

## **Cooperative Leadership: Reflections on the Autonomy and Delineations of a Cooperative and Value-based Leadership Style, based on the Situation in German Cooperative Banks**

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### **Preliminary remarks**

In the past, leadership principles for cooperatives have been discussed in a wide range of publications. Referring specifically to cooperative banks, some of these publications also attempted to define the respective leadership behaviour as “cooperative leadership”. However, it has recently been ascertained – as in the past – that employees in cooperative banks frequently perceive their leadership to “lack credibility”. This in turn leads to frustration with the “experienced leadership reality” (discrepancy between cooperative values and practiced/perceived leadership behaviour) (Kring & Walther 2016, p. 49). Hence any endeavours in the field of cooperative leadership will doubtlessly need to include a reshuffling of certain cooperative values (Blome-Drees 2013a, 2013b). Set against this background, this paper aims to explore these endeavours, primarily by examining recent publications, in order to gain a clearer understanding of cooperative leadership. One goal of the paper in doing so is to find practical applications for this understanding in cooperative banking. In order to place the subject matter in context, however, I shall first provide a thorough definition of leadership in organisations.

Parts of this paper correspond with a German-speaking publication on cooperative leadership in cooperative banks, which forms part of a series entitled “Hohenheimer Genossenschaftsforschung” (Hohenheim Research on Cooperatives), recently published by the Research Centre for Cooperatives at Hohenheim University, Germany (Krupp et al. 2018). However, this present English version expands upon the aforementioned publication. It includes a presentation of first empirical results which explore cooperative leadership in cooperative banks, and can hence be regarded as a personal contribution from the author.

### **Leadership in organisations**

Fundamentally, leadership in organisations can be defined as the conscious and targeted exertion of influence over persons who are actively involved in the organisation. In other words, it involves interaction in which persons in leadership roles motivate and induce employees to perform

purposeful services which can generally be derived from the prescribed or superordinate goals of the organisation in question (see Rosenstiel & Wegge 2004, p. 494f., and Rosenstiel 2014, p. 3). Academic publications cite value creation, productivity, efficiency and performance as “significant organisational goals”. Leadership recognises, activates and channels employee potential to achieve the respective goals (Wunderer 2009, p. 4f).

In this respect, leadership behaviour in practice should serve the organisation and contribute to its success. According to this definition, an organisation is successful if it achieves or surpasses its goals or key figures (in a business company and hence in a bank, these would include growth figures, profits and market shares, for example). “Together with their employees, managers should play their part in achieving these goals. They must ensure that the employees deliver (at least) what is necessary in order to achieve the respective goals. The success of leadership, therefore, can be measured by the performance of employees” (Nerdinger, 2014, p. 84).

However, focussing solely on economic business considerations when defining leadership in organisations generally falls short of the mark. A modern definition of leadership goes beyond this; it not only covers employee performance and economic and business goals, but also takes employee satisfaction and well-being into account (in parts, this two-tier approach corresponds with the management’s so-called “task and employee focus”). Satisfaction, attitudes and processing steps on the part of the leadership are also of interest.

### **Leadership models and leadership determinants**

Other than the generally held beliefs that leadership involves the exertion of influence over other people, that it is generally a process which unfolds in a group context, and that its purpose is to ensure goals are achieved (Walenta 2012, p. 496), there is no consensus, either in research or in practice, on leadership determinants and leadership models. The overall assessment made in specialist literature several years ago, that the focus on leadership – alongside the field of employee motivation, which itself overlaps with leadership aspects – is probably the most “flamboyant” and durable subject in corporate practice and in organisational psychology (Walenta & Kirchler, 2010,) is patently as valid as ever. In a nutshell: “Every few years, a new leadership style comes into fashion” (Jäger 2016, no page number).

There is, therefore, no standard opinion on situational and personal leadership determinants. The same can be said with regard to the relevance of personal determinants. Empirical studies have shown that whilst personality traits such as extraversion, conscientiousness and intelligence play an

