

CUES 161 Lesley Sears Human-Centered Leadership

March 2024

Theresa Witham 00:03

You're listening to the CUES podcast episode 161. Welcome to the CUES podcast where leaders and experts discuss the top topics in credit unions today. I'm Teresa Witham, the vice president of publications and publisher of CUES Credit Union Management magazine. In this episode, we talk about human-centered leadership. Returning to the show, as our guest is CUES, our Vice President of consulting Lesley Sears, who heads up our CUES consulting offerings, Lesley explains the difference between a business-centered culture and a human-centered one, and shares why centering your people is going to ultimately be better for the business. Lesley is not only an expert on people, strategy and culture, but she is one of the most approachable talent development experts around. If you have a question after listening, feel free to reach out to her at lesley@cues.org. That's lesley@cues.org. So let's get started. Welcome back to the show. Lovely.

Lesley Sears 01:17

Thank you so much, Teresa. It is so much fun to be here. I love these.

Theresa Witham 01:21

Well, I have had the pleasure of speaking with you many times. But most of our listeners won't have met you yet. And I'd like to help them get to know you better. To that

Theresa Witham 01:32

end, what do you share with us something that is saving your life right now, whether it's at work or life or whatever?

Lesley Sears 01:39

And I love that question. Because what saving my life can help so many other people, right. And from my perspective, it's always about it. I'm going to talk about work. And it's always about, give me more time and help me focus and get things done more quickly. So I have found what's called cave day. It's a kind of a meeting site, where groups of people, you can schedule your cave day time, and then everybody kind of collects together. But then everything becomes very quiet. So the thing that kind of surprised me about why I like this so much is it there's a level of commitment. Right? I know, if I want to focus in on something, when I sign up for it. There's a commitment there. And I will then go, it feels like I just get more done. Like it gives me time back I can focus really well. So cave day is my time calendar.

Theresa Witham 02:49

that is so interesting. Is this an app or like an online? It's a.com?

Lesley Sears 02:55

Okay, yep. k.com. It's very cool. And you can be as social as you want. There's times that you can kind of talk to people if you want or not. I'm not that I'd like my quiet time. Right? The whole point of me signing up is for commitment and quiet. Like, don't bother me. Let me do my stuff.

And let me focus. So you can choose to do either one. But I really like it. It's one of my favorite new binds from a technology perspective.

Theresa Witham 03:25

Thank you for sharing, I am definitely going to be new. Yeah. I think you'll like it. And we'll put a link in the show notes for anyone else who's interested in cave.day.com. That sounds like a great tool. It's cool. So today, we are talking about human centered leadership. Can you tell me what does that mean to you?

Lesley Sears 03:44

There's a lot of things within kind of the organizational development aspect of CUES, consulting, where I like to step back and really compare two things. Right. So some of the easiest ways to explain something to me is to compare it against what it's not. So human-centered leadership is really the counter to that would be business-centered leadership, right? So in, in business-centered leadership, you're really primarily focused on the numbers. You're focused on the ways of business that are outside of the people. Are we strategically aligned? Are we getting our numbers? What is the data showing? What's the profitability, everything that would be more operational, and the human-centered side of that, then the counter to that is really digging into and aligning leadership with what's the best for the People that are actually getting the business done. Right? They're the ones that are making the success making the credit union successful. So how can we structure our organization? How can we develop our organization to focus on them first, and then let the success of the credit union come from that people focus. So I like that kind of that dichotomy of the two. And I think it helps explain it better when you look at business-centered versus human-centered, very different.

Theresa Witham 05:38

Yes, that makes a lot of sense to me. And another way we might think about it is this was described in an article I read recently in Fast Company. And we'll link that in the show notes. And they described the employee as a cog in the machine. school of thought, though, that's more of the business-focused, and that lets businesses think Amazon tend to have more of a grind culture where the employees work very hard and are considered almost disposable, like a cog. cog can easily be replaced in a machine. But as you said, a human-centered approach. Employers acknowledge their people are humans with lives and many things going on in those lives. And so they want to take care of them. That leads to more productivity, loyalty, ultimately, benefits to the company. Do you have a sense of which of those approaches is more common in credit unions? Yeah,

Lesley Sears 06:37

honestly, I see more credit union leaders that really do genuinely care about their people. Right, if I wasn't gonna choose between the two of them, I would say more of them are human-centered. But I think the challenge is they don't know how to make that work for them the best. Right, they care about the people. But operational pieces are important, too. Right? Right. So they're kind of split between the two. So if you ask me about their heart, I would say that people-focused, I think they are traditionally business-focused and operationally focused. So they kind of they need some guidance to really get into an effective organizational development around the human-centered focus.

Theresa Witham 07:36

Yes, I can, I can see that the heart I think is always in the right place with credit unions. I don't think many are really operating in the human or employees as cog right mentality. But yes, obviously, the business is very important. So finding the right balance is going to be key.

