

157 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE Leadership & Resilience

00:00:04 Lisa Hochgraf

You're listening to the CUES Podcast, episode 157. 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. In this episode, we explore the concept of resilience.

00:00:20 Lisa Hochgraf

Our guest is Heather McKissick, the new CEO of CUES. She talks not only about resilience for leaders, organizations and the credit union movement, but also about how being resilient means being tough at times and flexible at others.

00:00:36 Lisa Hochgraf

She also discusses some examples of when each might be the right response to the situation at hand.

00:00:42 Lisa Hochgraf

The show also gets into what Heather loves about credit unions and why she took her first job in the industry, Heather's vision for the credit union movement and for CUES over time, ideas about resilience in the face of emerging and potentially disruptive technology like generative AI.

So, let's get started.

00:01:06 Lisa Hochgraf

Welcome to the show Heather.

00:01:09 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Thank you.

00:01:15 Lisa Hochgraf

It's great to have you here on the show. It's your first time and I imagine there will be many more.

I'm so glad to be included, of course, in the great deal of content you've been putting out to the industry. I recently read your article about how it's important for leaders to bring the banana bread to the office sometimes.

00:01:24

That's right.

00:01:24 Lisa Hochgraf

Maybe would you start us out by telling us a little bit more about the idea behind that article?

00:01:31 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, that piece was really about a story that I was told early days in my career when in a nutshell, basically the message was, "Don't do anything at work that would over-associate you with being

domestic.” In other words, you know, as a woman in the workplace, you need to make sure that you’re really compartmentalizing and not bringing to work anything that might paint you with too broad of a brush around being feminine or domesticated? I don’t know. That was the general message. Don’t bring baked goods to work.

00:02:12 Lisa Hochgraf

Uh-huh.

00:02:13 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I’m not saying that I agreed with that at the time, but it was early days for me in my career, and so I took more of that advice to heart than I probably should have at the time.

00:02:26 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And over time, I’ve learned that, in fact, it’s far better to be vulnerable, to show more of ourselves as leaders, male or female. And this business of compartmentalizing can actually be counterproductive. So, bringing the banana bread is really just a is that a metaphor or an analogy? You would know that, Lisa, it’s a ...

00:02:47 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Probably the metaphor. I’m going there.

00:02:51 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

The metaphor for just showing up and being who you really are, and if you enjoy making baked goods at home, then showing up at the office every once in a while with some of that to share can actually be a good thing. It helps humanize us as leaders and gives us the opportunity to show ourselves in a different way. That’s really what that was all about.

00:03:15 Lisa Hochgraf

Wonderful, wonderful. And in that same spirit of getting to know you a little bit more, I kind of want to ask you what else you bake besides banana bread. And I don’t just mean brownies, although I really do like brownies. And I would like to know if you make brownies but I’m hoping maybe you’ll tell us another thing or two you readily share about your non-work self.

00:03:34 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

The other thing that I bake is pumpkin bread so.

00:03:38 Lisa Hochgraf

Oh, that’s pretty good too.

00:03:38

No, no.

00:03:39 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Bread, but pumpkin bread and this time of year, sort of the fall season, of course, seems to be pumpkin season. So I like doing that.

00:03:48 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And those are pretty much my top two. I can do banana muffins and I can do pumpkin muffins.

00:03:56 Lisa Hochgraf

That's a good translation. I like that.

00:04:00

And beyond baking, what are some things that you share, like with the staff at CUES or when you're out in the industry when people are just kind of chatting?

00:04:07 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Ohh gosh, that depends I guess on what it's all about. I mean for me, family is key.

00:04:14 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And my son is a basketball player. This is his senior year of high school. And so personally for us around here, especially this time of year, it's all basketball all the time.

00:04:26 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So depending on who somebody is and whether or not they're a basketball fan, that is always a big topic of conversation.

00:04:33 Lisa Hochgraf

Great, great.

00:04:34 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And so is his search for a college. Where is he going to go next, and what's that going to be like because that means I will be an empty nester.

00:04:44 Lisa Hochgraf

Ohh, that's real. That's big.

00:04:43 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So these absolutely are big topics and it's kind of fun to bring that subject up because anybody who has been there or is going to be there soon can resonate with how I feel both excited and scared to death.

00:05:00 Lisa Hochgraf

Indeed, it's a big shift. I've been through that one where my son left for college, but fortunately he ended up choosing a fairly close-by college, so we still got to see him some.

