

Q1:

(note: the following are my personal opinions, but I am sure that if you spoke with any of my colleagues they would say similar things)

Ask CoopsUK <http://www.uk.coop/>, they've got a register.

In food retail, wholesale and production, we are an award-winning and leading example. Come and visit us when you are in Manchester, you will be impressed. Kellie Bubble will be at the MediaCity Round Table session on 14th July, so make arrangements with her.

There are also Daily Bread (we were modelled partly on them), Infinity Foods (Brighton), Essential Trading (Bristol), Suma (Halifax), Glebelands (Sale) and Glebelands (Wales, <http://www.glebelandsmarketgarden.co.uk/>) run by Adam York (one of the founders of Unicorn) and Lesley Bryson. Most of these are mature and highly successful both in raw business terms and in meeting their missions (which are broadly similar to ours, being based on the worker-cooperative model). This is by no means a comprehensive list.

Q2:

Fundamental.

Although we are at the end of the day 'just a supermarket', because of our Principles of Purpose <http://unicorn-grocery.co.uk/principles.php> we are so much more, and customers love us for this. We are genuinely embedded in our local community (it is not a bit of marketing); we live nearby, many customers are friends or neighbours, children go to the same school. We are trusted, human-sized, we strive to do the right thing, in the retail food sector plagued with scandal and the worst excesses of globalised extreme-capitalist practices.

We do regular customer surveys and can provide this evidence.

However customers also shop with us because we sell high quality produce at competitive prices.

Just as importantly, our suppliers enjoy working with us; again we have built up good working relationships. We pay promptly, we agree a good price, we trust each and are loyal.

And, crucially, we love working at Unicorn, it is a great place to be part of.

All of these characteristics are embedded into our Principles of Purpose, which, every day, determine how and why we do things.

We want to provide decent food and be a decent place to work.

We actively support other like-minded businesses. We don't keep this a secret, have a look at our website: <http://unicorn-grocery.co.uk>, in particular 'about us', our history. And we've produced a comprehensive 'grow a grocery' guide to help others do the same type of thing.

Q3:

Speak to CoopsUK, they've got lots of information.

We have large amounts of information, which we can share, and I am sure other worker-cooperatives would be the same. After all we have to ensure that we are effectively meeting our principles.

Q4:

We are a worker-cooperative with completely flat management structure, all members being paid the same wage, all are jointly equal owners.

We have zero gender pay gap and a 1.25 ratio between top and bottom pay (zero ratio amongst members). We directly benefit from our own endeavour.

Our motivations for being in business are driven by our socially based Principles of Purposes, rather than the requirement to maximise shareholder value.

We provide a real alternative to the current supermarket multiples' norm.

Our stakeholders are ourselves as workers, our customers and our suppliers. Our socially-based commitments are crucial to all three groups.

Many of our innovations are slowly being adopted: we were pioneers in the current 'food revolution', our commitment to organic, fairly traded produce; reducing our environmental impact; recognition of our social responsibilities; leading on employment rights.

Although we are a worker-cooperative, we are still a business in a ruthlessly competitive sector, so we need to be highly efficient and effective in what we do. Although we do not trade purely on price, we nevertheless achieve organic fresh fruit and vegetable prices that are less than non-organic equivalents in the multiples, and similarly with branded goods.

Q5:

If all businesses operated like we do, the world would be a far better place.

With big business, especially in retail, doing an excellent job in destroying public trust, and with the ease of connectivity to bring together small groups of like-minded people, the environment is ripe for an explosion in mission-led SMEs. Given a fair regulatory environment, and raising awareness of the opportunities and benefits of mission-led businesses.

See CoopsUK.

Case Study: Unicorn Grocery

Why mission-led?: See our Principles of Purpose: secure employment with equal opportunities; fair and sustainable trade; wholesome healthy consumption; solidarity in cooperation.
These govern every part of our business operation.

Stage: Mature, 20 years trading

Sector: Retail food

Geographic focus: Local, Manchester

Financial growth: 0-£3.5million turnover in first 10 years, now £7 million.

Now with 70 employees

Social impact: Customer surveys; feedback from international projects supported by our donations; recognition from the Council of our impact in Chorlton (along with other independent traders)

Other details: A Registered Society under the Cooperative and Community Benefit Societies Act, incorporating the Principles of Purpose from the International Cooperative Alliance

Part 2:

Q6:

Simple: set up as a workers' cooperative, adopt socially-based Principles of Purpose as a business vision, and then derive all other business processes from these.

Having a consensus-based flat management hierarchy is also a great benefit.

Q7:

We ourselves do an enormous amount of work to educate, e.g. our Grow a Grocery Guide; we regularly host groups setting up similar businesses; we run school visits; we are invited to speak to University students (business or economics).

There is the fantastic work done by CoopsUK (we are now part of their Hive initiative).

So now it's over to you.

Q8:

Again, having robust and clear Principles of Purposes drives our business. Everyone who joins knows what they are signing up to.

Because everyone is a manager-director, everyone owns the focus of the business and can ensure there is no mission drift.

Q9:

Quite often it's the usual barriers to setting up a business in the first place: high property prices; availability of suitable premises; funding and cashflow in the early years.

For us the threat to our links with our EU suppliers is of great current concern. We also have a wide spread of backgrounds of workers, with many originally from EU countries, so we are concerned about possible changes on eligibility to work.

We enjoy reasonable employment rights, and pay our taxes. Perhaps the biggest barrier is where our competitors get away with not doing this.

Q10:

It's pretty fundamental: having a corporate business and economic model which puts profit before socially-based principles.

Not being owned and run by the same people. Being too big, and not human-sized. Globalised economy, with remote shareholders. Management hierarchy and inequality, leading to massive pay and power differences, leading to poor working conditions, low engagement.

Everything we are that large corporations aren't essentially.

Q11:

Yes.

Unicorn is the best practice example I know of.

We are all manager-directors; I've never been a director of a traditional business.

Essentially we behave the same as directors of traditional businesses: we effectively deliver on our Principles of Purpose. But because these are socially-based, then the outcome is fundamentally different.

Having no management hierarchy, with everyone having an equal say and responsibility in all strategic decisions also has a fundamental and hugely beneficial effect on the way we operate.

Q12:

They are astonished (in a good way) that we work the way we do. It's perhaps convincing them that we actually work the way we say we do, and believe in it.

Q13:

CoopsUK could respond better to this.

Q14:

I would be concerned these would become a box-ticking exercise for old-school businesses which might see adopting a mission-led veneer brand would help them to increase sales.

Q15:

(No response)

Q16:

Reducing barriers to startups generally.

Other existing worker-coops working together with CoopsUK would be best placed to incentivise.
Having support for these initiatives would be useful.