Lesley Sears 07:57

And that's complex. Right? That's not necessarily clear. At first glance, that's one of those places, again, I like to advise people to as we're strategizing how they become more human-centered, starting to kind of map out, where are we focusing on the operational aspects of the business? What would a people focus look like? If we're going to take that list of operational strategies or just operational behaviors? How could we shift that and begin to look at that from a people-centered approach? What would that even look like? Again, kind of making that comparison with the strategic map? It helps them to see the differences.

Theresa Witham 08:48

Do you have any practical day-to-day things that a credit union leader can do to develop a more people-centered approach? What does this look like in action?

Lesley Sears 08:58

Yes, I would say, begin to ask yourself some questions, right and compare within your organization. Because remember, the leaders are really the role models. So a human-centered approach, while managers can do it, it's much more difficult if it doesn't come from the leadership down. So having them role model, some of these quintessential human centered behaviors can really be a great way to start things like are they humble? Are they empathetic to the people? Are they listening? Are they actively listening? Right? So are they asking the questions and when they receive the feedback, are they applying that feedback into the credit union itself? How can we ask the right questions and then apply that information or that insight? Because the people know the culture are better than anyone. So how can we ask them and then use the information effectively? Are they even looking at the culture, because so much of the human-centered versus business-centered perspective comes out in the culture, that's kind of the byproduct of a human-centered credit union will be very visible in the culture of that credit union. And by looking at it and managing it and really assessing it, you can begin to see that you can begin to see how are we doing? Are we doing well, in general? And is it showing up within the culture of the credit union, also, really, remembering process and systems within a credit union is really the key when issues occur. So when problems occur, Don't point at the people. Let's go into the process and see where do we need to fix the process, either realign, train, but it's not the person making the mistake. The problem is really in the process. So just again, kind of shifting that perspective, a little bit so that people become important, and not a cog.

Theresa Witham 11:22

I love that I'd love I always tell my team, I love mistakes, because they help us fix problems and process. Yep. And that is that will help us all in the long run.

Lesley Sears 11:36

Yep. As long as you look at it the right way. Right, which is exactly what you just said, We'd love them, we'd love to put fires out because the buyer reveals where there's a problem, right? In the system. Yeah. So it's a complex issue. So thereby, it's a complex restructure? Sure. Right, it's not one and done, there's not a quick fix, or I always laugh at Credit Union, because I'll tell them, I don't have a magic wand, I would love to be able to pass it over the top of you and everything is fixed. But it's not quite that easy. There's a lot of elements that we have to dig through and changes and strategies that we need to talk through to make sure that we start moving in the right direction.

Theresa Witham 12:20

It takes commitment and it takes it takes work. It's Yes, you said no magic wand you need to really put in the work to to make the change. Absolutely. Are there signs that a workplace is struggling to be human-centered, people should watch out for

Lesley Sears 12:36

I point to the culture, every time because the culture truly and if you think about it, it makes sense. Because the work environment, the culture that they're working in, they meaning the people that we're talking about, if they are being appreciated correctly, if they feel safe, if they understand their responsibilities, and how they can be successful, if we as a credit union are doing everything, to make them be successful in their part of the task, then the culture where everyone has the same kind of experience of enjoying all of these things, the culture with them will be positive and good. There'll be high trust, they'll feel like they are an important part of the bigger organization. debate will be good innovation will be good. They'll have time to think about how can I improve the process I work in, that becomes important that becomes an important creative part of a human-centered systems-driven credit union. So all of those things will be aligned in such a way that it will be enjoyable. I like I always say that kind of the fun, playful attitude that comes from a healthy culture, to me is one of the biggest byproducts, the biggest signs that that's a healthy culture so counter that if they're grumbling, if they're fighting if it's nitpicky, if it's all of those things that you would envision seeing in an unhealthy culture, it's probably this is centered. It's probably not people-centered. And guess what? members see that to that culture doesn't stay hidden behind closed doors. It's clear and obvious to members or customers or whoever, that that's what's going on.

Theresa Witham 14:42

That's a very good point. So the focus on human centered leadership, spend predicted as an imperative for this year for HR leaders. Do you have a sense of why companies and HR particularly needs to focus on this now or plans to focus on this now? because

Lesley Sears 15:00

it works. Right data, I think they started talking about this the powers that be right the they is in the in the world, HR experts learning and development experts development experts started talking about this probably in the early 2000s, ICT somewhat kind of circled around the beginning of the pandemic issues where they started talking human-centered, because the human centered focus has worked for years. And data just keeps continuing to roll out to show how much more profitable these companies are, how much less their attrition is, how good the cultures are, how they are the leaders in innovation, I mean, all of the things that every company, every credit union, wants to make sure they are works because it's human-centered. Right? Those are the things we keep talking about, especially now, after the pandemic, talking about hybrid work, we're talking about remote, we're talking about engagement, we're talking about career pathing, and all of the things that really are centered around caring about your people, putting the right systems in place for them to be successful. And then from that you realize recognize really develop this healthy culture. And as from all of those elements, that you have low attrition, people stay, people don't want to leave an environment like that they want to be part of that credit union, they see their purpose in that credit union. So that's why it keeps coming up. Again, and again, because it works. And because the results are in that that needs to be the workplace of the future, for sure. That's great.

