

Podcast Transcript 139 Jeff Disterhoft DEI

December 2022

By Jeff Disterhoft

Lisa Hochgraf 00:04

You're listening to the CUES Podcast, episode 139.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:09

Thank you, CUES Podcast listeners, for tuning in. Today's conversation with Jeff Disterhoft will give you lots of inspiration and ideas for supporting diversity, equity and inclusion with your staff members and communities. A CUES member, Jeff is president and CEO of \$11 billion GreenState Credit Union, headquartered in North Liberty, Iowa.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:32

My name is Lisa Hochgraf, and I'm CUES' senior editor as well as your host for this episode. Before we talk more about today's show, let's take a moment for a word from our sponsor.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:45

Executives, managers and board members: Commit to creating a truly aware and inclusive culture at your credit by attending the Diversity Equity and Inclusion Cornell certificate program starting online March 15. Attendees will explore the processes that impact the ways people interact with each other as they learn from top Cornell University faculty. Having an inclusive work environment is not just a nice to have; it can make or break an organization. Commit to going beyond mere compliance and build a truly aware and inclusive work culture at your credit union. Register for the DEI Cornell certificate program today at cues.org/ecornell-dei.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:30

I must say that the Diversity Equity and Inclusion Cornell certificate program is near and dear to my heart. I went through the inaugural program in early 2021 and learned so much. I am a stronger contributor to CUES' internal DEI team because of it. Plus, I have been able to apply insights learned in the program to the DEI content we create regularly here at CUES.

Lisa Hochgraf 02:00

In today's show, you'll learn more about the impactful DEI work of GreenState Credit Union, the winner of this year's DEI: Catalyst for Change award sponsored by CUNA Mutual group. This annual award goes to a credit union that has demonstrated sustained support for advancing DEI in its workplace, raised awareness of workplace diversity and inclusion issues, been a catalyst for change regarding workplace DEI; and/or supported positive change within the industry, their organization or their community. I think you'll find that GreenState has done all of these things. And it plans to continue.

Lisa Hochgraf 02:38

In this show, Jeff talks about his credit union's bilingual strategy, GreenState's two-pronged approach to helping close Iowa's racial homeownership gap. Iowa currently has the sixth largest racial homeownership gap in the nation; the backstory about what inspired Jeff's commitment to lead his credit union on a significant DEI journey; and how GreenState has used podcasts to help communicate with staff, along with other internal DEI efforts at the credit union. Jeff also offers useful ideas for other credit unions that are interested in starting or continuing their DEI journey.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:17

So let's get started.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:22

Welcome to the show, Jeff.

Jeff Disterhoft 03:24

Thank you for having me. Appreciate it.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:26

And congratulations on your credit union earning the CUES DEI: Catalyst for Change Award for 2022.

Jeff Disterhoft 03:33

Now, thank you so much, you know, we're we're humbled by the recognition. As everybody knows, it's, it really is very much a team effort and we're honored, especially given all the great things that credit unions are already doing across the country these days. So, very humbled and clearly a reflection of the wonderful team that we've we've built here in the last year or two.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:50

I've been really enjoying reading about what your team has been doing. And I'm really looking forward to talking more about it. But before we jump into talking about diversity, I wondered if you might have a quote or a mantra that you live by, that you might be willing to share with our listeners.

Jeff Disterhoft 04:07

I don't know if I have one that I live by, like all time, but one of my challenges here recently is to, to identify one per week, if you will. And so it's something I kind of reflect back on as I go through the week and maybe the stressful times they're in, and my faith is very important to me. And so my my mantra these days has been, "Let go and let God," because I think sometimes I have a tendency to take control of things that I don't always have control over. And that can make for a stressful life. And so my my mantra here of late has been, "Let go and let God."

Lisa Hochgraf 04:38

I love that. There are so many things that are beyond our control. And getting in tune with that can really help us do what we can do.

Jeff Disterhoft 04:46

Yeah, yeah, it's there's a natural tendency, especially for anybody that's in a leadership position or otherwise, to look at the world around you and have maybe the maybe a little bit of a warped perception about all the things that you can control and the things that you can't. And so I know I certainly can do a better job of recognizing those things that are in my control and those that are not. So I think that's a life lesson for all of us.

