

Transcript of Power Chat in The Electric Lounge
Season 1 – Episode 2 “CEO Journey in the Industry; Careers”
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00:00 – 00:25

Narrator: Power chat in the Electric Lounge is powered by Syco Energy, an electric distribution cooperative serving over 260,000 members across parts of seven Central Florida counties. For more information about us, visit <http://www.secoenergy.com/>

00:25 – 01:03

Curtis Wynn, SECO Energy Chief Executive Officer: Welcome to Power Chat in the Electric Lounge, where we talk about the people, ideas and opportunities that keep our cooperative moving forward. I'm CEO Curtis Winn and today's episode is a little different. Instead of me asking all the questions, I've invited our Vice President of Human Resources and Corporate Services, April Brown, to turn the tables on me. She's going to ask some questions that explore my 40 plus year journey, and also the career opportunities and leadership lessons available in the industry today. April. Welcome to the Electric Lounge.

01:04 – 01:14

April Brown, SECO Energy Vice President of Human Resources and Corporate Services: Thank you, Curtis. I'm so excited to be here and excited to talk about the careers in the energy industry today.

Curtis Wynn: Thank you for being here, April.

01:15 – 01:48

April Brown: The energy industry today offers a wide range of exciting career paths, from traditional roles like line workers, engineers and system operators to new opportunities in renewable energy, sustainability, cybersecurity and data analytics. Over the past decade, the industry has shifted from focusing mainly on power generation and distribution to becoming a tech-driven field centered on clean energy, digital innovation and sustainability. What was your very first job, and how did it shape your desire to work in the energy industry?

01:49 – 02:51

Curtis Wynn: Well, my very first job in the industry was, as a truck washer and it was something that just happened to fall in my lap, I guess you could say. I was not only a truck washer, but I got a chance to work also in the warehouse, as a part time clerk. It started my interest in the industry, because having that job and having the exposure to the co-op just really got my wheels turning. I became very intrigued about what the co-op is, what it does. Had never spent a lot of time thinking about the electric co-op, people who actually provide power and bring lights to our house, and the folks who do it, and the skills that they have to be able to make all of this happen was just it kind of blew me away. It just got my wheels turning and I was from that

point, and it got me thinking about what a what a great opportunity, what a place to have and to start a career. And I got kind of intrigued and attached to it from there.

02:52 – 02:59

April Brown: Nice. So, what initially motivated you to apply for a position at your local cooperative while you're still in high school?

03:00 – 03:53

Curtis Wynn: Yeah, well, again it's sort of like it fell into my lap. One of my high school teachers, who was also our guidance counselor, came to me and encouraged me to go and apply since she knew the general manager at that time. Her husband was my baseball coach. As a high school student, I was very much into sports, and she was an avid sports supporter. She had a real, strong interest in me, not only as a student and as an athlete, but also as a person. So, she sort of bridged the gap, a bridge to the highway for me to get involved and go on, apply. I went and got applied and got the job as a part time job. That one of the best part time jobs you can have in Graceville, Florida is. Yes, excellent. Excellent opportunity.

03:54 – 04:02

April Brown: Nice. What aspects of our industry, the electric cooperative industry, sparked your interest at such a young age?

04:03 – 04:51

Curtis Wynn: Yeah. Well, again, just bringing electricity, the whole aspect, the prospect of being able to work at a place where they provide power and they provide lights that go to your house and, understanding that business, it just really became more of, of an interest of mine and the people. Wow. You know, I could tell that people who worked at the electric cooperative were good folks. Genuine sound people who had a lot of a lot of pride in what they did. So, it's something that just stuck with me at a young age that, hey, these are the type of people I would love to be involved with on a day-to-day basis and have the opportunity to work with them.

04:51 – 04:59

April Brown: Nice. Was becoming a CEO something that you had your sights set on early, or did it evolve in an unexpected way?

