

## Featured emPOWERed Woman Interview

**Cheryl Mele**

**Sr. Vice President & COO, ERCOT**



Cheryl Mele has spent her entire career working in the energy industry. She started at GE in the Power Systems Division in Schenectady, NY. When her husband decided to attend Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin, she found an opportunity to join Austin Energy. There she worked in the operations areas and spent time in power production. She was promoted to

the plant manager role before transitioning to the wires business as the Director of System Operations. Her first executive role was the Sr. Vice President of Electric Service Delivery. After 24 years at Austin Energy, she retired as the COO in December 2015. She joined ERCOT as SVP and COO in January 2016. Cheryl graduated from Union College in Schenectady, NY with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. She has been married for nearly 28 years and has three children who are all in college.

### **How has the energy field changed and what are your thoughts about how the industry has evolved?**

Not overlooking the big legislative and regulatory changes that brought about the switch to competitive markets, this industry has also seen evolutionary change come from wind, technology and people. Driven by incentives, customer preferences for clean energy and advances in the manufacturing and design of wind turbines, wind energy has probably changed the ERCOT power market and topology of the grid more than any other factor. As a result, we have an abundant and growing presence of intermittent renewable energy resources operating and, at times, supplying nearly 50% of total energy. No one would have believed that this would be feasible 15-20 years ago.

The expansion and adoption of technology and communications to gain efficiencies, automate the grid, and enhance operations has also exploded. Rather than just a small IT department taking care of a customer billing system, radios and phones, technology is pervasive and employs significantly more people than in the past. Technology is embedded in the grid, power plants, bucket trucks, meters, customer

thermostats and the advanced systems the utilities and grid operators use to manage operations and markets. The appetite for and capabilities of technology have brought new participants into the industry and supported the transformation of previously high priced ideas into reality with solar, smart inverters, and storage coming into use. These new technologies are challenging the traditional models of energy supply and use. Additionally, the steady adoption of technology requires us to continually evolve skills and business practices for securing data, systems and networks.

People have also impacted the industry, and the diversity of those working in the electric industry has rapidly changed. Women are increasingly employed in more visible and important roles that are shaping the future. While I can still occasionally walk into a meeting and be the only woman at the table or attend a conference and count the number of women present on one hand, that is now more often the exception as contrasted to my experience when I first joined executive management. Interestingly over the last five years, I have had to learn how to adjust my own style to be effective at working with more women. While I still have worked exclusively with male bosses to date, the days of peers and staff being male only have passed. The executive team at Austin Energy as well as at ERCOT have an executive leadership mix that is very gender balanced. There is also a significant shift in the diversity of backgrounds of people working in energy today. The ethnic diversity continues to grow and adds new and interesting dimensions to our workplaces. And finally, there is a shift away from everyone being career utility or engineering types. You encounter successful people with experience in finance, technology, business, banking, education, etc. serving in a wide range of capacities and bringing new ideas and perspectives with them. This has added new creativity and “energy” to our industry.

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

Three areas come to mind if this is what you aspire to. First of all, be realistic about the level of commitment you are willing to make and the tradeoffs that may come with it. If you have a family think about what your priorities are for that role and how it will mix with the responsibilities and time demands of the C-suite. Be prepared to consider what gives you satisfaction. I had three young children when an executive opportunity became available. I had to consider what I would be willing to give up at home to make the position work. For

me, choosing to pass up the class parties or parent committee gatherings while prioritizing leaving the office in time to make after school sporting events worked. Limiting my after-hours networking opportunities to participate and support my kids' activities in the evenings worked. You have to be willing to prioritize and meet the job requirements, but also be satisfied going to the meeting du jour rather than the game if that is how it works out. Most people are accommodating when you really need time off or need to miss an important meeting if they know you have supported the business needs. If you can't live with missing things or are going to beat yourself up over it, the C-suite may not work.

Second, be self-aware. There's certainly not just one path to achieving the executive ranks, but self-awareness is one of the traits that I've observed in the people I most enjoyed working with or for. Without it, people can fail to grow or make the corrections needed to sustain the career growth they desire. Being cognizant of your impact on others and assessing your impact is a continual process and, over the years, I have unfortunately seen the lack of this hold people back.

Finally, know your strengths and leadership style and how you can use those effectively in the situations you find yourself in. Having worked primarily in management in operations areas filled with highly technical subject matter experts for most of my career, I have been keenly aware that I am not the expert in the room. I am comfortable letting people know that and in learning from them. That is more than okay since my role in management is focused on learning what people bring to the table, understanding the work they do, and how we can leverage the talent and capabilities of people to improve organizational effectiveness. Not being the technical expert lets me pay attention to other priorities such as establishing an open, respectful environment where people are comfortable and committed to exchanging ideas, challenging each other in the interest of improving outcomes and working effectively across silos. It has always been a priority to me to create an open and safe environment where organizational trust and commitment to the team performance are high. It's certainly not the only approach, but for me, it provides the right base for the team where we can hold each other accountable and meet the objectives rather than compete with each other internally.

**Tell us about the achievements that you are proud of and what you attribute your success to?**

I'm proud of a couple of things. First, I am proud to have helped pave the way and support other women working in nontraditional roles in the utility business. Second, I am proud of my overall contributions and reputation. Whether staff, peers, boss or the organization at large, I have helped others

look good. That always feels good and is the best way to build your reputation.

If I had to attribute a couple of qualities to my success, I would say they might be embracing flexibility as opposed to perfectionism and avoiding workplace drama. I don't get caught up with the fear of making small mistakes. We learn from these situations, and there is no shame in adjusting a strategy or decision along the way. As for drama, not everything can be urgent, organizations can't be in fire drill mode all the time nor can we improve everything simultaneously. Prioritize what is important.

