

From Dishwasher to CFO: Eric Gardey, CFO of Alpine Banks of Colorado shares his story and advice on leadership, managing people, and living life fully

Eric Gardey did not always want to work in banking. In fact, when he was younger, Gardey said that he wanted to be anything but a banker, and now he is the Chief Financial Officer at Alpine Banks of Colorado in Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

Long before his title as CFO, Gardey had dreams of living in Colorado. He grew up in a small town in northern Michigan and remembers that as a kid he was involved in everything, including little league and other local sports teams. Every winter his family took ski trips to Colorado and Jackson Hole, Wyoming, inspiring Gardey to dream of someday moving west.

After obtaining his Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, and an MBA in Finance, Gardey made his way to Summit County and got a job at a ski area and a restaurant as a dishwasher. Gardey remembers looking in the Denver Post's classified section for a 'real' job, as this was before computers and the internet. When asked why he chose to go into banking, he explained that his dad was a banker, however, he said, "I actually specifically did not want to be a banker".

Through his job search, he found an ad for Alpine Bank's management trainee program and thought it couldn't hurt to apply. Gardey chuckled as he recounted, "I had a typist that was doing cover letters for me...and one of them had a mistake in it, so I ripped it up, except I didn't rip up the one with the mistake, I actually ripped up the Alpine Bank cover letter. And I was so close to just blowing it off and saying 'oh, I'm not going to bother getting it redone.'" In the end, he decided to have her redo the cover letter and mailed it in.

Shortly after, he was offered a spot in the program, but Gardey was not sure he wanted to take it so he called his parents. He remembers his dad asked him, "Do you have the guts not to take it?" And so he accepted the offer and moved to Aspen.

Even after starting at Alpine Bank, he shared that he didn't have grandiose career plans. "I was in my twenties, I was having fun," Gardey said. After about a year he was transferred to Glenwood to the loan division, and then went on to work in the auditing side, and later started working on regulatory

reporting. He said that this is when he began to develop a clearer vision for his career, though he still was not very aggressive and career driven, explaining that it just was not a part of his personality. According to Gardey, it was slow moving from there, as there was not a lot of turnover in the bank, but eventually, he went on to become Alpine Bank's CFO. Gardey says that looking to the future, he is excited to see where Alpine Bank will go and how they will continue to grow and improve the organization.

The numbers are the easy part

Gardey admits that managing people was not his strong suit, and he thinks his college business program did not spend enough time preparing him for that aspect of his job. "Managing people, leadership skills, all that kind of stuff. They teach you the x's and the o's, but frankly, that's the easy part."

So what advice does Gardey have to offer when it comes to managing? When first asked, he laughed, "I don't know if I've learned anything," he said, "I think you need to make sure you treat all people with respect. Even the people who are giving you trouble, and you may have to fire....They're leading a life, and if you have to fire them, that's causing them some hardship, so you need to do what you need to do, but you also need to treat them with respect."

He also says that when there is trouble, as the manager you need to take action. "I would say don't let issues fester. We need to address [the issues] because they don't get better on their own."

Talk Less, Listen More

Gardey also offers his number one skill for being a good leader: listen more than you speak. He paints a picture of a crowded meeting, in which all participants are loudly talking over one another, and no one is trying to hear what is being communicated. Such meetings are a waste of time.

In order to have an accurate idea of what is happening at all levels of the business, the manager needs to be able to hear directly from the employees about how things are going. "I think if you're going to be a good leader," he said, "You need to have the ability to listen to everybody....But you need to be willing to take input and listen [to] what's going on in the trenches, and how they really feel."

Of course, you do not need to act on every piece of advice you are given, but "if they feel like you actually listened to it, and thought about it, that goes a long ways" Gardey said.

Do your homework and take risks

Gardey says that he does not let setbacks keep him from moving forward. When asked about how he bounces back from a failure, Gardey replied with "I think you watch the Rockies... what they say about relief pitchers, you've got to have a really short memory."

He explained that when you make a mistake, hopefully you learn something from it so you do not repeat it, but in order to make progress you will have to take risks again in the future. "If you play it safe to try to never screw up, you're just not going to get anywhere."

He cautions that it is important to do enough research and due diligence so that the risk is well thought-out, but if it does not work out the way you wanted, then learn from it and move on.

Don't buy stuff. Do stuff.

When asked if there is anything he would do differently, Gardey laughed, "It's interesting," he said, "because part of me says I should have saved more money when I was younger and the other part of me says I should have done more things when I was younger."

He advises that young people save 10% of their salary before doing anything else. Then, use the rest of it on experiences: "Don't buy stuff, do stuff" he concluded.

For his last piece of advice, Gardey said, "You don't have to know exactly what you want to do when you're 22. Life is long, if you want to take off a year or two, travel the world or be a ski bum, you're going to live a long time probably, it's not the end of the world. I mean, 3 or 4 years after you graduate, nobody cares what your business degree was in anyway. They want to know what you did on your job."