05:00 – 05:38

Curtis Wynn: Well, no. You know, at 17, 18 years old, I was just happy to get a job. A decent job. That really was a decent job, even as a part time job. To be able to learn about the co-op, learn how to drive a huge bucket truck, you know, something? That was exciting. To be around that type of environment. So. No. Had no clue, that I would ever advance to be a CEO. It wasn't even close to being on my radar. Had no idea at that time. So just happy to get a good job.

05:39 – 05:55

April Brown: Here at SECO, you know, we have several entry level positions that provide a good foundation for future growth, such as members support associates. Looking back, what was the turning point in your career that set you on this path to leadership?

05:56 – 08:18

Curtis Wynn: Yeah, the turning point really was when I finished, when I graduated from high school, I went in to talk with our general manager at the time and ask him if he would consider hiring me for time as a line technician. A junior line technician, so that I could learn that trade, progress, and be a top-notch lineman. And to my surprise, he said, no, no, you I won't give you that job.

And he further went on to tell me what his plan for me was. He said, I think you should consider going to college. And that surprised me, then he went on to tell me about another opportunity that was that he was about to create that had never been at the co-op before. And that was a nighttime dispatcher role. At that point in the cooperatives' progression they did not have anyone after 5:00 at the co-op who answered the telephones if there was a power outage and he was ready to make that change. The timing was perfect for me to go into his office at that time, and he offered that job to me. You know, obviously, I said, yes, I'll take that job. And he said, you know, you can also go to college. The cooperative will pay your tuition also wow, what a deal.

So, obviously I took him up on that and I enrolled in college while working full time as a night dispatcher. This was the turning point for me because it allowed me to start focusing on what my future could look like with a college degree versus a trade, which, either option I felt would have been great. The first couple of years in college, as you know, you don't have to decide on a major. Having the opportunity to see what things looked like at the co-op, I decided to major in business and information systems, which is really what started my progression through the ranks at West Florida Electric. And that to me was the critical turning point for me. That the general manager saw something in me that I didn't see in myself and encouraged me to take that route versus the one that I had planned to take.

08:18 – 08:26

April Brown: Nice. So how did your formal education and your on-the-job training prepare you to become a CEO?

08:26 – 10:34

Curtis Wynn: Well, I got a chance to get both. As I mentioned, the opportunity to do both going to school over four years, which was how long it took me to get my degree. From that time. And get on the job training, even though I was a dispatcher, it was more than that, because, as the job entails, if there wasn't bad weather there was a lot of downtime. Not only was I able to study while I was at work and make great grades. I was also assigned other tasks at night when everybody left, such as posting meter readings. At that time, we didn't have automated meter reading as we have here at SECO. We had to manually post those. So that taught me a lot about billing and how bills are produced based on the meter readings and how adjustments are made

and all those things. But also, it got me into the information systems aspect of what we do at a co-op. You have computers, and those computers needed to be backed up at night. So that was another role that that I had that they empowered me to oversee making sure the systems were backed up and doing nighttime jobs that were needed, so those things really got me started. And for those four years, another thing that really thought I needed or wanted during that time was to serve my country and to be in the National Guard. So, to add icing on top of the cake, they gave me a sabbatical to take 12 weeks to go to basic training and advanced training and come back and still have my job. Wow. And I just knew at that point. Co-ops. Co-ops care about their people in general. I think that, you know, that it was just a chance of a lifetime and to get that type of support and training prepared me for the next level of my development as a co-op employee.

10:34 – 10:43

April Brown: What obstacles did you face on your path to becoming CEO and how did you overcome those obstacles?

