September 2026 Update

Colorado Co-op Council

September Issue

Colorado Cooperative Council Monthly Newsletter 1

From Readiness to Responsiveness 2

Listening First 3

What We're Hearing So Far 3

Where We Are Headed 5

Heads Up: Prepare Before Pressure Becomes a Crisis 6

Cooperative Exchange: Questions from the Field 7

Closing 9

Colorado Co-op Council Monthly Newsletter

Fall brings a full calendar of county fairs, harvest celebrations, school events, livestock auctions, and hometown festivals across Colorado. Cooperative directors, managers, and employees are part of those communities. They attend as members, volunteers, sponsors, parents, customers, and neighbors.

These gatherings provide a useful window into what members are experiencing. Conversations may surface concerns about harvest, water, input costs, cash flow, labor, access to services, or the local community's future. Not every concern requires a cooperative response, but leaders need to understand the environment from their members' perspectives, not just their own, when making decisions.

This month's update considers what it means for cooperative leaders to stay connected to their communities, listen for the issues that matter, and use that understanding to inform the cooperative's work.

From Readiness to Responsiveness

Cooperative readiness is not only about financial discipline, governance, and leadership capacity. It is also about how leaders respond when members raise concerns, ask difficult questions, or need a clearer understanding of cooperative decisions.

Conversations at fairs, local events, and coffee shops give directors and managers valuable context. Members may be worried about harvest, water, costs, cash flow, service, or their community's future. Listening means taking concerns seriously, asking questions, and recognizing broader patterns. It does not mean agreeing with every concern or promising action before the cooperative understands the full picture.

Listening does not mean agreeing with every concern.

It means understanding the full picture before responding.

This is particularly important for directors who are also producers and members. Their connection to the community is one of the cooperative model's greatest strengths. It can also create tension when a director's personal view differs from the board's decision or from the information available to the cooperative as a whole.

Healthy boards make room for respectful disagreement, hard questions, and careful debate. Once a board reaches a decision, directors must represent the cooperative's position accurately. They do not need to claim every decision was their first choice, but they should avoid publicly undermining the cooperative, debating board decisions in the community, or validating incomplete information.

The cooperative difference does not mean every member receives the outcome they prefer.

It does mean that every member has a voice.

Strong cooperative leaders know when to listen, when to provide clarity, and when to carry the cooperative's message. Members elect directors who will listen carefully, deliberate honestly, and stand behind decisions made for the good of the membership. This is Democratic Member Control and Concern for Community in action.

Listening First

The Council continues to gather input through cooperative visits, customer meetings, and ongoing conversations across the state. As questions are raised and patterns become clearer, several themes are emerging around strategic planning, board responsibility, and the discipline required to govern for the long-term health of the cooperative.

The objective remains the same: ensure future education, resources, and convenings reflect what cooperatives and their members are experiencing in practice, not what we assume they need.

What We're Hearing So Far

- **Disconnect Between the Board and CEO on Strategic Planning**
  For some, the board and CEO may not share the same understanding of what strategic planning is intended to accomplish. Boards may expect a plan to immediately resolve operational concerns, while management may need clearer direction before developing recommendations and implementation plans. Effective planning requires the board and CEO to align on purpose, roles, decisions, and the work that follows.
- **The Board's Role in Strategy**
  Directors need to understand their responsibility to set direction, challenge assumptions, consider risk, and approve major priorities. The board does not create management's tactics or direct day-to-day implementation. Clear boundaries allow the board to provide meaningful oversight while allowing management to lead the business

- **The Farmer Hat and the Director Hat**
  Directors bring valuable member and producer perspective into the boardroom. The challenge is recognizing when an individual transaction, personal frustration, or short-term need differs from what is best for the cooperative and its membership. Directors must listen to members without losing sight of their broader fiduciary responsibility.
- **Financial Decisions That Support Cooperative Health**
  Boards sometimes face difficult choices involving pricing, patronage, capital investment, service levels, or financial discipline. These decisions may not benefit every member in the same way or produce an immediate return for a particular director. The board's responsibility is to make decisions that support the cooperative's long-term financial health, capacity to serve members, and ability to remain viable for the next generation.
- **Looking Beyond Today's Services**
  Current pressures can make it difficult to consider what members may need next. Boards need space to explore future services, changing customer expectations, technology, partnerships, and new opportunities without assuming every idea must become an immediate initiative.
- **Strategy Is Not Tomorrow's Tactics**
  A strategic plan establishes direction, priorities, and the choices a cooperative will make over time. It does not provide an instant operational playbook. Management must translate strategy into phased initiatives, budgets, responsibilities, and measures of progress. Boards need patience and discipline to monitor that work without expecting every strategic priority to become a tactic the next morning.

These concerns reinforce the need for practical director education that strengthens strategic oversight, financial understanding, and board-management partnership.

Where We Are Headed

The Council is moving from listening and analysis into action. The concerns and questions raised through cooperative conversations are shaping the education, resources, and opportunities now being offered to Colorado cooperative leaders.