00:05:09 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

That's good news.

00:05:10 Lisa Hochgraf

Yeah. Thank you. It's nice to know about your son's basketball pursuits. And I wish him well with the final season with that particular team.

00:05:16 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Thank you, thank you. It's exciting.

00:05:19 Lisa Hochgraf

So talking credit unions now. I wonder, would you talk a little bit about what made you decide to join the credit union movement?

00:05:27 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, honestly, what got me to join the credit union movement was the opportunity to work for a credit union that was really very deeply involved and engaged in the local community, and that was special to me.

00:05:44 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So, I've spent my career almost entirely in not-for-profit or nonprofit work. And when I was approached about possibly working at the credit union, I didn't know about credit unions. I didn't understand about their role in the community. I was brand new to that whole subject matter.

00:06:07 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And so, the closer I got and the more I learned about the credit union as a not-for-profit financial institution, the more I began to understand about financial health as a social justice issue that was just as important as any of the other community issues that our community was facing, like housing affordability or quality education.

00:06:38 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And this credit union was really deeply involved in those community issues, so it helped me see that credit unions are another force for good, making a difference in the lives of people in a different way, through their products, through their services and you know through their people. And that's why I decided to join up was I felt like it was an opportunity to really scale and share impact in a meaningful way.

00:07:13 Lisa Hochgraf

And so now you've been in the movement for about a decade, a little more.

00:07:18 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Yeah, a little more.

00:07:19 Lisa Hochgraf

And are there some other things that you've discovered, like you were drawn in by this community involvement and the social good that could take place. Are there more things now if I said to you today, "What do you love about credit unions?" I imagine you'd give me, that first answer for sure. Are there more things you would say?

00:07:34 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, I think the other perhaps obvious answer has to do with the people really love how credit union people unite in so many ways to help advance the industry and the movement. I love the spirit of collaboration across credit unions and credit union-serving organizations. People are so open and willing to share and compare and coach and help.

00:08:05 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

It's a wonderful thing that you just don't see across other industries and, you know, I'd venture to say especially other sectors of financial services.

00:08:16 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Credit unions are really still kind of leaning into that spirit of service and all boats rising when we work together and that's something else I really love.

00:08:29 Lisa Hochgraf

Indeed, great things, Heather. A story from my background in publications is that one of my writers used to write a lot in some of those other financial sectors you were referencing. And after he wrote for me a couple of times for Credit Union Management magazine here at CUES, he emailed me and he said, Lisa, your members, they call me back and they talked to me. It was delightful, I said. "Yeah, of course they do. They're wonderful."

00:08:51 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Yeah, it's the little things that add up to a lot.

00:08:54 Lisa Hochgraf

So in addition to being all about credit unions and not-for-profit and non-profits, you're an educator, right? And so educators are always in pursuit of something new of the next possibility. So with that in mind, what changes would you like to bring to credit unions during your career at CUES.

00:09:12 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, it's interesting, you know, change is an interesting word. I need to think about that one for just a minute, because what I think I would like to see is yes, change but also more magnification.

00:09:26 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

You know, there are so many wonderful things that are happening at credit unions and in the communities that credit unions serve because of the credit unions. But I think that we generally have a marketing problem or a communication problem and so many organizations are working hard to help us with that.

00:09:50 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

But that's one thing that I would love to put a magnifying glass on is the good that credit unions are doing, and specifically through their leadership.

00:10:03 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I mean that is what CUES is all about, right, Is helping to not only educate and develop, but also lift up and connect the leadership across the movement. And so, we've talked already about that spirit of collaboration.

00:10:25 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And we've talked a little about some of the challenges that our memberships and communities face.

00:10:34 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

But where I think there's a lot of opportunity is in that united voice and front that leaders across credit unions of all sizes and serving people from all walks of life can take and have when it comes to strengthening the industry and the movement at large. When we can convene and facilitate important conversation at the level of the industry, then the collective attention that is placed on the challenges that we face as an industry can make that much more of an impact that much faster.

00:11:18 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Am I making sense?

00:11:19 Lisa Hochgraf

You're making sense. I love this idea of sort of, it's almost like taking collaboration that's already in place to the next level and looking for ways to collaborate through the industry to facilitate those conversations that it will take.

00:11:32 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, and I know that it can't sound easier said than done because CEOs and executives and board members at credit unions are faced with significant challenges on a day-to-day basis.

