

Podcast 145 Dana DeFilippis

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By Dana De Filipis

Lisa Hochgraf 00:04

You're listening to the CUES Podcast episode 145.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:09

Welcome to the CUES Podcast where leaders and experts discuss the top topics in credit unions today. I'm Lisa Hochgraf, senior editor at CUES and your host for this episode.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:19

In this show, we explore the development of a CEO who has a vision for technology and teamwork. That CEO is CUES member Dana De Filipis, CEO of \$825 million Merck Sharp and Dohme Federal Credit Union in Chalfont, Pennsylvania.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:38

CUES thanks SkyStem for sponsoring this conversation with Dana, which will give you lots of ideas for how to leverage technology to make the lives of your credit unions, employees and members easier. Dana also encourages you, listeners, to learn and develop your skills and competencies, and those of your team members through both formal learning and on-the-job project opportunities.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:06

The show gets into Dana's unique path to becoming CEO of her credit union, including how she came to add IT experience to her extensive accounting experience; the value to a new CEO of knowing all areas of a credit union; and to forming teams with representation from across the organization; how Dana has implemented technology, including SkyStem's ART system, with a vision for making staff members' lives easier and keeping the credit union relevant; and the formal learning and networking benefits Dana gained from attending the three years of CUES' CEO Institute, plus doing the between-segment projects, all of which earned her the CCE, certified chief executive, designation.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:53

I think you'll enjoy a lively half hour now thinking about leadership and technology. So let's get started.

Lisa Hochgraf 02:03

Welcome to the show, Dana.

Dana DeFilippis02:04

Well, Lisa, thank you for inviting me. I've been trying to listen to podcasts more often. So but this is the first time I'm participating. So

Lisa Hochgraf 02:15

We're extra glad to have you, then. We'll try to make this as good a first go as possible. I'm excited to talk to you about your journey into the CEO role at your credit union, too. But before we jump into that, I'd like to warm up the conversation. And to that end, I wondered if you would have a quote or a mantra that you use to guide your professional life that you might be able to share.

Dana DeFilippis 02:38

I would say a mantra that guides my professional life would be that you can accomplish anything that you put your mind to, that you really, you know, work hard and things can get accomplished and can't just really let things happen.

Lisa Hochgraf 02:53

Mm hmm. Is there like one salient thing that you think that applies to in your career thus far?

Dana DeFilippis 03:00

Um, I mean, definitely the CEO. I mean, early in I knew that that's kind of where I want it to go. So you know, he was very helpful in that promoting me, but just working towards that goal is kind of probably 10 years prior to me becoming CEO.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:19

Oh, very nice. Very nice. You had kind of a long handoff, as we say, right, where the outgoing CEO was already mentoring and nurturing your growth. That's wonderful.

Dana DeFilippis 03:28

Yes.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:29

And now you've been in the CEO role for maybe two years. Do I have that? Right?

Dana DeFilippis 03:33

Correct.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:34

Yeah. And before that you were the VP of finance?

Dana DeFilippis 03:38

Yes.

Lisa Hochgraf 03:38

Okay. I wondered if you'd maybe talk about your experience, how you gathered what you need to know now. So you have a background in finance, accounting IT? Did you gather your knowledge intentionally

and strategically with your outgoing CEO? Or did you kind of more fall into these areas and then fall in love with them? Because I think you like what you do.

Dana DeFilippis04:00

Yeah. So I kind of began my career as in the public accounting area. So I graduated in, I have an accounting background, and went into public accounting. So I was in public accounting for about seven years. So I kind of gained that knowledge--accounting and finance. I worked for a small, regional public accounting firm in Philadelphia. So I had the opportunity to gain a lot of knowledge and experience in different industries. So I worked in manufacturing, you know, we did audits for manufacturing, nonprofits, financial institutions, so I became very interested in the financial institution area.

Dana DeFilippis04:42

So after seven years, I left that in the audit field and went into a community bank for three years. I worked for in a community bank for three years, accounting manager position, and then transferred into the credit union about 24 years ago. So I think my accounting and finance knowledge has been, you know, that's kind of my background, and I continue. I am a CPA. So I continue my education in the accounting and finance area. So that's probably how that came about.

