



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 255

Tracey Steiner (00:00):

The big threat is not being able to recognize that this too is a period in time. It will pass. We will be changed from it, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. We should stop focusing on what we have lost or what we can't control and start focusing on the good that's coming out of this.

Jeff Cobb (00:19):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:23):

I'm Celisa Steele. And this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 255 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features a conversation with Tracey Steiner. This is the fifth episode in a seven-part series on the learning business in disruptive times. Tracey Steiner is the senior vice president for education and training at NRECA, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, a trade association based in Arlington, Virginia. Jeff spoke with Tracey in September 2020.

Tracey Steiner (01:06):

Like most trade associations, we have a large advocacy and communications arm representing our segment of the electric utility industry. My role in education and training is to provide professional development opportunities for our member cooperatives, both their staff and their board of directors. So, all total, we're talking about a little over 70,000 co-op employees and roughly 7,200 electric cooperative board members. Now because they're cooperatives, these board members are elected from the consumers that buy electricity from those co-ops. So they tend to be lay people—that is, they're not industry-rich in knowledge. They come in having other expertise and community involvement. And so a big part of our education program was based in training those directors for the role of running a multimillion-dollar electric co-op. And our electric cooperative staff learning programs run the gamut from conferences to in-person and online training programs. Some of those are cohort-based and long-term; others are approaching micro-learning in terms of more just-in-time learning programs, predominantly Web conferences at this point.

Jeff Cobb (02:33):

And now we're about to talk about the times that we're in right now, which obviously are very turbulent times, but I imagine even before a global pandemic came along that there was an awful lot changing in the world of electricity, delivery of electricity. Is that true? And how is that playing out in NRECA's world?

Tracey Steiner (02:58):

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available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode255.*

Yes, Jeff, that's absolutely true. While I think electric utilities are not maybe the first industry that you think of as going through transformational change—after all, if you look out your window, you probably still see wood poles with wires on them, and that technology has been around for about a hundred years—but increasingly our cooperative members are embracing a wide range of different types of technology to automate and get greater real-time intelligence about the functioning of the electric grid. And that's been a multi-year effort. We're also seeing the proliferation of renewable energy resources, and they put different demands on the system and require different technologies and different skill sets of the staff to manage an increasingly variable energy resource—and by variable, meaning the sun doesn't always shine and the wind doesn't always blow. And unlike other things, energy is not something right now that can be cost-effectively stored.

Tracey Steiner (04:04):

So there's a lot of real-time reaction that's required in managing that system. And we're getting more intelligence because of sensing devices and other technology that's being built out on the grid. So from a technology standpoint, a lot of change. We're also seeing a generational turnover within our electric cooperative co-ops, in both the staff level and board level. These are folks coming in with different ideas, different expectations, different work styles. And, lastly, we're also seeing just members want to interact with their co-op in different ways. They want ease of use. They want convenience; they want choice and options. And they're used to being able to do most things on their phone. So they're trying to take that Amazon type of experience and expect it from their electric utility company. So those are some of the kind of foundational changes that our members have been wrestling with. And along with that comes a need for new skills and new capabilities, both on their boards and on their staff. And that's where hopefully we come in.

Jeff Cobb (05:13):

Well, that's a lot of change. And as you noted on the co-ops themselves, the volunteers there, mostly lay people, they're having to deal with all of this, and I guess learn a lot very, very quickly. So now you and I are talking as part of a series that we're doing now on the learning business in disruptive times. And so when you think about what we're living and working through right now, what comes to mind for you? What are the kinds of disruption that you're experiencing right now?

Tracey Steiner (05:49):

I would say our biggest disruption from our perspective as a learning business is that, while we've been dabbling in online learning for many years, it still only made up a very small portion of our entire portfolio. I would say if I looked across the numbers, maybe 15 percent of our business was actually being an online learning provider. And the other 85 percent was in-person training programs and events like large conferences. We haven't had a large conference since the second week of March, and we barely finished that up before things really started to get crazy. And so we've had to make some very major pivots in terms of our skill set on our team and what we spend our time doing to deliver online learning opportunities for our members during this time. So that's probably been the most direct challenge to us.