important role in leadership, their relevance for achieving predetermined leadership goals are often unclear (low proportion of enlightened variance on correlative observation, Nerdinger 2014, p. 88). Overall, leadership models and people's understanding of leadership ethics change constantly, and are the subject of (often controversial) discussion. According to recent publications on the subject, leadership models which have proven viable and practicable include, besides the primarily economic model mentioned above, those based on systemics and discourse ethics (Nass 2018). Naturally, each of these models has its own limitations, problems and weaknesses which require further critical research and expansion. For example, transformational leadership models, which came into vogue at the end of the 1990s and have remained popular ever since, see themselves as answers to an excessive focus on the purely economic aspects of leadership. Management-oriented research and literature also conducts an intensive discussion on the basic concept of transactional leadership. Here, leadership is interpreted as an exchange process between the leaders (who offer incentives) and the led (who perform the services) (see Rosenstiel 2014, p. 24, Robbins et al., 2017, p. 395f.). In contrast to the purely economic leadership focus described further above, transformational leadership revolves around ethically sound actions and sensemaking on the part of the leaders and the led. Managers who adhere to the transformational approach are particularly interested in motivating their employees intrinsically. They convey shared values and goal-oriented visions, act as role models and support employees in their personal development (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev 2009, Felfe & Bittner 2014). By accentuating collective action – and, wherever possible, collective success – transformational leadership also includes elements of “bottom-up leadership”, which can be regarded as a constructive reflection and exertion of influence by subordinates over the leader, within the context of cooperative leadership. With increasingly decentralised structures and flat hierarchies appearing in many companies, the significance of bottom-up leadership has been growing for some time (Blickle & Schneider, 2010).

Another leadership concept which has recently come under intensive discussion is so-called “agile leadership”. Initially developed in software and digitalisation projects, agile leadership is gaining popularity in general personnel and organisation development thanks to its emphasis on achieving goals in a flexible, unbureaucratic and apparently “unregulated” manner (Korn 2015) (I will go on to show that there are certain links between agile leadership and the cooperative leadership style). However, leadership does not consist solely of fundamentally positive aspects which can be verified and evaluated by applied organisation research with regard to their viability, strengths and weaknesses. Recent research also indicates that there is another, “darker” side (Nerdinger 2014, p.

98) which ignores the ethical implications of leadership and includes manipulative components, some of which are brazenly antisocial and destructive with regard to employee well-being (Krasikova, Green & LeBreton 2013). Patently, even so-called “charismatic leadership” can devolve into a destructive leadership style with alarming ease (Sparks, Wolf & Zurick 2015).

Such research may be disconcerting, but it is indispensable because it forces us to take a critical look at the sometimes exaggerated and decidedly “soft” idealisation of leadership. Although somewhat provocatively presented at times, this paper will also examine “repercussive leadership” approaches as advocated by authors and coaches such as Roland Jäger, (“Ausgekuschelt” [“Enough Pampering”]; “You can earn respect by being willing to make yourself unpopular”). These approaches are characterised by the realisation that too much leniency towards employees is by no means a sign of strength, but is actually an indication of weak leadership. In point of fact, the task of managers and leaders is not to “err on the side of harmony”, but to make their employees accountable and take “tough” action where necessary in order to exert control and create the necessary focus on performance (Jäger 2013). In this connection, it is important to mention that repercussive leadership by no means needs be practiced at the expense of employees, but should ultimately serve the common good (safeguarding the performance of an organisation or company).

### **Cooperative leadership – a construct in its own right, or “just” an extension of tried and trusted leadership models?**

The notion that cooperatives in Germany and other countries are a type of organisation which take a different approach, hovering somewhere between the market economy and business intervention, does not apply. On the contrary: even cooperatives are bound by the principles of market economies, i.e., they are exposed to competition and have to assert themselves in order to survive. Like all other companies which are active on the market, production-based cooperatives are also characterised by a division of labour. And a division of labour is not possible without “organised labour, and hence leadership” (Andreae 2003, p. 101).

Nonetheless, it makes sense to differentiate between the status of cooperatives and the status of companies which act on a purely commercial level in order to make a profit. One tried and trusted differentiation especially for the situation in Germany is: “Cooperatives are a further development of market economy principles in the direction of a social market economy, because they call for solidarity” (Andreae 2003, p. 105). In turn, this solidarity in cooperatives expresses itself in participation models. Organisations which are based on cooperative principles have hence

traditionally been regarded as role models in the field of participation, and as symbols of a correspondingly democratic approach to economic activities (regardless of the level of investment, “one member, one vote” generally applies). In addition, cooperatives centre around self-help and congruency between the “owners” of the cooperative and the members or customers (Steinebach 2017). In a nutshell, cooperatives unite both elements by not only operating as regular businesses, but also by taking social concerns into account to a sufficient degree via civic involvement (Wieg 2017).

