

JULY AUGUST 2023 • VOL. 81 / NO. 4

# PUBLIC POWER MAGAZINE

AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION



## THE LEADERSHIP ISSUE

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# PUBLIC POWER MAGAZINE

JULY AUGUST 2023

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The American Public Power Association is the voice of not-for-profit, community-owned utilities that power 2,000 towns and cities nationwide. We advocate before the federal government to protect the interests of the more than 49 million customers that public power utilities serve, and the 93,000 people they employ. Our association offers expertise on electricity policy, technology, trends, training, and operations. We empower members to strengthen their communities by providing superior service, engaging citizens, and instilling pride in community-owned power.

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# Developing Utility Leaders



**T**he ways to define leadership are as varied as the examples of leaders within and beyond our industry. It is clichéd to affirm many of the platitudes about leaders and leadership, and yet, there is a reason these get repeated and sought after – because across the many roles we each hold, we all lead in some ways, and look to develop our leadership in others.

We also all know how it feels to be led, versus “managed.” The latter term often has a more negative connotation, at least when it comes to talking about managing people (versus projects), indicating that when people describe a manager, they might be describing someone with a lack of leadership.

This issue of *Public Power Magazine* addresses several facets of leadership – from the thought leaders inside our industry and out (see p 22) to what it means to be a leading utility in customer service (see p 28) and a quick rundown on what traits make for top leaders in public power (see p 40). It also offers a chance to celebrate some of the outstanding leaders across public power. A common theme across many of the pieces is the challenge of handling the significant changes ahead for public power – whether in electrification, resilience, security, or the workforce.

Whether hearing from a long-time public power veteran or those who are newer to the sector, it is clear that the strong mission and values of community-owned utilities are core to continuing to attract and retain the leaders we will need to tackle these challenges. We hope you will reflect on the variety of perspectives offered throughout the issue, and where the advice resonates for you and your organization. We also recognize that some perspectives likely won’t – and would welcome your added perspective on what it takes to be a public power leader today.

Another theme you’ll hopefully recognize throughout is the many ways that line crews must display and interact with leadership – including in the fictional story from a retired lineworker (an excerpt of the story begins on p 38, read the full story online). There are countless examples, including from this publication, where our language has inadvertently sent the message that lineworkers are distinct from leadership, for example, in sharing quotes alluding to “everyone from line crews to management” as a stand-in for stating “all levels of an organization.” Words matter, and perhaps one takeaway can be to recognize how and if you use any similar language, and if that resonates with the leader you aspire to be.

We at the American Public Power Association know you are proud of the many ways that the public power model inspires and exhibits leadership (see p 20) – and we look forward to helping you foster leadership in whatever form it takes.

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# LEADING TODAY AND

## INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC POWER'S RISING LEADERS



Allison Bueché, director of customer and community relations, Kerrville Public Utility Board, Texas



Adam Dunne, working lineman foreman, Holyoke Gas and Electric, Massachusetts



Jake Oelke, vice president of energy services, WPPI Energy, Wisconsin



Alicia Holmes, assistant general manager, customer care and solutions, Azusa Light and Water, California



# TOMORROW



Phil Calderone, substation and distribution engineering lead, City of Naperville Electric Utility, Illinois



Amber Teitt, assistant vice president, debt management, American Municipal Power, Ohio



Jeremy Ash, chief operating officer, Kansas City Board of Public Utilities, Kansas



David Logsdon, director of electrification and strategic technology, Seattle City Light, Washington

**A** roundup of reflections on what it means to be a leader from an array of people in various management roles across public power utilities, joint action agencies, and associations. Some of these ‘rising leaders’ have been in public power for decades, while others are newer to the sector, but all were recognized by colleagues for their leadership.

Who’s included:

- Jeremy Ash, chief operating officer, Kansas City Board of Public Utilities, Kansas
- Allison Bueché, director of customer and community relations, Kerrville Public Utility Board, Texas
- Phil Calderone, substation and distribution engineering lead, City of Naperville Electric Utility, Illinois
- Adam Dunne, working lineman foreman, Holyoke Gas and Electric, Massachusetts
- Alicia Holmes, assistant general manager, customer care and solutions, Azusa Light and Water, California
- David Logsdon, director of electrification and strategic technology, Seattle City Light, Washington
- Jake Oelke, vice president of energy services, WPPI Energy, Wisconsin
- Amber Teitt, assistant vice president, debt management, American Municipal Power, Ohio

## WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE TO WORK IN PUBLIC POWER? WHAT ABOUT THIS SECTOR ATTRACTS YOU TO IT?

**Dunne:** I started off going to college for engineering. I was awarded a scholarship [from HGE] my senior year of high school that allows you to shadow each department. While I was shadowing the line crew, it caught my interest more than I anticipated. I started to realize that rather than being indoors, working at a desk, I preferred the outdoor experience - working on trucks, etc. It’s nice to work for the city that you grew up in, nice to be the ones to turn the power back on.

**Holmes:** I was looking for something that would work well with my school schedule. I was getting a bachelors in finance, and their customer service was connected to finance. I was able to do a lot of technical projects, but also help people. It was a perfect nexus for what I wanted to do and what genuinely interested me. I’ve spent the majority of my career in public power. I am passionate about helping people. Especially where my position is focused, I oversee all of our customer-facing touch points. I enjoy having the opportunity to help and educate customers on what programs can help them financially and seeing our customers’ reactions to what we’re doing to serve them.

**Ash:** As I came to public power, it felt like more than a job. It felt like a team, a family, they really cared not only about their organization, but the community they served.

**Oelke:** I am inspired by the concept of community, fighting for the underdog, and bringing people together around things that matter to them. I feel extremely fortunate that nearly everything I have had the opportunity to work on throughout my career in public power falls into one or more of those buckets.

**Teitt:** Public service has been the focus of my career. Transitioning to public power [from municipal and state governments] allowed me to draw upon experience in public finance and learn a new industry. My role has given me a wide breadth of various aspects of the industry, our organization as a whole, and the challenges public power faces. I’ve got the opportunity to work directly with [AMP’s member] communities, whether in sharing data or facilitating financing a local project.

**Logsdon:** I have worked in private industry, for an investor-owned utility, and now in the public power sector. One of the most important questions that a leader can ask themselves is, “Who are you acting for?” Public power, more than any of my previous roles, has made that a simple and straightforward question to answer: we are here to serve our customers. That clarity and the alignment with my personal values makes it much easier to show up as an authentic leader for my teams. I have also had the privilege in the last three years to serve in groups, such as the American Public Power Association’s Emerging Trends Taskforce, and have seen the sector embracing energy transition and innovation. Working to equitably decarbonize end uses of energy is my primary motivator and I have found this sector to be the key means to have an impact and address climate change and historic injustices at the same time.



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**Calderone:** In one word: rewarding. I love seeing the positive impact my contributions have to the community. I also get to work with a variety of leaders in a way I thought I never would as an engineer. Coming out of college, I thought I'd be sitting behind a desk doing calculations and that's just not the case in public power. A lot of the job involves working with members of the community to help problem solve. It provides a great sense of purpose that I was missing at my previous job.

**Bueché:** I had a background in marketing and customer service, but I had not worked in the electric utility industry until I began my career here at KPUB. I fell in love with the public power business model immediately and the essential service we provide to our community. Working for a community-owned utility that's not motivated by profits has been incredibly rewarding. I love going home at the end of the day, knowing that all the decisions that have been made are in our customers' best interest.



**I fell in love with the public power business model immediately and the essential service we provide to our community.**

## HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE, OR WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP DO YOU ASPIRE TO?

**Ash:** I try to lead by example and to be a servant leader. It is my job to put people in the best position. I've got to be doing what I'm saying. I also have to be cognizant of how we're moving, and where we're moving.

**Calderone:** It's my job as a leader to set overarching goals, communicate those goals effectively, and coach/motivate my staff into achieving them. I aspire to be a mentor and not a micromanager. Sometimes something needs to happen immediately, and that's when I flip the switch to problem solving mode, but more often than not, I try to be the one asking questions, not providing answers.