Dana DeFilippis05:16

The IT side of it, I would say, after being here at the credit union a few years, I saw the need for additional leadership and guidance for that department, as it was growing and as technologies were changing. So I really went to the CEO at the time, and suggested that I take it over in my role and supervise that department. So I am not a IT guru. So it's been a learning experience for me. You know, I have a great team in that department. I look for them for but you know, I guide them and lead lead them, but they are very, they have the knowledge, so I kind of lean on them for the knowledge. But I've also, you know, I educate myself through webinars and conferences and such to continue to increase my knowledge on the IT side, but I think it's helped them to, to guide them more.

Lisa Hochgraf 06:12

Maybe to set some vision and just provide the leadership, right. You don't have to know every technical detail maybe to give shape to the direction that the group is going to take. Yeah, yeah, really cool. So how many years were you in finance and accounting, and IT role, you said 22, something like that?

Dana DeFilippis06:31

I'm gonna say, maybe 20 years,

Lisa Hochgraf 06:33

And for half of that you were preparing, you know, I'm thinking maybe I'd like to become the CEO. At this point now, you've been two years leading the whole organization, how do you feel like those experiences with accounting and IT impact your perspective and decision-making now as CEO?

Dana DeFilippis06:52

So I guess, like we talked about before, I had tremendous support from our previous CEO. Whenever he saw the opportunity for me to connect with the board, because he knew ultimately, they were the

ones to make the decision, it was not up to him. He would, you know, of course, support the decision. But, you know, I had to present to them, and they did do a search, you know, they went outside. I was included in the search process. And ultimately, I believe they made the right decision.

Dana DeFilippis 07:20

But I think also, I believe that because I had the accounting because I had the IT, but I also had knowledge of the entire organization. So I was, he offered me that, you know, I had that opportunity to continue to be part of any decision-making processes, be part of any projects. So I have a pretty good knowledge base of, you know, how things work in all departments. You know, I'm not an expert in lending or marketing or operations, but at least I know, you know, the processes that happen or how decisions are made, or who to go to in those departments to make sure to ask questions.

Lisa Hochgraf 08:03

Sounds like you might be a very good cross-pollinator, right? Let's make sure this person is talking to this person, so that this project sails through.

Dana DeFilippis 08:10

Right. And I think the big thing too, and what has, you know, what I continue to do, is to be a big proponent of team collaboration, I guess, between all departments. So no matter what project we're working on, making sure that there is somebody from every area, you know, an employee from operations from the branch, call center, marketing, lending, that they're involved in that process from the beginning, from, you know. If we're, you know, if we're looking at a new vendor, make sure that they're in the selection process, they're in the implementation process, they're in that whole, you know, from beginning to end, I think just makes that projects more successful. And I think over time, just understanding being on those projects, and understanding how everything works, helps the whole organization as a whole. And I think that's helped me in my decision-making process and the transition into the CEO role.

Lisa Hochgraf 09:08

Yeah, that's, that's great backgrounding. Would you talk a little bit more about your big-picture perspective on technology itself? And how have you applied that perspective to how the credit union has used technology in the last couple of years?

Dana DeFilippis 09:23

Yeah, so to me, technology is extremely important here at the credit union, especially now with the remote workforce. We're not completely remote. You know, our branches, of course, cannot be remote. But we do have employees here that are part-time remote two days a week or so. So we just see it as a means of streamlining processes, increasing efficiencies, and then providing and enhanced service for a member. It helps us remain relevant in the industry.

Lisa Hochgraf 09:52

Oh, definitely. Technology is so important. It's so expected because our members are using Amazon, our members are using all Venmo and that our members are using all of these new applications and technologies

Dana DeFilippis 10:06

Right.

Lisa Hochgraf 10:06

They're using ChatGPT. And that's a whole nother conversation.

Dana DeFilippis 10:09

Oh yeah.

Lisa Hochgraf 10:11

So, tell me a little bit about some tech tools you've adopted in the last couple of years and how you've driven those decisions and what kinds of results you're getting from the choices you've made.

Dana DeFilippis 10:23

Some of the areas in the accounting area, we've launched SkyStem's ART system, which allows us to do all of our reconcilements, or monthly closes, and reconcilements are all computerized now. So it makes it much easier. You know, no more paper, we used to have binders of reconciliations every month. You know, a big huge binder of paper reconcilements. Now the process is all streamlined online, so someone can approve them. Somebody knows when they're due. You know, this reconciliation's due at a certain time, somebody else has to review them. So it's all automated in one system. So that that's helped with also with our audits, you know, when the auditors come in, you know, we can just submit everything, upload everything to their site, that they need to look at that. So that's one of the systems that has tremendously increased our efficiencies in the accounting department.

