



CAREER LESSONS FROM PUBLIC POWER LEADERS

by John Egan

There are a lot of ways to get to the corner office at Florida's public power utilities. Our conversations with four leaders showed some of those different paths but a shared passion about the importance of nurturing the next generation of leaders. Hint: micro-managers need not apply.



Say "Yes" to New Opportunities

Lynne Tejeda, Chief Executive Officer and General Manager, Keys Energy Services

Lynne Tejeda was all set to become a newspaper reporter. A freshly minted graduate of the University of North Carolina's Hussman School of Journalism and Media who grew up in south Florida, she went looking for newspaper reporter jobs in Key West. But before she could land an interview with a newspaper, she learned of an open public information officer job at Keys Energy

Services (KEYS), then known as City Electric System. She applied, was interviewed and was hired in the same week. She has moved up steadily over the years since then. In summarizing her 34-year career at KEYS, Tejeda said, "Be ready for whatever. Embrace new opportunities. All of my jobs held huge surprises for me, and I embraced the new challenges. Saying 'yes' to new opportunities has worked for me."

As the electricity business becomes more dynamic, Tejeda advised others to invest in their networks inside and outside the utility. A tip from a friend got her started on a career at KEYS: "Leverage the power of your network!"

In addition to her networking ability and can-do outlook, her writing skills were essential as she was promoted to communications director in 1996, associate general manager in 2003 and CEO/GM in 2005.

"As someone with a background in writing, I was asked to participate in a wide variety of activities, including strategic planning, writing a 50-year history of the utility and communicating with the KEYS Board on progress against goals," reflected Tejeda.

Tejeda said she doesn't feel her lack of an electrical engineering background has held her back.

"If you're bright and highly motivated, there's an abundance of opportunities out there," she continued. "Then, once you land a job, make yourself indispensable. Lots of changes in the industry means lots of opportunities."

In her communications — whether written or spoken — Tejeda follows the "KISS" approach: Keep It Short and Simple. That can be particularly challenging in an industry as technical as utilities, but

she noted how critically important it is to translate technical jargon into words the public understands.

These days, Tejeda is finding herself communicating more frequently with customers, especially business customers about their escalating bills due to rising natural gas costs. Her passion for breaking complex topics into simple terms has worked well for her.

When she tells business owners that the power KEYS purchases went from \$54.86 per megawatt-hour (MWh) at the start of fiscal year 2021 to a high of \$122.27 per MWh in fiscal year 2022, business owners focus on the numbers impacting their bottom line, not on the unit of measurement. Everyone understands a 123 percent increase in costs.

Tejeda and other leaders share some common ideas about the workforces they manage (see sidebar on page 27). She noted a particularly talented supervisor with an accounting background is now doing great work managing KEYS's fleets and facilities department. And Julio Torrado, KEYS's longtime spokesperson, has assumed ever-greater responsibilities as director of human resources and communications.

"Find talented people, grow them, retain them and promote from within," she said of her mantra related to KEYS' workforce. "That's particularly true here in Key West, where it's hard to recruit new employees due to the high cost of living. So, we focus on finding talented people, training them and staying out of their way."



***In Public Power,
Anyone Can Go from
the Bottom to the Top***
**Corey Bush, Assistant
General Manager,
Customer Service,
Lakeland Electric**

Corey Bush has always had his eyes set on being a part of Lakeland Electric's leadership team,



Bush meeting with Senior Key Account Manager Jessica Stanphill

and he's not shy about saying that. Even the recently appointed current general manager has known for years of and welcomes Bush's ambition.

"I was born in Lakeland. It's a great place to work and grow and spread my wings. I am fortunate to be in my current position at Lakeland Electric, where I can channel my experience and leadership style to help us remain successful, not just now, but for the future. I welcome the opportunity to learn and grow, and if the opportunity comes in the future for the top spot, I'm all in," he said.

Since joining Lakeland Electric in 2003 as an apprentice lineworker, Bush has held a wide range of positions, many in the energy delivery group, where he has been a line-worker, electrician foreman, electric system operator, chief electric system operator and, most recently, manager of system operations. As he moved up the leadership ladder, he accepted a position in a completely different area: customer service.

