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The Leadership Challenge Inspires Shift of Corporate Culture at Farm Credit Services of America

In 1999, after experiencing unsatisfactory incremental growth for six consecutive years, Nebraska-based Farm Credit Services of America (FCSAmerica) implemented *The Leadership Challenge*[®] *Workshop* based on the best-selling book of the same title written by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner. The agricultural lender, with assets of more than \$8.5 billion, serves the credit and financial needs of farmers and ranchers in Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming. It offers loans, risk management tools, and loan services.

"There was no reason we shouldn't have been growing. The fact that we were flat led former CEO Jack Webster to decide that we needed to tap into our resources and full potential, open communication channels, develop leaders, and guide our teams," explains Nina Swanson, Director of Organizational Development and Learning. "In doing so, we unleashed the talents and skills of our workforce."

The objective in launching *The Leadership Challenge* was to develop a core set of leadership skills and a culture where people felt inspired and productive. To begin embracing the philosophy, FCSAmerica first transitioned from a hierarchical institute to a team-based model. "We found that 80 percent of our time was spent leading people and 20 percent was spent managing staff," says Swanson. Therefore, the title "manager" became obsolete and everyone became "leaders". That shift also led to a one-and-a-half-day workshop titled "Leadership Is Everyone's Business"—based on *The Leadership Challenge*—for mid-level managers.

A representative of the Tom Peters Company, a consulting firm, led all 80 of FCSAmerica's senior leadership team through "The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership"[™] model of *The Leadership Challenge*. The training tools utilized included *The Leadership Challenge*[®] *Workshop* materials; *The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)*, which assesses skills and performance before and after the workshop; and *The Leadership Challenge Workbook*. Eventually, Swanson, along with President and CEO Doug Stark and another senior leader, underwent further *Leadership Challenge* training and earned certification to facilitate the workshop.

Three months after the rollout, the organization implemented a competency-development program, and in the winter of 2001, all senior leaders attended a two-day follow-up course. By 2002, Swanson launched the "Leadership Is Everyone's Business" curriculum company-wide to achieve alignment and agreement with established competencies.

Because it achieved breakthrough results, *The Leadership Challenge* became an integral part of FCSAmerica's environment. The two-and-one-half day workshop is held annually for new senior leaders, and "Leadership Is Everyone's Business" is offered monthly. More than 300 of the company's 950 employees have attended these workshops. The model is also introduced at new-employee orientations and the terminology from "The Five Practices" model is part of the workplace culture.

Success indicators include gaining a highly engaged workforce that supports a performance-driven culture, leading others instead of managing them, and demystifying and simplifying the concept and behavior of "leadership."

Swanson continuously hears positive feedback. "I've had leaders call me stunned about how team members want to take initiative and ownership. They'll say, 'What have you done to this person?' It hits home for everyone at that level."

Prior to gaining approval for the program's implementation, "our senior leadership talked about *The Leadership Challenge* all the time, and eventually, inspired their counterparts," says Swanson. "Once you change the language and people start referring to themselves as 'leaders' instead of 'managers', behaviors change."

This tried-and-true way of life continues to play an important role at FCSAmerica. As Swanson says, "It reinforces the leadership model. It reinforces the notion of having accountability to help better your team."