



Case Study

Collaborative Strategy Is Key to Growth and Innovation for these Trailblazing Credit Unions

With the voices of:

Adrian Legin, President & CEO of Coastal Community Credit Union

William (Bill) Kiss, co-chief executive officer of the G&F Financial Group

Jeff Shewfelt, co-chief executive officer of the G&F Financial Group

Shelley McDade, CEO of Sunshine Coast Credit Union

Credit Unions are, by their very nature, co-operative, founded on the 7 International Co-Operative Principles. However, in an era where digitization is transforming – disrupting even – the financial services industry, strategic collaboration is proving key for a group of credit unions looking to not only safeguard their place in the industry, but to grow, innovate and flourish.

The Back Office Collaborative (BOC) currently comprises 15 credit unions from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario looking to work together to meet the opportunities and challenges facing their industry. The founding members of the BOC approached Charles Holmes to facilitate the process because of his experience working on a range of collaborative ventures. For both Charles and the Credit Unions involved, a collaborative approach made perfect sense.

A Collaborative Approach with Multiple Benefits

“Philosophically I’ve always believed that all of us are better than any of us.” Adrian Legin



Sharing expenses, human resources, gaining scale, quality and financial capacity are all cited by several of the CEOs involved in the BOC as benefits of leveraging collaboration. Adrian Legin, President & CEO of Coastal Community Credit Union, believes that, “[Collaboration] helps us to get economies of scale but it also, maybe even more importantly, gives us economies of skill.” This mindset is shared by Legin’s collaborators who see the BOC as essential to providing opportunities to both learn and pass on knowledge. Jeff Shewfelt, co-chief executive officer of the G&F Financial Group, contends that, “You can get projects done quicker when you have more resources”, improving efficiency, aggregating purchasing and affording expertise that you couldn’t afford as a single Credit Union.

Collaborative Strategy: Key Lessons & Take-Aways

As with any new venture, there are ample opportunities for learning on this journey into broad scale collaboration. As Shelley McDade, CEO of Sunshine Coast Credit Union, insightfully comments, “The largest learning that continues to repeat itself is that you can never assume that the same words mean the same thing to the same people.” Communication and clarity of expectations are, therefore, absolutely pivotal, according to McDade. Good communication is also essential for building trust. Bill Kiss, co-chief executive officer of the G&F Financial Group, suggests that, “When you have such a broad representation trust is clearly the biggest factor. You have to have trust in each other so you don’t have those unsaid assumptions being made about why things are.” Legin agrees, commenting that the collaborative process takes “openness, transparency and a lot of listening”, along with respect for “what others bring to the table, the diversity of skills, experience and perspectives.”

The Strength of Togetherness: Impacts of Strategic Alliances

“You can accomplish things that you simply couldn’t do on your own.” Bill Kiss, co-chief executive officer of the G&F Financial Group



Although it is still relatively early days for the BOC, the impacts of their strategic alliance are already becoming clear, especially in the arena of learning and sharing information. As Legin argues, “New ideas and new perspectives that push the boundaries of where we’ve been thinking” are having a rippled effect on work streams, helping speed time to market by being better informed and allowing everyone to make better decisions. This has been particularly apparent in the success of phase I of their first major project, the Technology Roadmap.

Increased influence, and having a louder voice, is another positive impact of working together, both in terms of other players seeing the group as “a force to be reckoned with, a powerful group that can accomplish something” (Bill Kiss) and influencing things that are happening in the system. McDade suggests that, as a collaborative, you can, “Attain services, products or benefits that you likely couldn’t achieve on your own due to cost barriers or voice barriers – power of voice & influence.”

The Need for Facilitation in Collaborative Change Efforts

Masterful facilitation has been critical to the success of the BOC on many different levels, bringing transparency, clarity and focus to the teams while guiding them through both difficult discussions and exciting, innovative dialogue. McDade comments that, “The more complex the collaboration, the more necessary facilitation is” and the BOC is “the most complex, successful collaboration I have been involved in.”

Kiss reminds us that facilitation is “incredibly important at every stage of the way” – in the early stages to gain an understanding of expectations, levels of commitment, and how to communicate with one another, and then during later stages when you start

hitting hurdles, as a good facilitator can “pull it back to a sense of meaning,” while keeping all participants focused on the outcomes.

“It’s very easy as you get more and more people around the table to digress into a million different zones. [...] Charles constantly played the role of that neutral party that checked in with people and kept them on the bus.” Shelley McDade

Given, then, that every member of the BOC has a strong vested interest and opinion, it has been crucial for Charles, as facilitator, to create and hold the space for everyone to participate as equals.

The Success of The Back Office Collaborative

Creating the opportunity for diverse views to be heard, explored and honoured is critical to the success of any kind of innovation or change effort. The Credit Unions involved in the BOC are all stepping outside their comfort zones to learn from others and share knowledge in order to face the future in their industry with the tools and economies of both scale and skill needed to survive.

This hasn’t always been an easy process but, with the help of Charles’ facilitation, it is a process that is yielding truly impactful results, keeping these credit unions competitive in a quickly-changing financial services landscape. By leveraging the power of togetherness, each Credit Union can serve their members and communities in their own unique, and truly vital, way.

“I think it’s a screaming success! The risk, intensity and commitment required is greater than any other collaboration I’ve been part of. I’m grateful for Charles’ facilitation and leadership, and I’m grateful for the learnings that he and others are delivering along the path.” Shelley McDade

Writer: Kim Bridgett, with the voices of Adrian Legin, William (Bill) Kiss, Jeff Shewfelt, Shelley McDade & Charles Holmes.

