



THREE PATHS TO BECOMING THE EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

by John Egan

Unemployment is low. Competition for talent is fierce. Utility employees and potential employees have high expectations, including being part of an organization that is making an impact locally. Three FMEA member utilities discuss how they are making their workplaces a more attractive and meaningful place to work.

Green Cove Springs: Workplace Changes Flow from Bottom-Up Engagement with Employees

The 10 employees of the Green Cove Springs Electric Department, a small public power utility just outside of Jacksonville in northeast Florida, got a one-time, 6 percent lump-sum inflation increase in their paychecks in October. That's on top of a

15 percent annual salary increase, also effective in October 2022.

The increases were given the nod of approval by the Green Cove Springs City Council, but they were in response to the city's all-employee survey, director's discussions with employees and exit interviews conducted by the city.

Employees didn't want to leave the city, but other organizations were offering significantly better pay, so departing city employees swallowed hard and left, explained Dee Jones, human resources director for the utility.

"Employees want a sense of belonging, but they have to live in the real world too,"



she explained. “We had to find a way to stop the bleeding.”

Gas costs more than it did a year ago. Food costs have also risen. Rents continue to increase. Mortgage interest rates have doubled over the last 12 months. Employees are being squeezed financially on all fronts, making it harder to resist other companies’ job offers with higher salaries.

“Employee voices matter in shaping our policies,” said Jones, who joined Green Cove Springs Electric Department a year ago, after 21 years in human resources at other organizations. “Hearing their voices in a bottom-up format was really valuable to me and the utility’s leadership.”

While pay is one of several factors affecting employee commitment, Jones explained employees also had other things on their minds.

“Our electric department employees were looking for accessibility and improved communication methods so that they can receive up-to-date information in a more expedient fashion, so we are implementing a mass text messaging system to keep everyone — in the office and in the field — abreast of what is going on,” said Jones. “We’re also developing a city-wide

intranet where employees can access critical documents like their benefits, retirement accounts, health and wellness program information and much more.”

Going forward, other improvements stemming from employee feedback is that informational workshops with the city’s retirement plan administrators have begun and will continue to be scheduled annually or as needed. These workshops are held both in a group setting and through one-on-one conversations with the plan’s administrators. The city has also enhanced the retirement deferred compensation offerings by including a Roth option and stock investment access.

Employees across the city, including from the electric department, also expressed a desire for more and better quality employee wellness programs. The city is taking steps toward a comprehensive health and wellness program that will include whole-being and financial wellness.

“For lineworkers especially, family is first and foremost,” Jones said. “The pro-family improvements we are making to the wellness program so far have been well received and [have] encouraged me, as the HR director, to want to do more. We seek to take care of employees’ mind, body and spirit.”

Seven of the electric department’s 10 employees are lineworkers.

“Someday soon, I may see those lineworkers at the yoga classes I attend,” she added with a smile.

Jones added, “Happy employees are productive employees.”

When asked if the new policies have led to an improved workplace, she said the electric department is getting more applicants for a journeyman lineworker position than was once the case. Also, across the city, employee attrition is down.

“We aim to be the employer of choice locally,” the HR chief said.

Public power utility officials spend a lot of time and effort listening to the voice of the customer to improve service offerings. Employees are another critical stakeholder group whose views need to be sought out and acted on. Utilities can’t be an employer of choice unless they remain in continual contact with all stakeholders.

Electric Director Andy Yeager is doing his part to make Green Cove Springs Electric Department a local employer of choice by acting as chief safety officer and reviewing all field jobs before they start.

“By reviewing these projects, I want to send the signal that I care,” he said. “Everyone should go home at the end of the day in the same condition as they arrived for work.”

Yeager’s focus on employee safety stemmed from his years of experience managing lineworker crews. He aims to foster a team mentality in the electric department, where everyone watches out for each other’s safety and works together to plan each job. Yeager considers himself a team player in the department, rather than the coach.

“That means you are always looking out for [your] fellow lineworkers while they are

working. In other words, I will always watch your back and you will always watch mine to make sure we aren't doing anything unsafe that could get us hurt," said Yeager.