10:44 – 13:21

Curtis Wynn: Obstacles happen and I'm not exempt. Just to carry that story a little bit further. Once I graduated from college, just before I graduated college, there was another advancement opportunity to move from the dispatcher to systems analyst with the co-op. That position had been vacated. I was well suited for it. I was already supporting the systems analyst that was there before me with some of the nighttime stuff that she would assign to me. So, I asked and was successful in getting that job. I still had one semester of college left. So, the stipulation was that will shift you to daytime full-time systems analyst with the stipulation that you finish and get your degree. If you don't get your degree, you're going to lose a job. We made that that adjustment and things worked out and a few other promotions to supervisor, manager. Vice president was the last job I had. But getting to the obstacles, they are going to happen. And my first major obstacle is at that point, although I wasn't ready to be a CEO, then 16 years into my career there, I felt that I was but wasn't. I was denied that opportunity as I applied to be CEO. The best I got was a perfunctory what I felt was a perfunctory interview and just a no. It happens. Right. What I would say about how do you deal with it is in my case, it just really caused me to dig in and work even harder because obviously I wasn't quite prepared for it. So, the thing I would say is, objections and obstacles happen it's what you do because of those. That matters. In my case, I dug in and worked even harder. Wanted to prove myself even more. I even developed a chip on my shoulders. Just because I wanted to prove that I am capable. So, it was. It was a setback. What I thought was a setback. But it you know, when one door closes, another opens. I will honestly say to you, I wouldn't be sitting here now having this interview with you here at SECO had that door opened. So, in hindsight, I'd say to anyone not to be totally discouraged about obstacles or setbacks. Just move on and wait for the next opportunity.

13:22 – 13:28

April Brown: Yes. How did you know you were up for the challenge of becoming a CEO at such a young age, at 34 years old?

13:29 – 14:39

Curtis Wynn: I just felt like, paid my dues and I knew that my work ethic was indicative of what it takes to be at that next level. In comparison to other examples that I saw and knew of other people who had advanced to that level. I knew I had as much or more, to give than what I had seen. And I was motivated, very hungry. Wanted to advance. Even there was another opportunity that was sitting in front of me is that if I became successful at 34 years old, I would have been the first African American to move into that role. So that kind of got me even more motivated. So, just knowing who you are, knowing what your work ethic is and, and being having the confidence in your ability when you know you put in the time and effort. That's where I was. That's even at that age I was, it was really.

14:40 – 15:06

April Brown: Nice. So, in my role here at SECO, my team and I are constantly, constantly looking for strategies to help employees move from technical roles and to leadership positions. For example, one initiative we came up with this year was our Power Up Academy, which is our learning management system that we're utilizing as a pathway for employees to see their career path. Is that consistent with how you approached your journey?

15:07 – 16:56

Curtis Wynn: You know, April, I am so excited about Power Up Academy. Yes, you know, you outdid yourself on that one. I wanted to say that, that the only thing I would say is that I wish that you were my H.R. director back then. Because I didn't have a tool as productive and sophisticated as what you've just created for SECO. However, in, the same realm, the basics were the same. Getting training, understanding where I wanted to be, where I wanted my career path to go and identifying the training that I need and the support that I need it to get to that level. Much more antiquated back then than what you've developed for our team members here at SECO. But the concept is the same. Yes, I attended courses. Yes, I went to training. Yes. I called on other people who were in the role to give me advice, which is another huge, huge benefit we have as an electric cooperative that no other industry I'm aware of has the camaraderie and the willingness for co-ops and team members from one co-op to share all their ideas, all their secrets. All their success stories to a team member from another co-op to just so they can be as advanced and to take advantage of those same learnings. I think conceptually it was basically the same thing. But what you've created with, with our system, our learning management system has taken us to a whole new level.

16:57 – 17:10

April Brown: I see, so beyond technical expertise, can you give us some idea of some interpersonal or leadership skills that are valuable to employers today, whether or not they aspire to become a CEO or just a leader in their respective area?