00:11:47 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Sometimes it's all that we can do to, just make sure that we keep moving forward and doing what is in the best interest of our individual institutions or our specific memberships, and there's nothing wrong with that, especially during such turbulent times. But where I think the change could be possible is to begin to sort of magnify or unite people through understanding that our issues are similar. The multibillion dollar credit union is facing the same thing as the \$100 million credit union.

00:12:28 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And how can we lift up those concerns and make sure that we're talking about them in such a way that unites us and promotes the best interests of everybody involved?

00:12:44 Lisa Hochgraf

I love these comments and your comments about the challenges that credit unions are facing and the idea that their history of collaboration and the future of their collaboration could really help all boats rise kind of leads into my next question, which is to talk a little bit more about resilience. You've been out in the credit Union world talking about resilience. For our listeners, how would you define resilience?

00:13:09 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I think that different people define resilience in different ways, obviously, and there are a variety of contexts for that, too. Resilience can mean for us as individuals, right, the ability to withstand or bounce back from adversity.

00:13:28 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

You know I was using that term the other day we were talking about "Oh, well, she bounced back fast, and it occurred to me that, you know, that's sort of an analogy of a rubber ball, right, that you grow with force against the ground and it boom, you know, rockets back up with equal force. And I think sometimes that's what we think of when we think about resilience, personal resilience or organizational resilience is how fast can we bounce back.

00:13:59 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

But I think there's also another way to think about resilience, and neither is wrong. But that same substance you know a rubber bowl is made of rubber and the idea behind what makes rubber such a valuable thing right is that it also has give, and it also has elasticity.

00:14:23 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And I think that there's a definition of resilience that's almost the opposite of that hard rubber ball bouncing back up, which is this sort of malleable substance that can stretch and morph and adapt to whatever the situation might be.

00:14:45 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And I think inherent within that is also resilience. Yes, we need to be tough sometimes to be resilient leaders but there are also times when it's just as if not more important for us to relax, lean in, allow ourselves to be stretched, adapt to what is happening.

00:15:12 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So I think somewhere in there is a two sides of the same coin when it comes to defining resilience. It's about being tough but it's also about ... what's that word that I'm looking for?

00:15:26 Lisa Hochgraf

Did you say malleable? I kind of liked that one because to me it means you can be shaped. You can reform, flexible, adaptable.

00:15:33 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Yeah. There you go. I like that one. Yeah. So I think I think that's what it is. So it's about being tough, but it's also about being flexible and truly resilient leaders know when to be which.

00:15:34 Lisa Hochgraf

Adaptable. Uh-huh.

00:15:50 Lisa Hochgraf

Do you want to talk about when to be which? And do you have some ideas about how that decision is?

00:15:57 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, I think it depends on the forces that we were up against because some things you can predict because of wisdom or history or experience and other things are unpredictable. And there are times when you have no choice but to work with what you've got in order to withstand and as I said before, keep moving forward.

00:16:21 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

It's like I, as we're talking right now, I'm planning to visit the Economic Resilience Center that is being built on the island of Kauai by Kauai Federal Credit Union and many of their community partners under the leadership of their CEO, Monica Belz, and they are building that resilience center at a time when natural disaster, not to mention other forces, are really trying the residents, not just Kauai, but as we've seen and all watched on the news, the recent devastating wildfires on the island of Maui also came along at a time when no one was expecting that degree of devastation.

00:17:19 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So what did the leaders in those moments have to do? They had to respond with both toughness and elasticity. They had to morph their ways of doing business in order to not only preserve their credit unions, but to put the people first.

00:17:44 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And I think there are some really interesting, inspiring stories coming out of Hawaii, both on Kauai and on Maui. And I'm really excited to go there to visit and learn more about what's happening in both places.

00:18:02 Lisa Hochgraf

Indeed, I look forward to hearing about your experiences there and hopefully to bringing those ideas to our readers and listeners as well. Wonderful.

00:18:11 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Yeah, it'll be fun.

00:18:12 Lisa Hochgraf

So Heather, talk to me a little bit more about the connections you see between resilience and leaders' organizations and our overall movement and the financial health of credit union members. Maybe

there's an example from what you're learning about Hawaii that you want to bring into the conversation?

