

Featured emPOWERed Woman Interview

Allison Wall, COO
Spark Energy



Allison Wall has been a leader in the deregulated electricity and natural gas industry for the past fifteen years. Currently serving as COO of Spark Energy, Ms. Wall oversees the day-to-day operations of the nationwide electricity and natural gas retailer, which held its initial

public offering (IPO) in July 2014 (NASDAQ: SPKE). Ms. Wall's prior positions include Chief Operating Officer of StarTex Power and Vice President roles at Champion Energy Services and Gexa Energy. Ms. Wall serves on the GCPA Board and is chair of the GCPA emPOWERing Women committee which she helped start in 2012. Ms. Wall holds an MBA from Tulane University and a Masters of Public Health from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Allison, tell us about how you came to work in the energy field and your thoughts about how the industry has evolved.

I started my career as a consultant to the petrochemical, refining and shipping industries, evaluating workplace and environmental exposure to biohazards. The field required extensive knowledge of federal and state laws and regulations as well as the application of scientific and technological methods to mitigate exposure risk. As I graduated from business school, energy companies were in the midst of preparing for deregulation of electricity in Texas. In those early days, the companies needed employees with problem solving and analytical skills who could help interpret Public Utility Commission regulations and develop and implement business models, processes and systems. Those common requirements made the transition between industries very easy. Because the retail electricity industry was new and needed hard-working, energetic people to think through issues and execute on solutions, there has been substantial opportunity for a large number of people, regardless of gender.

What advice would you give to women who aspire to reach the C-Suite and excel as leaders?

I would give women the same advice I would give a man.... you don't have to be in charge to lead. Don't wait to be assigned responsibility to fix a problem or prevent a problem from happening; instead, be the person who solves the problem. Let others complain about how "marketing never tells us what is going on until the last minute"... you be the one to call the

meeting to create a better internal communication plan. Don't just take your problems to your superiors – instead, clearly communicate identified issues, the actions you have already taken to fix them and what you propose as next steps to reach a resolution. By the same token, when you see new opportunities to build your team or achieve the company's objectives, make the time to set those in motion. Ask questions and learn as much as you can about what really drives success or failure for your organization. No one is stopping you from doing that right now, right where you are. The person who leads the way is the leader regardless of their position or title. Those things will then come.

Kristy Ashley (EWC Conference Chair) reviews a book on mistakes and leadership in this newsletter. What advice do you have regarding mistakes to share with our readers?

Embrace your mistakes and feedback from others as opportunities to improve. Just like your mom told you, we all make mistakes and we all fail. The difference that drives success is demonstrating that you learn from your mistakes and that you continue moving forward to meet goals. Use what you learn from mistakes to anticipate future problems. At Spark Energy, we have an approach to mistakes that is formalized in our company's Social Contract: "When we make mistakes, we will understand what happened, accept personal responsibility, and refocus and move forward." I think that about sums it up!

As the current chair of the emPOWERing Women Committee, is the program meeting your expectations? What plans do you have for the rest of the year?

I certainly second the positive feedback Marcie Zlotnik gave regarding this question in her interview in our last newsletter. The GCPA emPOWERing Women group has engaged with literally hundreds of women in our industry via active mentoring circles in Austin and Houston and a sold-out crowd at our first annual emPOWERing Women Leadership conference last November. We are well into the planning cycle for our second conference which will be held at the AT&T Conference Center in Austin on November 3rd and have added a pre-conference workshop on November 2nd to this year's agenda. This newsletter itself is also a new 2015 addition to our program offerings. Our goals this year primarily center around formalizing more of our committee structure, instituting the newsletter as a regular communication tool, gathering feedback regarding the mentoring circles to design future enhancements, and maturing the annual women's conference into a sustainable, ongoing production. We are well on our way towards meeting these goals and are looking forward to an amazing conference in November!

