

How National Exchange Bank Built a Leader-Owned Culture

How do you build trust inside a compliance-driven business?



Case Snapshot

CLIENT	National Exchange Bank & Trust
INDUSTRY	Banking / financial services
SIZE / SCOPE	Fond du Lac, Wisconsin; 30+ branches
PROGRAMS / TOOLS	5 Voices; Communication Workshops on leader skills; Leader Coaching through small Core Groups; an online leadership platform; internal program “Team Essentials”
HEADLINE RESULT	Leadership development moved from a one-time event into the bank’s weekly rhythm; engagement and manager favorability both rose, and the culture became leader-owned.

When Tami Christian joined National Exchange Bank & Trust as its chief human resources officer, the bank ran more than 30 branches across Wisconsin on a customer-first reputation. Outside the building, the brand was strong. Inside, the bank had entered a season of transition, and leadership development was underused. Coaching was not a normal part of the week, and capable people led without much shared language for how they led. Her mandate named the gap plainly.

“We want to treat the people in our organization with as much respect, engagement, and relational harmony as we do with our customers.”

TAMI CHRISTIAN, CHRO, NATIONAL EXCHANGE BANK & TRUST

Senior leaders knew they needed a plan to raise communication and trust across the organization. They also knew one thing for certain: whatever they built could not be the flavor of the month.

That gap carries a real cost in a regulated business. When the only shared language is policy, managers manage process and avoid the harder conversations. Performance gets read through compliance, and good people start to wonder whether anyone sees how they actually lead. The cost showed up in small, daily ways: conversations that kept circling back to the same problem, and decisions that waited on one desk because no one had the language to challenge them well. The bank wanted a change in how people saw themselves and each other, and a way to make that change last past a single training season.

A shared language for how people lead

The Leaders Rising Network team introduced the 5 Voices to the bank's leadership group. The tools work as mirrors and lenses: a mirror for how you lead, a lens for how you experience everyone else. What started as a single workshop became something the bank kept doing. Leaders began to see themselves and each other with new clarity, and to name relational gaps that had gone unspoken for years. The room shifted. A measure of honest vulnerability opened a level of trust that policy alone had never produced.

One surprise reset the room. Most of the branch managers turned out to be Nurturers, driven by care and trust, not the Guardians a finance culture assumes it runs on. As the full range of Voices became visible across teams, friction and trust began to live together in healthy tension instead of working against each other.

The 5 Voices showed each leader their own default. A second tool, the Support Challenge Matrix, showed them something harder: how their leadership actually landed on the people around them, not only how they meant it to. For managers used to being measured on outcomes, closing the gap between intent and experience was the part that stuck.

"I fell in love with the language very quickly. And I've seen a lot of tools over the years."

TAMMY PITTS, TALENT OFFICER, NATIONAL EXCHANGE BANK & TRUST

From workshop to weekly rhythm

Then the bank did the part most organizations skip. It moved the work out of the training room and into the calendar. Communication workshops built the leader skills. Small Core Groups gave managers a place to practice them with each other. An online leadership platform kept the tools in reach between sessions. Every manager took on regular one-to-one development rhythms, and every new employee began taking the 5 Voices assessment and talking it through with their manager. The internal program, branded Team Essentials, gave the culture a home.

The bank wove the language into the systems it already ran. Engagement surveys started using the culture vocabulary to plan real action. Managers ran their one-to-ones with Team Essentials tools in hand. Leadership development became a rhythm the bank kept. Managers who once stepped around the harder conversation now had a way into it.

"We were able to pair the GiANT tools with our employee engagement surveys and start solving real problems. The language helped, but the rhythms are what made it stick."

Tammy Pitts, Talent Officer

When nemesis voices became the engine

The team that carried this inside the bank was an unlikely one. In the 5 Voices framework, Tami Christian and Tammy Pitts were nemesis voices, the pairing most likely to grate. Tom Nebel of Leaders Rising Network, a Connector and Creative, brought a third wiring different again from Tami's. On paper it read as friction waiting to happen.

It became the engine of the whole effort. The bank started calling them "the two Tammys," and the pair modeled the exact move the rest of the organization needed to learn: how to bring real support and real challenge across a voice difference, and how to trade self-protection for trust. They did it out loud, in early sessions, before they asked anyone else to. When

leaders saw two people who lead differently choose each other anyway, the work stopped being a workshop idea and became something they could copy.

When the work outgrew HR

As the Leaders Rising Network team developed senior leaders and managers, bank leadership reached a simple conclusion: everybody needs this. So the team trained internal champions to carry the work to every group in the organization. The aim was a people development system the bank could sustain on its own, long after the first cohort. Those champions still lead it today. They run trainings, coach managers, and walk new employees through the language as they arrive. What had been HR-led became leader-owned. Our team continues to support the work with strategy and content, and the bank owns its own culture.

"I see more open dialogue. It's a shortcut for us to get to outcomes much more quickly."

Tami Christian, CHRO, National Exchange Bank & Trust

Beyond compliance

The results showed up where the bank already kept score. Employee engagement rose sharply, past what the bank had projected. Manager favorability scores neared 100%. Cross-team understanding grew, and the conversations that used to stall started to move. The scores mattered most for what they let the bank do next.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Above target

Engagement increase

Exceeded the incremental gains the bank expected from baseline.

~100%

Manager relationship score

Favorable ratings sustained across survey cycles.

All staff

Adoption scope

5 Voices embedded in onboarding for every new hire.

In one leadership meeting, the bank's president stopped mid-session. "I've realized I've undervalued our Connectors," he said. "We lost two good ones. I want to lead differently going forward." Nobody had put that on the agenda. The language to say it out loud simply existed now, and he used it.

"We're not just getting engagement. We're getting beyond compliance. That's what's fueling our success."

Tammy Pitts, Talent Officer, National Exchange Bank & Trust

The proof was practical. The work, as Tammy Pitts described it, "gave us some hard numbers," and from there the bank could turn its attention to alignment and capacity, solving real problems and building on the strengths it could now see.

Where to start

If you lead in a regulated business and you want more trust and ownership, start with voice. Run one 5 Voices conversation with your team, then protect the rhythm that turns a single conversation into a habit. The bank's culture changed because it kept showing up to the work after the workshop ended.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Trust is built in the rhythms you keep.

Ready for your team's turn?

Your team's transformation can start the same way this one did: with a conversation about where your people are and where you want them to go.

Let's talk →