**Dunne:** Personally, I'm very detail oriented. I like to stay organized and work efficiently. As I was an apprentice not that long ago, I try my best to be inclusive with apprentices. The leader I would aspire to be is one that allows everyone to speak freely and want to contribute and to participate.

**Holmes:** My leadership style is leadership as a service. I have never perceived myself to be above any task that anyone on my team does. Every single job that I oversee, is a job I've done in my career. I'm interested in knowing what it is that my team needs to do their jobs to the best of their ability. Really paying attention to what's going on and what's happening with my team. Sitting in front of a computer or being on the phone for 11 hours a day makes for a very long day. Unfortunately, the majority of interactions do not start with the happiest customers. To help recharge my team, during the second half of our team meetings we have team bonding — with "game night" style team activities such as ice breakers, charades, and board games.

**Bueché:** My leadership style is best described as transformational. I really enjoy empowering others and inspiring changes that take our team and organization to the next level! I love looking for new opportunities to do things differently and am always open to innovation and new ideas.

**Teitt:** My leadership style has evolved over time, and it is continuing to evolve. It is important to adapt as a leader to specific situations, and also the personalities of the people you are working with. I try to be open to the process that individuals take to arrive at a result. I aspire to lead by example — striving for excellence in the work I produce and to be able to develop and empower my team. That includes transferring knowledge,

## LEADING TODAY AND TOMORROW

how to handle various situations, and providing them opportunities to grow and be challenged.

**Logsdon:** I aim to lead from a place of integrity and accountability, and to empower teams to achieve clear outcomes. That last point is key — there is a multiplier effect when we are all clear on what we are trying to achieve. Teams feel empowered to work towards those goals, and psychologically safe to put in the elbow grease to achieve those outcomes and can take pride in their work. If we are moving the needle for our customers, I want to recognize the teams that are putting in that effort, even if the path they are taking is different than I might have taken. I also aim to demonstrate for my team a commitment to building authentic relationships with our customers and prioritizing them above all else.

**Oelke:** I spend a lot of time thinking about what others need to do their job...and enjoy it. I guess that would be a people-first approach. I have been the most productive in my work when it is clear to me where I can make a difference and where I can't. Creating a team environment where others can experience this same sense of clarity is rewarding. And it makes for a fun place to spend your working hours.

## WHAT RESOURCES – OR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION – DO YOU LOOK TO DEVELOP YOUR SKILLS?

**Teitt:** I've had the opportunity to work with a lot of people from different backgrounds — including elected officials and executives. I have used that as a resource to cultivate my leadership over time. I try to learn from situations to help me transition from a manager to more of a leader. Using some of the resources we have in AMP, e.g., access to LinkedIn learning, means I have a lot of videos to help me along that path.

**Logsdon:** We all have different roles in our lives, and there is the potential to learn leadership skills in all of them. I have found that aspiring to be a good father and good husband has made me a better boss, and vice versa — the key is showing up authentically and being willing to learn and grow. I have learned the most from the leaders above and below me — they keep me honest, give me feedback, and push me to be even more committed to our values and the outcomes we are working towards for our customers. Debra Smith, City Light's outgoing CEO, has been an inspiration to me in terms of the sort of public power leader that I aspire to be on all of those fronts.

**Dunne:** While [HGE] offers pretty rigorous safety and professional development, my main resource are the other employees, especially my crew members and direct supervisors. We bounce ideas off of each other. One person may be better at one thing versus another. Our engineering department has been great, always able to assist with calls, etc. Everyone works really well together.

**Calderone:** The City of Naperville runs an excellent Emerging Leaders Program. I was lucky enough to be selected, and graduated from that program in 2019. Through it, I discovered some wonderful leadership training courses at our local community college (College of DuPage). I also developed working relationships with my fellow emerging leaders, past and present, and they have been a great resource.

**Oelke:** There are two tools that completely changed my perspective on leadership. Gallup's CliftonStrengths identifies unique talents that you bring to your work and how those talents can form your own effective leadership style. Human Synergetics' Life Styles Inventory gets at how you think about and do work, and whether that behavior is constructive for others or not.

**I have learned the most from the leaders above and below me — they keep me honest, give me feedback, and push me to be even more committed to our values and the outcomes we are working towards for our customers**



## LEADING TODAY AND TOMORROW

**Holmes:** I'm a lifelong learner. I went directly into my MBA program from my undergraduate program. It was exhausting, but prepared me for the career path that I chose. I consistently work on developing my soft skills and on keeping my technical skills as sharp as possible. I enjoy reading and I'm always looking for reading materials, especially publications that are specifically focused on leadership/communication. In addition, every year I enroll myself and my leadership team in a skills-based program.

**Ash:** I really lean on a lot of my networking with committees I'm involved with at APPA. You can go to conferences, take classes, or sit through webinars, but getting to learn from each other firsthand is some of the best learning that I've had. In just the downtime with the committees, we always end up talking about the challenges we have, who may have faced them, and what are you doing to get around them.

**Bueché:** A favorite quote of mine is to "live simply, love generously, and



**Listen to some of the younger employees – they have a lot to offer as well. Listen to the community – they are asking for [certain things], they want to be involved.**

learn constantly.” I am a big believer in continuing education. One thing I admire about KPUB is how much we invest in our employees through ongoing professional development and training programs. We also have a great environment where our colleagues share their expertise and skills, including through monthly lunch & learns. I frequently attend APPA's conferences, online webinars, and program offerings, and I try to keep up with all of the great information in the Public Power Current and Public Power Magazine. I am very involved locally with our chamber of commerce. I am a graduate of its Leadership Kerr County program and regularly attend the chamber's professional development seminars and educational opportunities.

## WHAT KIND OF OUTLOOK DO UTILITY LEADERS OF THE FUTURE (OR PRESENT) NEED TO HAVE?

**Ash:** We are in the middle or nearing the end of having a lot of experience leave. One thing that public power probably hasn't done as much as we should have is document a lot of that industry expertise.

**Holmes:** Communication is imperative. Really focusing on communicating with and engaging your team — as it's important to enable them to give their best. Another challenge that I've dealt with over the past few years is with the incoming workforce — their mindset is completely different. Their staying power is not what we're accustomed to. The incoming workforce is seeking options to work remotely or take days off to focus on their mental health, which is extremely important and we as utilities need to know how to support these needs.

**Dunne:** Be prepared for electrification. I recently went to a high school career day, and I was telling the kids there, [energy] seems like the place to be for the future. Individual capacity that customers will be using is going to go up pretty greatly in next few decades. Having background in basic electrical theory can help. You need to be willing to change... to be able to adapt and overcome. A lot of times this job isn't so cut and dry... the same project in a different part of town can have its own variation. Listen to some of the younger employees — they have a lot to offer as well. Listen to the community — they are asking for [certain things], they want to be involved.

**Logsdon:** We must keep a growth mindset — we are an industry in transformation that is constantly changing and taking on new responsibilities.

## LEADING TODAY AND TOMORROW

We must stay open to and embrace this transformation and also foster psychologically safe workplaces that attract the new talent we will need to work towards an expanded future. We need to stay fixed on the destination we are working towards and flexible in supporting the teams under us as they carve new paths to get there. At the same time, we must chart the path for all of our teams and recognize the value that they deliver to our customers on a daily basis.

**Calderone:** They need to have a growth mindset. Electricity users are connecting to the grid in ways they never have in the past. They are also demanding more visibility into usage and generation sources than they ever have. Public power has a reputation of being slow to adopt changes — that reputation needs to change.

**Bueché:** Today's utilities are ever-evolving. Utility leaders must have a flexible outlook and be willing to adapt to change.

**Oelke:** I often say, “The answer is important. But it is rarely as important as how people feel about the answer.” This has never been more evident than with today's political environment, where there are a lot of strong and disparate opinions. We can't expect Congress to change. But in public power, we have a compelling model with a shared sense of purpose for all our stakeholders to agree on...and feel good about.

**Teitt:** One constant is the importance of putting a focus on continuously developing a talent pipeline in your organization at all levels. Having the right people in the right places can be a blessing, but it can be a challenge to keep people there and keep them learning. No matter the role, make sure you have people developed into those positions. Making sure you are fostering and equipping the transfer of knowledge to the next level of leadership.

