



Culture, Mindset, and Money with Erin Pressley

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 445

Celisa Steele: [00:00:03] If you want to grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, you're in the right place. I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:10] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:16] In this episode, number 445, we talk with Erin Pressley, senior vice president of education, training, and events at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, or NRECA for short. Erin has worked in associations for well over 20 years, and she's "passionate about serving members and making money while doing it"—and those are her exact words.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:39] Well, nothing wrong with making money. It certainly jibes with our focus at Leading Learning and Tagoras on helping learning businesses improve their reach, revenue, and impact. But we also know that some learning businesses, especially associations or other organizations that may be nonprofits, shy away from focusing on money. They prefer, probably understandably, to focus on the mission and serving learners without talking so much about money. But we know that, for an organization like NRECA, the revenue it brings in through its learning products and services is crucial to being able to deliver on its mission and serve its learners well—that old "no money, no mission" saying.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:27] Absolutely right, Jeff, and that's one of the things that Erin brings up in our conversation. She's really clear on that connection between making money and delivering on mission.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:38] Very good. What else do you and Erin talk about, Celisa?

Celisa Steele: [00:01:42] We talk about what NRECA does in general and what it offers in its portfolio, but we spend most of our time talking about culture. When Erin started at NRECA, she consciously chose to focus on shifting the culture in her team—and, spoiler alert, part of that

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focus is about being more open about the need to make money. We also get into the challenges and opportunities on Erin's mind when she thinks about the next year or two. And I ask Erin about her approach to her own learning and professional development.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:16] Erin also offers three takeaways near the end of your conversation.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:21] Yes, she does. She mentions the importance of not sleeping on culture, of embracing a test-and-learn mindset, and of recognizing the reality of the need for revenue.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:34] Excellent. So, as you listen to this conversation, dear listener, keep those three things in mind. Now, on to the conversation with Erin Pressley.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:49] Tell us about NRECA—what it does in general and then a sketch of what it offers in terms of learning opportunities.

Erin Pressley: [00:02:57] Sure. NRECA is the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. We represent the 900 rural electric cooperatives that are scattered across the United States in sometimes very small, rural communities of only hundreds of people but also the rural suburbs of Austin, Texas, for example. We make sure and advocate as a trade association—make sure that our members' interests are front and center with legislators. But we also look to equip and educate our members on issues of real importance to them: the increasing load on electric grids; hiring and retaining folks in rural communities; AI; and, overall, the big umbrella, making sure that they can continue to provide safe, affordable, and reliable electricity to their rural communities.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:54] I'm thinking, in what I'm hearing about your audience there, that's potentially a pretty broad group, certainly geographically dispersed but then also probably the roles. Talk a little bit about your portfolio and how you try to serve those different members that you serve.

Erin Pressley: [00:04:10] Most trade associations probably have this challenge. You represent an industry, and, within that industry, as you said, there are lots of different roles and responsibilities. From an education standpoint, we have events and training for CEOs, communicators, IT folks, engineering folks, membership folks, up-and-coming emerging leaders. We also serve boards of directors that govern all of these electric cooperatives, and so we're also teaching a lot of governance and education to these boards of directors. That education can take the shape of events. We do about 20 to 25 live events across the country

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every year, and then we have probably 8 to 10 week-long, cohort-based, in-person education experiences. Sometimes we partner with University of Wisconsin. We also partner with Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University to deliver those programs. And then we probably have well over 100 online programs, sometimes live, sometimes self-paced, on-demand through a learning management system that folks can engage with. So lots of content across lots of platforms for lots of different people.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:34] Thanks for spelling the breadth of what you offer at NRECA in terms of the learning opportunities. When we think about your role in NRECA, how do you define it or describe your role?

Erin Pressley: [00:05:50] I'm grateful and lucky now to be leading a really amazing team. And my job, number one, is to grow and cultivate this team, to help point them in the right direction and give them this vision, but then to get out of their way and let them do what they do best. If I've hired right, and if we've coached right, we have an amazing group of folks whose job is to execute on all the things I just talked about. Sometimes I say I'm like their sherpa. We're climbing up this big mountain, and I'm their sherpa to help get them there, but they're also doing a lot of the work. And hopefully I'm going to get them to the top of that mountain, and we're going to deliver some really good stuff for our members.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:35] You're focused on learning at NRECA. Refresh my memory—how long have you been focused on learning, and how did you wind up with that focus in your professional life?