Lisa Hochgraf 05:09

Yeah. Yep, indeed. All right. So let's get into the specifics a little bit more. So in your application, I was also reading that GreenState launched last year a 10-year initiative to help close Iowa's racial homeownership gap. And that's a gap that ranks sixth largest in the nation. As I understand it, the goal is to fund more than a billion dollars in mortgage loans to people of color in all the communities you serve. Would you give us some background on how you set this goal and also how it's going?

Jeff Disterhoft 05:41

Sure. Well, first of all, as the No. 1 mortgage lender in the state of Iowa, we really felt like we had a responsibility and an opportunity to close that staggering gap in homeownership between BIPOC and white communities. You know, as I'm sure you sense, homeownership, historically has been such a huge generator of generational wealth. And you know, you look back over the last few years is perfect example, if you were a homeowner three years ago, you know, you've probably seen the least up until the summer, you've probably seen the value of your home increase 20, maybe 30% or more in some cases. And so, if you were a homeowner, that's great, but if you weren't, or your family hasn't been a homeowner, you miss out on that, that generational wealth, and that generational wealth has such an impact on subsequent generation's income, and as a result, their education and then as a result, income, and so it becomes kind of this self-fulfilling prophecy.

Jeff Disterhoft 06:38

And so when we convened a couple years ago, you know, our our senior team met with our board. And out of those conversations, we agreed to commit 10% of our assets over the next decade to home lending to people of color in the state of Iowa, which as you said, has the sixth worst homeownership gap in the nation. And so, for us that equated to roughly a billion dollars. We're a \$11 billion organization today. And through our special-purpose credit program, we're also able to offer downpayment assistance and other credit counseling, credit counseling services, to those who qualify.

Jeff Disterhoft 07:11

And so where we're at today is we've to date, we're about \$275 million in not quite the first two years. And so we're in a good spot today. But I don't want to just rest on those laurels. We're actually encouraging other credit unions, at least right now anyway, in the state of Iowa, to join us in that effort. And that effort is to basically commit to doing 10% of their assets over the next 10 years in home loans to people of color to kind of erase that homeownership cap.

Jeff Disterhoft 07:39

And so that's the 10-10 program. At the same time, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that, that we also made commitments in three additional areas. In total, we want to commit \$20 million to either affordable housing support, racial, immigrant and refugee equity support, or climate and environmental

sustainability. And so, at the same time, we made that billion dollar commitment in loans, we also announced a \$20 million commitment in just charitable support. So really a kind of a broad-based, broad-based program.

Lisa Hochgraf 08:11

Yeah, so affecting the situation in several directions.

Jeff Disterhoft 08:15

Yes, yeah.

Lisa Hochgraf 08:17

I have a dear friend in public health. And she talks a lot now about how the public health people, and this is even before COVID, were trying to work more upstream, right, to deal with the causes of the problems that they were later treating as disease. So it sounds like you're looking with your charitable arm to maybe claw help close the gaps, that you're also trying to close with loans.

Jeff Disterhoft 08:38

Yep. And it's, you know, it's, I feel like, in just one person's opinion, but it's obviously a very polarized political environment that we live in. So it's sometimes harder, I think, for public municipalities, etc, to really move the needle on some of the areas that they might have a passion about, but they just, they, to some extent, may be gridlocked. And in what they're trying to accomplish at the same time, you know, with the economy being a little tighter right now, you know, some of the nonprofits may lack the resources. And so we felt like, as a as a, as a relatively small business, we provided the opportunity to maybe get things done quickly, but also, at the same time, have some resources to dedicate to it. And so if you, you marry those things together, and then throw on top of it the passion that we have, then I think you see what you what you've seen here lately.

Lisa Hochgraf 09:28

That sounds like a good recipe.

Jeff Disterhoft 09:29

Yeah, I hope so.

Jeff Disterhoft 09:31

I was reading in your application for the award that green state established its emergent bilinguals strategy back in 2020. And the goal at that time was to address financial disparities and earn the trust of bilingual communities. Would you tell me more about that strategy and how it's going?

