

DCI's Fankhauser leverages people skills to navigate challenges

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DCI executives, from left: Tanna Faulkner, senior vice president, sales and digital channels; Sarah Fankhauser, president and CEO; Sandra Schmitt, vice president, application development, and Susan Flores, senior vice president, customer support and professional services.

When Sarah Fankhauser became president and CEO of core provider Data Center Inc. — the first woman to lead the Kansas-based company in its 57-year history — she faced an unfolding and historic pandemic that spurred the industry to become increasingly reliant on technology. Having come up through company ranks on the customer support side (after beginning her career at a bank), Fankhauser's people skills proved consequential. These are skills hewn by experience.

A few years ago, a DCI client in Texas — one of the first banks to use DCI's EMV card — encountered some trouble. The bank president wasn't happy, and it was a holiday weekend, related Susan Flores, senior vice president of customer support and professional services.

Accompanied by a customer service rep, Fankhauser booked a flight to Texas to talk through the snafu in person. On the long drive from the airport to the rural town where the bank was based, the pair had plenty of time to contemplate how the conversation might unfold and brace for the potential loss of a customer. After the meeting, however, the bank was so satisfied with Fankhauser's explanation and DCI's quick action that it hosted a barbecue for them.

Fankhauser immediately took ownership of the issue and set the wheels of the company churning to identify and resolve the problem: It had been a physical issue with the chip itself. “It took a couple days and a lot of work, but we got the cards working again,” Flores said. That bank is still with DCI, and has since become a stellar reference for potential DCI clients, she added.

Flores regards Fankhauser as a mentor with an ear open to feedback from across the board without compromising her own vision and principles. “She’s the one who has always pushed me and encouraged me to take the next step,” Flores said.

The culture at DCI is exemplified in the large number of boomerangs, employees who worked a stint at the company, left for another job, but made their way back. Tanna Faulkner, senior vice president of sales and digital channels, is one such employee. After a decade spent at a couple different startups, Faulkner returned to DCI.

“When you’re younger, you want to have jobs that help your career, help build your skill level; when you’re older you want to work with people you like, with a company culture that matches your personal goals,” Faulkner said. “We have a lot of integrity at DCI. I’ve worked a lot of places, and I was very happy to come back in 2018.”

As the country settles into the new normal of pandemic life, awaiting full vaccine implementation, DCI has turned its attention to developing a real-time payments offering and a global fraud product, as well as refreshing its teller system. It’s also making a push for its iCoreGO banking product. DCI acquired what was initially just an internet banking product five years ago and revamped it under Fankhauser’s leadership to add digital account-opening among other features.

The company’s original succession plan called for an extended transition once Fankhauser was named president last April. But as with so many things, the pandemic changed the projected timeline. Nearing retirement, John Jones was ready to pass the torch as early as last summer. “With the transition plan already in place, and Sarah fully prepared to step in, I decided that accelerating the transition would be the best decision for both myself and DCI,” Jones said in a statement at the time.

Fankhauser juggled her new role and a wealth of workflow adjustments as personnel began working remotely and customers required meetings and instruction over digital channels. The flexibility and responsiveness that serves as part of DCI’s pitch to potential bank customers became even more important as it adjusted to rapidly changing state lockdowns, and managed socially distanced collaborations to help clients navigate their own pandemic-inflicted challenges.

Sandra Schmitt, vice president of application development, reported directly to Fankhauser earlier in her career and hasn’t been the least surprised by her upward trajectory or able performance so far. “I had no doubt about her ability to take on the president and CEO role

at all,” Schmitt said. “She’s detail-oriented, fast on her feet, has a good way with people and customers and vendors, and she has a very good vision for the company and the plan she has for it.”

After almost a year in the corner office, Fankhauser has guided the company with a steadying hand. And those early months resulted in an intensified sense of purpose. “We’re moving in the right direction. Everybody is aware of where we want to go,” Flores said. “Everybody’s enthused to work for Sarah.”