Erin Pressley: [00:06:46] Interesting, because the bulk of my career—I've been working for, dare I say, well over 30 years—the bulk of my career was in media and publishing, and I spent probably two-thirds of my career in that space. At my last association, there was an opportunity. Our VP of education had departed, and I thought, "Hey, I'm used to dealing with content. I'm used to thinking about what an audience wants. I'm used to educating and informing. It just happens to be in the pages of a magazine or online or in a newsletter. Why can't I apply many of those skills and that passion for delivering good information to an audience? Maybe in a different format on a main stage, in an education session, in a day-long workshop?" So I raised my hand and said, "Hey, I think I can do this job too." That was really this pivot point for me. In my career, I'd been very focused on content and generating revenue from that content, and now I've expanded that into the education space, where I am generating content and driving revenue for that content. That pivot was really important, and I think some

of the experience I bring from the media side and the revenue generation side has helped enhance some of the work that we do here in NRECA on the education side.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:12] How long have you been at NRECA at this point?

Erin Pressley: [00:08:15] Two and a half years—not that long in the grand scheme of things. As an association person, I’m still very new to NRECA. I know most association folks often stay with their associations for years, so I’m looking forward to doing that here, though.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:31] One of the things you chose to focus on when you joined NRECA is culture. What led you to focus on culture and say, “This is where I really want to dig in as I’m starting my role here”?

Erin Pressley: [00:08:46] I was very lucky in my last association to see the benefits of focusing on culture firsthand. I was there for 15 years. At the beginning of my tenure, my CEO made it a priority, number one, for him. And so, over my time there, I saw how talking about culture, defining your culture, implementing measurements for your culture, and then seeing it in action—we all were rowing in the same boat in terms of where we wanted to take the culture of the organization. We were honest with each other. We had built trust and collaboration. As a result of all of that, everyone’s work was elevated because we could do our work more collaboratively, with more trust. There was less fear around taking risks. We embraced this test-and-learn culture—when you make a mistake, it’s there so you can learn. Just don’t keep making that same mistake over and over again. I saw firsthand what creating a good culture can do and how it can drive the business and increase member satisfaction, so I wanted to make sure that I brought that along as well in my new role.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:04] It occurs to me that it might be useful to hear from you how you define “culture” because it’s one of those terms that I think we all go, “Okay, yes, culture,” but maybe we all have slightly different views of that. Do you have a definition you like to rely on? Or, if I put you on the spot and ask for one now, what will you say?

Erin Pressley: [00:10:21] I’ve been a longtime fan of Jamie Notter. He talks a lot about culture, and so a lot of how I define it is how he defines it too. It’s the behaviors and the actions and the artifacts that are in your environment that people are seeing and feeling on a day-to-day basis. Even if we don’t have a defined culture statement, there’s a culture there. There are signs and signals from how people are behaving as to what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable. I want to be overt with my team about what is acceptable and defining that—things like

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communication and transparency. It's great to be a subject matter expert, but it's better to share that knowledge and what you know with others around you so that they can contribute and be additive to projects that we're working on together. So that's my definition and a little bit of a hint of the kind of culture that I'm looking to drive here.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:28] I did want to ask about how you think about or describe the culture that you're aiming for with your team at NRECA and then some of what you are doing or have done to try to create that desired culture, and potentially, if it involved a shift, how you were trying to drive that shift as well.