"As a department, customer service is so much more than the contact center," he said. "I feel like I have been in customer service my entire career. In public power, we all work for the customers and we're all accountable to them. It's important we tell stories that point back to our value as community-owned."

Some of the most important lessons Bush learned throughout his 20-year career at Lakeland Electric was to pick his battles

and not take everything personally. "I like to win, but I have learned to take losses too."

Early on in his career, Bush asked his then-manager for an individual development plan, which he said gave great clarity to what he needed to accomplish to advance at the utility. "I said, 'Someday, I want to sit in your chair, and I need to know what I need to do for that to happen.'" His manager welcomed Bush's candor and ambition, and together they developed the plan.

Bush urged others to be as candid and proactive as possible with their managers in discussing career development. Communicating with your team in an open and honest way is essential for organizational clarity, he continued. "If there's something I can share, I will."

As AGM, Bush sits on the 9th floor of the Lakeland Electric headquarters. The nearly 100 people he manages, however, sit on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 8th floors, so he spends a fair amount of time managing by walking around and checking in with members of his department.

"When I became AGM in May of 2022, I thought of introducing myself at an all-hands meeting, but I decided to do it more informally, on a one-on-one basis," he said. His consistent message to those he manages: I have your back and I will stay out of your hair.

He said he relies on his employees' expertise to make sure Lakeland Electric takes good care of its customers. "The era of the command and control is over — no one wants to work for a micromanager. Empowering your employees is so important."

If you pay attention, you can find leaders at every level in your utility, he said, adding that there's no pre-determined path to the top. "Not everyone is comfortable on a college campus, and people who never set foot on a college campus are

incredibly valuable. It doesn't matter how many letters (e.g., J.D., MBA, P.E. or Ph.D.) you have after your name. Value is created in a lot of different places. I'm living proof of that. Ours is a business with technical and people components."

"In public power, anyone can go from the bottom to the top."

Bush finished his bachelor's degree in energy management and took an MBA while at Lakeland Electric. He said he particularly enjoyed the Six Sigma course in business school because it explained business processes as well as the importance of communications in project management.

"The Six Sigma course was one where I could apply my practical knowledge. It taught me the importance of business processes. Before you change a business process — and there's a lot of that going on today — you need to understand the reasons why that process was implemented in the first place."

Bush said utility leaders at all levels need to have good communications skills to be effective: "Things are changing so fast today, with advanced two-way meters, electric vehicles, rooftop solar and changing customer expectations, that leaders need to be a salesperson one minute, a business manager the next."



Don't Chase Money – Instead, Chase Your Passions
Kinn'zon Hutchinson,
Chief Customer Officer, Gainesville Regional Utilities

As a child growing up in Hawthorne, outside Gainesville, Kinn'zon Hutchinson recalled watching lineworkers climbing utility poles and working to restore power to his mother's home.

"Those lineworkers were superheroes in the community — they were working outdoors and they were helping members

of the community. Who wouldn't want to be a superhero?"

Then and there, Hutchinson at age 16 decided he knew what he wanted to do. "Ever since that day, I have wanted to work for a utility," he said.

Along the way, he broke barriers by becoming the first Black executive at Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU). "I wanted to be the first, so I could inspire others to achieve."

Thirteen years ago, in late 2009, Hutchinson left a six-figure job with a big box retailer to become a temporary energy analyst at GRU. Starting pay was \$10.21 per hour.

That led to his top career recommendations and advice for others: "Don't chase dollars, instead chase your passions."

Also, "Do the best you can and see where it takes you."

Thirdly: "Do not be afraid of yourself. Your greatest competition is yourself."

Finally: "Never stop learning and never stop challenging yourself."

Now the chief customer officer at GRU, Hutchinson has instilled his passion for service to those he manages, helping GRU to win a national award at CS Week (an annual national utility customer service conference) a few years ago. It is not the only award in the GRU customer service department's trophy case.

Hutchinson recalled a year he spent in GRU's energy delivery department, which included meter reading. There, he got a more holistic view of the way GRU's decisions affected customers. "Rather than sitting behind a desk, I learned first-hand how GRU's decisions and policies affected customers." He also gained a better appreciation for the importance of accurate meter reads, as they started the revenue cycle for the utility.

