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Institutional Leadership Gets Real When Easy Answers Disappear

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Banking transformation puts leadership judgment under a microscope. The hardest moments often come when the right decision creates discomfort in the short term, whether that means acknowledging an organization's shortcomings, challenging a long-standing process, or making a decision that people will not immediately understand.

For Darius Wise, president and CEO of Red Rocks Credit Union in Colorado, those moments have shaped both his approach to leadership and the institution's transformation. Wise has guided Red Rocks Credit Union through financial challenges, major technology changes, difficult people decisions, and a rethinking of board governance.

In a recent episode of the Banking Transformed podcast, he shared how meaningful transformation depends on the quality of the leadership decisions surrounding it, not simply the strategy or technology behind it.

Need to Know:

- **Tell the organization the uncomfortable truth.** Wise openly acknowledged that Red Rocks was not operating at a high level, then gave employees a clear picture of what better performance could look like.
- **Pair care with candor.** Wise's approach creates room for accountability without turning difficult decisions into personal blame.
- **Make the board smarter, not more compliant.** Red Rocks uses development plans and reverse mentoring so employees train directors on areas including lending, operations, finance, and HR.

- **Treat technology as an execution problem.** Wise argues that technology cannot compensate for weak processes or the wrong operating model.
- **Test before going all in.** Wise has adopted a “fire bullets, not cannonballs” approach: test, learn, and then make larger investments once an idea proves itself.

Start With the Uncomfortable Truths

When Darius Wise became CEO of Red Rocks Credit Union, he inherited an institution with plenty of reasons to be cautious. The credit union was coming off two years of net losses, going through a core conversion, and evaluating a potential merger. The board was also experiencing turnover.

Wise had already spent more than two years inside the organization as COO, then called chief impact officer. He initially had no intention of pursuing the permanent CEO position. But stepping into the interim role changed his perspective. He discovered that he was energized by the work of setting a compelling vision and moving an organization toward it.

The permanent title brought something else: weight.

“When the interim title was taken off,” Wise said, “it was like, okay, the proverbial keys are yours.” The board and management team still have important roles, but the CEO ultimately owns the responsibility for driving the institution’s vision and executing the board’s strategy.

That responsibility began with an uncomfortable admission.

“We’re not good at this right now,” Wise told his organization. Red Rocks was not performing at the level it needed to perform. In his more colorful formulation: “We suck.”

Key insight: The point wasn’t to demoralize employees. It was to establish a shared starting point.

Wise and his team studied what good looked like, using peer comparisons, industry data, and conversations with larger, high-performing credit unions. They also looked inward. Red Rocks had been profitable for 40 of its first 44 years, Wise noted. The organization had a history of innovation and trailblazing. In his view, it had lost its way and needed to find it again.

Once the organization agreed on where it stood, the harder question was what it was willing to change. For Wise, that meant creating a culture where candor could coexist with care.

Care Requires Candor and Accountability

Wise’s background gives him an unusual perspective on the leadership challenge. Before entering financial services, he spent two decades as a pastor. He sees a direct connection between pastoral leadership and running a service organization because both are fundamentally people businesses.

The transferable skills include understanding how to lead and develop people, care for them, and communicate a compelling vision. Wise learned how to move people from point A to point B by repeatedly casting a vision and building support around it.

But he also had to unlearn something.

As a pastor, Wise became accustomed to softening information so people could receive it. In his corporate role, he discovered that approach could obscure what actually needed to be said. One employee eventually told him that he seemed to want to say something but wasn't saying it.

Key insight: That became a leadership lesson. Wise now emphasizes candor at Red Rocks, with the expectation that difficult truths can be delivered without making them personal. He applies the same principle to difficult people decisions.

Red Rocks went through layoffs early in his tenure, even as Wise was trying to build a culture of care. His framework is "hard on the issue, soft on the person." The issue could be underperformance, a technology problem, or an operational mistake. The response should address the problem directly without turning it into a blame exercise.

That philosophy also shapes how Wise thinks about trust. He acknowledges that difficult decisions can damage trust. But his decision-making test is straightforward: What is in the best interest of the credit union and its members?

Wise describes that question as the great equalizer when stakeholder perspectives collide. It gives leadership a consistent reference point while leaving room to repair relationships afterward.

Build a Board That Challenges You

Wise experienced the downside of poor governance early. His first board meeting as COO was a shouting match between directors and the CEO. He came away convinced that the CEO-board relationship is the institution's most important relationship.

His response was to make governance an active leadership discipline rather than a compliance exercise.

Red Rocks has modernized its governance model and takes board education seriously. Directors maintain annual education and development plans, while employees participate in "reverse mentoring" to train board members on lending, sales, operations, finance, accounting, and HR.

Key insight: The goal is a board that understands the business and is equipped to question it. Wise expects directors to challenge processes directly without making the discussion personal. As one partner told him, Red Rocks' board "challenges the process really, really well," without management becoming defensive.

Wise welcomes that tension. "That sharpens us," he said. "That helps us make better decisions."

Make Technology Prove Its Value

Red Rocks has undertaken a substantial technology transformation, including modernization of its core, CRM, loan origination, account opening, and digital banking systems. Wise's biggest technology lesson is surprisingly simple: buying better technology does not automatically produce better performance.

Key insight: Technology cannot repair weak processes or an ineffective operating model. In fact, it can simply allow an organization to perform bad processes faster. Wise compares it to owning a Ferrari with a manual transmission but not knowing how to drive it. The capability is sitting in the driveway, but the organization cannot extract its value.

That is why Red Rocks' focus has shifted toward "momentum and optimization." The institution wants technology to make employees' jobs more efficient, improve operations, and help prevent fraud.

The same discipline applies to innovation. Wise initially made some large technology bets, but has since embraced the "fire bullets, not cannonballs" concept from Jim Collins's book, Great by Choice. Rather than immediately committing significant resources, the organization tests and learns, then goes all in when the idea proves itself.

Wise makes an important distinction between being slow and being patient. Slow means missing the moment. Patience means doing the necessary diligence, testing the idea, and still getting into the fight.

For Red Rocks, technology is ultimately about creating the capacity to grow. Wise sees the economics of smaller institutions as a central challenge: fraud and cybersecurity require investment, while scale and margin pressure can make those investments harder to absorb. His answer is to build a stronger institution organically, using technology to expand what a smaller organization can accomplish without losing the member focus that differentiates it.

But Wise does not believe growth requires Red Rocks to look like a larger bank. Technology partners can give smaller institutions access to capabilities they could not reasonably build themselves, which makes choosing those partners an important strategic decision.

The same willingness to test assumptions shapes Wise's approach to consolidation. He expects M&A to remain part of the industry's future, but a failed merger taught him that growth for its own sake is not enough. Red Rocks needs the strength and clarity to decide whether a potential partner actually serves the institution and its members.

That puts technology in its proper place. A new platform is only valuable when it changes what employees can accomplish and what members experience. For Wise, the measure is simple: Is the investment making the institution better at serving its members and running the business?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica has more than 20 years of experience crafting communications, research, and stories for enterprise technology and financial services organizations, including Spinwheel, MX, and USAA.