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# Leadership in

**F**or the third year, utility crews from across the country traveled to the Navajo Nation as part of a dedicated effort to electrify homes in the massive, remote area, which encompasses portions of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico.

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PHOTOS AND INTERVIEWS BY JULIO GUERRERO, GRAPHIC AND DIGITAL DESIGNER, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION, AND PETER SPENCER, MEDIA SPECIALIST, NAVAJO TRIBAL UTILITY AUTHORITY



# Service

A utility worker in a bucket truck is working on a power line in a desert landscape. The worker is positioned high up on the bucket, reaching towards a tall wooden utility pole. The truck is parked on a dirt road, and the background shows a vast, arid desert with scattered shrubs and a few small buildings in the distance. The sky is clear and blue.

Twenty-six utilities, including 19 public power entities, sent crews throughout the 12-week period from April to July to participate in Light Up Navajo IV.

All told, this year, the volunteer crews, working side by side with crews from the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, constructed more than 50 miles of new power lines and connected 159 homes to electricity for the first time. Since the initiative kicked off in 2019, more than 660 families have had their homes connected to NTUA's power lines, and crews have built nearly 170 miles of new lines.

These efforts have helped to accelerate NTUA's timeline for bringing electricity to homes across the Navajo Nation — which includes the majority of households still without electricity in the U.S. There are still more than 13,000 Navajo families without electricity, and the estimated time to electrify all homes that wish to be connected is still counted in decades.

Here is a snapshot of the experiences from a few of the volunteers from this year's effort.



LEADERSHIP IN SERVICE



“I was shocked in how many people still don’t have electricity. It’s something that people take for granted every day, and people are out here living without it and still getting by. It’s amazing to me that they have gone this long without having it.”

— **STEVEN DELEO, LINEMAN,**  
**DELAWARE MUNICIPAL ELECTRIC CORP.,**  
**DELAWARE**



“Last year, we had a crew that came out, and when they came back, the stories they told about being able to bring people to power and help serve the community, it sounded like a really awesome opportunity. Talking with the guys who came last year, they kind of gave us a bit of an idea of what to expect, but it didn’t even come close to what I actually saw. The scenery here is amazing. I never knew that people in 2023 didn’t have power. To be able to come out here and help with that, it’s really humbling. The people here are very friendly. **It’s humbling to be able to bring modern amenities to people that have not been served ... well, ever.** It’s awesome.”

— **DUSTIN FITE, TECHNICIAN, WESTERVILLE ELECTRIC**  
**DIVISION, OHIO**

## LEADERSHIP IN SERVICE



**“We hooked up some people who said they had been without power for eight years. They have six children in the house.** When we were done hooking them up, they all came out and gave us hugs and told us how grateful they were to have power. It’s just an awesome experience.”

— **BOBBY LEWIS, LINEMAN, GREENVILLE UTILITIES COMMISSION, NORTH CAROLINA**

“When we think of Utah, it’s our home state, we a lot of times don’t think about people not having power here. ... We were pretty excited to come down and help. It’s a very neat and humbling experience. ... Just seeing how people live down here ... it’s very different. I’m originally from southern Utah, so I’m used to the sand, but it’s different from where we’re working up in northern Utah. There are different ways to go about a project ... **seeing how these guys down here do their work, it’s a little bit different from what we do, but the end result’s the same. It is good work, it’s fun work ... it’s a good time.**”

— **JAKE AKINS, LINEWORKER, SPANISH FORK CITY POWER AND LIGHT, UTAH**





## LEADERSHIP IN SERVICE



“If we can just change a little portion of their life to energize and let them have power ... allow them to heat their homes without having to haul wood, that’s huge. The Navajo people are a very appreciative people — always humbled that we come all the way from Oklahoma to come and help them, take a week from our lives and our families.”

— **BRENT SCOTT, POWER LINE MAINTENANCE SUPERINTENDENT,**

**GRAND RIVER DAM AUTHORITY, OKLAHOMA**

“Most of these people are my relatives. [By participating in this project,] you get to know people from different areas — and different values and different cultures. Especially if you are coming from the East, the atmosphere is a whole lot different. You’re definitely going to have an experience. **Hopefully, we’ll show you how we try to exceed our customers’ expectations to build that power line.**”

— **BRUCE TODECHEENE, LINE MAINTAINER JOURNEYMAN, NAVAJO TRIBAL UTILITY AUTHORITY**

“I volunteered to come to the LUN project because I wanted to be of service. Since I’ve been here, I’ve been shocked from the terrain, the difficulty of the surrounding area, the remoteness — imagining how difficult it must be to live here without electricity. This is different than the situation I was born into, having electricity. Coming out here and seeing the day-to-day struggles, the distance from the road to travel to the main road. Every house has an outhouse. I envision my wife and my daughter trying to make it out here instead of what we have back home.

“It’s an emotional experience to turn the meter on for the first time, to see the customer smile. It has been very rewarding for me. ... It’s like being on a storm after a hurricane; these folks are extremely happy that we’re here. They are right there with us, smiling.

“I’ve never been out in this remoteness. It’s a good experience; it’s camaraderie, team building. It’s an opportunity to grow, to learn and see another culture. I’d recommend anybody to come out here and experience this and lend a hand, be of service. Some of the necessities that we enjoy and take for granted, I won’t take for granted anymore.”

— **LANDRY BERTSCH, DISTRIBUTION ELECTRICIAN CREW LEADER, AUSTIN ENERGY, TEXAS**



“I like to help people. The job that us linemen do ... we feel inside ourselves that we like to help people; that’s what we do. After a storm, it’s totally different. Because you’re helping a town that’s already had power, and they know you’re coming. [Here], we show up, and it’s overwhelming to them to see us when we pull up with a line of trucks. It’s a very good feeling, it’s like Christmas morning.”

— **RYAN HARDEE, UNDERGROUND ELECTRIC DISTRIBUTION SUPERVISOR, GREENVILLE UTILITIES COMMISSION, NORTH CAROLINA**

“The biggest thing I’m going to take home is: Don’t take anything for granted. When we wake up in the morning and flip a light switch, you just automatically assume it’s going to come on. After working out here and seeing people living miles and miles off the main road that have never had electric, and we’re able to hook them up ... and the first time they flip a switch on, and see the smile on their face. If you have the opportunity to come out here, you should absolutely jump on it. It’s a once in a lifetime experience to really showcase your skill set and help others out.”

— **J.J. SAVAGE, LINEMAN, WESTERVILLE ELECTRIC DIVISION, OHIO**

“I’ve been in the trade for 30 years. I’ve done a lot of things, but this is the best part of it — bringing people power who’ve never had power before. It’s a great feeling. **It’s the highlight of my career.** I’ll be retiring soon, and I’m glad that I’ve done something that I feel is worthwhile for another person.”

— **DENNIS EHRENBERGER, SENIOR ELECTRIC LINE TECHNICIAN, ROSEVILLE ELECTRIC, CALIFORNIA**

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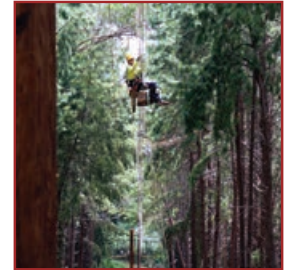
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# WHERE PUBLIC POWER IS LEADING THE WAY

A variety of metrics showcase how public power is ahead of other types of electric utilities – from getting the lights back on faster to supporting the quality of life in their communities.



## RELIABILITY

Public power customers experience the shortest average outage times of any utility type.