Jeff Disterhoft 09:49

Yeah, you bet. So first, a little bit about why we established the strategy, and the short answer is we really wanted to grow among our Latino community. Latinos are the largest minority group in our state. And they're projected to double in size by the year 2050. And so, you know, it's it's a growing part of not just Iowa's or Illinois' demographics but quite frankly, the country's demographics. And so taking better care of the Latino community is, I think one of those rare intersections where doing right also intersects

with doing with with good business. In other words, it's, it's right for those communities that may have been historically marginalized. But those are also growing communities. And so that's good for our business.

Jeff Disterhoft 10:36

And in terms of our successes, so far, you know, as we look back over the relatively short amount of time that we've been doing this, we've doubled the size or the number of our bilingual staff employees; we began accepting foreign IDs for account opening; we're making our digital platforms available in Spanish. And we're building partnerships with immigrants serving organizations, which is, which is really a journey. But you know, a lot of these communities don't necessarily think of us as GreenState, as the first place they might look to as a resource. And so the first step is becoming a real trusted real resource. But the second part is helping people understand that we're available to them. And we can't do that on our own. We need the we need partnerships with those immigrant-serving organizations to help get the word out. So that's kind of where we're at and what we've done so far.

Jeff Disterhoft 10:36

And so we recognize, you know, Latinos fall on a spectrum of language usage, some prefer English, others are bilingual, newer folks, to the to the country may prefer Spanish, so very similar to other immigrant communities. So our goal is to serve them in the language that they feel most comfortable with. And so that's kind of where we're trying to get to.

Lisa Hochgraf 11:46

That's really interesting. You know, we were talking before the show about how I grew up in Wisconsin, and I actually spent a couple of summers in Iowa doing dance camps. And I have to admit that when we started preparing for the show, I thought, Iowa? Lots of Spanish speakers? That's not what I remember. Of course, that was 100 years ago. But I tell me a little bit more. I understand the intersection of what's happening with the business opportunity. But can you tell me a little bit more about how your credit union got started on this journey? Was it a personal experience? Was it an enthusiastic employee? The drive of the board? Just what just what is it that pushed this forward for you?

Jeff Disterhoft 12:23

It's a little bit of all the above. And I apologize for the length of the story. But I need to kind of tell a story. I grew up in rural Iowa, myself. And when I was in junior high, a young man moved to our community from Cambodia. From the he was an immigrant from the Killing Fields of Cambodia. And as near as I could tell, he was the only person of color not just in my community in eastern Iowa, but quite frankly, probably in the county that I lived in here in eastern Iowa. And so, we quickly became the best of friends. We had a mutual love for basketball. And so we remained friends throughout the rest of his time, our time in high school. And so I sort of grow grew up with this, I think, misperception that I had race all figured out, that I didn't have any unconscious biases.

Jeff Disterhoft 13:13

And then, fast-forward, 25 years later, 30 years later, our son was taking a class called, I think, politics and law at the University of Iowa. And every Sunday night, we would drive him home back, or I would

drive him back to college. He would grace us with his presence for dinner and in exchange, we got to drive him back to college. And he started, as part of his class, he started asking me questions about my views on race and politics. And a few things became clear over the course of the semester. One, I didn't have it all figured out in terms of the systemic oppression of people of color in our country for hundreds of years. Two, I had a lot of unconscious biases that had not been properly addressed. And three, I could do more as an individual, and I felt like GreenState could do more as an organization.

Jeff Disterhoft 14:06

And so that was five or six years ago. And so in the years that elapsed since then, I really tried to immerse myself in understanding, again, the systemic oppression of people of color in our country. And so that involved a lot of reading, a lot of watching, a lot of talking, a lot of lunches, to get different perspectives. And so, again, I guess I set up on this journey to try to learn more about what things I could and should be doing differently or better to, to reverse that, which has been done last 250 years. So I get done with that journey. and at the same time, I kind of get done with that learning process, the George Floyd tragedy takes place. And it was an intersection of time where I felt like "Okay, I had kind of, I've kind of been almost preparing for this timeframe. And so, thankfully, we had a board that was also there was also very and still is very passionate about about improving our service to people of color. And so it was a passion of mine, it was a passion of our board, and it was a moment in time that all came together, that really provided a flat platform for us to, you know, do something more than what we'd been doing. And so that was really kind of the genesis for it in the first place. I apologize for the length of story. But that's that's really how it came to be.