Theresa Witham 16:59

For managers, who may default, the employees as cog mentality, how can we help them evolve? Or what kind of development would you suggest for

Lesley Sears 17:10

them? It's a bigger, complex problem, right? It's beyond just a single managers development, right? It really digs into. I mean, I've worked with credit unions on doing this. And it engages every department in some way. We really work on HR and their processes, because you can undermine human-centered by having HR processes that sabotage. So we look at those things, we look at people strategy, are we focusing on the strategies around people because you can't boil the ocean? Right? So I talked about how complex while part of the complex is you have to do it one step at a time. Right? So we look at the strategies that makes sense. We look at the current culture, we gather data of what we've got now. we strategize for where we want to be. And then we strategize about how we want to get there. So it's, there's a lot to it. But the answer to that question is, if I was going to subscribe to one training, one development, or manager specific, oh, really, for anybody is emotional intelligence, understanding, trying to see through the eyes of the people, the humans that we're talking about, is certainly step one. And again, leaders, please remember, you are the role models. As you go. So goes to your credit union. So if you're not walking the walk, nobody else will. If you're primarily focused on the numbers, if you're primarily focused on the business output, with little consideration of the people doing the work, it's going to show and the rest of your credit union is going to follow you. Right, if you care about the people, if you really want to do human centered better, it will begin to reveal itself as well. And they will feel the difference. And then you will see the difference within the credit union and members members will see the difference within the credit union because it again, you can't hide that behind the walls. It will come gleaming through

Theresa Witham 19:33

and then the numbers should also see the difference. Right? Absolutely.

Lesley Sears 19:36

100%. And they do and that's what and that's why people are shifting because the data is showing that people are more resilient. They can change better, they're more agile. They're more innovative. They're just happier, stronger, purpose-driven, better teams.

Theresa Witham 19:58

You could just You're so inspiring. And I feel very, I feel very energized right now just listening to you talk about this.

Lesley Sears 20:06

But it's good. It's fun. And it's, it's effective. And as you get into it, and you start to see, and I'm working with a credit union right now, that's just at the precipice of starting to see some of the changes as we're shifting away from much more operational into a more human-centered, she's starting to see the results. And it's so exciting and so much fun. It's a different place to work, and different place to lead. Mm hmm.

Theresa Witham 20:37

That sounds really wonderful. Well, you have been so generous with your time today, Lesley, thank you very much. Before we close the show, is there a question I didn't ask that you would like to answer for our listeners?

Lesley Sears 20:52

I think I've said a lot. But I like this question because it kind of gives me the opportunity to tie it up with a red bow. And I would say, if there's a leader out there, that knows they can feel it in their culture, that it isn't the human-centered perspective, the human-centered focus, they want it to be, let us know, like, let us help you. We love to partner with credit unions, and we

genuinely partner with them, right? We want to stand beside them and make every step of the way as easy as we can and as effective as we can and thereby make the journey shorter, more focus, right. So if there's any leaders out there that feel that they're ready to do that, let us know and why we would love to work with them, help them out.

Theresa Witham 21:44

And listeners, you will love working with Lesley, she is tremendous. She heads up CUES, consulting. And as the head of that Lesley as anything new you want to highlight that's new this year, or are you excited about? Yes,

Lesley Sears 21:58

actually, yes, we are getting into career pathing to a different level, like we've seen the benefits that can come for an entire credit union, right from leadership management and individual contributors. So we're leaning into that in a big way. And really putting together a bigger system to help credit unions do that as best as they can, in a timeframe because it notoriously that can take a long time. And we're working to put together a system that will kind of escalate that make it easier to do and quicker to do. So that's our one of our focuses of the 2024 year. So I will have more to come on that. But that's very exciting. And that's kind of what we're focusing on right now.

Theresa Witham 22:55

That's great. Stay tuned, listeners. We will have Leslie on again. In the meantime, if you would like more from her. We'll have lots of links in the show notes. And Leslie, what's the best way for listeners to reach out? Would that be email or through the site?

Lesley Sears 23:09

I would say email. My My email is Leslie Le s l ey@cues.org. So I'm easy to

Theresa Witham 23:17

find. Great. And again, we'll have all of the information in the show notes for how you can reach Leslie. And I just want to say thank you so much for being on the show today. Leslie, I can't wait until we talk again soon. Thanks,

Lesley Sears 23:29

Teresa. It was fun. I love these. Anytime you need me. Let me know.

Theresa Witham 23:35

listeners. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to listen to today's episode of the CUES podcast. And many thanks to Lesley for once again sharing her perspective on the benefits of improving your culture. Learn more about CUES consulting, which lezlie champions@cues.org slash CUES consulting and I'd love to hear from you. Send me questions that you'd like to hear answered on a future episode of the CUES podcast. My email is theresa@cues.org That's Theresa with an H so th e r e s a r t cues.org I'll say we have a correction on the cave Day website. It is cave de.org not.com As stated during the interview, but you can find that link and a full transcript of this episode at sea you management.com/podcast 161 You can also find more great credit union-specific content at CEU management.com. 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.