

## **Personal Leadership Strategies! The Lessons We Learn in Hard Times**

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*At the Economic Developers Council of Ontario's 2021 annual conference "EvolveON", Ranisha Khurmi and Simone Samuel, students in the post-graduate Public Administration Program at Seneca College, summarized the workshop entitled "Personal Leadership Strategies! The Lessons We Learn in Hard Times", which was presented by Sophie Perreault, the Chief Operating Officer at Farm Credit Canada (FCC).*

### **Abstract**

In 2020 the world grappled to adjust to the recommended preventative measures brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a nation we were forced to diversify our ways of doing business, servicing the public, and staying connected to our families, friends, and colleagues while keeping up with the ever-changing COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions. The pandemic tested the resilience of families and businesses, emphasizing the strengths and weaknesses of our leaders. Companies quickly rose to the occasion by taking advantage of technology while creating and increasing their online presence. This change gave us the flexibility of working from home and challenged our ability to maintain a work-life balance. Sophie Perreault, the Chief Operating Officer at FCC, took us step by step through her journey during the pandemic to date, exposing her personal accomplishments, fears, leadership weaknesses, how she managed to turn her negative leadership traits into positive ones, and how the changes she made to her personal leadership strategies, impacted her relationship with her staff.

**Keywords:** *Farm Canada Credit (FCC), Leadership Weaknesses, EvolveON, Leadership Strategies, Pandemic, COVID-19.*

### **1) How It All Started**

Perreault grew up in a small-town north of Montreal and completed her economic development degree at LaValle University in Quebec City. Her love for the land, animals, and the genuineness of the people attracted her to the farming industry. Having no farming background, Perreault joined FCC as a Relationship Manager straight out of university and worked her way up to becoming one of the youngest vice presidents at the age of 29.

### **2) My Journey Had Its Challenges but I Had No Choice but to Succeed**

We have all had our share of struggles navigating our way through our careers in search of the ideal position, for some of us the path is clear and others the opposite. Perreault shared the hurdles she had to overcome in the early stages of her career, starting with her lack of fluency in the English language, managing older and more

experienced staff, to being mistaken for administrative staff based on her youthful appearance.

As the new vice president, Perreault felt pressured to act the part in order to be taken seriously – “failure was not an option”. Feeling obligated to be knowledgeable, resourceful, and prepared all the time led to increased anxiety, stress, and self-doubt.

### **3) Wait! I’m in Charge of This?**

As time progressed Perreault was given the opportunity to lead a big project in the IT department. Coming from a lending background with very little knowledge on how to manage a technical team raised some concerns, but she willingly took on this huge undertaking focusing on the new skills she would acquire along the way.

Settling into her new role was not as easy as expected, as Perreault found herself relying heavily on her staff to get the job done within the established deadlines. Her lack of the technical knowledge affected her ability to lead her team, and her management style became more authoritative which caused discord and contention in the department.

### **4) It Was Time to Get Some Feedback**

To regain cohesiveness in the department and improve the work relationship with her staff, Perreault sought feedback from her team, peers, and boss through a confidential survey. The results were as follows:

- 57% - Overall leadership score
- 54% - Listening skills
- 58% - Created a safe work environment
- 59% - Micromanaging

### **5) Pressure Shows Us the Cracks – How Are You Showing Up?**

The results were a wake-up call for Perreault as it exposed her innermost fears. It was clear that her management approach was not working, and it was time to make a change. The audience was asked to reflect on the following questions:

- Will the leadership style that has gotten you here today get you where you want to be tomorrow?
- What behaviours do you struggle with when under stress?
- What impact do those behaviours have on the people around you?
- How do they impact their ability to deliver business results?
- How do you become more aware of what is happening within you and start making better choices for you and your team?

## 6) I Had A Decision to Make

After analysing the results of the survey Perreault realized how stressed and unhappy, she was in her home and work life. The options were to either walk away from the challenge of managing the IT project or embrace the feedback and make the necessary changes within herself that would be advantageous to the functionality of the team, success of the project, and improve her leadership skills.

Perreault chose to revamp her leadership style by openly acknowledging her lack of expertise in the area of IT, accepting guidance from her colleagues, and training from her employees. The top three learnings identified were:

- Stay present
  - Focus on what needs to be done in the moment
  - Listen all the way to your fingertips
- Remember that no one is perfect
  - It is okay to be vulnerable amongst your colleagues and staff
- Knowing that failure leads to success

## 7) How Are You Really Doing?

Perreault's Chief Human Resources Officer asked the question "How are you really doing?" repeatedly of all employees during the pandemic to gauge their perspectives and current state of mental wellness. The question was meant to let employees know that it is always okay to be vulnerable. The follow up to the responses were as follows:

- The leaders were asked to connect with their teams daily to provide direction and to make sure the team felt supported, and
- Mental health support and services provided to employees was increased (not only were these supports largely advertised but the employees were also encouraged to use these supports).

To check in on her team, Perrault sought feedback through a survey in the Fall of 2020 for and the results were as follows:

- 89% felt supported by FCC
- 89% felt supported by their manager
- 92% felt work helped FCC and their customers
- 74% said they had what they needed to be productive

However, when the effects of the pandemic did not subside by December 2020, there was evidence of COVID-19 fatigue and struggles with the workload. To tackle these issues, it was postpone any new changes until January 2021 to give employees a break and allow them to focus on themselves and their customers. This is an example of how listening and showing vulnerability builds trust, empathy and understanding – which

further translates into stronger relationships/connections between supervisors, employees, and amongst other teammates.

When employees are allowed the freedom to express themselves and be creative, individuals with special talents (that they may not know they possess) come to light. This, however, often requires comfortability in handing off the keys and trusting employees to make the right decisions. When the pandemic first hit, an across-divisions response team was created to ensure they had tactics in place to support employees and customers. Delegation of important matters such as day to day information gathered and provided, allowed for the executive team to serve as decision makers for critical matters and take quick actions.

## **8) Failure Leads to Success**

Perreault's view is that failure leads to success if we learn to embrace it and demolish the expectation of perfection. Perfectionism can often present itself as the unwillingness to take risks and embrace new ideas that could potentially improve results. It can act as a paralysing force that involves spending extended time gathering thoughts for a perfect solution that may not exist. Not only may that perfect solution not exist, but by the time we get to the solution, depending on the client base, industry and technology, the problem itself may have escalated and changed. Employees and leaders were urged to experiment with concepts and ideas, and in instances where the information to make informed decisions was incomplete, they were encouraged to try smaller, simpler solutions that could help. These steps usually have three possible outcomes:

- The solution will work perfectly;
- The solution will partially work and will require some tweaking; or
- The solution will not work at all (in which case the failure is identified early on and we can then proceed to brainstorm new solutions).

## **9) How Do You Take Decisions and Risk Things That Are So Important?**

The pandemic itself calls for quick action and those actions would have real lasting impacts on the parties involved. When the stakes were high, Perreault's team set guiding principles to help focus on what was most valuable:

- To keep everyone safe (customers and employees);
- To do their part in flattening the curve; and
- To continue to serve the customers.

The team was urged to move forward and take action with risks as long as these criteria were met. The trick she believes is to manage the risk, so the failure is not long lasting.

## **Conclusion**

Perreault managed to successfully lead a team and manage customer relationships from the beginning to the current state of the pandemic, by seeking consistent feedback and allowing herself to be vulnerable to changes and failure. Her success is not only reflected by the measurement of goals but is also evident in her acceptance to work through her own leadership weaknesses. While it is relatively easy to lead a team when the circumstances are supportive, providing resilient leadership when the circumstances get truly tough differentiates the good from the great leaders.