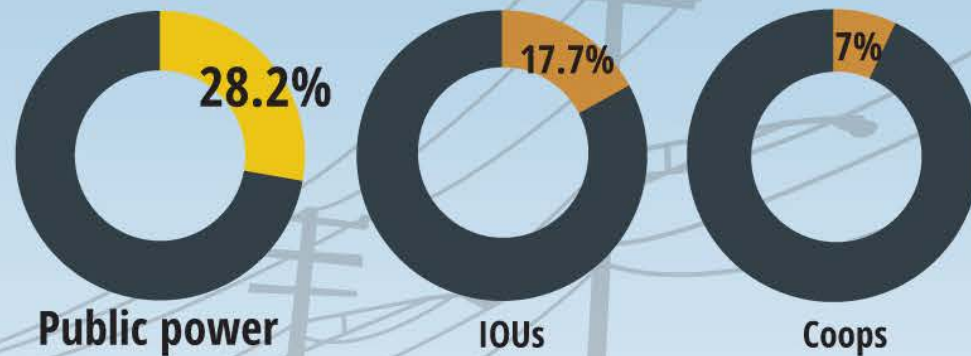
SAIDI, without major events, 2021



## SUSTAINABILITY

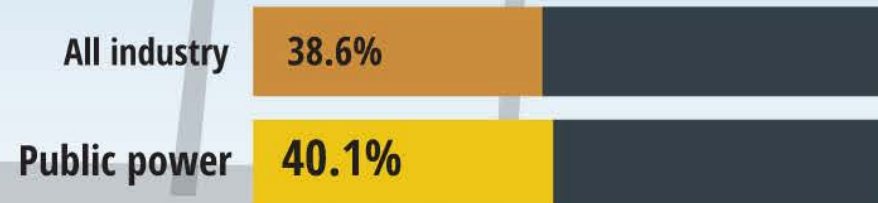
Public power owns a higher portion of generating capacity with no carbon emissions than other types of utilities.

Non-carbon-emitting capacity



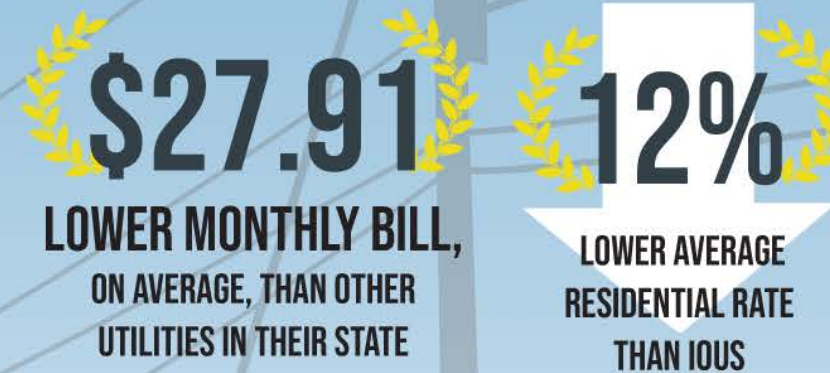
Many public power utilities use power purchase agreements to supplement their generation mix, particularly for renewable energy. Even without those figures, public power's generation relies on more clean energy than the industry overall.

Non-carbon-emitting generation, 2021



## AFFORDABILITY

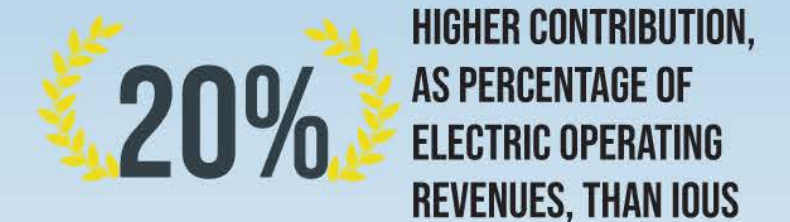
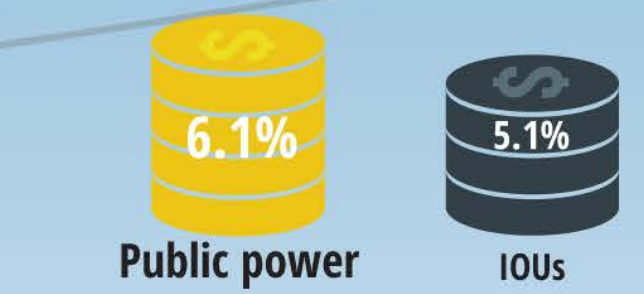
Residential customers of public power utilities see the lowest average bills in 35 states.



## COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

Public power utilities provide higher contributions to their communities.

Median electric operating revenue contributed/paid to community, 2020



### ...AND WHERE IT ISN'T

Public power utilities have room to improve relative to their utility peers in other areas.



Public power's average industrial rates are 3% higher than average industrial rates for IOUs, and 4% higher than average industrial rates for coops.

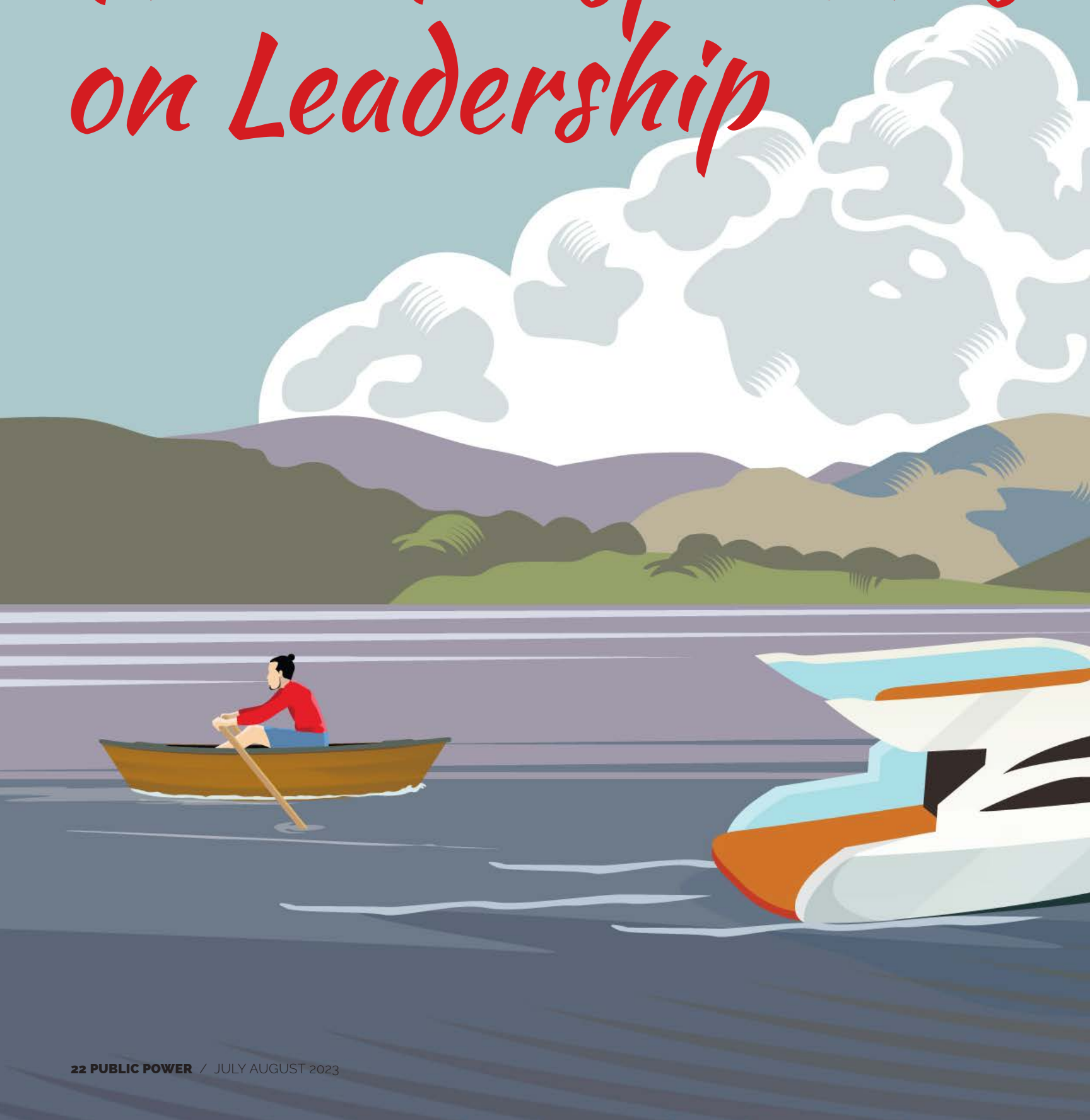


On average, the public power workforce: Brings in smaller salaries, sometimes 20-30% less than the salary for similar positions at other types of utilities



Has a smaller share of younger workers

# *Three Perspectives on Leadership*





**T**here are many ways to be a leader. This series of Q&As offers some thoughts on what it takes to be a leader – inside public power and out.



