



INFORM, INSPIRE, AND MOTIVATE

with Melissa Seixas

VICE-PRESIDENT, GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS
DUKE ENERGY FLORIDA

Can you tell us about your current role?

As vice-president of government and community relations for Duke Energy Florida, I have the privilege of leading the company's efforts to strengthen relationships with county, community and civic organizations and business leaders in order to best meet their needs and ensure Duke Energy's ongoing service to customers is our top priority. I am also responsible for strategic planning of customer satisfaction efforts for the state president's office and directing support of employee engagement opportunities in collaboration with departments across the company.

Generally, when people think of careers in the utility sector, they may think "engineer," "line worker," or "customer service representative." Your role is a unique one. Can you tell us about the significance of your role in the energy industry, especially as it pertains to the growth of our economy?

Government and community relations is sometimes misunderstood by colleagues, friends and even family. The initial reaction to the role is sometimes seen as the "softer side" of the industry. My team turns that stereotype on its head by working to eliminate barriers to infrastructure projects, listening to the needs and concerns of elected officials and putting out "fires" before issues arise to the point of delaying construction and maintenance of facilities. Their ability to build and nurture relationships enables them to gain confidence and respect from customers that opens a path to mutually beneficial solutions. No day is ever the same and there's never a dull moment.

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Please describe to us your journey in arriving where you are now. What is an idea, a motto, an insight, a person, an experience, etc. that you feel has motivated you along the way?

I started my journey as a 19 year-old college student who wanted to be an engineer. I had the opportunity to begin working for Florida Power as a distribution draftsman and worked both full and part-time while I finished school. Along the way, I ended up with a Master's degree in American History. This is the cross-roads where the left side of my brain met my right side, and the result was a merger of the benefits of a liberal arts background coupled with technical training in the electric industry. Thirty years later, that unique experience gives me the tools to "translate" our often technical world into language that our community partners understand and can align with the objectives for their constituents.

What is the most memorable lesson or skill that you have learned in the energy industry?

Never go straight to NO as the answer to a customer request. Always listen for opportunities for an alternative option. Or if this answer is ultimately NO, do your best to communicate the reasons with care and empathy. It's much tougher to say no than yes. This is not always easy since rules and regulations of our industry often preclude certain degrees of flexibility.

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What do you look forward to most in the work that you do?

I really love it all, but day-to-day, I enjoy finding solutions to help my team and colleagues with challenges they face in their respective areas. Our Florida territory is very diverse—from the urban areas of Pinellas County to the rural, wide-open lands of North Florida. What works in one area isn't always the best option for another area. Giving my team the support they need to represent the company gives me great satisfaction.

What is a special area of opportunity that you see in energy?

In the area of corporate social responsibility, energy companies have the opportunity to leverage their expertise to strategically address energy solutions in all parts of the world. This is the next step for philanthropic investment—more than providing financial support for charitable causes, but actively engaging in helping communities become more energy efficient.

What advice would you give to other women who aspire to join the energy industry, especially on the communications and development side?

I encourage them to spend time on the operational side of the business to get hands-on experience with the services provided by their respective companies. This could be through a development opportunity, job shadowing or a storm role that enables them to support operational activity. The other experience I encourage them to have throughout their career is to always find opportunities to engage with customers. Many of us make decisions every day that impact our customers, but if you haven't spoken to a customer in six months or a year, you're not positioned to be the best ambassador or influencer.

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Describe the energy industry using one word, and share with us why you chose this word.

“Amped-Up”

The industry is changing rapidly and at a pace we haven't experienced in decades. And it spans across all segments: from how we generate power to customer options on how they control their usage. We've witnessed a level of innovation that electric companies aren't known for historically. We are setting the stage for the next generation of electric industry pioneers and employees, and they will take to yet another level.

The annual Florida's Women in Energy Leadership Forum (FWELF) aims to promote opportunities in the energy industry by recognizing the success that women leaders in the energy industry have demonstrated in growing Florida's economy and diversifying an already tremendous workforce.