

Visionary Leadership is the Engine Behind Strategic Growth

A Conversation with April Clobes, President/CEO, MSU Federal Credit Union

FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Heather McKissick

It's Heather McKissick again, CEO of CUES, and today I'm super excited to be here with April Clobes—welcome April. Very happy to have you with us. It was fun to just now chat with you and learn you've had 28 years' worth of credit union experience already so far, and CEO experience for 10 years—a really important decade for so many of us and for the industry. So, I know you've seen a lot of ups and downs, lots of twists and turns for the industry and the movement, really, as a whole. But I'm certain also in your community. I'm curious, you know, what are you seeing right now?

April Clobes

Well right now, I think we're seeing a change in expectation, right? And that's some of what we've been talking about. Certainly, the way the operating model exists is changing, and what that means is you have to find a way to be efficient in your operations in order to generate the revenue to invest in the future technology, the future member experience that you know, as all things we keep talking about, don't get less expensive. And so, the more efficient that we can run the core business, the better we'll be able to invest in what I think the members are expecting from service in the future. That's what we've been really focused on our organization.

Heather

So how do you keep the pulse on that—what your members are expecting? Because member expectations are really changing and shifting rapidly these days.

April

Well, we do variety of things, but you know, at our organization, we definitely have a lot of feedback loops for members to provide input. We do a lot of after-interaction surveying. We do regular surveying. We have a feedback button on the website. I've been in our organization long enough I get a lot of just direct emails from my members, which I think all of us do, but really, for us, we do a lot of data and research and diving into the data of the organization. Where are people directing their funds? Where are they, you know, spending their time that you can track through their transactions with us? And you know, so for us, we serve a lot of young people. And, you know, it's a university-based credit union, and we're always looking to what type of engagements do they do with other financial-related experiences. And, you know, we do a lot of FinTech partnerships, and we determined which FinTech to partner with based on, you know, analyzing member data so that helps us know what is important to our members as we move forward with partnerships and relationships.

Heather

So, a lot of what you just said requires a lot of trust, and I want to say vulnerability, in some ways, as a leader, I mean as a CEO, to be open to direct emails from your members. And you know that feedback button that anybody can click anytime there's something special, I think about that being open to that kind of consistent feedback so that you can stay member centric with everything that you're doing. Do you ever feel that way? Are you making a conscious effort to be vulnerable as a leader?

April

I think yes. I mean, it makes you vulnerable for certain. We, you know, I've been at our organization, as you noted, 28 years, when I started with 100 employees, we had 40,000 members, and we were perceived as a small institution. We were \$400 million in assets, and they grew up in the environment where the members knew the CEO, they had access to the CEO. And as we grew larger, the member feedback was, you know, "you're too big now," and "you don't operate as a small credit union anymore." And so, we've really tried to work to be accessible to the members like they would expect of the credit union that they might have joined 30-40, years ago, while focusing on the future. You know it does. You are subjecting yourself to critique. Sometimes the member, you know, doesn't have all the detail on what they're trying to give you feedback on, right? But it does give you an idea of what members are interested in understanding about the business and trying to make sure we publish and communicate to the membership what we are doing.

Heather

I mean, that's vulnerability. I love the word that you used, probably a better word, accessibility—just putting yourself out there, consistently, continuously for them, walking that talk, helping honor that legacy and still grow and still be a thriving institution. I think there's a lot of courage in that, too, right?

April

So, it's a little challenging, but at the end of the day, I think the role of the leader, you know, and certainly we've heard this from some of our presenters, is to be learning and listening, right? And I think you talked about, right? You're in a role where you want to listen to your members, we all have to be in that same role of listening to the members but it's hard though, right? Because every member wants you to do what they're hoping for themselves, and then our role is to listen to all the various points of feedback determines best time your membership and getting those inputs are critical to making that decision.

