Over 40 people from 6 Northeast Cooperative Council member organizations, along with a visiting scholar from Brazil and a Fulbright Scholar from Pakistan participated in the 37th Future Cooperative Leaders Conference. Chris Fesko, Farm Credit 100 recipient and retired Farm Credit East board member kicked off the event with “Leadership, do you follow me?” She suggested that to become a good leader, one needs to become a good follower and align oneself with others who share similar goals and passions. Constant learning is critical to increase understanding and awareness of the industry and one cannot lead others where “you, yourself will not go.” She suggested that effective leaders have emotional intelligence, integrity, determination, resiliency, are effective communicators, embody a servant attitude, and are humble.

Todd Schmit, Cornell University helped the group become more acquainted with each other as they assumed the role of a cooperative owner and worked towards balancing their needs as individuals with the needs of the cooperative via the Co-opoly board game.

Future leaders learned about the responsibilities of a cooperative board member. Will Baildon, CoBank provided an overview of cooperative financial statements and business ratios used by lenders when evaluating loan requests and enterprise performance. David Chamberlain, Director, Dairy Farmers of America, Northeast Area Council talked about the roles and responsibilities of the board of directors. He noted that directors fulfill the duties of care and diligence by preparing for and participating in board meetings by actively listening, asking relevant questions, and speaking in a respectful manner to explain their perspective and position of the persons whom they represent. Terri Webb, Advisor, Dairy Farmers of America.
Northeast Area Council shared information on what drives a business to merge with another, enter into a joint venture or acquire assets. She explained that acquisitions, joint ventures, and mergers are successful because of good planning, excellent communication, implementation of a well-organized plan with flexibility and desire to make it work. Deals fail due to a clash in cultures and management styles, poor communication, over-estimate of financial gains, unrealistic objectives, and lack of diligence.

Future leaders assumed the roles of board members and worked through a series of issues facing cooperatives outlined in a scenario. Directors and managers of NECC member cooperatives and Cornell faculty served as resource persons to assist future leaders with their board deliberations regarding investment in facility renovation and expansion versus new building construction.

Bobbie Severson, Cornell University with assistance from Todd Schmit and cooperative leaders in the group provided an overview of cooperative ownership in her presentation, “The Enigma of Member Equity.” Future leaders were introduced to tools used by cooperatives to acquire and return equity to members, considerations when balancing member investment with member use, and the ‘free-rider’ effect. Scott Lackey, Director, Dairy Farmers of America, Northeast Area Council shared his leadership journey to become a director along with how he balances his farm, family, and cooperative responsibilities.

A highlight of the conference is the tour that features the host cooperative and other NECC member cooperatives. The group visited Craigs Station Creamery, a joint venture between Dairy Farmers of America and 8 western NY dairy farms. Craigs Station Creamery prides itself on sustainable processing as energy is sourced from a methane digester adjacent to the facility at Noblehurst Farms and milk is delivered daily from nearby farms. The group also visited R.L. Jeffres and Sons a diversified grain, vegetable, and custom crop service operation to learn how the farm business examined opportunities to strategically position itself for success in the future.

What was learned from the conference?

- “I feel confident enough to begin asking questions, which is a valuable first step.”
- “I plan to become more involved in leadership roles in our co-op. I’d like to be involved in our Legislative Committee.”
- “I will continue to learn more about the co-op and start getting involved. As an employee I want to continue to help farms and co-ops be successful.”
- “Diversity of voices—others should attend to think outside of the day-to-day.”
- “Network with peers. Encouragement from knowledgeable leaders.”
- “The scenario showed that different decisions tend to be mostly gray, not black and white.”
- “Exposure to different thoughts and ideas. The perspective of others was valuable.”
- “A better understanding of how co-ops work; their role and how everything effects the whole supply chain.”
- “The scenario was real-life based on what some of the people who were on boards said. It helped having presenters and directors participate in the discussions. I think it challenged small groups to think further.”