Book Review



Kristy Ashley
Director of Market Development
Exelon Corporation

Mistakes I Made at Work: 25 Influential Women Reflect on What They Got Out of Getting It Wrong by Jessica Bacal

In her book *Mistakes I Made at Work*, author Jessica Bacal interviews 25 influential women representing a broad cross section of industries and backgrounds including author Cheryl Strayed, Jezebel.com Founding Editor Anna Holmes, and Sonic Youth band member Kim Gordon. The book offers interesting real-life narratives about mistakes made professionally by these women - mistakes that would fill almost anyone with anxiety and days of worry about job security. The lessons in the book are varied and include women in creative jobs who did not stay true to themselves and their work, a doctor who nearly killed a patient because of a simple mistake, and a woman on Wall Street who, after being too embarrassed to seek clarification on terminology unfamiliar to her, subsequently made a decision that cost her company a substantial amount of money and caused her to become the victim of a colleague who continuously reminded co-workers of her error.

The book covers topics such as negotiating, making difficult personnel decisions for the good of the team, being brave, and the importance of asking questions. One particularly interesting account comes from Alina Tugend, award-winning columnist for the *New York Times*, who discusses mistakes she made at the negotiation table when pricing her work. Tugend believes that women underprice themselves because “we worry if we are given more money, we will have to do everything perfectly.” She goes on to describe a friend who actually feels sick to her stomach when she gets a raise and says that women need to overcome that mindset. As one possible solution, Tugend suggests that financial negotiations be done via email as this removes the pressure women feel to “be nice” and give in when interacting verbally. Negotiating over email allows women to be a little more hard-nosed than they might be otherwise and also offers the benefit of providing a written record of negotiations. If negotiating verbally is the only option available, Tugend recommends that women allow for silence after relaying their request, keep the focus on business needs rather than personal feelings, and never be apologetic for requesting appropriate compensation. She also advocates that women pre-plan their talking points and develop responses to potential pushback questions.

By emphasizing the unsettling details of mistakes made and subsequent lessons learned, Bacal strives to leave the reader

with impacting lessons about the wisdom of taking risks and the importance of learning from mistakes. Admittedly, not all of the narratives will resonate with every reader. On a personal note, I bookmarked at least a half dozen of the interviews and found myself, in some cases, experiencing the same anxiety via reading that these women must have felt while living through these difficult situations. Bacal very astutely points out that simply hearing leaders say that we all make mistakes and can learn from these mistakes is not meaningful for most. Therefore, Bacal has attempted to go above and beyond this typical lip service by providing a book where mistakes are laid bare and lessons learned are recounted in detail. More importantly, this book illustrates that even the very best of women have made mistakes along the road to professional success and that it truly is possible to emerge from these blunders a wiser, stronger and better leader. I would recommend this book to women entering the workforce and middle level managers. If you are in upper management, chances are that you have already filled your quiver with lessons learned.

[Upcoming GCPA/emPOWERing Women Events](#)

GCPA MISO Special Briefing: “Gulf Coast Disaster Readiness” on Tuesday, Aug. 18th - Co-hosted with LSU Center for Energy Studies on LSU Campus in Baton Rouge. [CLICK HERE](#) to learn more and register.

GCPA Fall Conference: “Competition 2.0” on Wednesday, Sept. 30th and Thursday, Oct. 1st at the Hilton in Downtown Austin - Pre-conference activities on Tuesday, Sept. 29th include Annual Fall Golf Tournament hosted by GCPA emPOWERing Women, Half-Day Workshop: “Cutting Edge Technologies and Market Trends in the Texas Market” and Welcome BBQ Dinner at Scholz Garten. Registration opens in early July.

The GCPA emPOWERing Women 2nd Annual Leadership Conference on Tuesday, Nov. 3rd at the AT&T Conference Center in Austin - Pre-conference activities on Monday, Nov. 2nd include an afternoon workshop by one of our most popular speakers from 2014, Mary Chauvin and an evening networking event. Registration opens in early August 2015.

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