

RELIANT ENERGY
An Outcome Based Corporate Culture
Extraordinary People Working Toward Extraordinary Results

by Richard Varr

A successful career is all about balance: the process of juggling career and company goals with the demands of personal and family life. And when a company's culture recognizes that balance with a strong respect for each individual, the result is powerful. It's a corporate culture that Houston-based Reliant Energy is proud to call its own.

"We employ whole human beings, not just the person who shows up during work hours," says Karen Taylor, Reliant Energy's Senior Vice President Human Resources and Chief Diversity Officer. "Everyone's got a full life, and we think employees are most productive when we can help them balance it all."

To highlight the energy giant's progressive hiring, development and promotion policies — and how they affect women and diversity — Houston Woman Magazine interviewed four women executives at Reliant: Taylor; Tracy Carmen-Jones, Vice President, Retail Community Marketing Involvement and Association Development; Donna Benefield, Vice President, Wholesale IT & Planning; and Suzanne (Suzie) Kupiec, Senior Vice President, Risk & Structuring and Chief Risk Officer.

Each of these senior executives highlights Reliant Energy's culture of support and balance through their own success stories.

"The company's philosophy, when it comes to women, is that it's an even playing field," says Suzie Kupiec, who has been with Reliant for four and a half years. "We ask all of our employees to achieve breakthrough outcomes. Things you don't think possible become possible as you work with your team. Your career path is really contingent upon doing your job very well, and with that come the rewards and opportunities that Reliant Energy has to offer."

Kupiec continues, "We have a diverse and inclusive team with a variety of perspectives. That variety becomes part of the discussions, and it results in better decisions. I'm extraordinarily proud to work for a company that believes in that and walks that walk."

The executives emphasized how Reliant encourages employees to think out-of-the-box, asking them to set high personal and team goals —without a road map to getting there.

"Reliant has given me the opportunity to take a look at how to enroll employees to sign up for extraordinary outcomes and things that we have no ability right at that moment to actually see," says Tracy Carmen-Jones, who has worked within the company's retail sector for eight years. "I think the level of creativity and collaboration, and the amount of

hard work that needs to go in to get the outcomes, is also extraordinary. We tend to amaze ourselves on what's possible once we go down that path.

“Reliant Energy is a great company to work for, and it's a place where people can really enjoy work. Both professionally and personally, they can get total fulfillment from what 'work' represents for them. I think that's an amazing place for Reliant to be.”

Donna Benefield started as an IT manager when she joined the company eight years ago. “I am very proud to be a part of Reliant Energy. The teams that we've built and the diversity we've built across the teams is extraordinary,” she says. “The field of technology has changed dramatically and enabled the industry to change in both retail and wholesale segments. To be a part of that and help drive that through the cyclical change that our business went through has been not only challenging but very rewarding.”

“This company has a very strong value set and good vision with an equal playing field for women — you're expected to do your job well, work hard and drive to results,” adds Benefield. “That's very encouraging.”

Employed with Reliant and its predecessor companies since 1985, Taylor started as an assistant controller and moved through various positions in accounting, budgeting, financial reporting, purchasing, IT and communications, and eventually chose a career path into Human Resources.

“I'm evidence of the flexibility the company offers; your career path doesn't have to be linear,” she explains. “I haven't felt constrained or bounded by anything. It is common for people working on cross-functional teams get exposure to senior management and other parts of the company so they can explore other opportunities with Reliant Energy.”

She says the company offers an open work environment.

“Anyone can come to the executive floor, and it is not unusual to see our CEO out among employees,” Taylor says. “The pride of turning the company around and creating the environment where these things are possible, and the integrity with which we conduct ourselves makes it a great company to work for.”

With a shining downtown office tower, Reliant provides electricity and energy services to retail and wholesale customers throughout the United States. In Texas, the company provides service to more than 1.8 million retail, commercial and industrial customers, and is one of the nation's largest independent power producers with a generation capacity of 16,000 megawatts. Reliant Energy is now striving to enhance its leadership in Texas and beyond by transforming the way customers use and value electricity.

“We're not your grandfather's utility company,” jokes Taylor.

Prospective talent interested in joining Reliant will note that virtually all jobs are posted, so there are equal opportunities for a diverse set of job seekers. Development and mentoring programs at corporate and team levels help foster and develop skills, while training programs develop communication and technical skills. The executives also say applicants should be excited to know that Reliant encourages cross-functional teams, allowing employees to gain insight and skills into how other areas of the company operate, which can be key to job advancement.

“There’s the opportunity to really get to know people and to work cross-functionally in ways that are probably not that easy to do at all levels in other companies,” says Carmen-Jones. “We’re a small company inside a big company. We have all the trappings of a Fortune 250 company,” she adds, while noting there are less than 1,500 people in the Houston office.

“I personally benefited from a number of cross-functional teams when I first came here eight years ago, and through them, had a chance to meet and work with a diverse set of executives,” explains Benefield. “That helped me foster leadership and communications skills and, over the years, was rewarded by a variety of different managers.”

Reliant Energy continues to vigorously pursue diversity initiatives by integrating them into Reliant’s corporate culture and daily operation.

“Our ultimate goal is for diversity to just be part of the way we work and add value to the business,” says Taylor.

The company goes beyond limiting diversity to just the workforce, but instead seek to influence from key constituents, i.e., workforce, community, customers, suppliers and business partners.

“Our belief is that if we successfully integrate diversity into our company, it will yield bottom line results. Every interaction we have could be a potential customer, business partner, future employee or other key relationship,” Taylor adds.

Reliant is supportive of its women employees when it comes to starting a family. Each of the four Reliant executives interviewed has started or added to her family while working at the company.

“It certainly hasn’t limited our upward mobility,” says Taylor. “Our careers have progressed either through promotion or additional responsibility.”

“I had two children while at the company,” says Kupiec. “In both instances, the CEO, my boss and my team worked with me to make everything successful while I was out. It enabled me to spend time with my family, and when I came back, I quickly immersed myself back in the business. It’s an incredible experience professionally and personally to be able to achieve both of those things in your life.”

To this end, the women praise their male colleagues who also balance their careers at Reliant Energy with their families and community activities, so a work-life balance is built into everyone's schedule.

"I think there's a tremendous amount of support from men in leadership positions to help find the work-life balance," Taylor says.

In addition to working for a stable company with competitive pay and excellent benefits, Reliant Energy offers flexibility regarding work location, schedule and job opportunities.

What qualifications do the executives look for in new hires? Those with the right educational background and a willingness to go above and beyond their specific skills sets!

"An ability to be flexible and to be able to go in different directions as required," points out Carmen-Jones. "This is not a strong-arm environment where the strongest voice wins. It's more of a collaborative, open culture focused on an outcome-driven environment. I think people who thrive in that kind of culture would do very well here."

"Candidates looking for individually focused career paths or an all-about-me environment that focuses only on individual rewards won't do well at Reliant," Taylor says. "Our value system is based on collaboration and working with others to drive extraordinary results — more of a 'we' environment than a 'me' environment. That said, it can be very fulfilling for individuals to succeed here and see how they can make a difference."

The executives explain there is strong respect for each person — how they work and live. "The uniqueness of each individual is respected, valued and, quite frankly, that helps us optimize how we succeed," says Benefield. "The company helps identify your strengths, how you want to work and then lets you do that. It lets you succeed and achieve balance at the right time in your career."

"It really is an environment where people are proud of what they're doing," concludes Taylor. "They're excited about the work, and they're excited about the opportunities they have."

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