Tracey Steiner (06:50):

And, at the same time, I think we're also trying to be mindful of the disruption that our members are facing. A lot of people that are out of work, so they're seeing higher delinquencies in paying their electric bills. They too are struggling to adapt their operations to more contactless and remote and mobile activities for members to establish service, to pay their bills,

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to dispute bills, so forth, report an outage. So we're trying to be cognizant of the fact that they have a lot going on too, and therefore anything that we offer them online, we want it to be easy. We are trying to make it as affordable as possible and convenient in terms of timing.

Jeff Cobb (07:48):

Are there any other ways in which you've changed, that you're very directly, in your messaging and your offerings, just in the way you're relating with members, saying, "We recognize the pandemic's out there; we recognize some of the stresses that it's causing"?

Tracey Steiner (08:07):

Yeah. One of the things we're hearing loudly and clearly is that our members really miss getting together with one another, that peer networking is just so important. And you don't always find that in a trade association because, in many trade associations, the member companies are competitors of one another. So sharing at the level that we see is somewhat of an anomaly, and that's largely because they are more monopoly businesses, right? They have a dedicated service territory. So they're not in direct competition with one another. And that sharing of ideas and lessons learned happen so freely. And a lot of it happens face to face, and folks have developed very close relationships. And NRECA's role in a lot of our programming has been bring those people together, typically face to face, and enable them to solve problems, get new ideas, leave with some inspiration and motivation, and a backup resource of folks that can help.

Tracey Steiner (09:09):

So that's been that kind of real disruption, I think, that people are still struggling through. And while we have offered a number of online programs and tried to build in that networking, it's still not the same, and people really miss that. So trying to be cognizant of that and not to try to sugarcoat or overpromise what we think an online learning experience can really deliver to them and just being very upfront about that and letting them know that we understand that this is something that they miss and that we miss it too, frankly.

Jeff Cobb (09:52):

I like that—obviously being very authentic, obviously wanting to be and being trustworthy in terms of how you're presenting things, that this is what we need to do right now, and we're going to do it as well as we can. We're going to get better at it. I imagine it's going to be a bigger part of what you do going forward, that online component of this, but also recognizing obviously that people do value that that face-to-face time together, and we know from so many conversations are missing it greatly.

Jeff Cobb (10:26):

I'm wondering about other aspects of what we're experiencing right now because, I mean, in some ways the pandemic, I think, it's brought to the forefront—or somehow has helped bring to the forefront—some of the things we've already been experiencing that have been there for a long time in terms of systemic racial inequity that's out there. Certainly, we have a lot of contentiousness in the political environment right there right now, particularly around that issue of racial equity. Are there ways that that factors into this, maybe within the learning business and maybe within what NRECA overall is doing as an organization? How are you wrestling with that?

Tracey Steiner (11:13):

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Great question. And I think it's one that a lot of companies and associations probably wanted to be a little more hands-off about before because it was just fraught with a lot of peril, of risk of offending someone or leaving out someone or just not knowing how to go about having intelligent conversations about systemic racism and diversity and inclusion, inequality. And, thankfully, we had already kind of been going down that path internally at NRECA from our own staff standpoint, creating an employee group to really first provide a forum to better understand what people were experiencing and how they felt NRECA was responding as an employer. And before we went out to our membership, we really felt that to be genuine, to be authentic, and to have something really intelligent to say, we had to first understand ourselves where we were at and live through that kind of early formation of something more intentional and deliberate around these issues.

Tracey Steiner (12:24):

We also have a board president who has championed these issues, and we have some member resolutions that state the desire for cooperatives to live up to their potential. Cooperatives as a whole have something unique about their business model in that we subscribe to certain values and principles. And one of them really does center around equality and democracy and ensuring self-help for those that maybe need a little bit more assistance, those communities of people that have been underserved in one way or another. And that really speaks to the heart of what electric co-ops were about because they were formed because for-profit companies did not want to go out and electrify rural America because it was simply too expensive, and they would never reap a profit. So it kind of touches on our very roots, and that gives us a plank to stand on to begin to have those kinds of conversations.

Tracey Steiner (13:27):

And the way we've tried to translate that through our learning business is to come at that as sort of diversity awareness and fairness and equality, inclusion from a particular skill set or cultural competency that is built into our frameworks that we've created. We created an electric cooperative competency framework for electric cooperative staff and then another one for board members that really speaks to those knowledge, skills, and abilities that they need to be successful in their respective roles. And we're now working to make sure that we're highlighting those competencies more and that we're focusing programming more directly and intentionally on helping our members build those competencies within their own systems.

