

BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

A handful of young credit unionists have taken on the Herculean task of turning the Canadian system into the No. 1 financial employer in the country.

by Roberta Staley



'If you build it, they will come,' is a well known proverb within the North American lexicon. In this case, 'it' was the idea of a new credit union system that bright, ambitious young Canadians looked to as the place to cultivate a career in finance.

The group that concocted a template for a revamped system is the National Young Leaders Task Force, made up of 15 volunteers in their 20s and 30s representing young credit union leaders from coast to coast. Not only do they understand their youthful brethren, but they already hold stellar resumes demonstrating leadership abilities. Together, they are forging a national action plan to confront a crisis of leadership in the Canadian credit union system.

The majority of people on the task force are either finalists or winners of Credit Union Central of Canada's annual National Young Leaders Award, which recognizes up-and-coming leaders aged 35 and under. Over a year ago, several of these award recipients approached Canada Central—the national organization representing 500 credit unions in English-speaking Canada—requesting support for a plan that would attract and retain young leaders. Their 25-page strategic report, called *Leading for the Future*, was released in 2006. Its comprehensive, commonsense approach to recruitment is a template that could be used by credit union systems throughout the world that are facing the same difficulties in attracting and retaining young leaders.

Out of the three dozen or so ideas presented in *Leading for the Future*, four main pillars were recently identified as key to making credit unions "the No. 1 employer of young leaders in the national financial services industry," said Frank Mancuso, 33, assistant manager of commercial services at FirstOntario Credit Union in southern Ontario.

These pillars address deep-seated problems in the credit union system. At Canada's Big Five Banks, which dominate the domestic banking industry, ambitious young workers can hone their financial craft and build on experience by transferring throughout the system to take on new jobs and challenges. In comparison, the credit union system is staunchly individualistic and fragmented. "Smaller credit unions especially have a ceiling that can prevent ambitious young people from gaining experience and skills needed for promotion," said Mancuso. "A dearth of mentors exacerbates this," he added. "People who want to climb the corporate ladder perceive that a bank promises more room for advancement, as well as the freedom to move anywhere in Canada."

To confront this, the first pillar the task force is establishing is a system of mentoring for sharing knowledge and life skills by pairing managers and executives with young

credit unionists. This will ensure that younger workers in such provinces as Newfoundland and Labrador, which has a population of only 500,000, can hone their credit union skills to an equally high level as someone in the more populous province of Ontario.

The second pillar is creation of a national job inventory website. Right now, there is no central place where potential employees can learn about credit union jobs throughout the entire country.

The third pillar is a young leaders' think tank that will meet at annual general meetings and regional and national meetings. It will take ideas of youthful participants and present them to system executives. This will serve a dual purpose: ensuring that ideas of young people on major issues of the day are heard, while focusing the attention of current executives on up-and-coming young leaders.

The fourth pillar is the creation of a database of young leaders to help develop the mentorship program and push national participation of youth in system debates.

"When we wrote the report, we knew that high-level strategizing wouldn't work," said Eric Dillon, senior vice president of member service at Common Wealth Credit Union in northern Alberta. "Instead, we needed to devise very concrete, tactical action plans to cultivate the next generation of CEOs, whether in credit unions with C\$50 million or C\$5 billion in assets," Dillon commented. "Credit unions are having a very difficult time establishing a well-defined succession plan, which is part of a CEO's mandate."

To attract young people, credit unions must push their unique marketing edge—profits that go back into the community. "This is a major attraction that appeals to young people and one that bank competitors can't offer," said Dillon.

"We are creating a meaningful and tangible value proposition for people," Dillon added. "To be frank, young people are looking to change the world. This way, they can look at the system and be engaged in a business where they can change outcomes, rather than merely take orders and execute them."

To learn more about *Leading for the Future*, visit the Credit Union Central of Canada website at www.cucentral.ca/youngleaders06. ■

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