



NRECA Awards (2023-2024)

2024 J.C. Brown Nomination Form (Chapter: J.C. Brown CEO Communication Leadership Award)



olawYPRZ

GVEC General Manager & CEO Darren Schauer

Entry details

Your Name	Tammy Thompson
Your Job Title	Senior Marketing & Communications Manager
Electric Cooperative	Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative - GVEC
City	Gonzales
State	TX
Phone Number	+18302632812
Email Address	tthompson@gvec.org
Preferred Method of Communication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Phone <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Email
I have read the eligibility requirements found in the Call for Entries and confirm my nominee is eligible for the award.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Name of Nominee	Darren Schauer
Job Title	General Manager & CEO
Electric Cooperative	Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative - GVEC
When did the nominee become CEO/GM at this electric cooperative?	2003

Has the nominee served as CEO or General Manager at another co-op previously? No

Provide a brief description of your professional relationship with the nominee.

Darren Schauer guides and mentors our Marketing and Communications department alongside Senior Executive Manager Krista Davis and myself.

Overall Strategic Communications Approach (25 points)

In what ways does the nominee integrate communication into the organization's strategic planning and management processes? Evidence may include a well-defined strategic communication plan, active CEO engagement as well as adequate annual budgets and resources devoted specifically to communication.

During his two-decade tenure as GVEC's General Manager and CEO, Darren Schauer has prioritized building meaningful connections with people, emphasizing a commitment to "delivering more". This ideal has become the foundation of GVEC's brand promise, shaping his approach to strategic communications in recent years.

Schauer's leadership is largely characterized by a clear sense of direction. In 2021, he instigated a significant mindset shift by transitioning from an annual, department-focused static business plan to a dynamic 5-year strategic framework. This new approach fostered collaboration across the cooperative, challenging the Strategic Planning Team (SPT) and staff to transform the business plan into a living communication tool. The outcome was a focused and comprehensive roadmap that eliminated departmental silos, aligned goals with purpose, and promoted communication at all levels. The plan's key focus areas encompass People and Culture, Customer Connectivity, Operational Excellence, Data and Analytics and Financial Performance. It empowers employees, board members, and cooperative members to monitor progress and make changes as necessary while keeping the broader vision in mind.

Schauer believes in trust and accountability within the SPT and their respective teams. Inclusive of executive leaders from Accounting, Customer Service, Human Resources, IT, Marketing, Operations and Wholesale Power, he ensures all areas have input during and after the 4-month planning process. In SPT meetings, you'll often find support staff presenting project results and recommendations, underscoring Schauer's regard for listening and open dialogue.

The Board of Directors is engaged in the plan during an offsite strategic session. During this time, he educates them on the ever-evolving energy market in Texas, the emerging technologies, data, and budget needed to support the plan, and how it will enhance what matters most to our members – reliable, resilient, and affordable services. Once approved, plan progress is shared through quarterly updates.

This transparency extends to the entire cooperative through consistent communication meetings led by Schauer. Bi-annual in-person all-employee meetings and separate managers' meetings keep staff connected. Meeting notes from SPT and Board meetings are emailed to all employees monthly for interim communication. Our members stay informed through a monthly "GM Comments" column in Texas Co-op Power magazine. A detailed, award-winning, annual report and video presentation are distributed to our members at the Annual Meeting, in the magazine, and posted on the website as well.

Some of the more notable examples of Schauer's strategic approach to communications include:

- 1) Forming and leading a focus group of millennial and Gen Z employees, gaining insights to boost engagement and retention.
- 2) Investing resources into targeted marketing data, utilizing Claritas demographics, to highlight our value-added energy efficiency and broadband services and programs.
- 3) Leading the charge to gauge customer satisfaction and gather feedback through the American Customer Satisfaction Index survey, which plays a key role in shaping our business plan initiatives.
- 4) Identifying the need for and overseeing the establishment of an in-house Data and Analytics team to organize and mine our existing data, fill gaps, and create opportunities to further personalize our members' experiences.

Internal Communications Approach (25 points)

In what ways does the nominee ensure co-op employees are informed, engaged, and empowered with the information they need to be effective communicators?

From day one, each employee and board member is armed with the information and resources they need to be successful at GVEC under Schauer's watch. Examples include:

1) An employee's first day starts with Meet GVEC which is an introduction to GVEC from its rich history to our mission, vision, values and high expectations of service. This includes a face-to-face meeting with Schauer. Within 6 months of employment, each employee attends a 2-day comprehensive New Employee Orientation session where leadership in each area of the cooperative details their departments and respective roles within the organizational structure. Additionally, attendees board a bus to visit each GVEC office and complete a tour of the service area for a first-hand account of the team, equipment, people and culture they are supporting.

2) The business plan and goals, as mentioned in question one, are reviewed with the employee which ties directly to an individual Performance Management document. This creates a mutual understanding and agreement of the key roles and objectives the employee will contribute to success. This tool further emphasizes the impact of collaboration between teams and departments for the greater good. Most importantly, in Schauer's perspective, it prompts clear communication and conversation between the manager and employee.

3) All employees are included in outage communications from the Control Center 24/7. In the case of large and/or prolonged outages, hourly updates are provided along with supporting information as needed for customer communications via phone and social media.

4) A Marketing Communication (MarCom) email is sent to all employees when marketing pieces are launched. This includes relevant links, the target audience, areas, and speaking points when necessary to answer member questions.

5) Employee development is one of our Corporate Values. Schauer encourages all forms of development from reading books, organizational memberships, to attending conferences and training. He has also made it possible for employees to spend up to 4 hours per year on cross-training between departments.