However, when it comes to the manner in which leadership in cooperatives should be practiced, and to according leadership models, one must ask oneself – despite the focus described above – the same questions as in other companies and organisational forms. Which approach to leadership is best able to preserve the cooperative organisation and enable it to grow? Which leadership model takes the desired well-being of employees (and members, customers) into account, and what leadership behaviour will ensure the overall success of the cooperative in all its many facets? In principle, all types of organisations (whether cooperatives or other companies) can experience similar tensions regarding suitable leadership qualities, for example, with one executive occupying the “popularity role” for a certain period of time – “someone you can wrap round your little finger” – before efficiency dictates that another manager occupying the “efficiency role” takes charge and takes decisive leadership action (Andreae 2003, p. 106, referring to the insights of the psychiatrist and sociologist Jacob Levy Moreno, \*1889 +1974, on leadership structures in groups).

In addition, recent feedback from research and practical experience indicates that one cannot assume the style of leadership in cooperatives to be homogenous. On the contrary – there can be huge discrepancies between leadership and participation approaches. According to a recent empirical study conducted by Chemnitz Technical University in cooperation with the Hans-Böckler Foundation, “participation” (...) is not always the factor which imbues a cooperative with purpose or identity” (Hartz et al. 2017, p. 7).

Particularly in the East of Germany, it would appear that some leadership constellations in agricultural cooperatives display similarities to those of owner-managed businesses with distinct patriarchal tendencies: “This type is primarily found in East German agricultural cooperatives which evolved from former LPGs (collective farms) during the transformation process. In principle, agricultural cooperatives regard themselves as ‘normal’ agricultural enterprises. (...) The participation bodies for members are based on minimum legal requirements. (...) Cooperatives of this type are managed by a board of directors who bear sole responsibility. In such cases, however,

the chairman of the board frequently regards himself as ‘boss’ and is referred to as such by employees. Thus he makes all plans and decisions, referring major investments to the supervisory board only when a vote is legally required” (ibid.). On the other hand, so-called “employee cooperatives” – such as those which were created in Germany during the state-funded energy transition to pursue innovative ways of generating energy – are characterised by a high level of participation and democratic leadership. As a result, employees in such cooperatives are likely to be more motivated and have greater freedom to act (Vogt 2017).

According to more recent empirical surveys, it is interesting to note that leadership and participation structures which are explicitly value-based are particularly prevalent in economically successful and fast-growing cooperatives in the consumer and credit sectors, amongst other places. In particular, such cooperatives find their purpose and values in a focus on sustainability, and in intensive communication between members and employees (Hartz et al. 2017, p. 6f.). A simplified viewpoint – which claims that successful economic activities and growth in cooperatives lead to a decline in participative elements and democratic leadership – is rendered unwarranted by these findings. Consequently, with regard to the participation and leadership typologies found in cooperatives, account must also be taken of the influence exerted by a number of additional factors such as the market environment, the cooperative’s respective history and external forces (ibid., p. 7). However, there seems to be a certain validity to the conclusion drawn in both older and more recent research, that certain values or groups of values play a major role in the respective leadership typology (Ringle 1994, 2012 and 2017; with explicit reference to leaders in cooperatives, Hill & Doluschitz, 2015). In particular, the values named in the general field of cooperatives included “democracy, self-help, solidarity, personal responsibility, equality and justice” (Hill 2015, p. 106).

To summarise briefly at this point, one must conclude that there is no such thing as a standardised, “modular” leadership style for and in cooperatives. In practice, leadership in cooperatives varies greatly from sector to sector. It is important to note that expressly value-based leadership and participation structures in cooperatives by no means collide with the economic success or growth of the cooperative; in actual fact, they can go hand in hand. Hence one must emphasise here the strong value focus of successful cooperative leadership. In the course of this paper, I will go on to explore the extent to which this intermediate conclusion applies to the special but economically significant segment of cooperative banks.

## **Leadership style and leadership parameters as the hallmarks of cooperative banking – occurrences and form**

Successful leadership in a cooperative bank means ensuring the bank pursues clearly defined goals and hence develops in a predefined direction. However, the social and organisational systems in cooperative banks are even more complex than in some private banks, with centrifugal forces frequently pulling in completely different directions. The management of the bank should be in a position to handle such a strategic mixture – formed by the respective conflicting interests of active parties in a cooperative (or those who exert influence over the cooperative from the outside) – in a strategic and skilful manner: “Top managers must assume that many parties will follow their own rules and agenda, and that coalitions will form which have agreed on their own sets of rules. Directional decisions are processes in which numerous parties are actively involved. So strategic leadership cannot be a matter of the top management level dictating a certain direction, but rather of promoting, channelling and guiding a multiple discourse strategy process whilst at the same time exerting one’s own influence” (Blome-Drees 2013b, p. 253f.).

