

Linking Young, Veteran Staff Calls for Breaking Down Walls

Collaboration, New Techniques Needed to Grow the New Leaders

BY MYRIAM DIGIOVANNI

It's pretty obvious that the next generation of leaders is ready to learn, grow, network and challenge the status quo in preparation to take the reins.

From the national expansion of the Crash Network, which sparked spinoffs of young professional development organizations to state leagues offering new ventures including a Gen Y Summit, many agree it's all about the next generation.

The first step to harnessing rather than extinguishing that passion seems to be listening and empowering, some credit unions have discovered.

Some of those techniques can be seen through a collaboration between the Southwest CUNA Management School and the Texas Credit Union Foundation. Both have teamed up to launch Connect to Collaborate or c2c as a way to help engage and retain leaders under the age of 30.

"[Connect to Collaborate] was a direct result of listening to the first Crash the GAC group live broadcast during the event," said Janine McBee, director and synergist at SCMS. "They stole my heart. It was clear—the Crashers were seeking to make a difference, wanting their voices to be heard, and seeking mentor relationships. Through SCMS, there was an opportunity to reach out and help younger professionals connect on a wide variety of levels."

The younger credit union leaders who were consulted to help create, name, and

develop the concept were Brent Dixon, young adult adviser at the Filene Research Institute, Mark Arnold, president of On the Mark Strategies, Shawn Temple, chief operating officer of Bossier Federal Credit Union in Bossier City, La. and branding firm PTP New Media. In addition to being able to hone their skills at the school and participate in peer-to-peer learning and mentorship, first-year students have a chance to have their tuition reimbursed via the C2C scholarship by being voted as the one who exhibited the most leadership skills among their peers, according to the program. After an annual alumni and student auction dinner, students can build their network while enjoying an open bar and chatting with a circle about credit union and career topics. Seated outside the circle, executives listen in and get an inside peak at what a group of under 30 credit union leaders think as they share their hopes, ideas, fears and concerns about the future of credit unions.

"I would never have created a session going from 9:00 p.m. to 11 p.m., at the end of the day, in the second week of an intense program," McBee said. "We've done this for two years now and it works. The environment is deliberately casual and relaxed with open discussion. The scholarship was created to help open doors for younger students to attend and provide an opportunity to brag on young leadership. There is so much to learn from one another."

From the summer C2C session, about 20 out of 126 SCMS program participants were under the age of 30 and in the circle. Questions from the audience ranged from 'please, tell me what it is you all want,' and 'what do you feel you bring to your credit union as someone under 30 that someone with more experience may not bring.' Mentorship expectations were also talked about. After much discussion about mentorships, what they mean and what is being looked for, McBee said a student

within the circle wrote out a comment card that succinctly summed it up: "The reluctance to mentor reminds me of a middle school dance with boys on one side and girls on the other...someone has to make the first move...if they don't move, you need to."

"The biggest win for me is to see the generations listening to and learning from each other, [and] growing in appreciation of what each can bring to the team," said McBee of the circle.

In Vancouver, Wash., Jen Shefner, assistant vice president of eCommerce at the \$769 million Columbia Credit Union, has had success fostering innovation within her department with the Genius Hour. The program was inspired by Dan Pink's book *Drive* and an initiative from Google that allows employees to allot 20% of their time to do noncommissioned work.

"What happened at Google was that 50% of their new projects were generated from that 20% of free time," Shefner noted. "So, I wanted to bring that same force of culture and autonomy to my department of three as I could. The Genius Hour has been our way to start small, and in my mind, we'd just try it for a month. But the staff loves it so I'd never want to take it away."

Here's how Shefner makes it work. The creative time is clearly scheduled for each person weekly and everyone pitches in to ensure business needs are met while that individual is in the Genius Hour.

"It's important to all of us so we make the time," Shefner said. "If it's not scheduled then it's too easy to let the daily workday take over. I have to say since announcing we'd be doing this in October of 2010, there hasn't been any lack of ideas. They come up with [ideas] they are passionate about or want to learn more about or want to work on."