6) Testing and training on individual Myers-Briggs personality types. This not only includes employees, but also the Board to put the concepts to work in strengthening their communication levels as well. This helps further empower our team by understanding the differences in communication style and preferences to tailor a message in a way that is well received and productive.

7) The Delivering and Implementing Outward Mindset by the Arbing Institute is taught cooperative-wide as another pillar of the Meet GVEC program. Schauer has been the catalyst for infusing the expansive concept of "treating people as people" as opposed to objects. He supports the significant investment of time and resources necessary to teach, apply, and constantly reinforce these tactics for a strong culture. This includes having select employees certified as Arbing facilitators, conducting one mandatory training per department annually, and other learning opportunities throughout the year. When asked about the impacts of the Outward Mindset, employees have responded that it has changed their relationships professionally and personally and made them consider others over themselves in all they do.

The Cooperative Difference (25 points):

In what ways does the nominee's commitment to communication, both internal and external, help advance the seven cooperative principles, philosophy, and way of doing business?

Darren Schauer demonstrates a strong commitment to the cooperative principles by fostering an inclusive and participatory environment, focusing on economic well-being, maintaining autonomy, providing education and information, fostering cooperation, and actively contributing to the betterment of the communities served by GVEC. His leadership reflects the core values and principles that cooperatives are founded upon.

1) Voluntary and Open Membership: Schauer's leadership at GVEC is characterized by an open and inclusive approach. He encourages input and engagement from all cooperative members and employees, creating an atmosphere where their voices are heard, and their contributions are valued.

2) Democratic Member Control: Under Schauer's leadership, the cooperative ensures that decision-making processes are transparent and that members have a say in important matters. The district meetings, annual meeting and feedback mechanisms, such as surveys, empower members and employees to participate in shaping the cooperative's direction.

3) Education, Training, and Information: Schauer places a strong emphasis on member and employee education. He ensures that members are well-informed through channels like the Texas Co-op Power magazine and a detailed annual report and video, informational emails, and an interactive website designed to find information quickly and work with all devices. Additionally, he invests in and encourages employee development, promoting continuous learning and training opportunities for professional and personal growth. Under his leadership, GVEC has a strong apprenticeship program and a generous tuition reimbursement program.

4) Cooperation Among Cooperatives: Schauer recognizes the importance of cooperation among cooperatives. GVEC collaborates with other cooperatives and organizations to leverage shared resources and expertise, reinforcing the principle of cooperation. For example, in May 2023, Schauer worked with Texas Electric Cooperatives to represent not only GVEC, but cooperatives across the state, in testifying before the Business and Commerce Committee in the 85th session of the Texas Legislature. Upon conclusion of the session, House Bill 4246 passed allowing electric cooperatives to transfer up to 50% of their total unclaimed property to three funds dedicated to economic development, energy efficiency and scholarships. In addition, he is a member of the Texas Broadband Now Coalition advocating for awareness and funding to deliver high-speed broadband access to unserved and underserved rural businesses and residents of Texas.

5) Concern for Community: One of the most visible ways in which Schauer embodies the cooperative principles is through his commitment to community engagement and service. He encourages GVEC's involvement in community projects, sponsorships, and initiatives, demonstrating a genuine concern for the well-being of the people and communities the cooperative serves. GVEC employees can always be counted on to show up for numerous volunteer opportunities and are encouraged to serve on boards and committees in the community. He included it in our Corporate Values as "Good Corporate Citizenship" and has supported community services from educational presentations to programs such as our Power Up Charitable Fund. The Power Up funds are member donations from rolling up their bill. GVEC stewards the funds and passes on approximately \$350k per year in grants to non-profits for community projects benefiting our service area.

Measures of Success (25 points)

How successful have the cooperative's communication/marketing programs and efforts been during the nominee's tenure, and on which he or she has had an influence?

The measures of success in Schauer's strategic communications are noted in many ways that, in large part, directly correlate back to the 5-year planning cycle and annual business plan initiatives:

1) Since Schauer implemented the reimagined business plan model in 2021, GVEC has achieved higher-than-ever scores in terms of plan completion. 2021 saw an 88% achievement score, despite the extreme challenges posed by the unprecedented Winter Storm Uri in Texas, 2022 achievements were at 96% even with the lingering supply chain effects of the pandemic.

2) In 2021, Schauer won a Glassdoor Employees' Choice Award as one of the top 50 CEOs in the U.S. Small and Medium Business category. This distinction was awarded based on approval rating by anonymous, voluntary reviews from GVEC employees on Glassdoor. The average Glassdoor CEO approval rating is 73%. Schauer claimed his spot in the top 50 with a 97% approval rating.

3) GVEC now serves over 23,000 customers with high-speed broadband technology, with over half of those accessing fiber internet speeds up to 1 gigabit. This is a direct result of a strategic operational construction plan as well as utilizing targeted demographics to reach consumers.

4) Over \$3.5 million in grant funds distributed to non-profits serving our communities and \$600k in member bill assistance through the Power Up Charitable Fund since 2012.


5) A 2023 ACSI customer satisfaction score of 83, which is higher than any other form of utility measured in the study in 2023 including municipalities, investor-owned, and the U.S. cooperative average.

The purpose of the cooperative business model is to simply empower the people and communities we serve to live a better quality of life. Through the many activities GVEC engages in, strategically and genuinely led by Darren Schauer, GVEC has become a highly respected employer, service provider, partner and cooperative ally known for standing behind our promise to “deliver more”.

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