One cannot even rule out the possibility that – in line with the principle of participation – the top management level of a cooperative bank will, at times, approve and support multiple directions, so long as these are all deemed to serve the superordinate well-being of the bank (ibid., p. 254). More than 40 years ago, Erik Boettcher, who served for many years as the Director of the Institute for Cooperatives at the University of Münster (Westphalia), characterised the requirements imposed on the actions taken in cooperative banking (leadership) to achieve this superordinate goal of holistic well-being as follows: “Always act in a way which not only enables you to remain competitive, but also benefits the members who have commissioned you to the greatest extent possible” (Boettcher 1980, p. 50). The principle behind this characterisation remains as valid as ever. Boettcher’s rule of action can be regarded as a formative value position or decisive foundation which ultimately forms the basis for all operative success in cooperative banking (increasing balance sheets, profits, growth, increase in membership etc.) (Blome-Drees 2013b, p. 253). However, such a formative position does not emerge on its own. Rather, it “exists when economic, social and cultural advancement and the democratic involvement of the members are actively pursued in practice” (Blome-Drees 2013a, p. 1). In this context, the decisive factor is the significance which the top management and other executives in the cooperative bank attach to their guiding principles and values, and the extent to which they are able to pursue, practice and assert these (ibid., p. 1ff.)

Recent empirical studies, however, suggest that there are sometimes huge discrepancies between the above-mentioned “ideals” for guiding operations and the values actually advocated in cooperative banks. The way in which values are practiced and asserted in leadership behaviour falls short of the mark. In the mission statements of cooperative banks in Germany and other countries, the basic stock of values once detailed by Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen and Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch (see Birnstein & Schwikart 2014, Aldenhoff-Hübinger 2016) is, in many cases, only partially present, even though the same banks propagate the respective values strongly or differently on their internet sites (Zimmermann 2017, p. 224ff.). The risks that hereby emerge to cooperative identity (cue: reality/ideal discrepancy, merely a “nominal” cooperative bank with a focus on general commercial banking principles and a certain amount of arbitrariness) are all too evident. Equally evident is the fact that such discrepancies create a stimulus and an incentive for organisational and personnel development in cooperative banks, specifically on executive and supervisory board levels and other levels of management (ibid., see also Kehr 2017).

It is interesting to note that – in conformity with the approaches discussed further above regarding the connection between basic values and subordinated achievable operative success – there is empirical (though not particularly explicit) evidence for a relationship between the form taken by a value-based leadership style in cooperative banks and their economic positioning and operative success parameters (Zimmermann 2017, p. 221ff.). Subsequently, with express reference to leadership and management structures in cooperative banks, empiric evidence was produced (Walther 2016) to show that at the very least, the principles of self-help, personal responsibility, self-administration and regionality were distinctly evident in the structures, and simultaneously, as already mentioned, acted as positive factors influencing economic success (beyond this, of course, they also had an impact – not of a directly economic nature, but no less relevant – as social and organisational-ethical factors). Incorporating the detailed findings from the more recent research conducted by Walther (2016) and Zimmermann (2017) on cooperative banking into practical bank strategy development and leadership training would certainly help to “not only increase the benefits for members, but also increase the influence of cooperative banks in society and improve the profitability of cooperative business operations” (Walther 2016, no page reference).

Proposing this incorporation implies that, thanks to their value-based management and leadership principles, cooperative banks in Germany and other countries ultimately have a cutting-edge “Unique Selling Proposition” which, however, has not yet been exploited in full (this is inseparably linked to the key thought described earlier and particularly expounded by Blome-Dress, which posits

that values and cooperative leadership principles serve as the basis for operative success; see Blome-Drees, 2013a and 2013b). Accordingly, in the framework of cooperative bank management, the aim is to transfer the “ideal core of cooperative values” into specific areas “which create efficacy on all levels of the bank and which, when implemented rigorously, generate a cutting edge over other types of banks” (Voigt & Walther 2016, p. 55). This is also where considerations regarding agile leadership in organisations can come into play, since cooperative values and management principles are patently highly compatible with the principles of agile leadership. Special attention should be paid here not only to the principles of personal responsibility and self-administration – which are hallmarks both of the cooperative and the agile approach – but also to values such as “courage, respect and simplicity” of the agile concepts (Kölbach 2017, p. 46; for references to agile leadership and value criteria, see also Hofert 2018, p. 9ff.).

