
view from the top



John Bryson led Edison International, one of the largest investor-owned utility companies in the nation, as chairman, president and CEO until his retirement in 2008.

In this recent conversation with Senn Delaney Chairman Dr. Larry Senn, he looks back on why building a high-performing leadership team was critical to helping fulfill the utility's vision of Leading the Way In Electricity.



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Building a high-performance leadership team to fulfill the Edison vision of Leading the Way in Electricity

John Bryson recently discussed his focus on his senior team and on culture at Edison in a conversation with Senn Delaney Chairman Dr. Larry Senn.

Headquartered in Rosemead, California, Edison International is the parent company of Southern California Edison (SCE), one of the largest electric utilities in California, and Edison Mission Group, a competitive power generation business.

As CEO, John Bryson earned the distinction of being one of the nation's leaders in the development and use of renewable energy sources and served as a tireless advocate for Edison's mission of "Leading the Way in Electricity" in California, across the U.S. and internationally.

Among Bryson's many notable accomplishments as chairman and CEO was successfully leading its California utility, SCE, through the energy crisis of 2000–2001 and the challenging next few years, when a flawed state industry restructuring and market manipulation caused California power companies to lose billions of dollars and pushed the major Northern California utility, though not SCE, into bankruptcy.

During the crisis, people at all levels of Edison rose to the challenge in what he describes as "heroic" effort.

But by 2004, Bryson saw that SCE needed to move beyond crisis management mode to continuously improve value for its more than 15 million customers. Teamwork and continuous improvement would become a strong focus as he sought to shape a culture for the 21st century. Because cultures need to be shaped from the top, John asked Senn Delaney to work with him and the officer group to define, model and create the desired culture.

Though Bryson no longer spends his days leading Edison International, retirement is not a term in his vocabulary. When he is not hiking mountain trails or cycling at his family retreat in Idaho, or at home with family in Southern California, Bryson is helping guide other companies to greater success. He is a member of the National Commission on Energy Policy and an advisor to the Secretary General of the United Nations on energy and climate change around the world. He also is a corporate director of The Boeing Company, and The Walt Disney Company and a trustee of the California Institute of Technology, and chairman of the board of BrightSource Energy.



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Q In an article we did earlier called *Team at the Top is it Really a Team?*, we pointed out that CEO teams contain very talented and capable people but very few such teams are well aligned high-functioning “teams”. You were able to build a team that many of your reports said was the best they had experienced in their careers. That is significant and any insights into why and how you did that will be helpful for others. What caused you to take on the task of creating an even better team at the top in your last years as CEO and after you were through the energy crisis?

Thanks Larry, I appreciate that. We had a very good team of excellent people with deep experience in our business, diverse backgrounds and deep commitment to the mission of providing electricity.

Our people cared about providing reliable services and meeting customer needs well, under even the most challenging conditions.

And yet, following the extraordinary achievement of working together day after day through the harrowing experience of the California energy crisis, that sense of working together in a very challenging business began to shift back to silos that had previously characterized the way the company worked.

People began again to identify primarily with their own sub-units in the company. There also developed a resistance to changes in traditional practices. I thought we needed to do better — to build on success with yet greater success.

That led me to want to work together on developing a yet stronger one-company, higher-performance culture.

Q What were your goals for bringing the team at the top up a notch?

I believed we needed to revive and strengthen that sense of a common, shared enterprise to instill a renewed affirmation of the company’s values and a yet stronger sense of one company in which we all took pride.

We couldn’t rest on the fact that we had done well — we needed to continuously get better.

We needed to affirm further the importance of teamwork constantly across the company. Individual performance alone was not enough. Siloed performance in a particular unit was not enough.

What would make us as successful as we could possibly be was consistent, mutual support across the whole company. And, with that, we needed to affirm and especially recognize the people who day after day made their fellow employees yet more successful.

Q What are some of the things that helped you create that shift?

The first step that we took on your advice, Larry, was to bring the 28 senior-most people of the company together. This was across the entire company — across the utility, across the competitive power business, across every enterprise that we had. And we spent two and a half days working with no distractions and the requirement that all participate fully, with openness and candor, in addressing together what it was that we needed to do to be as excellent in the future as we possibly could be.

That was the beginning of what led to a rethinking of the culture and values at the company — an initiative we ended up calling “Leading the Way”.

Q What did you discover as you worked together on defining and modeling the culture you wanted?

Throughout our history, we had committed to three values that have guided the company — integrity, excellence and respect. Through meetings that went deep into and across management throughout the company, we concluded that we should add two additional core values. One was “continuous improvement”. The second was “teamwork”. Further, we worked across teams to flesh out just what that meant in terms of specific guiding behaviors.