Heather

It requires a lot of vision and at the same time being grounded to find the right way to help those two things converge, at least that's what I'm hearing. I think you've been really well noted for that. I mean, congratulations on being the Outstanding CEO Award winner from CUES, you know, so

much support for you in that position. Everybody's thrilled that you're the one being honored for that. And those nominations were really all about that. The word, I think that was most consistently used to describe you, was a visionary.

April

It's probably true. I have, you know, a marketing and technology background, so I think that gives you what you're thinking for, like, all your marketing focuses, you know, what am I creating to solve the need for a future problem and a product or service. And so, I think I'm a little hardwired to think forward on what do people need next and I want them to get it from our organization, not somewhere else in the financial services space. And being relevant for the membership for the long term is how we ensure a legacy.

Heather

So, I don't want to put words in your mouth. I've talked about courage, I've talked about vulnerability, I've talked about some of the indices. In your own words, what's the leadership skill in these 28 years' worth of experience that you've had? What is the leadership skill that you have been consciously cultivating and really pulling up on as you have been this visionary leader for your credit union.

April

I think for me, in the way that I like to be present in our organization, I really work on accountability and transparency and the skill, maybe to drive that is communication. And I think we work on so many touch points of communication for our employees' access to me. I make myself available to everyone at times. That means, you know, we talked a little bit about life and balance and all that means I spend a lot of time with those in the organization, and I think that's important, and so communication channels are always open in our organization, and to me, that means we have a blog. People can directly ask me questions. They can answer. I answer an email. I meet with all of our employees that are new hires once a month. We do quarterly town halls. I have monthly dinners with management. They can sign up, any manager can come and have dinner and take a group out each month, because in smaller settings, people are more comfortable impressing their curiosity of why we're doing something organizationally. I also feel that they know me as a person and maybe attach different thoughts to why we might do something, right, because they feel confident knowing that I've considered all the options, and this is the path, because I've listened to their feedback and heard from them in a variety of ways.

Heather

You've sought to understand their point of view, instead of just representing your own or that of the organization. We are communicating a lot, that's really impressive as a CEO.

April

You know, I think it's important. You know, I have a marketing communications background, and so I tell everyone, that's probably the biggest part of being CEO, but all the stakeholders that you

need to talk about the organization, whether it's members, community, the news, the industry, employees, everyone is interested in what you're doing and being comfortable sharing your message, sharing your vision, even explaining "why," I think, is really necessary, and especially more in today's environment. I know our younger employees very much expect differently than when I grew up in the organization. You just did what the boss said, and today everyone wants to know. Well, why? Right? And that makes a big difference.

Heather

So what advice are you going to give? What would you like to say as the leader, that you are given all of the strengths and skills that you've talked to us about and everything that you've seen over the course of your career, as people are watching you today on this video and listening to your story, what's the advice that you'd like to give the rest of us, as we continue to move forward on our own leadership journeys.

April

I tell every employee; I tell all the people around me to treat every day as their job interview. So, I've been in our organization 28 years. There's a lot of history in how I get to this. But when I was an entry level marketing specialist, my role was to do financial education as well as marketing, and that meant I would go to Michigan State's campus and talk to students in classrooms, and I spoke at a classroom and with the professor, and that professor is now my incoming board chair. So, if you just think about that moment that I didn't know when I was, you know, whatever, in my 20s, that this person that I'm interacting with would one day be one of my bosses, if you just think about, was I polite? Was I professional? Was I knowledgeable? How did I represent our organization? And had I not done all those things? Well, this would be an awkward moment in both of our lives, right? And so, I try to explain that to people. It's how you show up in each and every touch point that you have with somebody that really sets what people think about you for the long term, and it's not that one hour that you're interviewing for anything. It is your body of work that speaks for you, and that's kind of the advice I give all of our employees too.

Heather

I think that's great advice. There's no such thing as a throwaway moment. This has been fantastic. Thank you for sharing all of this with us. I've learned much sitting here talking to you, so congratulations again, and thank you again for being with us today, but more than that, just for being with all of us and leading the way for the industry and for the movement, we're super grateful.