17:11 – 18:54

Curtis Wynn: Yes, Communications. What we're doing now. Communications is paramount. Interpersonal skills, the ability to collaborate. We talk about collaboration here at SECO all of the time. We have been intentional about breaking down silos. Having cross-functional teams

where your department is working with someone in the accounting department, who's working with someone in the member services department to get the job done. So, to do that, employees have to know how to not only do their craft or their skills or do their specific job, but how to communicate and have the interpersonal skills to work with others to get a job done as a team.

Teamwork. Team building is another trait that you have to have. So, I think those are the those are the kind of skills that I think can allow a person to move to the next level.

Also understanding the needs of the people, we serve. And that's our members being grounded. And what the pain points are to having empathy. I know we work with training our frontline call center people to understand what that member is going through when they call. They might be in a bad mood when they call, but there's a reason for it. So, to have empathy for your customer, that's another skill that everyone should have, not only the frontline member services people, but also that staking technician that's out there interfacing with the members, that line technician to have those interpersonal skills and respect for the members.

18:55 – 19:03

April Brown: Yes. So, who are your mentors or role models and what lessons did they teach you that continue to guide you today?

19:04 – 20:12

Curtis Wynn: Well, I'm just like probably a lot of other folks, my role models were my parents. And what they taught me and my nine siblings was that there's nothing wrong with giving a hard day's work for a good meal when you got home from the farm. Yeah, we grew up on a farm. We did a lot of farm work, and we worked as a family. But it translates to a hard day's work for a good day's pay. And treating people with dignity and respect no matter what the circumstances are, being spiritually grounded in your upbringing, having God, as a guidepost for you and to make sure that you carry that respect forward. Treat people right. I've always tried to keep that as a part of everything I do. If you treat folks right, they'll do wonders for you. And that was all ingrained in me as a child, and it sticks with me as an adult.

20:13 – 20:23

April Brown: Here at SECO we're always talking about culture and how we cultivate our teams. How would you describe the culture here at SECO?

20:24 – 23:17

Curtis Wynn: The one word I would use is evolving. Yes. And evolving in a good way. I think culture really, the foundational part of culture is having a clear vision, a precise mission, and a solid strategy to make those two a reality. Here at SECO, our vision of course, as you know, is to be the preferred employer in the region. We want folks to want to come to work here. If we don't have a good culture, people might come, but they will not stay. The other part of it is we all have to be clear about our mission. What do we aspire to do? And that is to serve our

members with affordable rates and good quality service and to make sure we're community partners.

That's our mission. Then you have to build a strategy around that that will make those two a reality. But here's where the culture comes in. The culture comes in when your employees understand those three important things. And we remind our employees constantly, what is our mission? What is our vision? Here is our strategy map. And what we also stress is as an employee, whether you are a cashier, a line technician, a staking technician, an engineer, where does your job fit on that strategy map? How are you as an employee, contributing to the strategy and the mission and vision? My humble opinion is that when employees understand that they have involvement. We did a culture survey, as you know, and one of the places where our employees yearn to be and to have more of was involvement.

Yes, I believe they said that because they want to have a purpose for coming to work. So if an organization has a clear mission, a clear vision and a strategy, and employees understand where they fit in, they're involved and they have a purpose, and doing that in an electric cooperative environment, when we're here for one purpose, and that is to serve our members, not make a profit, not, not satisfy shareholders, but serve our members and give them the quality product that they need and deserve. And our employees are bought into that. That's when you have a good culture. And I think we're working very hard to make that a reality here. But I love that purpose. There's two important days in everyone's life, right? The day you were born and the day you figure out why, as this can instead of love it.

23:18 – 23:34

April Brown: Absolutely. So how would you describe your leadership style or philosophy and how has that changed over time?

23:35 – 25:43

Curtis Wynn: Yeah. Well, and I think to go back over the years, I have always had, felt that you give people, your employees clear direction and going back to a strategy, having a clear direction of where we're trying to go as an organization and helping them to understand how they fit into that. Empowering them to do their jobs with the freedom to be creative, with the freedom to suggest things and not think that they're going to be repercussions for coming up with good ideas and holding us everybody accountable. There is an accountability part of that. Yes. But you can't do it and be afraid to make a mistake.