Lisa Hochgraf 15:25

Not at all. That's a wonderful story. And I appreciate you telling it very much.

Lisa Hochgraf 15:31

I see that GreenState has been doing some podcasting in support of these initiatives, not just the CUES Podcast today, but your own shows. Please tell us about the GreenState of Mind podcast and the GreenState Unplugged podcast, including why you chose the podcast format for the outreach, and where listeners can access the shows.

Jeff Disterhoft 15:50

Yeah, so there are two different podcasts and two different kinds of purposes, if you will. First of all, but let me speak to the why, why the podcasts and, you know, we've got roughly 1,000 employees. And to some extent, I think that we approach our employees as we approach our own members, and how we market to them. And some members, you know, prefer videos, some prefer audio, some prefer to read, some prefer digital, some prefer prefer print, etc. And so, with 1,000 employees, we realize that they're all going to want to take in content in different ways as well. And so I think one of the things that we've tried to do in the last few years is to mix it up. So whether it's a podcast, a weekly video that we send out every Friday, a weekly email that also goes out every Friday, we try to meet people where they want to be met, if you will. And so with that in mind, we do have two strictly internal podcasts.

Jeff Disterhoft 16:45

The GreenState of Mind is, is a monthly podcast that really just kind of brings people up to speed on what's going on within the organization--might be a topic of the day, might be a particular area of interest. And then we have the GreenState Unplugged, which is more towards our DEI efforts. And we've had four episodes as far as pride, mental health, holiday seasons and race. And so that's also an internal podcast. And it just really again, creates a variety of ways for our employees to learn. And so it's easy thing to kind of have reference, they can listen to him in their car, and they're at their desk while they're working out going home, whatever. So, again, we're just trying to meet people where they where they can be met.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:23

I totally hear you as a as a longtime editor in the credit union space, how we've gone from just print mostly print to a few e newsletters to websites to podcasts and videos. And sure, I haven't yet done Tik Tok, we'll see.

Jeff Disterhoft 17:38

You and me both or neither, I should say. So.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:43

So my understanding is that the GreenState of Mind is internal and GreenState Unplugged. Is something more public is that?

Jeff Disterhoft 17:50

Well, actually both of them are internal. Both of them are internal.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:53

So this is talking about credit, what the credit union is doing with the staff to reinforce what's going on?

Lisa Hochgraf 17:58

Very good. Very cool. I love it. So I happened to notice that GreenState has almost 11 billion or maybe even over 11 billion in assets. What would advice would you give to smaller credit unions that want to start a diversity outreach initiative?

Jeff Disterhoft 17:58

Yeah.

Jeff Disterhoft 18:13

Yeah, I know that it really depends on the size of the institution. I do think there are some kind of must-have kind of things. First of all, I think you have to have some passion at the top of the organization. By that I mean, both the board and the CEO. You know, I think a successful DEI initiative oftentimes start by just acknowledging what must change internally before implementing an external plan. So if for any reason you feel like you have it all figured out, then this probably isn't the path or you got to recognize that there's going to be some gaps. And if you do, that's a place to start.

Jeff Disterhoft 18:45

And so it can also be started by leveraging resources that you have internally, such as the folks that you already have on your team. And then from there, you create a committee, right? And that's the way it often starts: Create a committee that's going to evaluate your staff diversity, how inclusive your workplace is, and how your current policies may or may not be excluding members of color and immigrant members. But again, without that passion at the top, then I think it's as well as it is with any initiative, it's probably tough for it to succeed. But if you get that passion, then I think really good things can happen, because you can in today's day and age, you can attract the right people to your organization, people that see that vision that join in you join with you on that vision. And that's where things get exciting. That's where things get fun.

Lisa Hochgraf 19:28

Indeed.

