

SUCCESS STORY

CoBank Learning Executive Discusses Building Resilience for Growth



CoBank

INDUSTRY:

Financial Services

CHALLENGE:

"We were notified that our then-CEO was retiring that led the bank to extraordinary success. I was getting questions from associates about the change that comes from any transition at the top."

STEVE FRANKLIN
CoBank's Director of Learning & Development

SOLUTION:

Adaptive Mindset for Resiliency

OVERVIEW

Most large organizations are balancing the need for growth with operational challenges of their daily business. CoBank, a Colorado-based agricultural-focused financial services company, traces its roots back more than 100 years. But success in today's global financial market requires equipping employees with new skills and ways of thinking. CoBank's Director of Learning & Development, Steve Franklin, recently sat down with TRACOM CEO David Collins to talk about how the organization has deployed TRACOM's Resilience training as part of their growth strategy.

Q&A

Collins: Why Resilience training?

Franklin: In the beginning we actually weren't thinking about Resilience. At first we were looking at change management. We were notified that our then-CEO was retiring. He had been with the bank for 16 years and led it to extraordinary success. Tom Halverson, our Chief Banking Officer, was going to be taking over as CEO.

I was getting questions from associates about the change that comes with any transition at the top. I started doing research on change management. But from the associates' or employees' perspective, this didn't seem like a typical change management process. It wasn't really about communicating and more about how the individual employees deal with change. What I first found was very academic and clinical. My mantra for learning and development is I want my students to be able to walk out of class with things they can readily apply. I never want it to be academic or theoretical.

Since our company had worked previously with TRACOM's SOCIAL STYLE program, I was intrigued to learn more.

Collins: When you looked at TRACOM's program, what was it that made you think it might be a good fit for CoBank?

Franklin: It was really two-fold. First, CoBank's had a longstanding relationship with TRACOM. We've used the SOCIAL STYLE Model® for over 10 years and it's become part of our culture and how we communicate with each other. I love that TRACOM's programs are based on brain science. People in the program start to understand that what and how they respond to different situations is very natural. This allows them to not judge themselves or judge others, but to look at things in a more neutral way.

I like that TRACOM's programs are always scientific, but very practical. TRACOM was going to be at the top of my list just because of our longstanding relationship and the quality of what TRACOM's training offers.

Collins: In the classes, how do people react to learning about their negativity bias?

Franklin: The class begins with a discussion of how people naturally look at the world. I start with one of the exercises in the class. I show them a generic photo of a woman's face and ask people, "What emotions are you sensing from this photo?" It's designed intentionally to be neutral and non-emotional, but when I record people's responses, 95 percent or more are negative. They say she looks angry, she looks puzzled, she looks concerned, but then when I talk about the fact that it doesn't really have any sort of emotion with it, that we're all interpreting based on ourselves, they start to recognize how we interpret things in a negative way. So we ease the class into understanding that the brain operates this way. People then become more receptive to the whole concept that our brains are wired for safety and survival and we need to be able to be aware and overcome these biases.

Collins: The program teaches several strategies that lead to Resilience. Can you share what resonates most at CoBank?

Franklin: It's the strategies that really make the difference. One that is important is the concept of "Automatic versus Active Thinking." That's the concept of automatic reaction as opposed to an intentional reaction. It helps people to understand that they are in complete control of how they respond to things if they're aware of their natural inclinations for how they react.

TRACOM also provides scientific research around the way people naturally react and put it into fun "draining patterns or personas." We meet "Disastrous Diane" and "Internalizing Ike." These characters help people

recognize their own thoughts and behaviors. That format takes the sting away and they learn to react differently and better.

Another strategy that I find very useful is the concept of mindfulness. As you know, when the brain is left to its own devices or allowed to wander you can get yourself in trouble and start to develop a lot of negative stories. So it's helpful for the class to learn ways to create more mindfulness in their everyday lives. It could be meditation, relaxation, exercise or something to get their brains to refocus and turn off the negative noise we all have.

For CoBank, another strategy that is very important is the gratitude strategy, which includes helping people think about others and how they interact. We emphasize giving back to communities. All associates are given \$500 to contribute of the bank's money to charities of their choice. TRACOM's course helps remind them of our mission and our culture.

Collins: I know that CoBank has a very robust development program for employees. Can you share how your employee population has responded to the Resilience training there?

Franklin: Our people have responded very positively to the Resiliency training. With any training where you're asking people to be introspective you have to go in with some caution. I was very mindful of how we were going to approach it. But the scientific basis helps take away any stigma of how people react and helps people buy into improving. The course is seen as very sound and smart. It has become the highest-rated class at CoBank University.

When I first piloted the program, I started off with some select people from across the bank to see how the concepts resonated and if the messages worked. We got a very positive reaction. I started doing it as an open-enrollment course. Quickly, the classes were filling up. I also have people coming up to me in the hallway or in meetings and using the language from the class. So I can see that it's really having an impact in their personal and professional lives.

Collins: What kind of feedback have you received from learners?

Franklin: The response to TRACOM'S Resiliency training is that a lot of people say it should become a mandatory training at the bank. I know that I'm hitting the mark on training when people feel strongly about that. Those

people show me it's really resonating and giving them practical advice they can apply.

Collins: What advice would you give to people just starting out and looking at Resilience training for their organization?

Franklin: I suggest organizations start with a pilot and make sure their messaging meets their needs and culture. I was very intentional about how we teed it up and of the sequencing of the class to make sure that it was hitting the mark in terms of language and culture. Then once I started to get success with the pilot program, I started to promote it more informally to get people really engaged and excited for the program.

Collins: How does Resiliency training fit into your leadership development strategy?

Franklin: Resilience training is such an important leadership competency because leaders set the tone for their teams. If a leader is highly Resilient and they're highly positive about things in the organization, their people will be too. The reverse is also true, that if they're not excited and not positive, they're negative and people will be the same way. So I put Resilience into our leadership curriculum as a 14-month program. I also put it into an aspiring leader program we've implemented. I've taught it to a lot of different types

of groups, from leaders to admin professionals. The Resilience content makes it one of our foundational courses now in terms of being successful as an organization and having a highly engaged workforce.

Collins: Can you tell me about your experience as a facilitator of the program?

Franklin: Using the TRACOM materials is easy. I find that with all TRACOM's materials and courses. I can customize it and make it flow in a way that works for us. So it's not a "one size fits all" program. I leave the essential parts intact, but I put our own spin and culture into the program. It's also very scalable, so you can do the program in an hour and a half or two hours without going into a lot of depth. You can also do it for a full day. So it's scalable to the needs of your organization.

I also enjoy TRACOM's programs because I can really highlight the science. It's important with something this personal because people can react negatively when they look in the mirror. But when you focus in on the science, you're really able to make sure that people understand I'm not making any judgments about how you react, but you should make judgments about how you react. That scientific approach helps people recognize they are not alone.

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