And so that those are the things that I've always believed. I still believe it today. Now as I transition to how it has evolved and how it has changed and empowering them to do their jobs and having the freedom to offer suggestions, offer ideas, even make mistakes. But learning from those mistakes, as I have, as I move forward to how it has changed, I think I have more of a focus today on developing people, developing talent, and giving employees the opportunity to grow and to understand, to set, to stretch themselves, to be even better than they are today and giving them the tools to be able to do that.

So, the learning management system that we talked about. Power Up Academy is a perfect example of how we're putting action behind those words. Yes. So that's how it has changed and evolved. I'm all-over developing people right now and making folks better at what they do.

25:44 – 25:53

April Brown: So, I know this list is going to be long, but, if you could pick some. What has been your favorite aspects of your current role here at SECO?

25:54 – 27:56

Curtis Wynn: It's a lot. It is a long it could be a very long list. That is a long list. Really the favorite aspect is, is really watching how employees, are managing the challenges in the industry today. This this is a very, very challenging time today in the industry and is changing so much. The, the technology is evolving. The expectations of our members are evolving. The ability to have enough resources to serve our members, to have supplies, transformers to be able to get the material and things that we need is becoming more challenging. There are more challenges today than I think there's ever been.

But for those who are in the industry today, as I know, is the case here at SECO, you've got to love that stuff. You got to be a little bit crazy. Just love those challenges. And that's what I see at SECO. The best example I can give you is, is Milton. I won't give it a first name, but the last year everybody knows what Milton was because we don't say that word here in SECO. Everybody knows what Milton was, but to watch this team take on the biggest challenge in the history of this cooperative, and to restore power within seven days after this devastation we saw is the best testament for what it means to be a cooperative employee and for me, to be the leader of this team and to watch all of that just brought so much gratification. Even over the 40 plus years I've been in the industry, it eclipsed all of that just to watch what happened last year. And that's the kind of stuff that is exciting. And there's so many other examples. But that's the big one.

27:57 – 28:02

April Brown: Yes, I would agree with that. What advice would you give to someone out there listening today that aspires to be an executive?

28:03 – 29:56

Curtis Wynn: Wow. So, the first thing I would suggest and advise is that they should first master the craft that they love, whatever that is, and be good at it. And then build upon that because it's if you're not really if you don't really love what you do, it's hard to be effective in it and it's hard to excel. So, and once, you get that foundational piece, look for ways to expand on your knowledge by self-improvement, whatever that may be.

As we talked earlier about learning, you know, doing more around communications and interpersonal skills, working with others, and for that student or that young person that's out there, especially coming up today, we can't get around this, this thing called the artificial intelligence. I just think and I was sharing this with my son just a few days ago, he was like

getting ready to go into an interview. And he said, that's not talk about artificial intelligence. Maybe I shouldn't, because that's going to take my job one day. I said, no, son, you've got to talk about it and make sure that whoever you're interviewing with understands that you know what AI is all about, and you know how to use AI to do your job. Artificial intelligence is not going to replace people. It's going to replace people who don't know how to use artificial intelligence.

So those are just some nuggets I would give to anyone listening. This is how you think about what your passion is, build upon that and always be open to technology. And right now, the technology of the day happens to be artificial intelligence.

29:57 – 30:10

April Brown: Wow. Such great advice. So, what are some of the initiatives that you've started here at SECO and how that did it lead and challenged the status quo or changed our cooperative story?