## THREE PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

### *Learning from Generals*

*Rick Atkinson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and military historian*

#### **How do you define a leader or leadership?**

I think a leader is someone who has the capacity to persuade others to unite in pursuit of a common goal, to row the boat with purpose in the same direction.

#### **What can leaders of civilian organizations/businesses learn from the leadership styles of military leaders?**

Regardless of whether they wear military uniforms or not, successful leaders are worthy of study, and sometimes of imitation, if they demonstrate a capacity to unify an organization by causing individuals to act collectively.

#### **Are there any leadership traits that are common across the Generals you have interacted with? If yes, what are they and what effect do they appear to have?**

Most successful military leaders are distinguished by an indomitable will — a determination to achieve their mission at an acceptable cost. Some

military leaders are soft-spoken, others are loud or brash. Regardless of individual styles, most evince an empathy for subordinates, even if they are demanding and driven. The best are willing to share hardships and risks with subordinates.

#### **Are leadership strategies from military leaders more or less applicable to running local government/institutions than other types of businesses? Why?**

Obviously in a military organization, a commander can be directive — ordering subordinates to do this or that. That sort of command leadership has limits in any civilian organization, and in a political democracy, even in a military unit, a wise, successful leader will take pains to make clear why something should be done. As George Washington wrote in 1777, “A people unused to restraint will not be drove. They must be led.”

#### **Are there drawbacks to having leaders make parallels between civilian and military leadership?**

Sure, there’s a hazard if a boss thinks he or she is George S. Patton. That sort of swagger doesn’t play well in many organizations, including military organizations. There are more similarities than differences between good military leadership and good civilian leadership, but it’s important to recognize that there indeed *are* differences.



# Restoring Trust in Public Service

Steve Wright, *Inspired Public Service*

### Why emphasize the focus on improving public service leadership?

The data shows there is a dramatic decline in trust in government. If you go back to the 1960s to today, it's a huge drop. As leaders in the public sector, we have a responsibility to do something about that. We could think about it as a small drop in the bucket, or, if everyone works on it, we could make a big difference.

### What actions should public power leaders take to counter this decay?

Building a system around creating a culture of public service starts with mission, vision, and values. Once you incorporate public service into those pieces, working through creating clearer accountability for your measures that are included in your plan. Combo of defining outcomes in the best interest of public and building a culture internally that provides public service.

If you're trying to create a system that focuses on what best serves the public interest, then you also need to provide incentives for employees to be a part of that. Part of that bargain is recognizing that many employees want to be really terrific. That means providing the things that they need — resources, training, etc. — to make them great at their core competencies. It's about Maslow's Hierarchy. Generally, we are well off enough today that people are looking for meaning and purpose in life. And in public power, we provide jobs that have real meaning and purpose. We need to take advantage of that as a tremendous motivational tool for our employees.

### What leadership traits embody "inspired public service"?

There are many that could be there. What I find most powerful are trustworthiness and stewardship. Trust embodies confidence and integrity. Put those together, and you get a lot of the key things. Those are examples, but there needs to be a conversation around what you and your organization believe are the key values you want to see exhibited and that you believe bring out the public service ethic.

### What are effective ways to develop leaders with these traits, or identify those who could build on them?

Once you have defined what your organization needs to serve the public interest, you then have to create the structure and train to it. If you have



a set of values, then one of the things I encourage is to make personnel decisions based on those values. You may have someone apply who is good from a technical standpoint, but they may not share the values that you think are necessary. You could train on important aspects of the values, such as how to get personal accountability, or you could provide training to build good competency into great competency.

If you tell people what you want, they may be born with the value or they may be able to be trained to it. But there may be some people who just don't share the value. And if that's the case, then it's important to recognize that early on.

Surround people with the concept of providing great public service. Give them every opportunity to succeed by showing them what it means to be successful in the organization. That includes connecting them with actual constituents that benefit from the public service focus. For example, you can bring in the people from the industrial plant that exists in your community because of your low cost, explaining this connects their work to meaning and purpose.

### What else would you want public power leaders to know?

There's a third value that is applicable to any public to any public sector organization — operational excellence. Unfortunately, in our society, there is a belief that the public sector cannot operate efficiently and effectively, but I think that's wrong. That is a cultural perspective. But it means we have to be way better than average to be recognized for providing great service.

Public power has a history of being very good in providing low rates and higher reliability. That doesn't mean we can rest on your laurels. You have to be looking for opportunities to adopt new ways of doing things, such as deploying new technology, to maintain operational excellence.

As you make progress, you are able to recruit and retain better employees, because they become more excited to work there. Just get moving, it will help to address the recruitment and retention issues. In some cases, we are not going to be able to compete on pay. We have to play to our strengths. If it turns out that pay is not our strength, that doesn't mean we give up, it means that we allow employees to see how important their work is and how it's going to make a real positive difference in our community.

## THREE PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

# Helping Each Other Grow

*Troy Adams, P.E., general manager, Manitowoc Public Utilities, Wisconsin*

### How did you get into public power?

After I graduated with my engineering degree, I worked in the private sector. When I met my wife, her dad, who had been a lineworker for an investor-owned utility, was insistent that I look into working for a utility. He told me how utilities are so important to their communities, and always will be needed. An opportunity came up for an engineering manager at a utility where my wife had graduated high school, and it just so happened to be in a public power town. I couldn't articulate why public power resonated with me at the time, but it did. I liked that it was an opportunity to know who you were servicing.

Two years after I started, the general manager and the city were not aligning, and inevitably they parted ways. Through that vacancy, I was promoted to be the GM – while there was still conflict that needed to be resolved. The city happened to be communicating regularly with [the neighboring rural electric cooperative]. So, I got hit with the question, "Why shouldn't we sell the utility to the coop?"

I didn't fully have the depth of what it meant to be public power. I called our state trade association, and they were incredibly helpful and pointed me to other public power leaders around the state to talk to who had run into similar challenges. It helped me get my head straight before I presented to our city council about why they shouldn't sell. I was able to go to the city council armed with facts, stories, and support from the public power community. We ended up turning it around and finding ways to create alignment and have successes that were mutually beneficial to the city and the utility.



I found out that public power is family. Everyone is willing to stop what they are doing to help out. It was a really powerful, foundational experience for me, and I try to pay it forward.

### What does it mean to be an effective public power leader?

Utilities, especially municipal utilities, generally don't spend time putting out social media, blogging, sharing stories, going to speak. The way things used to be done, we just did our work and assumed that everyone would know that we were doing a good job. As I started talking to businesses and community leaders, I found people really didn't know what it meant to have a community-owned utility. I became passionate about sharing the public power story and what it means for a community to have public power. I spoke at everything that I could, about those values, and then allowed employees to go speak at any opportunity that they had, whatever connections they had, and talk about the utility. The idea that there are no shareholders and then the value stream goes right back to the customers is a pretty powerful statement when you actually take a moment to talk about it with a customer or a stakeholder. Developing those relationships with the community and the city ended up being a really important part of being a successful public power leader, and being able to share the values of what public power is about made those relationships grow.

We put focus on developing employees. Whether that was holding leadership team book club or having some offsite outings, it helped to build the relationships within the team. During the pandemic, I joined Manitowoc Public Utilities as its GM. I was looking to do the same things to establish a culture that supported employee development, but it was much harder to connect in the same ways as before. Yet, you just need to take advantage of the opportunities to connect with employees and the community as they present themselves.

### How do you expect the skills needed for public power leaders to change in the coming years?

Relationship building will always be a part of successful leadership – how you build those relationships will change as expectations change. What's the foundation of a relationship? Communication and trust. If you want to break it down, you must always be clear and honest with your communications. There is never one thing that you do to build trust – it's millions of little things. But you can do one thing that can be detrimental to trust that will tear it all down.