December Director Training: Registration Is Open

The December Director Training agenda is set, and registration is now open for the December 14–16 program at Flying Horse Resort in Colorado Springs. The program will provide practical education for directors and managers of our Colorado cooperatives. To register, follow this link. The site password is **2026 Director Training.**

** Early Bird registration is available through October 15 for $300 per person. Registration will be $350 per person after October 15.*

Membership Application and Drive

The Council is also launching its membership application and outreach effort this fall. Membership is designed to make Council education, connection, and resources more accessible. As the Council grows, member participation will help ensure future programming remains connected to the needs of Colorado communities and cooperative leaders.

Fourth Quarter: Education, Feedback, and Direction

The Council will continue to gather feedback as registration and membership outreach move forward. Emerging priorities and recommended areas of focus will be shared with the Council board, while work continues to prepare resources and convene leaders for December's training.

The Council Website Is Live

The new Colorado Coop Council website is now live and will serve as a central location for Council updates, training and registration information, membership details, and cooperative resources. The site is in development, and we will continue adding content as programs and priorities develop.

Heads Up: Prepare Before Pressure Becomes a Crisis

The economic pressure facing many rural communities, combined with a summer marked by heat, drought, water concerns, wildfire, severe weather, and uneven harvest conditions, may create a difficult operating environment in the months ahead. The effects will not look the same in every community or cooperative, but the risk is real: tighter producer cash flow, changing purchasing patterns, delayed capital spending, increased credit needs, and greater scrutiny of prices, services, and cooperative decisions.

This is the time for boards and management to avoid both complacency and panic. A cooperative cannot control the weather or eliminate every financial challenge its members face. It can prepare by watching leading indicators, updating forecasts, asking what member needs may be changing, and being clear about the choices required to protect the cooperative's financial health.

Boards should be asking:

- What conditions are members experiencing that may affect demand, credit, inventory, or service needs?
- Is management updating financial forecasts as conditions change, rather than relying only on the annual budget?
- Which financial and operational indicators deserve closer board attention this fall and winter?
- What decisions may be required if conditions worsen, and what information will the board need to make them well?
- How will the cooperative communicate clearly with members if difficult decisions become necessary?

The goal is not to predict disaster. It is to ensure the cooperative is prepared to serve members through uncertainty without sacrificing the financial discipline and long-term capacity they depend on.

Cooperative Exchange: Questions from the Field

Question: What is the board's role in strategic planning?

Insights: The board sets direction, establishes priorities, challenges assumptions, considers risk, and approves the strategic choices that will guide the cooperative. Management's role is to develop recommendations, translate approved direction into plans, and lead implementation. A board should be deeply engaged in strategy without taking over the CEO's job of managing the business.

Question: Why does a strategic plan not become tactics the next day?

Insights: Strategy identifies where the cooperative intends to go and the choices it will make over time. Tactics are the specific actions, timelines, budgets, responsibilities, and measures management develops to carry that strategy forward. Some strategic priorities can move quickly; others require research, capital, capacity, sequencing, or changes in market conditions. Boards should expect progress and accountability without expecting every strategic idea to become an immediate operational initiative.

Question: How should a director respond when their personal view differs from a board decision?

Insights: Directors should raise concerns, challenge assumptions, and participate fully in board discussion before a decision is made. Once the board has reached a decision, directors have a responsibility to represent the cooperative's position accurately. They do not need to claim every decision was their first choice, but they should avoid debating board decisions in the community or validating incomplete information. A director must know when they are speaking as an individual member and when they are carrying the responsibility of the board.

Question: What does it mean to make decisions for the cooperative rather than for an individual member?

Insights: Directors are elected by members, but they govern on behalf of the entire cooperative. That requires looking beyond individual prices, purchases, service experiences, or personal preferences. A decision may not benefit every member in the same way or produce an immediate return, but it should strengthen the cooperative's financial health, capacity to serve, and ability to meet the needs of current and future members.

Question: Should an organization be concerned about a 2.9 Glassdoor rating when employee comments repeatedly say management does not listen?

Insights: A 2.9 rating paired with recurring complaints that management does not listen is a signal worth investigating. Online reviews are not a complete employee-engagement survey, but leaders should look for the same themes in turnover, exit interviews, employee feedback, and day-to-day conversations. Employees do not expect every concern to produce their preferred outcome, but they do expect to be heard, treated fairly, and told what was considered and why.

Question: When should management be included in board meetings??

Insights: Management should be included when its expertise is necessary for the board to understand a decision, its risks, or its consequences. The CEO should remain the board's primary management voice and bring in functional leaders when their perspective will improve the board's understanding. Functional leaders should inform the board and answer questions, not become a workaround that sidelines the CEO or fragments management accountability.

Have a question you would like insights on? Just ask, and I will dig in.

Closing

A cooperative earns trust not by avoiding difficult decisions or promising every member the outcome they prefer. It earns trust when leaders listen carefully, ask better questions, communicate clearly, and make decisions that protect the cooperative's ability to serve members over time.

The pressures facing Colorado communities may continue to change, but the leadership responsibility does not. Directors and managers must remain connected to the people they serve while keeping their eyes on the future of the business, the needs of the broader membership, and the cooperative they will leave behind.

The Council is committed to supporting that work through practical education, candid conversation, and stronger connections across Colorado's cooperative community. We hope you will join us at the December Director Training and continue to share the questions, concerns, and ideas that should shape what comes next.

Respectfully,
Sarah E. Bower Spivey
Executive Director, Colorado Co-op Council