-operator you have to avoid many of the deadly sins – like pride and greed – and learn the self-discipline that's needed to restrain impulsive behaviour, anger and violence, and the tendency we all have to be oversensitive to criticism or neglect.

Promoting co-operation

So what could be done to promote more co-operation? Can these skills and dispositions be learned?

The short answer is that they can be learned, and are, all the time. Children automatically have a very strong sense of fairness ('its not fair!' is the common complaint from a very early age). But children usually need some help to learn how to share with others, and how to avoid getting angry when another child plays with their toy, or gets too much attention from a parent. We learn in part by seeing how others behave – so watching adults, or older brothers and sisters, co-operate well, for example sharing out tasks on holiday or playing music together, makes co-operation seem natural. By contrast a child who grows up only ever seeing their parents glued to the TV set won't get much feel for what it means to co-operate.

Part of the challenge for employers, and for co-operatives, is that these aren't skills that can just be learned from a manual, with neat boxes to tick.

Much of this learning happens within the family. But schools also play a part. On the sports field you quickly learn to co-operate – and get shunned if you don't pass the ball, make opportunities for others.

But much more could be done in schools. Far too much learning is still very individualistic: with pupils learning alone, doing homework alone, and being tested in exams on their own. A better approach might be to shift more of the curriculum onto projects where pupils collaborate with each other, solving problems and creating things. Getting teenagers to work together to plant an allotment, to raise fish, or to fix a car, teaches several things in one go: maths, literacy and science as well as the skills of human interaction. Technology may be a help here: the Internet has often fostered a passive individualism, and even sometimes narcissism. But at their best social networks encourage people to collaborate together, for example in multi-user games, and some expect that it won't be long before schools systematically measure how good pupils are at collaborating with their peers over networks.

In the workplace co-operation has moved much more centre stage in the last few years. It has taken its place alongside a set of what are sometimes called 'soft skills', or alternatively non-cognitive and employability skills. These include emotional and social intelligence, the ability to read what others are thinking and feeling, as well as the ability to motivate and recognise others. Recent research suggests that such skills may be better predictors of success in life and work success than traditional IQ and academic qualifications and almost any job today involves working in a team, at least part of the time. Within a team you have to be able to work out both what needs to be done and how it should be

done; you need to be able to respect other people's skills, and increasingly you may need to be able to get on with people from very different backgrounds to you, who don't easily laugh at the same jokes or share your values.

Employers complain that too many school-leavers and graduates lack these skills, and that their absence has become even more important than the absence of vocational or academic qualifications. Part of the challenge for employers, and for co-operatives, is that these aren't skills that can just be learned from a manual, with neat boxes to tick. Nor can they be learned in the classroom, like a foreign language. Instead they have to be learned through practice, and through reflection on practice.

The subtleties of co-operation

That sort of reflection brings to the surface many of the subtleties that co-operation brings with it in daily life.

In a team or an organisation, it's good to listen to as many viewpoints as possible: but sometimes it may be just as important to force things to a decision, even if not everyone is happy with it. Research also shows that what makes co-operation successful will vary from situation to situation. In a military unit, or a team climbing a mountain, the ability of people to trust each other can make the difference between life and death. But there will also be times when someone has to be empowered to take a decision on behalf of the group (for example if a team climbing a mountain are spread out across a dangerous rock face). Then, co-operation depends on the team combining the skills of leadership and the equally important skills of followership.

So there are skills for co-operation and they can be learned. But they need constant topping up and relearning, and some of them are quite subtle.

A very different example is of research in the USA which found that the most successful African-American high schools were those where the principal was considered to be a risk-taker or maverick who was "far more collaborative" than others, but at the same time served as a buffer between their school and external influences which might detract from the supportive environment inside the school.[1]

In schools, as in many institutions, it's also never enough just to be tolerant. One of the lessons of a great deal of research on social psychology is that humans are natural reciprocators: if someone does us a good turn we usually want to do one back. In that sense we are programmed to collaborate. But the corollary of this is that we're also intolerant of anyone who we see exploiting others, or trying to free-ride on their hard work. Communities work best if they have some fairly clear punishments for non-co-operators, and some rewards for those who do

share and care. Communities where things are allowed to slip, like anti-social behaviour going unpunished or unchallenged, can quite quickly lose the habits of trust and co-operation.

Singing and co-operating

So there are skills for co-operation and they can be learned. But they need constant topping up and relearning, and some of them are quite subtle. Perhaps singing is the best analogy. Everyone can do it; many of us forget how to do it; but we do it best when we do it often, with others, when we get feedback about whether we're doing it well or badly, and above all when we see the pleasure that it gives to others. Perhaps it's no coincidence that one of the consistent findings of research on social capital is that places with many choirs are also the places that do best at getting on with each other in every other sphere of life.

Notes

1. Roberts, Yvonne (2009) 'Grit: the skills for success and how they are grown'. London: Young Foundation.

THE AUTHOR

Geoff Mulgan is Director of the Young Foundation. Prior to this he was the Founder and Director of the think-tank Demos. Between 1997 and 2004 held various roles in government, including Director of the Government's Strategy Unit and Head of Policy in the Prime Minister's office.

Co-operatives UK

Co-operatives UK works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. It has a unique role as a trade association for co-operatives and its campaigns for co-operation, such as Co-operatives Fortnight, bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.

Any organisation supportive of co-operation and mutuality can join and there are many opportunities online for individuals to connect to the latest co-operative news, innovations and campaigns. All members benefit from specialist services and the chance to network with other co-operatives, whilst for new co-operatives, Co-operatives UK provides low cost registration, free membership and free advice on legal structures and governance.

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This *Think Piece* was launched during Co-operatives Fortnight.

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In this *Think Piece*, Geoff Mulgan outlines how people can learn the skills needed for co-operation. Co-operating, he says, is like singing: everyone can do it, but many of us forget how to and we do it best when we do it often, with others.

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Published 2010

Design by Calverts • www.calverts.coop