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Q One of your leaders said to me that you had built one of the most effectively functioning teams at the top in the history of Southern California Edison. What are some of the things about the leadership team that you are proud of as they functioned during that period?

SCE had a history of attracting, training and promoting able people who took great pride in the company. It was a culture in which people came and tended to stay and make their way in the company. So, we were building on a strong foundation.

To take things further, we made the company less hierarchical and increased movement of employees from one area of the company to another. We prominently took those steps at the senior executive level of the company, and those leaders in turn set models for others throughout the company.

Another important model of behavior for the company was recognizing people who mutually supported, by their personal behavior, a one-company teamwork approach. Among other steps, we created wonderful “Leading the Way” annual recognition for managers — selected by their peers — who particularly exhibited those behaviors.

We also worked hard on clear delegation of responsibility. We enhanced the racial,

religious and ethnic diversity and other differences among people to reflect the makeup of society across the U.S., and particularly in Southern California. And, we built affinity groups, and built a sense of pride across the full company in those groups. A highlight, for example, was annual celebration of Chinese New Year — a great event sponsored by the Chinese and Vietnamese employee affinity groups.

Q It struck me that there were also relationships mended that built trust and built relationships across the company. I think that people were more connected to each other and focused even more on the relationship role that had an effect on how things changed.

That’s definitely true. Larry, I think that in that first meeting of the 28 senior-most people and then the follow-on meetings, including a second meeting six months later with the senior group, you and your Senn Delaney team helped us by role modeling the behaviors for the whole group. That included modeling an openness and an instinctive, intuitive support for one another, of talking candidly and directly with each other, and on consistently collaborating for the best results.

Following the initial candid meeting with the senior 28 executives, we agreed that we should proceed with similar meetings

throughout management across the company. And, again, themes that arose frequently were a tendency to work primarily in silos within the company, and to recognize certain people who were talented but made themselves prominent — sometimes at the expense of other groups or other managers.

That led us to the decision across our management team that we needed to add the “teamwork” value. And, we took a series of steps to recognize and celebrate those people across our management who exemplified that value.

Q Has it had a lasting impact on the team at the top and the culture?

It has been more than two years since my retirement, and I am pleased to see indications in the communications and in the company that people continue to place emphasis on continuous improvement and teamwork as well as the incredibly important traditional values of integrity, excellence and respect.

What people got a lot out of — almost everybody at the first meeting and then subsequent meetings and then down into the organization — is that these models for how to work most effectively apply outside the company to one’s family life and life with friends. The value of the importance of that resonated and stayed with people.

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The process of working with you on values, teamwork, culture and committing our people’s time and focused attention on how to make the company yet better have contributed to a stronger company, as it is now. There will always be challenges. There are challenges today. But our capacity to address those challenges is greater.

And, for many of us, the excitement of taking on those challenges has stuck with us and the rewards have been very personally satisfying.

Q Thanks for taking the time to share this with us. I know you were pretty passionate about executing the mission of Leading the Way in Electricity. How was this done in daily ways? And what is your purpose and mission these days?

I am very glad you raised the question of mission. I didn’t join Edison until I was 40 years old. Prior to that, directly out of law school, I had created, with some classmates, a national environmental advocacy firm called the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). I am proud that NRDC today — 40 years following its founding — is effective across not only our country but globally. Many outstanding leaders over these decades have been drawn to working there and to making a major dif-

ference for the good they have contributed to.

At Edison, we have often worked with NRDC side by side, and, when we were able to do that, we achieved results greater than what either one of us could have done working alone. Similarly, we consistently tried, often successfully, to work to mutual advantage with our labor unions and with consumer advocacy groups.

I am proud of how we carried out our responsibilities across Edison. In some important ways, we really have led across the utility industry. In the environmental area — supported by a strong state policy and leadership — we have, for example, been the leaders in energy efficiency achievements for our utility customers, and in the use of renewable energies as a percentage of the total electric power provided.

Q I think that’s important as background on the continuing story of your leadership. When you are doing purposeful work, retirement doesn’t seem to come up...

Like so many people, I continue to enjoy my work, and retirement allows me to make new choices for what seems most interesting and satisfying. I am a member

of the United Nations Secretary General’s Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (AGECC). I remain active in California and the United States on the environment and energy, including as a member of the National Commission on Energy Policy, and have become active on the board of the Public Policy Institute of California.

And I have been working with some promising, early-stage startup companies in green energy. It’s a pleasure to see high-energy, high-capability younger leaders who are taking the risk of trying something new and committed to trying to make the world a little better. ■

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