00:18:26 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I think you know, you can talk about resilience in all of those ways, right? We as individual leaders have and show resilience in a variety of ways. There might be times when I need to make a tough decision and I need to have that strength of resolve, knowing that the consequences of my actions may not be viewed favorably by everybody, but I have to stay the course in order to do what is in the best interest of my organization in the long run. That is a show of resilience in that spirit of toughness that we talked about earlier.

00:19:11 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

As an organization, that may be true when it comes to adhering steadfast to the policies or the procedures of my organization. But in addition to that, organizations can be resilient in the same way leaders can be resilient and that tough, hard-line approach may not be the most appropriate approach for me to take as an individual leader in every situation. Sometimes I need to be more malleable, more flexible.

00:19:47 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

We need to have that growth mindset and know that change is all around me and if I don't continue to adapt to that change, then I will get left behind.

00:20:01 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

The same is true for our organizations.

00:20:04 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

We have to make sure that we're building organizations that are equally as adaptable. There's all kinds of language around this. Some people call it agile organization that are able to forecast and respond and test and pivot and change and not hold steadfast to whatever those policies or procedures or practices might be because if we hold too strongly to those things, we may get left behind.

00:20:41 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I think credit unions and credit union-serving organizations are experiencing this in a variety of contexts. Some of us are really well known for our technology, and we are leading edge when it comes to serving members virtually. That requires a great deal of adaptability and testing and experimentation in order to do it well because technology is changing as we speak as we well know.

00:21:18 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Some organizations that don't have that same kind of spirit of experimentation or transformation when it comes to how they serve their members and experience lag, can experience attrition, can experience a lack of engagement or satisfaction by their members because the organization that they're looking to to help them through some of the most challenging times in their careers or in their lives isn't able to keep up with the challenges and changes all around them.

00:21:58 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So in other words, leaders can be resilient. Organizations can be resilient, and collectively the movement, the industry can be resilient. I think you're seeing examples of that collective resilience right now, as we look at this newly formed America's Credit Union organization, which takes two large national-level advocacy and trade association organizations and brings them together at a time when unity is more important than ever, in order to keep credit unions viable and resilient into the future.

00:22:43 Lisa Hochgraf

This is really interesting conversation about resilience and how do we bring that out at all levels. You mentioned technology in your last response, and I'm thinking about generative AI, artificial intelligence, and how that might be maybe the most feared and revered agent of potential change that's out there right now. How would you suggest credit union leaders boost their resilience in the face of disruptive technology like this?

00:23:09 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I guess you know, for me, this is all about that idea of growth mindset, right? We were just talking about if I'm going to be resilient as an individual leader, and I have to be open to things that I don't personally understand or have experience with, right, and that in and of itself is really challenging. But how does that then manifest itself in our organizations for example? We can take that same feeling of resistance, which I think is just another flavor of fear, and apply it then to how we might choose to invest, or what we might choose to promote and sometimes it can feel like the safer route is better. Go with the tried and true. And other times we have to kind of move through the fear. That's what courage really is. We move our organizations through the fear by having that mindset that just because I don't have experience with this, just because I don't understand this, doesn't mean that I or we will fail if we embrace it.

00:24:23 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And so really looking at the challenges that we face, AI is a great example of it. Personally, my recommendation is for leaders to do exactly what I am doing, which is learn as much as I can about it, and don't rush to adopt those learnings.

00:24:45 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

But first understand, right? It's that classic Covey principle. I'm going to seek to understand what this issue is really all about, how other people are adopting this technology, what's working, what's not working, and then if I were to take that sort of more agile organizational mindset, I would find the appropriate ways to collaborate and test, collaborate and test in a way that fits with my risk tolerance or my organization's risk tolerance so that we can experientially learn as we go and then decide what and how to adopt that technology.

00:25:37 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I don't know if that's addressing your question in terms of disruption, but I think that we as an industry, any industry really, AI affects everybody, not just credit unions or financial services, but we as an industry have to be able to a) know what the right sources of information are, b) be able to understand,

digest and respond to that information appropriately, c) know who our partners are that we can safely collaborate with, and d) test and experiment, test and experiment, test and experiment in a way that is I don't want to say low risk because not everybody's interested in a low-risk scenario, but in a way that is appropriate so that we can take informed action in the long run.

00:26:38 Lisa Hochgraf

That's great advice. I love the advice. First of all, just to face the fear and to have the courage to work through it. Learning is important in this in what I'm hearing you say, and also listening like there's no better time to surround yourself with people who think differently than you and have different experiences from you than when you're looking at something that's emerging and potentially disruptive.

