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Kingston ON: Experts Surprised by Co-op, CU Leadership Qualities

When Françoise Morissette and Amal Henein set out to write *Made in Canada Leadership: Wisdom from the Nation's Best and Brightest on the Art and Practice of Leadership*, they did not consider co-operatives to be part of the equation. What they found led them to add two chapters one which Morissette termed Co-op 101 for the uninitiated and one to delve into the strengths of the movement.

Morissette gave CU Newswire an interview to discuss her findings. She is an organizational development consultant and faculty member at Queen's University.

The motivation for the book was the concern of lack of quality leaders for the present and future. Complaints abounded: solutions were missing, she said. She made the analogy that time is spent on training athletes but not leaders. Rather we wait for the hero to come in, roll up his sleeves and save the day. It is better to create leaders where less days need to be saved.

The methodology used was to interview 295 leaders from all sectors throughout Canada.

They asked what the leaders recommended to develop leadership skills.

They also talked with leadership development experts, always asking what works, what are the best practises.

The secondary motivation, according to Morissette was to start a national dialogue on leadership development.

The book took a year and a half to research and to look at the data and the same amount of time to write.

About a third of the way through their research they were introduced to the co-op

movement. Besides fishery, dairy and forestry co-ops she talked with CU leaders from Desjardins, Vancity, Envision and The Co-operators Group.

Co-ops opened a whole new world, she said. They found the nature of co-ops, including CUs, based leadership more on influence than authority. What impressed her was the co-ops movement in managing different mandates: long term vs. short term, economic vs. social, receiving vs. giving.

Co-op leaders all showed a consistency with which they framed their answers by using the terms mutual gains, common interests and win-win.

Co-op leaders talked about values, not as a slogan, but on how these values were applied. As she said, this was very different from the business sector and government who blew with the wind. To them long term is the near future unlike CUs.

She quoted Kathy Bardswick, president and CEO of Co-operators, who recommended speaking with personal passion and relying less on structure and more on people.

That co-ops and CUs invest in training and certification programs, was another plus that set them apart from the public sector where people assume leadership roles with little or no preparation. The concept of this training is something Morissette feels the public sector would benefit from greatly.

The book clearly shows that a fundamental shift in thinking to create a critical leadership mass for Canada is necessary and this, the authors hope, is the opening volley.