Jeff Cobb (14:16):

It's interesting—I've known you and NRECA for many years. It hadn't really quite clicked with me until we were speaking just now that that whole cooperative model, I mean, that really is about very diverse people coming together and serving a community need. So, in so many ways, it's a great space for having some of these conversations, and I definitely share that feeling you expressed around some wariness around how do you have intelligent conversations—how do you have conversations that really are meaningful and useful and are going to help and heal rather than just hurting the situation? And it can certainly be difficult at times to do that.

Jeff Cobb (15:09):

A lot of times, organizations don't necessarily want to touch politics so much—and this is definitely not Republican/Democrat, you know, getting into the specifics of the race—but it feels like a very unstable environment out there right now. Nobody knows which way things are going to fall in the fall. How does that impact your organization overall, and how you're thinking about the coming months and the coming year unfold?

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Tracey Steiner (15:41):

Right. Well, I think, again, like many associations, we probably have members that span the political spectrum, from very conservative to very liberal and progressive. They're Rs. They're Ds. There is. And everything else. Where I think we see it really impacting some of what we do is that it's very easy when we talk about certain topics—and, in our industry, climate is one of those—where it's very easily a slippery slope of people going to polarized ends of the political spectrum and having that debate because the parties have aligned more on two opposite ends of how we address climate change. So that's sometimes difficult, a challenge for us is that some of the most pressing issues in our industry are ones that have been politicized, and how do we help our members in terms of our role as a convener of leaders within our industry who want to get together and talk through tough issues and share ideas? How do we help them have those conversations but have them in a safe environment where it doesn't immediately devolve to those ends?

Tracey Steiner (16:57):

And that really takes a lot of very deft facilitation skills to be able to pull that off. It's very important to craft the messaging correctly and set the expectation around how those kinds of conversations are going to take place. Too often, I think, we can want to just take the easy way out and just say, "Let's just not go there." Right? And at least from my own personal standpoint, I feel we do our members a disservice if we're not willing to put in the hard work of finding a way to have that conversation, not ignore the elephant in the room. And when you have helped to create and cultivate an expectation among your membership that your organization is where we can go and agree to disagree but have constructive and productive conversations about tough issues, that's where, I think, there's a lot of value to be unleashed. And I'm hoping that we continue to be on that path of willing to take on those subjects.

Tracey Steiner (18:04):

And certainly, given where we are in the election cycle, that is going to be even more difficult to do, but I see it as one that's really necessary if we want to help fulfill our mission, which is to help move our cooperatives forward and help them be successful in the future.

Jeff Cobb (18:24):

I think that is so important, what you just hit on, and so valuable to be able to provide the spaces where those conversations can happen and to be able to facilitate those types of conversations well. Obviously, that just plays out in general and interactions with and among members. It can also play out very specifically in education and in formal learning experiences that you're offering. Are you doing anything, or do you plan any initiatives around helping—whether it's just your staff or also your volunteers and those instructors who are in the classroom—are you doing anything to help them in, sort of, being more deft at facilitating in a way that they're going to be able to handle these types of conversations well when they come up?

Tracey Steiner (19:16):

Yeah. That's not something I want to just throw anybody into and—sort of like throwing them in the deep end of the pool and saying, "Good luck." No, we really do try to take some time to think about, first, who has the credibility in terms of the knowledge base to really understand these issues, which are much more complex than they're often made out to be in popular media. So we want to have someone who is facilitating that conversation that again has credibility with our members, that understands the industry, and is perceived as a neutral party, that their role

is there strictly to be the facilitator, not to take sides, not to declare a winner. They're not a judge or an arbitrator. They are there to merely keep the conversation going, try to help the parties get to whatever conclusion it is that they're seeking for that particular conversation or meeting or program that they're a part of.

Tracey Steiner (20:14):

So we, one, look for folks that already have that skill set, and then also just try to coach them up and prepare them well for that, let them know what we expect and where are our members on this. We have members that are coming at this from very different perspectives—making sure that they have a full understanding of that, giving them techniques, and making sure that they know, if this comes up, this is an instructive way to handle that. Saying it's okay to say, "I'm not sure how to react that" or "I would need more information" if they are in a situation where they're sort of being asked to give their professional opinion. So we try to give them as much coaching and guidance as we can and, again, pick the right person for the job. Not everyone is well suited to that. You have to have someone, I think, who is willing to be in a difficult or uncomfortable conversation at times. Not everyone is. And that doesn't mean that they're not a great instructor. They just may not be perfect for that particular facilitation role.