Looking to the future, the rate of change is discussed a lot, so leaders need to be effective with change management. That comes down to being able to communicate the why, building a movement, and allowing people to play a role in that change (versus just tell them what to do). Inspiring

## THREE PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

others is a critical part of that. If people aren't excited about being part of change, then you aren't going to be successful in leading it.

Bringing it back to public power – I see future generations really wanting to connect with value. Employees aren't looking for a job, they are looking to contribute. The fact that we have consumer-owners makes it easy for us to do good. Public power is a perfect career path for someone who connects with that value.

### What can today's leaders do to help identify and develop rising leaders in their organization or across the public power community?

A lot of times, the succession plan is limited to just an organizational chart and looking for the pathways where people are going to step up if there is a vacancy. But a succession plan is really something more. Short term, if someone walks out the door, you need business continuity. In the long term, the target is moving. You aren't just looking to plug and play for the

same positions that exist today. You need to look at the talent you have in your organization and map people to different opportunities. Give them support and the opportunity to develop before they are needed. Create a forward-looking plan, look at professional development and skills development.

Development of people doesn't just have to be a manager to an employee, leaders should also encourage peer development. There are lots of opportunities for professional development through APPA and its training programs. Sending your employees to conferences is a great way to help them grow within their profession, develop skills, network, and meet others outside of their normal routine. You have to allow for the time for employees to engage and grow.

In a smaller organization, the same need to develop the bench exists. When you have fewer employees, you have fewer opportunities, but it doesn't mean you can't find opportunity for development – you may need to look to your state organization, or maybe with your community, such as through service organizations like the Rotary Club.



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# Organizational Culture: The Secret Sauce of Customer Service Excellence

BY JOHN EGAN, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**P**ublic power takes pride in its connection to the community, and little better embodies this connection than the relationship between the utility and its customer-owners. Public power utilities that truly go above and beyond when it comes to customer service are intentional about fostering an organizational culture that hires, highlights, and honors acts of superior customer service. These utilities — such as Clark Public Utilities of Vancouver, Washington, the Electric Power Board of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the Orlando Utilities Commission in Florida — regularly appear at the top of various electric utility customer satisfaction or customer service surveys, such as those conducted by J.D. Power, Escalent, and others.

## Hiring for Cultural Fit

Organizational culture is the powerful sum of formal and informal traditions, beliefs, rules, procedures, and practices that determine what work is done, and how it is done, in an organization. Discount its power at your own risk.

In the words of J.Ed. Marston, EPB's vice president of strategic communications, "Culture is all about screening, training, and rewarding the desired behaviors that affect the customer." EBP provides electricity to about 180,000 customers and fiber service to 130,000 customers in the greater Chattanooga, Tennessee area.

"We always want to treat customers as if they have a choice," Marston said. The utility is a monopoly provider of electricity, but it competes with other providers in its fiber business. Over 75% of its electric customers have signed up for fiber service, for which there are several competitors.

He said utilities that operate as if they are in the "cheap kilowatt-hours" business, rather than the "customer" business, "have allowed our industry to become commodified and thus under-valued. Utilities must stop thinking they're the only game in town."

"Cultural fit is critical, and we are very intentional about it," said

Marston. "We want to hire people who want to perform meaningful work, and we organize our culture around it. We live here, we work here, and improving the community is what drives us."

Angela Henry and Kimberly Bidy knew they were in for something different when they sat for their separate interviews at EPB four years ago. Both had worked in profit-seeking businesses — Kimberly at an advertising agency and Angela in mobile communications — and they welcomed the change that was signaled during their EPB interviews.

"It has really been



## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: THE SECRET SAUCE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

a breath of fresh air to be able to work for the good of the customer and community rather than cutting costs to chase profits,” said Biddy, EPB’s manager of social, digital, and traditional media. “We’re all here to serve the customer, no matter our title or department. During widespread outages, we all pitched in, cooking food and washing clothes for the mutual aid crews.”

“During my interview, I was screened about my passion for service. The interviewers were really candid in telling me about the good, bad, and ugly aspects of life at EPB, because they wanted me to know what I was getting into,” added Henry, EPB’s manager of quality assurance and director of customer relations.

For example, if a customer calls EPB at 2 am on Christmas Day, he or she will be able to speak with a customer service representative. The EPB contact center is staffed around the clock, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

The Orlando Utility Commission, or OUC, which provides electric, water, chilled water, lighting, and solar services to more than 400,000 accounts in Orlando, St. Cloud, and parts of unincorporated Orange and

**“Everyone who works here has the customer in mind, because we’re ultimately in the customer business. Caring and collaboration matter. They are harder than they sound, but they are critical ingredients for success.”**

Linda Ferrone, chief customer and marketing officer, Orlando Utility Commission, Florida

Osceola counties in Florida, also emphasizes customer service within its culture.

Linda Ferrone, OUC’s chief customer and marketing officer, said culture is one of three pillars of the utility’s business strategy, alongside employees and the community. “Everyone who works here has the customer in mind, because we’re ultimately in the customer business. Caring



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and collaboration matter. They are harder than they sound, but they are critical ingredients for success. When we hire, it is all about the customer and each other.”

### Reinforce Desired Behaviors

“Do the right thing” and “value the customer” are two of the six core values OUC has adopted, and those values are woven into all internal communications, according to Derek Hudson, OUC’s public relations manager.

Organizations can reinforce the behavior they seek from employees in several ways. Some use bonuses or cash incentive programs driven by different metrics, such as safety or customer satisfaction. Others, like Clark Public Utilities in Washington state, prefer to focus on non-cash ways to publicly recognize employees who go above and beyond.

Cameron Daline, Clark Public Utilities’ manager of customer experience, said, “We tell, and try to show, our employees that it’s never the wrong time to do the right thing,” a take on the famous quote from Martin Luther King Jr. “Every customer interaction is an opportunity to do the right thing. We don’t just go the extra mile for customers — we go an extra 50 miles to do the right thing.”

Daline said the utility makes a point of collecting and sharing instances where employees showcase this value. For example, the CSR who worked to locate emergency bill-payment resources from outside agencies for a customer who had several months of unpaid water bills and was scheduled to have their water turned off, which would mean a child welfare agency would remove their children from the home. Or when employees donated to a fund to buy food for a needy customer. In another example, a line-

worker stopped their truck to help another employee who was picking up trash.

“Customer satisfaction, as measured by J.D. Power, is a byproduct of your culture,” Daline said. “It’s an external manifestation of internal processes.”

It doesn’t just happen. Twice a year, Clark holds mandatory training workshops twice a year for all employees that explore and reinforce the utility’s culture of customer service. “We use that to show that our culture of service is part of everyone’s job,” he said, adding that a large part of his job is to show how the work of every single employee connects to customers.

Managers at the Vancouver-based utility have several ways to publicly recognize employees who do the right thing for customers: The “All Star” program, “Hats Off,” and “High Five.”

In addition, Daline said that for over 35 years, Clark has had a non-cash incentive program, “Goal Rush,” that provides additional paid time off to employees who meet a specific set of metrics. Each of those metrics affect customer service, he said.

Although all of Clark’s employees are in the customer business, about 25% are employed as CSRs. At EPB, that percentage is 18%.

How can someone who doesn’t directly interact with customers affect customer service? EPB’s Marston explained: Employees who work in marketing could develop talking points for the CSRs to explain a new program or service offering. Employees who work in accounting could participate in a cross-functional team to remove bottlenecks in the bill-payment self-service application.

“Superlative internal customer service enables superlative external customer service,” he said.



### Collecting Kudos

Public power utilities rely on a blend of CSAT scores, as measured by the annual J.D. Power surveys, and qualitative and quantitative customer feedback to determine whether they are providing exemplary service. EPB, OUC, and Clark Public Utilities all have been long-time top-quartile CSAT performers in the J.D. Power survey.

They also measure success – and share customer comments and kudos to employees - as signs of high-quality service.