Lisa Hochgraf 11:19

How long ago did you put that into place?

Dana DeFilippis 11:21

Um, I would say we're probably like a year and a half into that process.

Lisa Hochgraf 11:26

So that was really something you brought in, and you probably drew on your experience, because you've probably closed a lot of books over your time in accounting.

11:34

Yeah.

Dana DeFilippis 11:35

Also, we moved our accounts payable process to an online system. So in the past, you know, we used to have to, I used to get a pile of invoices and have to sign off on them. And now that's all automated. I get an email that says I have to go in and approve them. I approve them, and off they go. And then too, with the whole COVID incident, you know, having to have people come in to print out checks. So we're trying to get all our vendors to pay them through ACH. And I think that has helped too tremendously. I

don't think we're there 100%. But we're getting there with our vendors to be able to just submit payments through the ACH process. So that's been really helpful.

Lisa Hochgraf 12:17

It's really interesting because I might not initially think of an accounting system as a system that would like keep a credit union relevant. But I bet what that does, this my guess, you can tell me, is that it frees you up. So you don't have to spend quite so much time on that sort of nitty-gritty part of the business. And instead, you can talk to the board or think about what your next innovation might be. Is that true?

Dana DeFilippis12:41

True. I mean, one of our actually one of our goals this year is to work on innovation. We're going to be working with Filene to come in and sort of talk to our whole organization about innovation and how to go about being more innovative. So our ultimate goal is that we free up our employees' time doing mundane things, so that they can be more innovative; they can think about how things are being done and how do we, you know, continue to improve our processes, improve our products and services that we're offering to our men members. So yes, the ultimate goal is because we're only we're you know, we're 800 million credit union with 85 employees. So pretty lean. So to be able to really free up people's time so that they can be more innovative and think about ways to be more productive and

Lisa Hochgraf 13:35

Possibly better serve the members because they're not so stressed out about getting their numbers taken care of.

13:40

Exactly. So being having more time to engage with the members is definitely another goal with putting in more technologies that help, you know, streamline processes.

Lisa Hochgraf 13:50

Marvelous, marvelous. Some more questions for you. I'm kind of interested based on your experience. What kind of advice or learnings would you share about talent development in the credit union space? Say the goal is to develop strong and well-rounded professionals? What would you recommend?

Dana DeFilippis14:08

Yeah, so I guess going back to what I said about team collaboration is getting people involved in different projects or teams. So here at the credit union, we actually have what we call strategic teams. So there are teams of people that work on different strategic goals that we have for the year. And it's just and it's not just senior management, it would be senior management, managers and even some of our high-potential employees are on these different strategic groups that we call, so like there's a membership growth or the lending growth strategic team and getting them involved and they meet internally to discuss ways to how do we achieve these strategic goals. So really just getting everybody involved. So I would really just say encouraging employees to volunteer for different projects within the credit union to gain ... because I think that's how they gain knowledge. That's how they grow to be better employees and to be more innovative. And definitely education. I would say too. Myself, I participated in the CUES CEO Institute.

Lisa Hochgraf 15:21

Oh, yeah. Mm hm. Three years of, of intense programs at top business schools, right?

Dana DeFilippis 15:25

Yes. So I did that, maybe, gosh, I'll gonna say I did that 15 years ago or so. But it's a great opportunity to, you know, learn from professors in those top universities like University of Penn, Darden, Cornell. But it's also you know, the ability to learn strategies used by organizations outside the credit union industry, and how do you relate it back to our industry. So I thought that to me was, you know, very helpful, and seeing how other organizations, successful organizations, what their strategies are and stuff. So yeah, definitely, education and then participation in different projects.

Lisa Hochgraf 16:06

I love that it's a great combination, right, of learning best practices and theories, but then also having the project experience to put those things to work. Right. Both are valuable.

Dana DeFilippis 16:17

And also the ability to meet other credit union leaders and work with them. So it was a great opportunity.

Lisa Hochgraf 16:24

People have told me that when they graduate from CEO Institute, they have this, like this new group of colleagues that they can reach out to. Is that true for you?

Dana DeFilippis 16:32

Yes, yeah.