Jeff Cobb (21:21):

Right. I do think that is just so important that you're providing that type of support. And as you note, it's not for everybody, but, of course, you can't always control when you're going to end up in those types of situations. So having some coaching, having some support to prepare, even when they're not expected, I think, is incredibly important.

Jeff Cobb (21:54):

The times we're in right now, I think, obviously can be daunting. And I'm wondering what you see as some of the potential threats right now, particularly for organizations that are in the learning business. What worries you most as we're heading forward?

Tracey Steiner (22:14):

So threats are what worries me most moving forward out of this time. And I do think it is important for us to remember that while this feels like it's been going on forever, and that it's not going to resolve any time soon, it is something that we will get past, and we will have a new normal. So I think that the threat that I see most is people who misjudge and think we're somehow going to go back to the way things were before, and that they're just, sort of, riding this out, and everything will be fine, and we'll be back to what we used to know. And I think that that is a real risk for someone to take that view. There are going to be ways that we're changed fundamentally as a society as well as learning businesses in responding to COVID and what comes after.

Tracey Steiner (23:07):

So keeping an open mind and recognizing that some of the strategies we're employing right now to, kind of, get us through this may or may not last. And I think that's going to be the real imperative, is to try to see beyond this. And I can see some folks really have a hard time with that. That is, it's hard for them to see past the immediate situation and think to what is our next normal that we want to create. So instead of waiting and reacting to whatever state they find themselves in, say, a year or 18 months from now. So the big threat is not being able to recognize that this too is a period in time. It will pass. We will be changed from it, but that

doesn't have to be a bad thing. We should stop focusing on what we have lost or what we can't control and start focusing on the good that's coming out of this.

Tracey Steiner (24:09):

So, if I could speak about that for a moment, one of the silver linings we've seen is that we have been overwhelmingly pleased and pleasantly surprised by the reaction to our co-op board members to online learning. That was a cohort where a small but vocal minority would speak up from time to time and say, "You've got to bring training online. I still work full time. I don't have the time to travel to come to your in-person training. You need to make this more convenient for me." And yet we just didn't have a majority who felt that way. And so we resisted trying to replicate that very rich dialogue that we enjoy in a lot of our director training courses online. And we made that pivot and started offering those courses in an online format in May. And they have really gravitated to it.

Tracey Steiner (25:08):

We sell out sometimes in a matter of a day as soon as we open a course. So that tells us that there is in fact an appetite, and we need to stop thinking of this as an either/or and look at it as a both/and situation, that there are segments of our membership for which this is all they're ever going to want after this. And there's another—I still think majority—segment that is going to say, "I can't wait to get back in the classroom, but sometimes online is good enough for me." And we have to be flexible enough to be able to deliver our programming, our content across different channels and in different formats to satisfy those different member segments.

Jeff Cobb (25:52):

And so do you feel like that's going to be a lasting change, that e-learning is going to be a much bigger percentage of your portfolio going forward?

Tracey Steiner (26:02):

Absolutely. And we do know that there is a fairly significant portion of our membership, that they are just very, very small companies, they just don't have the luxury of being able to allow someone to travel out of state for four or five days to go take a training program. When you've only got maybe 15 employees, 20 employees, that's just not realistic. And we've known that. And yet we've not been able to figure out how to do something to serve that part of our membership. And this has taught us that that is an opportunity, but we shouldn't think that online is just for them, that it's not just for those folks that can't afford the time or the dollars to come to in-person training. We're also seeing that there is a large appetite within our more moderate and heavy users as well. They like having choice. They like having the opportunity to do it this way or that way. What works for them at one point may not be as convenient another, so, if we can provide those options, that is really going to be important. And that is, I think, a lasting change.

Tracey Steiner (27:14):

And the challenge there will be, "How do we staff our organization to be able to meet that demand when at this point it's somewhat unknown?" And I've been really pleasantly surprised by the adaptability of my team to learn new skills and to get outside their comfort zones because predominantly they've been focused on in-person events and in-person training, and they've really jumped on this bandwagon. They've risen to the challenge. They've learned a lot through the process, and I think it's going to be, how do they balance what they probably really love to do before and were really great at, and now they've got some new skills, and finding the

right balance for them to play to what their real strengths are yet also align those with what our members are asking for is going to be my challenge.