30:11 – 32:38

Curtis Wynn: Well, we mentioned earlier, we have a lot a lot of initiatives. We have a strategy map that's loaded with initiatives. So, I'll give you a couple, one dealing with employees, the other I'd say is dealing with how we're interacting with our members, the voices in action. I think that has your fingerprint. And two of the two of our other colleagues' fingerprints on them. You and Tolu, really birthed that that program and Voices in Action is really more it is totally in line with what we've been talking about, of how we at SECO are empowering our frontline team members to create innovation, come up with ideas on how we can be better, that we can incorporate those ideas into our overall strategy. What a powerful idea that was to open up the floodgates for ideas and for innovation with the people who are closest to the work. That has been so exciting. And we had, you know, we have ten great initiatives that have come out of that. Yes, our employees are plugged into that. They're looking for ways for us to improve as an organization in ways that you and I will never be able to come up with, because we're not as close to the work as they are. So that's one.

The other is our Smart Connect program, and this is where we are engaging with our members to help us save cut costs with the biggest expense we have, and that's buying wholesale power to sell to them. So, this allows our members who have smart thermostats, who have electric vehicles, who have batteries in their homes to engage with us, their co-op, to save the need for power when we have high demand for electricity, which is when we pay the most for electricity. So, what an idea. What a what a way for the members to take part in controlling costs that they would have to pay. So that's an exciting program that is putting us right in there with our members, making it what it is. And that's the cooperative difference where members can participate in how the cooperative actually manages its cost, and it also creates the savings for them. I could go on with 15 more, but those are the two at the top of the list that I believe, are just indicative of what we're trying to do as a, as an electric co-op.

32:39 – 32:47

April Brown: Thanks. What about the high school students? What advice would you give the future of work to students who are graduating high school today?

32:48 – 35:25

Curtis Wynn: I would tell them to have an open mind. There was a point in all of our lives probably now, I won't say all of our lives, but most of us that the ideal way to make a good, honest living was to graduate from high school and go to college. That has been proven over and over again. That's not always the case. And I think there, there's this resurgence of taking a look at the crafts. I look at the hundreds of line technicians we have here who whose jobs do not require for them to go to college, but they are some of the smartest, brightest people we have in this organization. And they have some of the most important jobs out of anyone in the organization. They're the ones who keep the lights on. So as a high school student, it depends on who you are and your personality. Not saying that going to college is a bad thing, but be open to other trades, crafts and skills that could allow you to raise a family, make a living, and also realize that the that passion of yours may not translate into a good living.

I'm going to bring my son into it again because his aspiration, he loves gaming. So he thought that gaming was going to be his career. But the pathway to get into that as a career is not like playing games. So sometimes your passion does not align to 15 years from now. Raising a family and supporting a child. Your son or daughter going to college. So, you got to have a balance of understanding what the career paths are and what matches up with your personality and your things that you love to do. But it may not all perfectly align, so you may your passion may not always convert to your and to your career path.

And again, I'll bring I end to this conversation again. Don't ignore AI as a student there probably this probably blah blah blah to them because they're so far ahead of us that they already understand that. But I just want to mention that that's another part of my advice to any student. And if you love being local, you need to come talk to SECO energy. So just a personal plug because we're hiring. Yes. So those are some things, especially that last piece.

35:26 – 35:33

April Brown: Yes. So final question. What do you hope to be your biggest impact as a leader? Or better said, what do you want to see as your legacy?

35:34 – 36:24

Curtis Wynn: Well, I don't know. April, I think is as long as I leave the place better than I found it, I will have accomplished that. And the day that I walk out of the door, I expect leaders like yourself to just flourish in my absence as much as you are in my presence. So that's going back to that leadership development piece, because the legacy is what you do while you here. And it's it matters that determines what happens when you leave. And when I leave the place should be better than I found it. So that's my hope. That's my, aspiration. And I hope it comes true. Wow. Love that. Thank you. April. Thank you. Thank you for guiding the conversation today.

36:25 – 36:39

Narrator: If you're interested in exploring careers in the energy industry or at SECO Energy, visit SECO Energy Careers page. High school juniors, don't forget to check out the youth tour application, opportunities like this can shape your future.