Lisa Hochgraf 19:30

So we've talked a lot about your external programs, and we've talked a little bit about the internal podcasts. But can we talk a little bit more about the internal work at the credit union in terms of DEI? What are some things that stand out for you?

Jeff Disterhoft 19:44

A couple things come to mind. Now first putting action behind our words by hiring someone dedicated to be our diversity, equity and inclusion coordinator. His daily focus is to continue to build on GreenState's value system and help foster an inclusive environment among amongst other items.

Jeff Disterhoft 19:59

So the second thing I'd call attention to is just our Grow Career Development program. It's a career development program that will help employees with their opportunity to achieve their full potential by helping them identify their career goals and providing the tools and resources needed to achieve them. So, the program has three learning pathways, six competencies they're in. So we've partnered with LinkedIn learning and our own internal learning management systems. Doing so staff will have the opportunity to learn and develop in each of those six areas. And so in leveraging diversity, there are more than 25 options for staff to engage in, read, watch and listen to to further them on their own DEI journeys.

Jeff Disterhoft 20:38

And the last thing I call attention to, what I mentioned earlier, is just our employee resource groups. They play a significant role within our company. We've got five of them right now: Rainbow Connections, Women's Impact Network, Somos GreenState, the GreenState Association for Black Employees, and Inspiration. So we look forward to adding more in the future. But these spaces are important because they really help us build community and camaraderie across the company. And those involved can see other employees who look like them and discuss ways for our cultures to improve. Because it really is a it's a journey, not a destination, there's never going to come a day where we have it all kind of completely figured out.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:15

Yeah, yeah, it's really important to keep on keeping on with this, isn't it?

Jeff Disterhoft 21:20

Yep. Yep, very much. So.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:22

We want to be respectful of your time today, Jeff. But before we wrap up the show, may I ask you, what is something that I didn't ask you about that you kind of wish I had, and then will you tell me something about that additional topic.

Jeff Disterhoft 21:35

Yeah, you know, if that it needed topical, per se, I would just remind everybody that you know, the old saying every journey begins with the first step. And so the first step is, is always the toughest. But once you start on that path, some really amazing things can happen. Second, as we were talking kind of before we started here today, don't underestimate how much your DEI efforts can really resonate with staff throughout the organization. So often in our industry, it's easy to get caught up in the numbers, the dollars and cents, and really forget about the impact we can make on people's lives. And that resonates not only with the communities that you serve, but also with employees who see those communities being served.

Jeff Disterhoft 22:11

And then the third and final option, just be prepared to make some mistakes along the way and give yourself some grace. I know, you know, we're relatively new in our journey. And there have some been some difficult conversations. There's been some hurt feelings from time to time, but those are all reflections of our learning, right? And if, if we're making some mistakes, that means we're learning and we're getting smarter as we go. So give yourself some grace. Give some grace to those around you, and get a little bit smarter as you go.

Jeff Disterhoft 22:11

And I was talking to a CEO earlier today said there was 1.9 jobs for every er 1.9 jobs for every person who looks for a job right now. And that's helpful, too. When when potential employees see the commitment that you make towards DEI, it can really be a differentiator for, for you as a potential employer. So don't underestimate the value there.

Lisa Hochgraf 22:58

Give yourself some grace. Keep learning. I love it. Thank you so much for being on the show today, Jeff.

Jeff Disterhoft 23:04

Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

Lisa Hochgraf 23:08

I would like to thank you, our listeners for taking time out of your busy schedules to listen to today's episode of the CUES Podcast. And many thanks to Jeff for sharing so many useful insights.

Lisa Hochgraf 23:21

To get more information about the CUES DEI Catalyst for Change Award and all the CUES awards, visit cues.org/recognition.

Lisa Hochgraf 23:31

Find a full transcript of this episode at CUmanagement.com/podcast 139.

Lisa Hochgraf 23:40

You can also find more great credit union-specific content at CUmanagement.com. You can also find CUES content specifically about diversity, equity and inclusion at CUmanagement.com/diversity-equity-inclusion.

Lisa Hochgraf 23:58

Thanks again for listening today. CUES is an international credit union association that champions and delivers effective talent development solutions for executives, staff and boards to drive organizational success.