Jeff Cobb (28:11):

And I think that's such an important perspective you shared around e-learning not just being for those who maybe can't afford it, whether budget-wise or time-wise or whatever the barriers are to them because, I think, historically e-learning has always been treated as something lesser—it's what we'll give to the people who can't manage to make it to the real stuff, basically. And we definitely need to get rid of that mindset. I think at the, sort of, highest level, some of the broader issues of equity are wrapped up in there as well.

Jeff Cobb (28:58):

Now, I wonder—e-learning probably a lasting change—what other changes do you think will be lasting out of what we're experiencing right now, whether they're good or bad changes?

Tracey Steiner (29:13):

Well, we're still in the middle of it, so I can't tell you that it's going to absolutely be a lasting change, but this is what I foresee is that, being an association, we don't just rely on registration fees for revenue associated with learning programs. We also have trade show. We have sponsorships, and I think one of the things that's going change as a result of this is we're going to look more holistically at all the different types of ways we might engage with our vendor community and provide them the value that they're looking for, which is to connect with our membership in meaningful ways, to be thought leaders and content contributors.

Tracey Steiner (30:01):

And instead of doing that very piecemeal and event by event, I think we're going to be looking more broadly at how do we really, kind of, put together packages or bundles of benefits that meet their needs as well as ours and help us maybe be able to provide more than what we could with just our own resources or maybe at a more affordable price point that's more attractive to our members than we could otherwise. So I think it's really going to help upend our whole approach to sponsorships and trade show involvement from those vendor companies and really invite, hopefully, a deeper and more strategic partnership with those key vendors.

Jeff Cobb (30:45):

I look forward to seeing how that evolves at NRECA and other organizations. It does seem like that is certainly a direction that the membership organizations really need to be looking at and taking seriously. Now, you're someone, as I mentioned earlier, that I've known for a good while now. I have a great deal of respect for how you lead your team there, how you lead learning there at NRECA, so I'd be remiss if I didn't ask, on behalf of all of us—me and the listeners—what words of advice, caution, courage, however you want to frame it, do you have for anyone who's in the learning business right now about how they can thrive, how they can be their best in this moment?

Tracey Steiner (31:33):

Well, I don't know if it's a highly original set of advice, but I think just, first, acknowledging to yourself that this is a trying time. It is wearing, and it's particularly wearing as a leader when people are turning to you for answers and clarity in what is a very uncertain time. So I would just say, first, is take a step back and recognize that in yourself. And don't be afraid to share that with your team to acknowledge that you, like them, are feeling unsettled, that you don't have

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all the answers, but you're going to help them find the answers that they need to do their best work, and keeping your mind focused on what your true goals and purpose and mission are and not so much on the day-to-day disruption about how you achieve that mission.

Tracey Steiner (32:28):

Because I think what we've all learned—and we just need to celebrate when we do have those small wins or maybe big wins—is that there are multiple ways to achieve our goals and objectives, and we are going to find them, some very intentionally and others by happenstance, and that's okay. It's what can we pick up and take with us that helps set us up for success moving forward.

Celisa Steele (33:00):

Tracey Steiner is the senior vice president for education and training at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. You can find out more about NRECA's membership and industry at electric.coop. For more on what NRECA is doing to serve its members, particularly from an education standpoint, go to cooperative.com, NRECA's primary member-facing Web presence. At cooperative.com, you can access information, before the firewall, on what they offer to members around director training, cooperative staff training conferences, meetings, and more. NRECA also focuses on helping its members navigate the educational offerings and think holistically about how they develop the knowledge and skills of their team. The help NRECA has put in place includes competency frameworks and a set of short articles called Tracey's Takeaways. Tracey writes some, and she's also invited colleagues in to contribute to Tracey's Takeaways, offering snippets on learning and development, organizational culture, leadership, and more.

Jeff Cobb (34:08):

You can find links to NRECA's Web sites, NRECA's competency frameworks, and Tracey's Takeaways in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode255 along with a transcript of my conversation with Tracey.

Celisa Steele (34:23):

At leadinglearning.com/episode255, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss the remaining episodes in this series, we encourage you to subscribe—and subscribing helps us get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb (34:40):

And we'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa and I personally appreciate it, and reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (34:57):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode255, there are links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (35:09):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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