Lisa Hochgraf 16:33

Yeah. I love that. That's really cool.

Lisa Hochgraf 16:36

But as you reflect back on your, on your experiences growing into the CEO role, and now you have two years as CEO, what would you say, so far, has been your pinnacle experience or achievement that you're most proud of? And then what's your vision for what's next?

Dana DeFilippis 16:54

So very recently, we just converted to a new digital channel. I think that to me, would be the most successful in. I mean, it's been something that I knew that we needed to do, because the platform that we were on just was not getting updated.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:11

And you mean for the accounting? You mean, the SkyStem?

Dana DeFilippis 17:14

No, no, this is digital. So our digital channel what our members use online banking,

Lisa Hochgraf 17:20

Okay, and a mobile app too?

Dana DeFilippis 17:22

Yep, yeah.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:23

So that happened since you've become CEO?

17:26

Yeah, we actually just went live weeks ago.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:29

Oh, my goodness. I'll ask you more questions after. So that's a huge thing.

Dana DeFilippis 17:33

Yeah.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:33

So how long did you work to prepare that to go live?

Dana DeFilippis 17:37

Oh, probably a year? Yeah. It's a big project. I think, too, is I, you know, in the past, I was sort of the project lead when we've, we've done core conversions in the past and letting somebody else lead that was something that I was, you know, it's hard to do, but I did, which was good. I mean, I was able to let somebody else lead the project, but still be available to answer questions and help with any issues or stuff. So but yeah, I mean, definitely, I think it's something you know, we went to Alkami, innovation wise, is going to allow us to be more innovative on our on the digital and be able to compete in the market.

Lisa Hochgraf 18:20

That's another nice example of you looking to technology to keep you relevant, right, and to hopefully, as it smooths out, I know, always the first couple weeks can be where you learn a lot, that it will be a great thing for both the internal staff and the members and the community.

Dana DeFilippis 18:37

Yeah change is hard for everybody. But I think over what we're trying to say to our membership, you know, there's definitely going to be people that don't like the change. But over time, what we're trying to communicate to them is that this is a system that we can change, you know, and listen to their ideas and listen to their suggestions. And I think it's a system that we can update more easily, you know, with the partner that we're with, with the system that we're with.

Lisa Hochgraf 19:06

So it'll give you some flexibility to adapt over time to your members' needs.

Dana DeFilippis19:11

Mm hm.

Lisa Hochgraf 19:11

And maybe the staff needs too, so pain points on both sides are resolved.

Dana DeFilippis19:14

Yeah.

Lisa Hochgraf 19:15

That's exciting. And then talk to me a little bit about what's next. What's your vision for down the road for you and your credit union?

Dana DeFilippis19:22

I think one of the areas that we are looking at is business accounts. We do some business lending, and we do business accounts. And that's one area that I think that technology can help us advance what we're doing currently. You know, we don't properly use probably some of the systems that we have for business accounts, but you know, is that an opportunity for us to grow the membership and on the business side. Even though we're a single SEG, we still have probably about 400 small SEGs that are part of our membership. So you know, being able to to serve their needs too. So I think that's one of the areas that we're looking at is the business account side. And then what I talked about was innovation. How do we be, continue to be more innovative?

Lisa Hochgraf 20:10

Yeah, very exciting times for you. That's wonderful. Thank you so much. We've been going for a while. And I want to respect your time. But before we close up the show, I want to ask you, what is something that I didn't ask you about that you would like to talk about for our listeners?

Dana DeFilippis20:27

I guess my thought, and I kind of instill this too, in my own kids, I have two boys. You know, don't be afraid to take a challenge. Take on challenges because I think that's how you grow. And that's how you learn. Sometimes you have to step out of your comfort zone to grow and to take on new new challenges.

Lisa Hochgraf 20:47

That's a wonderful message to take forward. Thank you so much for all these great insights. Thanks for being on the show, Dana.

Dana DeFilippis20:53

I appreciate you having me and I love this great opportunity to speak to you and I hope that this helps others in their in the industry as they aspire to be CEOs.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:05

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.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:13

And many thanks to Dana for sharing her experience and insights. Thanks also to SkyStem for sponsoring this show. Learn more about SkyStem and its ART month-end closing system at SkyStem.com. That's s-k-y-s-t-e-m.com.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:31

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Lisa Hochgraf 21:44

Thanks again for listening today.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:47

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