Describing himself as "always running at 110 mph looking for the next challenge," he also recalled the guidance he received from a mentor: "You will rise in this organization, but take time to smell the roses. Don't miss too much on your way up."

Mentors like that one helped Hutchinson appreciate the importance of cultivating the next generation of leaders: "Don't forget what got you to where you are, and don't forget about the next generation."

Because "every day is an interview," Hutchinson emphasized the importance of first impressions. "You never know who you may be working for someday."

Hutchinson said he's not afraid of hiring someone with a different — or better — skill set than he has: "If they have a passion for serving customers, I want them on my team."

Interviewed shortly after Hurricane Ian ravaged Florida and the southeast, Hutchinson underscored the importance of employees attending conferences



and taking a proactive role in their professional development.

He noted that GRU changed its storm response process after people came back from conferences and shared what other utilities do. Specifically, other utilities were prepositioning food and water for customers in advance of a storm. Now, GRU does too.

"Go to conferences, learn success stories from others and come back and share those learnings. Each utility should not have to think it needs to reinvent the wheel, he added, giving kudos to FMEA and the American Public Power Association (APPA) for the workshops and skill-building events they hold.

Most importantly, he said, do what you love and the money will follow: "You'll never 'work' a day in your life if you find your passion."



**Professional Growth:
Getting Comfortable
Being Uncomfortable**
**Doug Peebles, Utility
Director, Ocala
Electric Utility**

Professional development can be

about getting out of your comfort zone, according to Ocala Electric Utility Director Doug Peebles: "Getting comfortable being uncomfortable is one way to grow."

That describes Peebles 22-year career at Ocala from line crew groundman to utility director.

"Having worked for family and friends growing up, I didn't know what I wanted to do for a career at age 18, but I knew some people who worked at Ocala Electric Utility and they said I should check it out. I'm glad that I did," Peebles said.

In his early years with the utility, he said, "the old school mentality of believing that

all the learning you needed took place in the field was apparent." Doug shared that he recognized there was more included in true professional development.

He longed for a broader, more holistic, understanding of the utility's business. He also aspired to management. Doug found an opportunity for growth in the metering side of the utility business and was hired as a meter apprentice. "I wanted to understand what was going on in other organizations and how all of the pieces fit together."

Succession planning has become an important construct in his time as a supervisor: "It's become a big focus of mine. You need to support those around you who are seeking to grow professionally. I enjoy serving as a mentor to those that are finding their professional path."

He's been putting that commitment to employee development into practice for more than a decade, ever since he was a meter foreman. While Peebles said the utility has always supported his desire to grow professionally, there hasn't been a formal professional development program historically.

Doug noted that he prefers to coach others in a small setting, or on a one-on-one basis. And whatever word you use to describe professional development, he recommended not using the word "training." He shared that sending someone to training doesn't necessarily mean they will learn something. Effective professional development takes a more personal and dedicated approach.

Peebles prefers a drip-drip-drip approach to continually grow. He'd rather seize on a learning moment than send someone to a classroom. When someone comes to him with questions, that's a signal that the employee wants to grow.

As a coach, he said, "I say 'we' a lot more than I say 'I'. All of us stand on the shoulders of those who came before us." ■

Top 10 List: What They've Learned

Our interviews with leaders in Florida public power revealed a number of commonalities:

1. Leaders at all levels in an organization always need to be on the lookout for the next generation of leaders.
2. Tomorrow's leaders can be found everywhere in an organization — if you are looking.
3. Today's record low unemployment validates the wisdom of growing leaders internally: hire talented and motivated people, support them as they grow, provide them with new challenges, and let them figure out the best way to get the job done.
4. Leaders are coaches, not micromanagers.
5. There are several ways to accomplish work tasks. Yours may be different from others. Be mindful of safety, but allow for diverse paths to achieve a common goal.
6. Don't be afraid to hire someone whose skill sets differ from yours.
7. Being a professional engineer is no longer a prerequisite to success in public power.
8. Find ways to connect what employees do to the mission of public power.
9. Clear, open and honest communication is required of leaders at all levels of an organization.
10. Being self-directed is a prerequisite for success, but organizational support is critical.