City of Tallahassee: Building Soft Skills Is Hard Work

Electricity is a technical business, but utilities need more than experts in electricity, engineering and finance to succeed. To perform optimally, utilities need to balance those quantitative, technical skills with "softer" qualitative skills like communications and leadership.

A dozen years ago, the City of Tallahassee Electric and Gas Department introduced a mandatory course for all new supervisors, called IGNITED. An acronym for Inspiring, Generous, Noble, Innovative, Trusted, Engaged and Dependable, the program has helped improve the consistency of supervisory decisions across the city's

electric and gas departments, said Tony Guillen, general manager for the city's electric and gas utilities.

"Prior to IGNITED, many of our newly promoted supervisors didn't have a lot of training in managing others," he explained of the mandatory program for those who supervise either craft employees or office workers. All new supervisors must complete the course within a year of getting promoted. The course consists of four full-day workshops spread across an eight-week period. Each class is limited to 12 new supervisors to ensure a high level of interactivity with the instructors and each other.

Guillen said one of the benefits of sending new supervisors through the course is that organizational silos are lowered. The utility has seven divisions with a total of 85 supervisors, and many would never get the chance to meet but for the program.

Absent the program, what's the chance that someone supervising lineworkers in the field would interact with a supervisor of finance, who works in headquarters?

What do the new supervisors learn? Soft skills like communications and leadership, mainly. "We want to give our new supervisors tools they can use in their work and also in their life outside work. Knowing how to relate to others and how to lead them are valuable and portable skills," Guillen said.

The program was developed in-house as a way for the utility to put its values into practice, he added. Each assistant general manager from the electric and gas departments teaches one module of the class, and as a capstone, students are responsible for delivering a team presentation about one of the program's modules.

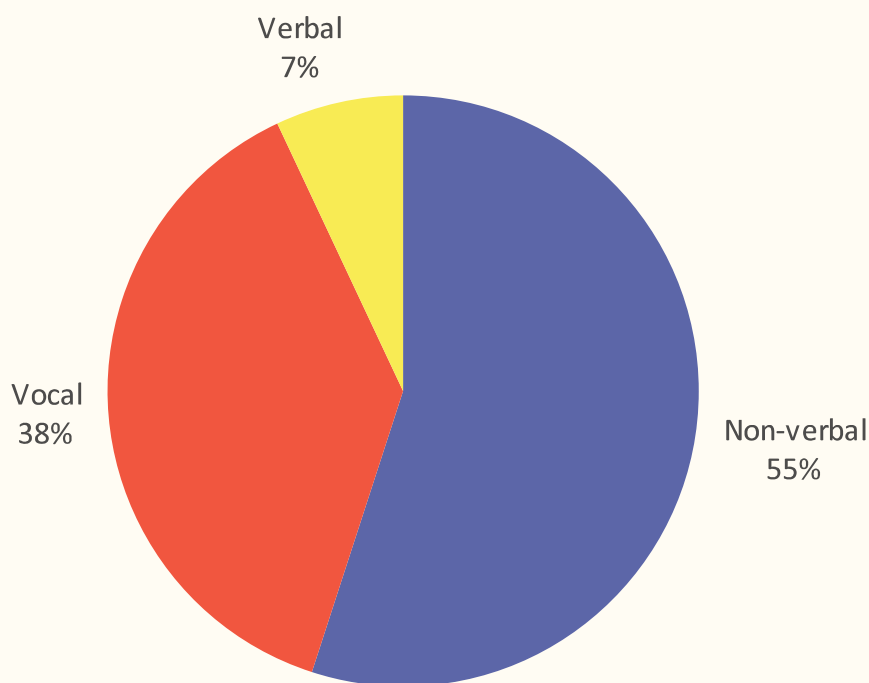
Having AGMs teach a module in the IGNITED program is a way for leadership to stay fresh and current with the concerns of new supervisors and those they supervise, Guillen commented. The face time with executives also helps new supervisors build relationships with the leadership team.

Communications means more than words in an email. In fact, psychologist Albert Mehrabian has shown that as much as 93 percent of meaning in a conversation is conveyed non-verbally, through eye contact, body posture, hand gestures and the volume and tone of voice.