EPB shared several customer kudos, including:

- “Whitney took care of my issues, she’s really good at her job. No one talks to me like that on the phone! She took care of the problem and took care of me.”
- “Katrina took really good care of me today. She was very patient and informative, and slowed down and took her time patiently explaining things.”
- “Melanie was sweet, helpful, and the nicest person I’ve ever spoken with.”
- “David was so nice and professional. Sometimes nice people get lost in the shuffle and I didn’t want that to happen to David.”

Similarly, Clark Public Utilities has received a bevy of customer kudos and “thank you” notes, including:

- “Just a note to thank you for all you do in keeping us all cozy and warm during these hard times.”
- “Thank you so much for fixing our power so fast after a snowstorm in the middle of the night”
- “A few weeks ago, we had a very large /heavy dead tree branch poised to fall and rip out the power line between our house and a conveyance pole,” wrote some customers. “Clark Public Utilities got an assessment team out within one day after my call for help, and CPU linemen teamed up with a man from Asplundh. They quickly downed the line and removed the threatening tree branch, barely even disrupting our power. We are so thankful that CPU is so dedicated to great service and has such exemplary employees.”

### The Practical Implications of Being in the Customer Business

Being focused on customer needs drove OUC to install solar cells atop bus stations and install cell phone chargers there so people could recharge their devices while they waited for a bus.

The utility also has a program, Efficiency Delivered®, that provides up to \$2,500 of energy- and water-efficiency upgrades for low-and moderate-income customers. Qualifying customers who opt to install additional measures can pay for them over a 24-month period on their bill, with no interest charges.

“Doing the right thing is not always cheap, but it is always right,” commented OUC’s Luz Aviles, a 29-year veteran of the utility who is its director of customer experience.

“We sit, we listen, and we don’t take a cookie-cutter approach to customer service,” she continued. “In our recent integrated resource planning process, we engaged the community to learn more about what they wanted. They said they wanted their energy to be sustainable as well as reliable, affordable, and resilient. We listened and we responded” by increasing the utility’s investment in renewable energy.

Sometimes, utilities let organizational silos impede the delivery of superior service. That’s when it helps to have a chief customer officer, empowered to revise processes, and break down organizational silos to provide better service.

That’s been Linda Ferrone’s experience at OUC. The chief customer officer since 2018, she reports to OUC’s general manager and chief executive officer, Clint Bullock. “Part of my job is to bring the customer voice into internal discussions and break up organizational silos when necessary. It helps to have a direct report to the CEO with that mandate, because there are so many processes that affect customers, but not all of them were designed with the customer in mind.”

OUC is one of several public power utilities that have conducted a journey-mapping exercise to identify all the ways customers interact with the utility, and identify processes that needed to be improved.

Commented Terry Torres, OUC’s director of customer experience, “We assessed all the customer touchpoints, including the website, the integrated voice response system and our CSRs, and found about eight areas that needed to be improved.”

She said employees are empowered to bring customer or process issues to the attention of management so they can be fixed.

All of those interviewed agreed that providing superior customer service is a way to lower costs. There was a generalized push back against traditional thinking that customer service investments only added new costs without creating new benefits.

Said OUC’s Ferrone, “You only have one chance to make a great first impression. Customers need a great experience every time they interact with you to continue to choose to do business with you. But when you earn the benefit of the doubt, you will get extra grace from them when there’s a problem or challenge.”

# Public Power Leaders: Debra Smith



# A

*Q&A with Debra Smith, special adviser to Seattle City Light in Washington state. She served as City Light's general manager and CEO from 2018 to 2023, having previously served as general manager for Central Lincoln People's Utility District in Oregon and spending 17 years with the Eugene Water and Electric Board, also in Oregon. Debra served as the first chairwoman of the Public Power Council and served as chair of both the Fish & Wildlife and Long-Range Planning committees. She is on the board of the Pacific Northwest Utilities Conference Committee, the Electrical Power Research Institute, the American Public Power Association, and the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Energy and Environment Directorate Advisory Committee. She also served on APPA's Climate Change Task Force, the Large Public Power Council's Steering Committee, Puget Sound Energy's Beyond Net Zero Carbon Advisory Committee, and the Columbia Basin Collaborative.*

## HOW DID YOU COME TO WORK IN PUBLIC POWER?

I made no conscious decision to move into public power or the utility industry. In my mid-30s, I worked for a local computer software company as its chief financial officer. When that company was bought out by its largest supplier, I decided to take some time off, because I had three young kids.

After reflecting on the possible paths ahead, I made the decision to go back to school to get my MBA. At the same time, a friend said Eugene Water and Electric Board was hiring for a part-time job share for a senior staff accountant. I thought I would work for a little while until I started school. I thought it would be great, low key. I loved it.

Since the accounting position was part time, I wanted to be open to other opportunities. I had the opportunity to work on the trading floor when markets were just becoming liquid, and the focus was on risk management. After that gig, I started moving around — I literally did almost every job there was at EWEB. Some advice I give to anyone new in their

career: take every lateral assignment that's offered to you. We often come into our jobs because we are subject matter experts, and we can get stuck in whatever role we're hired into. I thought, if I can develop more breadth, it will make me more viable. I think I was right!

## **WHAT KEY LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM WORKING IN THIS SECTOR?**

Embrace the governance structure, whatever it is. I've had the opportunity to work for utilities with very different governing models. At EWEB, we were attached to the city but had a great level of independence, with a standalone elected board of commissioners. In Seattle, we report directly to the mayor's office, but the city council approves budgets, contracts, and other long-term commitments. It is at times challenging, but it's also exciting to be part of the city structure. At Central Lincoln PUD, we had five commissioners who were elected by the district, and we were outside of any city governance. That structure is particularly supportive, because commissioners are paid, which means there is more continuity and less time spent educating new commissioners, so they really get to know the business.

I believe in leading with kindness, I believe in authenticity, and I believe in people's resiliency. That means people can hear really hard things if they're delivered with enough safety and kindness. Going back to my time at EWEB, I taught a class about how to have safe conversations. I don't believe that the answer is ever to not have them. The people that have worked for me all know that if you have a people problem, it is automatically your No. 1 problem. People want to be heard, respected, and to know that their beliefs matter.

## **WHAT CHALLENGES SHOULD PUBLIC POWER'S FUTURE LEADERS BE PREPARED TO FACE?**

I love public power and believe that essential services should be provided without a profit motive. But the investor-owned utility model can also serve its customers well. In the West, we are talking all the time about resource adequacy, markets, transmission constraints, staffing challenges, and regionalization. And those are not public power only issues. There is a tremendous opportunity for us to work together [with IOUs] to solve issues, because we're all dealing with the same stuff.

I'm super proud of how City Light dealt with COVID. Utilities that didn't have leaders who were focused on their people quickly learned that

they needed to be. We've talked for years about bringing your whole self to work. And then, during COVID, we really did. People weren't necessarily bringing their physical selves to the office, but they were bringing their selves, their pets, their kids, their problems, their fears — they were bringing all of that to the table. If we're going to ask people to be engaged at that level going forward, then we need to be prepared to deal with them holistically.

There's a lot we need to do — and we can do — if we want to be attractive to the next generation. We want engaged employees who are partnering with us in creating this new energy future. We need to meet them where they are. For instance, if an employee is a single parent with a sick kid, we can provide the flexibility they need. We've learned how to work remotely, so let's tap into that knowledge. Let employees be the parents they want to be and get their work done in a way that supports everybody else in the organization.

## **IS THERE AN ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF FROM YOUR TIME IN PUBLIC POWER?**

One is the relicensing of the Skagit Hydroelectric Project. Relationships with the Indigenous people who came before us to settle these lands really matter. We filed the final license application at the end of April, and it includes fish passage on all three dams, which was hugely important to the tribes. The global settlement process will also include off-license agreements with the three primary tribes who call the Skagit Valley home. I believe that my team would have gotten there without me, but I took on some of the hard stuff so that they could focus on the science. We're in as good a place as we could be right now. I'm appreciative of the opportunity to work with all the license partners and participants.

Second, I came into the industry when most utilities were run by white male engineers. But senior leaders today are starting to look differently, as do their credentials. In the Northwest, we have embraced gender diversity and we have a number of female CEOs. I like to think that my time in the seat will have some influence on the future.

