

This interview with Lynn J. Good, chief executive of Duke Energy, was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant. New York Times Corner Office Article - November 23, 2013

Q. Were you in leadership roles early on?

A. No, I had a childhood that would be called ordinary. But my parents taught us about responsibility and instilled incredible confidence in us. My father was a World War II Marine who became a high school principal. He always had a heart for students who maybe were underprivileged or had difficulty of some sort. My mother was also a teacher; both had an incredible work ethic. They also told me that I didn't need to pursue traditional roles.

Other lessons from them?

They demonstrated accountability to me through actions. When I was growing up, we had a widow living next door to us. So the habit was that if we went to the grocery store, we called her first. If we cut our yard, we cut her yard, no questions asked. When you graduated from college, did you have a clear idea of what you wanted to do?

I went to work in accounting, at Arthur Andersen. At one point it was the crème de la crème. I wanted to work there because it looked like the hardest thing I could find, and I loved being on a steep learning curve. I progressed quickly, and two years out of college I was managing a small team of people.

What did you learn from that experience?

The beauty of it was that we worked together around a table. I could see when someone was frustrated or had a difficult meeting, so I could keep in touch with what was going on. I would typically stay after they left so I could get a gauge of the work they produced, so I had real-time feedback about whether an assignment was working, and I could adjust. The feedback loop was almost immediate, so I had a chance to practice.

Have you heard feedback over the years about your leadership style that caused you to make some adjustments?

I can be incredibly focused, and I can appear impatient. So I've learned to slow down, get to know people and provide more context. There's nothing wrong with getting to the point pretty quickly, but it's also helpful to give people an opportunity to talk about their work.

You faced a pretty tough task as a new C.E.O. – merging the staffs of Progress Energy and Duke Energy. How did you decide who was going to be on your leadership team, particularly since there were people you already knew from Duke?

There is a comfort level with people you've known for a long time – you've been in the foxhole with them. But when you bring an organization together, you need to be agnostic about background, and to interview on capabilities and track record. So we went through interviewing processes to pick the best person for each role.

So what questions did you ask? Let's say you're interviewing me. What have been some of your specific responsibilities? What successes have you had? How do you think? I'm looking for creativity. I'm looking for an ability to lead. I'll ask about failures. What have been some things that have changed you and developed you over time?

What are your best interview questions?

Why do you come to work in the morning? What makes you passionate about what you do? Why did you choose the career that you did? How do you want it to develop over the next five years? What makes you uniquely qualified for this role? I try to engage people around what makes them passionate about what they do, because people who love what they do get after it every day.

Other things?

With people at this level of their career, it's no longer about whether you are the smartest subject-matter expert in the room. It's whether you can be effective in leading a diverse team. Can you adapt? As you think about developing people through their careers, you're looking for that transition from being the smartest person in the room – and caring so much about that – to being the most effective. It's about how to develop a team. It's about how to solve something where the solution isn't obvious. Effectiveness comes from those qualitative things that give you the ability to network, communicate and lead people toward an outcome they can't see.

What advice would you give to graduating college students?

I've had an interesting career in that I was with Andersen when it went out of business. So in my 40s, everything I'd worked for disappeared. That changes you. It causes you to refocus on what's important. So I'd say: "Be passionate about what you do, but also be passionate about your relationships and family and other

things in life. That's where happiness is. It's not all about career."

Did the experience of seeing Arthur Andersen go out of business make you more risk-averse or more tolerant of risk?

Between March 2002 and May 2002, the firm disappeared. It was a crazy time, because I really didn't have time to think about a career move. I was focused on getting clients and people from Point A to Point B in a way that preserved as many jobs as possible. Later, I had a chance to re-evaluate what I wanted to do.

Risk is an interesting way to think about it, but I would say it refocused me on the importance of family and where happiness comes from. The lesson was that I'm not defined by my career, so I need to be prepared at any time to go or to change careers. There's a freedom with that. It's not that you're disloyal or don't like what you do or aren't passionate about what you do, but your asset is you. It's not who you work for. So is that risk-taking, or just recognizing that a career changes over time and you have to be ready at any point?