In the dozen years since IGNITED has been held, leaders are getting fewer complaints from employees about their first-time supervisors, Guillen said.

The strong positive response to the new-supervisor workshops led the city's electric and gas departments to create another leadership-development program, ACHIEVES, an acronym for Accountability, Communication, Humble, Interpersonal, Engagement, Victory, Education and Self-Esteem.

HOW MEANING IS CONVEYED



Source: Albert Mehrabian, professor emeritus of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles

Many utilities have selected their leaders from employees who have steadily moved up through the traditional path of supervising others: supervisor (or foreman), manager, AGM and GM. But sometimes the supervisory route doesn't play to the strengths of future leaders. They'd rather become subject-matter experts (SMEs) in their field rather than supervising others.

"We need a lot of leaders who have not been supervisors," he said.

The ACHIEVES program, currently being piloted, is not mandatory. It consists of five full-day workshops stretched across six or seven weeks. The first class had 10 employees, a mix of those with supervisory responsibilities as well as non-supervisors.

The city's electric and gas departments are trying a lot of new things and planning to keep what works. One way they are trying to build connections to the community, as well as to employees, is by using a series of videos — "The People Behind the Power" — to showcase people and jobs at both utilities.

"Everyone sees lineworkers climbing poles or in bucket trucks, particularly after a hurricane like Ian, but what about jobs in finance or as a meter technician or an energy

efficiency auditor? Those jobs are vital too. We can't roll without them."

In recruiting potential new employees, the city wants its job applicants to have a broader understanding of the types of utility jobs that could become available at the city. Featuring employees in the videos has also improved employee commitment, he said.

In addition, the videos are a chance to inform customers and community leaders about the diverse set of jobs performed by employees at the city's utilities.

"We do a really good job on the 'hard' skills, but we want to place as much emphasis on the 'soft' skills," Guillen said. "They have an [equal] importance. Balancing them benefits employees, the city and its customer-owners. Younger workers are especially looking for this balance."

Beaches Energy Services: Looking to Hire EPIC Job Candidates

Those who apply to work at Beaches Energy Services in Jacksonville Beach will find this statement on the job application: "This position requires working as a member of a team that values empowerment, pride, integrity, communication and teamwork. Are you willing to commit to these values?"

Those values spell out EPIC Team, a program developed internally a few years back to guide all aspects of work at the utility.

"We wanted to define our core values better, so we enlisted the help of all departments," said Dana Hyland, a human resources recruiter with the City of Jacksonville Beach. "This way we were assured that we would have everyone's input but also their buy-in to the program as well."

"This was key to the implementation and roll-out because all members of the team felt that their voices had been heard. It is now the core of how we do things here."

How does being a values-driven organization work? Hyland shares this story: "There was

a prospective job candidate who did not understand how to use email or computers. He really wanted to apply to an open position but because the process is mostly electronic, he was having a difficult time. He stopped by the city hall and I assisted him with the application process in my office."

"Integrity is an important core value, and well, I wanted to help the gentleman get a chance at the opportunity."

"EPIC Team is the reflection of our core values," he continued. "Here at the city of Jacksonville Beach and Beaches Energy Services, we use the program as a guide to our decision making on many levels. Our efforts and programs related to recruiting, professional development and career advancement are areas where we utilize the EPIC Team model."

"From small decisions to the really impactful ones, we always keep our core values in mind. Not only does this make a better workplace but it helps our customers, the citizens, know we have their best interest in mind."

Being a values-driven organization is helping the utility and the city become an employer of choice, said Hyland, who has worked as a recruiter for various organizations for more than 15 years. "This [is] one of the most difficult times I have ever been involved in recruiting. Candidates are looking for more than a steady paycheck and a good benefits plan. Unemployment is low and candidate expectations are high."

"Our core values help us to stay on track with the current expectations of a younger, ever-growing new class of talent," he continued. "Employees and potential employees want to feel empowered, appreciated and a part of something special."

"The EPIC Team program [helps] to put those values out there so the perspective candidate can feel better about choosing us as their employer." ■