Erin Pressley: [00:11:47] I think it did involve a little bit of a shift. Every time you bring a new leader to a team or even a new colleague to a team, that becomes a new team. We were making a lot of changes. I was making a lot of changes. We had to think closely about, "Okay, how do we want to incorporate these changes? How do we want it to feel?" I had to first create this psychological safety among the team and allow them to be able to share what their idea of a good culture was—the things that weren't working for them, the things that they did, what made a great day of work for them—and I'm still building it. It's a journey. But having these conversations and listening to the words and the feelings that they brought up about the kind of culture that they would like to see, we organically backed into what we want as a culture—things like trust, accountability, collaboration, a growth mindset. We are in the learning business, and so we should also be learners. We try and bring those values forth when we have conversations, difficult conversations, to say, "Hey, I'm trusting you with this," or "I'm sharing this with you because we said we wanted to have a culture of transparency or honesty and working to give people valuable feedback. We're here to help each other."

Celisa Steele: [00:13:22] I'm thinking, too, it might be helpful for listeners to have a sense of the size of the team as you're talking about having some of these conversations and arriving together at some of this. Tell us a little bit about the makeup of your team.

Erin Pressley: [00:13:35] I am lucky—and I consider myself very lucky—to have 34 folks on my team, which is a big team, and I get that. I've worked in very small teams before too. But we have 34 folks divided into four groups. Our meetings folks who execute all of our meetings, logistics, work with convention centers, etc. Our program manager folks who do the content for all of our events. I have a director education group—I mentioned we work with boards of directors—and these are the folks who are building day-long classes and content for our boards of directors. And then we have a staff and executive education group who works on the certification programs and content for the staff and executives who work at cooperatives.

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Celisa Steele: [00:14:27] One of the things I've heard you talk about before, in terms of culture at NRECA, was that part of what hadn't necessarily been a focus for the education group was the recognition of the need for revenue, and that that's been something that you've helped refine. Will you talk a little bit about that?

Erin Pressley: [00:14:47] Sure. We're a fee-for-service department. What that means is membership dues do not cover the cost of the work that we do. In fact, membership dues at our association and maybe others don't cover the cost of membership. It's critical for departments like mine and others in the organization who can generate revenue to do so to support our government relations activities and other things that we have to do that aren't revenue-generating. There's a tremendous focus here at NRECA on service excellence and serving our members. I don't think it's very different from many other associations, but here sometimes it was at the expense of generating revenue. A lot of what I started to do was just talking about the importance of generating revenue—and not necessarily just to make money. We're generating revenue because we want to invest it back into the work that we do, whether specifically for education, training, and events because we want bigger, bolder speakers, because we want to invest in a different kind of technology platform or implement some technology that costs some money, or because we want to help the rest of the organization.

Erin Pressley: [00:16:06] There's a lot going on with a new president, so there's going to be some financial resources that we need to implement in order to educate a whole new staff, and our team can contribute to that. A lot of what I did was making sure that folks knew, on a day-to-day basis or on a weekly basis, monthly basis, how we're generating revenue, where things are coming from, making sure they understood what a P&L was, building some general business acumen, but also this constant drumbeat of "We're making money to help our members, to be a stronger organization so that we can continue to help our members." One of my colleagues at one point was like, "We've never talked about making money before." But I think, again, it's framing why we're making the money that's important. We're not making the money just to have a huge bottom line at the end of the year; we're making the money so we can do more for our members.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:07] You know that we like to talk at Leading Learning and Tagoras about reach, revenue, and impact, and it's very similar to what you're sharing there, where the revenue is a critical part of it but almost always because it's in service of helping deliver greater impact or helping have greater reach in terms of who you're serving. We see reach, revenue, and impact as critical for learning businesses, and so, if you think near future—and I'm thinking

maybe a year, maybe two years out—what challenges are you seeing for NRECA in general in those three areas, in terms of culture, however you want to frame them? When you think about challenges in that near future, what comes to mind for you?

Erin Pressley: [00:17:50] For us, the reach part is critical because, if we can't get that right, building the revenue and having that impact are going to be that much harder. I mentioned earlier hiring folks to work in rural communities and retaining folks in rural communities can be very difficult. What we're seeing in our industry is a huge amount of turnover in all roles and especially in the CEO role as CEOs who've been at their cooperatives for 20, 30 years are retiring. We're working hard and trying to get ahead of being able to reach out to these folks so they know who NRECA is, what we have to offer because there are so many new staff coming on board in electric cooperatives who might not know who we are. We're leaning into our marketing efforts a little more, taking another look at our messaging.