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## **Book Review**

### ***"I Am Malala" by Malala Yousafzai***

**Reviewed by Mary Anne Brelinsky  
President, EDF Energy Services**

You know those rare moments that happen to you that make you feel small? Not skinny jeans small, but that "Holy cow, I am a tiny-speck-on-a-tiny-planet-hurling-through-space small?" When one of those moments happens to me, I try to sit up and take notice. I had one of those moments a few weeks ago while reading *I Am Malala*, an autobiography by Malala Yousafzai. It is the story of one brave girl who stood up against the Taliban to change the world.

*I Am Malala* is not the typical leadership self-help book. Malala isn't trying to teach how to deliver a better presentation and she isn't giving advice on how to deal with a difficult boss. Malala, in a very visceral way, tells the reader how it is possible for one person to stand up in something that he or she strongly believes in, even in the face of death. She demonstrates that it is possible for each and every one of us to create a meaningful difference in the situations in which we find ourselves.

In an almost prophetic foreshadowing, Malala was named after a famous warrior woman from Afghanistan who led her people into battle. In Pakistan, the birth of a boy is cause for celebration: guns are fired in the air, gifts are placed in the baby's cot and the son's name is inscribed on the family tree. When a girl is born, no one visits; the women express sympathy for the mother. Malala tells us that her birth was different. Her father paid no mind to these customs and he wrote her name in bright blue ink amongst the male names of her family tree. Malala was the first female name in over three hundred years to be written on her family tree. Malala was fortunate to have parents that married for love and not for duty and a father who believed that girls should be educated and valued as equals, teaching her to always stand up for her beliefs.

Malala was only ten years old when the Taliban took control of the Swat Valley in Pakistan, a region known for its beautiful mountains, lush green hills and crystal clear rivers. Her view of the world was

turned upside-down by the changes implemented by the Taliban, and she tells her story in such a matter-of-fact way that it is impossible for you to not be moved by her experiences. No more music, it is a crime. No more dancing, it is a crime. No more women in the markets, it is a crime. However, for Malala, the worst part of the new Taliban rule was that girls were no longer allowed to openly attend school. Instead of becoming a victim, or giving into the injustice, Malala became an advocate for girls' rights. That same year, at the age of ten, she became a BBC secret correspondent. She also appeared on TV to speak out against the Taliban. The apex of the story happens to Malala at the age of 15. She is riding home from school on and school bus and was shot point blank in the face by the Taliban. Not only did she survive, but she has become an international symbol of peaceful protest and the youngest-ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

After reading this book, I felt stronger and more powerful in my own skin. I began to realize that, while the challenges I face every day are significant and are real, I can make a difference. I will be vocal when I see injustices. I will be an advocate for my team, my colleagues, and for young women starting in our industry. I am Malala.

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## ***emPOWERing Women Leadership Conference: WHY Don't You Join Us?***

The agenda for the 3rd Annual emPOWERing Women Leadership Conference is shaping up to be an amazing ride. "Why?" you may ask... and you'd be right! With the help of experts in the field of leadership along with leaders from the electric power industry, conference participants will explore: **why** diversity matters, **why** leaders must be storytellers, **why** unconscious bias influences the choice of leaders, and **why** women leaders matter. Our dynamic line-up of speakers won't just leave it at "why." They'll also take on "How": **how** three families fostered successful careers while also raising children, **how** a pioneering women's initiative was created, and **how** to deliver difficult information.

The **where** of this year's conference will be the classroom-style setting of the amphitheater at the AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center, and will feature new iterations of popular events from 2015. **When** the event kicks off the afternoon of November 14, acclaimed author and executive coach Natalie Manor will present a workshop customized specifically for the conference - "Confident Communication: Delivering Difficult Information Successfully." Following the workshop, a Kendra Scott pop-up trunk show will take place at the AT&T Center with 20% of proceeds benefitting GCPA emPOWERing Women Scholarships – just in time for holiday shopping.

On Tuesday November 15th, the conference opens with a panel of three successful professional women discussing how they achieved their incredible career success while raising children. Speakers include Janet Melcher (Shamlian), National Correspondent for NBC News appearing on the Today Show and NBC Nightly News; Neena Newberry, President of Newberry Executive Solutions and former HR executive at Deloitte; and Cheryl Mele, Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of ERCOT. The topic will be introduced by 2015 GCPA emPOWERing Award winner and co-founder of StarTex Power Marcie Zlotnik and the panel will be moderated by Allison Piper Wall, retail energy executive who was most recently Chief Operating Officer at Spark Energy.

Have you wondered **how** to communicate the benefits of diversity within your organization? Catalyst Inc. will present an interactive session exploring the business case for diversity, **why** change has been so slow, and **how** individuals can drive action in their organizations and careers. Additional speakers throughout the day include Merrie Spaeth (President, Spaeth Communications), Julia Rathgeber (President, Association of Electric Companies of Texas), Dee Martin (Bracewell Policy Resolution Group), and Julie Parsley (Parsley, Coffin & Renner, former PUCT Commissioner). Executive Editor of Ms. Magazine, Katherine Spillar, will wrap-up the conference with a keynote reflection on the day's discussions. Following the conference, join us for an informal happy hour with speakers and attendees.

That covers the how, why, when and where for the 3rd Annual emPOWERing Women Leadership conference. **What** are you waiting for? Registration opens in August.

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## ***Upcoming Events***

### **GCPA 2016 SPP Conference:**

Sept. 1, The Westin DFW Airport - [Registration now open](#)

### **GCPA 2016 Fall Conference:**

Oct. 4-5, Hilton Austin - [Registration Now Open](#)

### **GCPA emPOWERing Women 2016 Conference:**

Nov. 15, ATT Conference Center in Austin

Registration opens in August 2016

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