I hope that when people look back, they say that I was smart and that I did really good work. I want folks to think of me as a model of what it looks like to be vulnerable, authentic, and accessible. I loved my employees — in fact, I often said that every employee has a right to a supervisor who cares about them and their career. That's a critical component of servant leadership and that's how an engaged workforce is built.

It has been a remarkable career. Now, I look forward to narrowing my scope a bit.

# A Changing Industry Needs Involved Governance

BY STEVE VANDERMEER,  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



One of the key pillars of public power's value to its customers and community has been local management, and the linchpin to that local control is the governing board that oversees the utility. For the first 100 years of public power's existence, the essential role of the utility remained singular and unchanging, governance was straightforward and many of the "big" decisions were technical, relying on staff or consulting expertise.

For many boards, governance focused largely on approving budgets, capital plans, equipment purchases, and other expenditures. Life was simpler, and, frankly, not a lot was asked of many governing boards. Yet today, with an industry in flux, more is being demanded of public power governing boards than ever before.

I have had the honor of working with dozens of boards for public power utilities large and small since 1988. As I look at public power in 2023, I see an electric industry that has been turned on its head. Changing priorities, new competitors, greater legislative activism at the state and federal levels, and enormous advances in technology have altered the landscape.

These changes introduce new opportunities, new threats, and rapidly evolving customer and community expectations. For many of these challenges, a utility's response does not, and should not, be determined by the CEO and his or her staff, regardless of how talented and capable they are. If the staff's role is to *do things right*, then the governing board's role is to *do the right thing*. In other words, the board must determine the most critical outcomes desired of the utility, while staff members determine the most appropriate means to achieve those outcomes.

For example, clean power sources are rapidly approaching fossil fuels as cost-effective options. If your utility wanted to increase its use of these sources, the board would be faced with questions, such as:

Should the energy be green-priced, where subscribers pay a different fee, or should it be rate-based, where incremental costs of the new sources are folded into all rate classes?

How much variable power should be pursued? What will be the effect on reliability?

What risks are you willing to take? How do your customers and other stakeholders feel about this?

While staff must help answer most of these questions, these are not decisions the utility CEO should be making. It is the decision of the board, which must fully understand the risks, trade-offs, and advantages. Certainly, staff members and other experts are needed to help the board

make as informed a decision as possible. Yet, ultimately, the *board* must decide whether pursuing new services is in the best interests of the utility's constituents.

Offering community broadband is an excellent example of a decision many public power utilities have been grappling with. *Can* you offer broadband service? Probably. *Should* you offer broadband? That is the more fundamental question. More than one utility has gone down that road without having a good understanding of what it wanted to accomplish and how its customers — and the competition — would respond.

Although many utility initiatives are technical in nature, it is not the governing board's role to be experts on those technologies. Rather, it is the board's role to understand and translate what the utility's and community owners' needs and expectations are and how well an initiative supports them. The board should be encouraging — and participating in — a strategic conversation within its utility and its community, focusing not on the day-to-day, but rather the long-term outcomes it believes are necessary and important.

This leads to perhaps the most challenging board action: stakeholder engagement. If your task is to represent the community owners, then you must know who they are and what they need and expect. Historically, boards have done very little stakeholder engagement, and when they have, it is often delegated to staff members to conduct a survey or a focus group, or to meet with key accounts. This must change, and boards must take greater interest in or ownership of these kinds of communications.

Public power remains an incredibly viable model for success in our changing world, and local control will continue to be a key part of that success. Yet governing boards must be increasingly cognizant of those changes and how their role must adapt to ensure the utility, its customers, and its community continue to thrive.

*Steve VanderMeer is a long-time public power professional and semi-retired consultant. He is the author of Policy Makers Handbook: A Nuts and Bolts Guide to Governance in Public Power.*

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# A Life on the Line

BY C. EARL BOTKIN

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have always been fond of saying that a line worker is predestined to do this work at birth, and those that are not don't stay around long. While the characters and town in this story are all fictitious, I wanted to spotlight the struggles of the ubiquitous small-town blue-collar line worker. These hardworking and underpaid souls have to do the same work as those of their richer investor-owned utility cousins, but often have to settle for older and sometimes handed-down equipment to accomplish those same tasks. Every line worker, whether they work for an IOU or public power, has to balance their family needs with the constant demand for their time in the field. It's imperative to have a spouse that understands their sense of duty when that dreaded call comes through during their daughter's birthday party or just as they are leaving for an anniversary dinner. No matter the size or type of their electrical systems, these talented employees have a brotherhood no different than the ones of our dedicated policemen and firemen. Our hats are off to them!

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The following is an excerpt from a fictional short story submitted by a retired public power line worker. The events and views presented in the story are the author's own. Read the full story online at [PublicPower.org](http://PublicPower.org).

The night air felt cool, which was unusual for mid-July in Kentucky as Samuel Arthur Carter wearily stepped out of his well-used Bracken City service truck. The short boom appeared ready but equally as tired from the extended workday. Sam quietly unlocked the front door to his house and gently walked up each creaking step until he reached the upstairs level where his family lay sleeping. Hearing a rustling sound, he turned to see his five-year-old daughter, Mary Ann, sleepily reaching her arms out for him to hold her.

"Mommy told me not to, but I waited up for you anyway, Daddy."

Smiling tiredly, Sam hugged Mary Ann and carried her back to her room. He tucked her in and gave her a light kiss on the forehead. Mary had inherited many of his physical features, but she had her mother's eyes and personality. Thank God for that, he thought. One chronically insecure person in the family was enough.

As tired as Sam was, his mind just would not shut down. Just as his regular 10-hour shift had ended, a reckless 17-year-old slammed into an angle pole with his brand-new red pickup truck. He not only broke the pole, but he also succeeded in knocking out electrical service to over 400 homes — including a factory that had to cancel the entire evening work shift, probably without employee pay. The fact that the teenager's truck was new, while his was over 11 years old, made Sam feel inadequate.

"How the hell do other people do it?" he almost said out loud.

Working as a lineman for a municipal power system certainly had its rewards, but money was definitely not one of them.

Sam's wife Veronica stirred irritably as Sam, restless, tried to fall asleep. A quick glance at the nightstand clock showed that it was approaching three o'clock, and he was usually up by six.

With two hours' sleep and a quick shower, Sam made his way downstairs to find his family already having their morning breakfast. He selected a bowl from the open dishwasher, not knowing or caring whether the dishes were clean. Seeing his family going through their daily routines gave Sam a much-needed lift from his rotten mood — if only momentarily.

Fourteen-year-old Joshua was sullenly picking at his half-empty bowl of cereal while glancing irritably at his mother. Witnessing this, Sam gloomily said as he sat down in his usual spot, "All right Joshua, out with it - what's wrong?"

Glancing up, Joshua said, almost crying, "Look Dad, school will be starting in a few weeks, and all I have done is babysit Mary all summer. Lukas and his family are going to Disney and Lukas has asked me to go with him. Mom says no."

"We crossed this bridge last night, Joshua," interrupted Veronica firmly while sitting down next to Sam, "and the answer is still no. We went to my mother's last month and spent four days camping at the lake, so we've already had our vacation."

Joshua's glare told his parents what he thought about his mother's remarks, and Sam knew that this subject was far from finished.

Changing the subject, Veronica said excitedly as she touched Sam's arm, "Oh, by the way Sam, a trucker left me a \$20 tip yesterday. I used it to top off the car's gas tank before I came home."

Sam's grumpy mood suddenly deepened. Veronica had been working as a waitress at the Bracken Fuel Stop for six months after losing her customer service job at the farm store when it closed. Sam didn't like her working there, but the three nearby factories had not hired or expanded for years, and jobs were just plain scarce in Bracken City.

Sam looked at his watch, kissed Mary Ann on the forehead for the second time that morning, and headed for his truck that was waiting patiently in the driveway. He surveyed the muddy interior and recalled the previous night's work. His back muscles still ached, and his head hurt from lack of sleep.

"I'll need a shovel to clean this cab out," he mumbled to himself.

Sam then backed his truck out of the driveway, and unknowingly, began a day like no other he would ever experience.



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