00:27:00 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

You know, there's there's something else there about that that I think is important that maybe I should have said earlier, which is: Seek out credible sources of this information. Everybody wants to talk about AI right now, and everybody's using AI to talk about AI right now, and there's a plethora of information out there. The question I think really is, "Who are you looking to for the content and the education that is credible and applicable for credit unions?"

00:27:38 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

And that is one thing I will tell you, Lisa, that I am exceedingly proud of, which is that CUES has, over decades, established its reputation as a high-quality provider of credible information, education and development for leaders in credit unions, and that is an essential part, I think of this entire process that you're talking about. Know who you can trust with the information that matters most.

00:28:17 Lisa Hochgraf

And I can't help myself here. I'm gonna put in a shameless plug because I believe so much in our CEO institutes. So we have a fairly new CEO Institute: FinTech ... that if anyone is trying to embrace the need to learn about fintech, which would include AI in my book, that could be a great opportunity to look for, I'll put a link to that in the show notes for this show.

00:18:42 Lisa Hochgraf

So now that we're talking about CUES, what about resilience at CUES? What initiatives are you leading to strengthen the resilience? And I wrote the question as of your own organization but frankly, Heather, of my organization.

00:29:54 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Well, you know, as I said before, I am really incredibly grateful to be coming to CUES at a time when there is such a strong foundation to stand on, No. 1.

00:29:06 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So, you know, CUES has shown some great resilience overtime and I think that the pandemic is one great example of that. You know, for an organization that was or is as well-known for large-scale, in-person events as CUES is. Because of the pandemic, we, like many other organizations, had to pivot and pivot quickly, and it was an excellent example of deployment of technology, new technology for us as

CUES. When we started to deliver more and more content virtually and it has now evolved into some of the most highly valued content and programs that our members have to choose from. So, everything from the emerging leaders program to the Harvard content that we for managers to the CUES dashboard, that has been award-winning because it serves up customized recommendations for people as members. I know this doesn't exactly answer your question, but these are all examples of how CUES has already shown up as a adaptable, flexible organization that has still delivered quality and value to its membership even though that wasn't the majority of the strength of the brand to begin with.

00:30:50 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

Now, I think our opportunity is to look at both of those things in combination with one another and say, "OK, how can we continue to provide high-quality, in-person content for leaders across the credit union movement, both at our signature events and across the country, potentially in smaller regional forums where people who are like-minded and who share certain geography or other industry-related issues can get together to share and compare in such a way that they are learning from each other just as much as they are learning from us or from the speakers that we are bringing to that scenario?"

00:31:49 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

I think the other thing that I'd really like to see us do as we continue to evolve as an organization is to help credit unions and credit union-serving organizations to develop the talent within their organizations in such a way that helps them be more resilient.

00:32:12 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

CUES is excellent at helping an organization diagnose what their critical leadership challenges are and design plans and deploy plans for those leaders within the organization to develop individually and collectively.

00:32:34 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So, we as CUES can become a more resilient organization when we are working more directly with our credit union members to help them become more resilient organizations through their leadership. That's going to teach us a lot about the industry that we serve and help us kind of develop our own repertoire around leadership and talent development.

00:33:02 Lisa Hochgraf

I love that. We promote learning. We offer learning at CUES, but then we're learning all the time.

00:33:09 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

So when I think about how do we build resilience as an organization, what does CUES need to do? And that is practice what we preach. If we are an organization that is all about learning and development, then we need to continue to learn and develop ourselves not only as leaders but as an organization. So what does that mean? That means staying on top of what the most important trends are when it comes to the movement or the industry.

00:33:39 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

It also means paying close attention to our members and what it is that they really need from us so that we can be that rubber ball when we need to be and bounce back hard and fast with what we know is tried-and-true and works every time, *and* we can be malleable and flexible and respond appropriately because as our members' needs change, we need to be able to adapt and change right along with them.

00:34:12 Lisa Hochgraf

Heather, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate all your insights and it's always a delight to talk with you.

00:34:21 Heather McKissick, I-CUDE

You're the best, Lisa. Thank you very much.

00:35:48 Lisa Hochgraf

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 Heather for sharing so many insights.

00:34:33 Lisa Hochgraf

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00:34:43 Lisa Hochgraf

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