Erin Pressley: [00:18:49] For many folks who work in rural communities, maybe they didn't have a pleasant education experience or a higher education experience. They didn't have those opportunities. When we're looking to them to invest in education as an adult, how can we tap into what's important for them to make them understand that this education experience is maybe different than what they've experienced in the past? That, by investing in us and our education, they're really helping their communities? Because that's why they've joined their boards, or that's why they work at these cooperatives. So leaning into the reach part, I think, is a big focus for us over the next few years.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:31] I think that I'm hearing in your answer there, too, that you think that part of the answer to that challenge around reaching more people is marketing. It's around having that communication piece of it. And we're hearing that in some of the data that we collected in a year-end survey on the Leading Learning side—that marketing is a big focus for people. Part of it is that awareness piece, making sure that the people you want to serve are aware of all that you have to offer.

Erin Pressley: [00:19:58] And I think hand in hand with that is data, whether it's the data of the people that you're trying to reach—do you even know who you're trying to reach, their demographics and their contact information?—and then also data on the other side too. After you've executed this marketing, what's working? What's not working? Where are you finding opportunities as you look at your data over time of growing audiences and ideas? We looked at data recently and realized we were not really serving the IT community, and, with cybersecurity and AI growing, they weren't engaging with us in many of our events. So now

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we're looking to potentially launch an IT week-long cohort program for IT folks because we looked at the data and saw that it was an underserved audience.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:54] We talked a little bit about challenges, the challenges around reaching more of the folks you want to serve. When you think about opportunities—again, that short-ish future year, two years out—what are you seeing as major opportunities for NRECA as a learning business, and what are you choosing to focus on out of those opportunities?

Erin Pressley: [00:21:19] This might not be very different from other trade associations or other associations in general, but we're leaning more into the growth we're already seeing in online learning and especially within self-paced, on-demand—we call them SPODs here—but the opportunity for folks to learn on their own terms at their own time in bite-sized chunks, whenever they have time that's available. We're seeing great success the few times we've dipped our toe into that water. Again, we embrace this test and learn. We've taken some of our courses and made them self-paced, on-demand, so we're seeing a lot of growth in that area. I imagine we'll continue to lean into that online learning going forward, potentially making it smaller and more bite-sized.

Erin Pressley: [00:22:13] The term "Webinar," I think, has developed a bad reputation over the last few years, and I get it. So we are launching what we call "online workshops," which, in format, are Webinars. But we've changed the name of them, and they're very focused on teaching basic skills, like Excel and PowerPoint and how to give a good presentation, to small cohorts across our industry, whether it's executive assistants, linemen who worked many years restoring power and now find themselves in leadership positions and need to learn some certain skills. So smaller, bite-sized pieces of learning as well in these online workshops. Another area where I see a lot of growth for us, we do a lot of events. The ones that seem most successful are the ones that are focused on these more niche, narrowly defined audiences. We have an event for communicators. We have an event for engineering folks. When we lean into specific demographics, we seem to be doing really well. When we have events that are trying to appeal to everybody at once under one roof, like our annual meeting, we struggle a little bit with engagement.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:35] Those are very interesting trends to think about. The more niche events, it occurred to me that part of that would be that it's a smaller size, which then seems potentially to open it up better for more peer learning or more interaction among the attendees because it's not overwhelming. You're not necessarily dealing with thousands of people but maybe under 100—or I don't know exactly how small your niche conferences are.

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Erin Pressley: [00:23:59] Well, 600 or 700 can be our niche conference. But from a content standpoint, it allows us to be more narrowly focused, and you have people in a room who are already rowing in the same direction.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:17] I thought it was interesting too with the online workshops (the rebranding of Webinars). Some of what you were talking about in terms of subject areas, like Excel and PowerPoint, communications, those are areas in which they could go to other providers for; it's not necessarily electric-co-ops-specific. But maybe it also ties into that sense of at least you're in a room with people who are all rowing in the same direction, as you were saying, or in the same boat.