However, it would be wholly inappropriate to regard the modern concept of agile leadership as a magic bullet and force cooperative banks, as it were, into this mould. Agile leadership is not a miracle cure, and offers little added value for well-functioning production processes, whether in linear or complex systems (Kölbach 2017, p. 44). But if such concepts are deployed in a cooperative bank in a well-considered manner, it is by all means possible for the operative management level to develop a better understanding for assuming both cooperative and entrepreneurial responsibility for a region and, for example, offer bank customers/ members “direct and unbureaucratic solutions on a local level” (ibid., p. 46).

### **First empirical findings on cooperative leadership and future outlook**

In general, cooperative organisations – and hence also cooperative banks – have to align themselves to the market and to their respective competition or efficiency criteria. Managerial behaviour in these organisations serves to meet these requirements. In contrast to other purely commercial organisations, the success of leadership in cooperatives should be measured not only by the degree to which economic goals are achieved, but also by social and thus intangible criteria. In this, values and cooperative leadership principles can form a basis for operative success. In cooperative banks in particular, value-based leadership can thus yield economic benefits, whereby one must also note that these value systems and leadership principles have declined to a considerable extent, so need to be developed and exploited all the more.

The results of a standardised questionnaire, conducted by the ADG (Akademie Deutscher Genossenschaften, Academy of German Cooperatives) in 2018, reinforce this view. This

questionnaire, which dealt with various aspects of leadership behaviour in cooperative banks, was sent to more than 900 cooperative banks in Germany. In particular, it was interested in assessments of the leadership behaviour of the respective executives, and corresponding requirements. The aim of the questionnaire, which also honed in on cooperative values, was to develop a broader understanding of leadership in cooperative banks. 389 executives responded to the questionnaire. With regard to the basic assessment of leadership in cooperative banks, the respondents were asked to focus on incentives for good performance on behalf of the bank, but also on recognising, activating and guiding employee potential. When asked to specifically assess their personal leadership behaviour in their respective cooperative bank, the respondents attached great importance to achieving prescribed (economic) goals and economic efficiency as essential criteria for leadership. But apart from that, other integral components of leadership which were highly valued by respondents included sensemaking, stimulating employee development on an individual level, shared values and a shared and target-oriented vision. Respondents to the above-mentioned survey partially recognised a genuinely cooperative leadership style, but the attributed leadership style was, to a certain extent, regarded as identical in both private banking and cooperative banking. Tendencies to equate leadership and management principles in cooperative banks and non-cooperative banks should certainly be subjected to critical discussion, because this tendency could potentially erode the cooperative self-conception and identity.

On the other hand, the survey showed that respondents displayed a high to very high level of acceptance for values and mission statements that are of particular importance in cooperative contexts (e.g., democratic participation, self-help and general support for members, increasing the benefits for members of the cooperative, justice and solidarity). Additional analyses, however, also indicated that the executives of cooperative banks who responded to the questionnaire recognised certain discrepancies between cooperative “value ideals” and the (leadership) reality at work, particularly in the areas of “increasing the benefits for members” and “general support for members”. Two emphases which emerge on close inspection of the results of the leadership questionnaire are the identification of leadership which has a sufficiently cooperative/ social orientation, provides direction and is flexible, and a participative cooperation amongst the respondents which builds on this. Overall, these findings make it clear that the cooperative approach is alive and well, and that it has potential for activation which executives in cooperative banks could exploit.

In all this, one should avoid a simplified “idealisation” of the way leadership is understood in cooperative banks, particularly given that the ability of such banks to survive depends on a whole range of other considerations, including operative, economic and demographic factors (see Maurer 2015, with an analysis of success factors and comments on safeguarding the future viability of cooperative banks). Critical and pragmatic leadership concepts should be taken into account to a sufficient degree. As workplaces become increasingly virtual, leadership needs to gain a sufficiently flexible focus, and it hence becomes ever more imperative for managers to engage in deeper self-reflexion and be open to criticism. It would be wise to conduct further empirical research, with a focus on the form of specific management styles and behaviour in cooperative banks, in order to shed more light on this area – which to date has only been rudimentarily researched – and to develop a model for cooperative leadership (with a special focus on banks), based on the data provided. Based on existing insights, such cooperative leadership should and must be characterised in particular by genuinely cooperative values, and thus have a normative character.

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