Erin Pressley: [00:24:43] Right. And we really do lean into that. There's a saying in the co-op industry that's like, "If you've seen one co-op, you've seen one co-op." There's a sense that we are a unique industry unto ourselves, and it's certainly a unique business model to be a cooperative. We do lean into that uniqueness when we offer courses that, as you said, could be found in other places, but they don't have that cooperative twist.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:14] I have a question that we like to ask of all of our podcast guests, which has to do with your approach to your own lifelong learning. When you were talking about the culture that you're striving for in NRECA, you mentioned growth mindset, and you mentioned that you all are serving learners, and so you're trying to be good learners yourselves. I'm guessing that you are thoughtful about how you approach your own development. What are some of your habits, practices, or sources when you think about your own growth and development?

Erin Pressley: [00:25:45] Celisa, you and I have talked before—we both love books. To me, that's often my go-to. At my last organization, I was like, "Do we really want to go to a subscription model?" So I bought a book about it. Here, I'm struggling with some coaching stuff, so I bought a book about it. For me, that's a lot of where I find direct resources. But, as I think back on my career, where I've really found the most value is in building a peer network of folks who can help me out. For many years, I was a part of Association Media & Publishing and participating in those events and being with those folks. I now have a group of peers to talk to and ask about when I have a question.

Erin Pressley: [00:26:32] It's things like PAR, which I'm also a part of—Professionals for Association Revenue—another organization where I can get with some folks and talk about

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some things that I might be struggling with. Part of the Tagoras mastermind group that you and Jeff host as well, which has been a great resource to use. One as therapy—to talk about things that are giving you pain—but also ways to get solutions and ideas from folks who are like you. Sometimes you can't talk to your direct reports or other folks in your organization because they're not in the education space with you, but building that community of folks has really helped me with my lifelong learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:18] We believe in the power of reflection, and one of the things that we like to help people do with the podcast is think about what are some of the takeaways. If you're thinking about our conversation, are there one, two, three points that you're hoping people might walk away with, either to think about or to do something with?

Erin Pressley: [00:27:38] The first one we talked a lot about was culture. I would say don't sleep on culture. For me, it's the grease for the wheels. If you can get that right and continue down that lifelong—and it is a lifelong—journey of building that culture within your organization, it's going to make reach, revenue, and impact and the other work that you do a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable. I would also say embrace this test-and-learn mindset. Try something. You don't want to try every idea that you have, but, if you've vetted an idea, and you really want to get it launched, just try it. Do it once. You don't have to commit to an event that goes forever and ever. Just do it for one year. See how it works. What did you learn? And if you want to do it again in the future. Lastly, I would say remember that we are a learning business. That means we want to teach education and learning to our members, but we also want to generate revenue from that as well—those two things are not exclusive of each other, so I would definitely lean into that as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:53] We're not done just yet—keep listening for our recap.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:58] At leadinglearning.com/episode445, you'll find show notes, a transcript, options for subscribing to the podcast, and links to the NRECA Web site and to connect with Erin on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:09] And, if you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, we'd love for you to share an episode on LinkedIn and tag a colleague or two who you think would benefit from listening.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:18] Jeff, when you think about the conversation with Erin, what are you taking away?

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:23] Erin herself did such a nice job of capturing takeaways at the end, and those really landed with me. Not sleeping on culture, for example, is solid good advice. Erin mentioned Jamie Notter, and we know his and Maddie Grant's work on culture as well. In fact, we had Jamie talk about culture at a Leading Learning pre-event we co-located with PAR's RevUP conference, and Erin was there. One of the things that Jamie says is that people think changing culture is hard, but it's really not. There are just certain things you have to do.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:56] And that ties right into Erin's second takeaway around embracing a test-and-learn mindset. Just doing some things means you need to try some things, and you need to learn from what you're trying out. And all of that is part of culture too. You have to create the psychological safety that allows for potential failure—as long as learning happens as part of whatever failure might come about.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:20] And then her last point around being honest about being in the business of learning, well, that's like music to my ears. Like Erin, I know and see the importance of revenue in what learning businesses do. And that's not all about profit at the expense of mission. It's about revenue in service of mission and revenue driving greater reach and impact.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:47] That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]