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# Aligning for Growth

Clarke Energy is aligning its strategies, core values, and key relationships to ensure that it works with its employees, partners, and customers to continue to deliver exceptional products and services.

Images by David Evans

**A**s the authorised Australian distributor and service partner for GE Energy's Jenbacher gas engine, Clarke Energy is dedicated to providing long-term, quality installations and service. This commitment to customer service and building long-lasting relationships has positioned Clarke Energy as the market leader for not only coal-gas applications in Australia but also remote embedded energy and tri/cogeneration applications.

Greg Columbus has been leading Clarke Energy as managing director for 10 years, and has seen the company grow from eight employees to 120. *The CEO Magazine* sat down with Greg to discuss the evolution of the energy industry and Clarke Energy's role in its journey.

**The CEO Magazine: In your 10 years as MD, what have been your most notable achievements?**

**Greg:** It's been a wonderful growth journey, and I think it would be the growth of the brand in the marketplace, gaining industry recognition, and successfully delivering the product safely, on time, on cost, and in

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- Greg Columbus

good quality. It's probably the overall quality and performance of the product and our service support areas which have been our most significant achievements.

I think that's augmented by our strong culture, which focuses on doing what we say. That's an achievement, because there are a lot of players in this industry who promise a lot and deliver short. We follow a mantra of doing what we say, and we have engaged with people to do that.

**You mentioned you built the brand. What was involved in that process?**

That involved growing a local, dedicated, and skilled group of people who were committed to the core values of not only the Clarke Energy business but also the GE Energy business, as we supply and service GE's Jenbacher gas engine range. Being a class-leading product, the brand, culture, and synergies needed to be there. When we're representing a class-leading product like the Jenbacher, we really need the culture of the people to be aligned, and we need to make sure that we uphold the GE Jenbacher brand and ensure it's synonymous with Clarke

Energy. It's about tying the two brands together with similar, strong values. With close to 500 MW of GE Jenbacher gas engine equipment installed, and now being the industry's largest service supplier concentrating solely on gas reciprocating engines, Clarke Energy and the GE Jenbacher brand is more important than ever.

**What are the core values of Clarke Energy?**

First and foremost is the recognition of safety, ensuring that all people go home from work exactly the same way as they came in. We're doing a lot of work with implementing and understanding what an incident- and injury-free workplace means. Moving on from just zero harm, we're looking at the complete picture and avoiding incidents that may not result in injury but can also cost time and cause potential long-term injury. We're moving towards that goal of incident and injury free within the business as an overall part of raising the game.

**How do those values intertwine with the GE Energy business?**

As a globally recognised company, GE Energy is very focused on the >



customer and people. They both go together, so when you're managing people as a customer or people in your business, the values need to be aligned because, commercially, you might not get the short-term outcome that you want; it's about the long-term vision for both Clarke Energy and GE. These assets run for more than 20 years, so it's not about ensuring there's a quick win. We need to be totally aligned not only in our culture but in our entire approach for the next 20 years over the life of the asset for our customers.

**Besides reinforcing these values, how have you shaped the culture at Clarke Energy and engaged employees?**

If you think back a decade ago, we were a \$5-million business with eight staff. Today, we're turning over \$100 million-plus with 120 staff. It was important to grow that culture. I knew what I wanted to

achieve, but I wasn't entirely sure how to go about it. From the early days, it was really about setting up open communication with our staff and teams and making sure they understood what we were trying to achieve as a company. We started with monthly meetings in the boardroom, and, as we grew, there became too many people for the boardroom and we started once-a-month barbeques. Today, we still do monthly barbeques, but we also have quarterly sessions where we involve all the staff in an overall business update.

We're transparent to the staff about what our goals and ambitions are, where we've had our successes, when we face challenges, and where they can help with that journey. That covers everything from our incident- and injury-free approach right through to commercials, operations, and our end customers. Having that alignment with them has built a culture where everybody is all in,

and if you're not all in, then you're not part of the team.

**Would you say that approach was a big part of how you made Clarke Energy into the prominent market player it is today?**

Yes, very much so. It certainly starts with the class-leading product of the GE Jenbacher. It wasn't very well known 10 years ago. I've surrounded that product with a really quality team who have the required technical and operational skills, and also have the right cultural fit. It means that we have a total solution for the customer, not just technically or commercially, but from a fundamental functionality point of view as well. This approach is also aligned with Clarke Energy Group principles and the way we go about our business globally in the 15 or so other countries in which we operate, being similar entities to that in Australia.



emissions, all of which is positive for continued growth.

**How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to meet the demands of your clients?**

For us, it's key to have alignment of our objectives and the outcomes we want so that when we're looking at suppliers, subcontractors, and strategic partners, it's really important that they are aligned with us. The first principle is the incident- and injury-free goal, and it's really important that we're promoting that. Everyone in our team, whether they're a supplier or subcontractor, is aligned with our deliverables because we cannot do it without that strong team with us.

**With increased environmental legislation and concerns, how are you addressing these shifts and evolving the Clarke Energy offering?**

It's quite a challenge to stay up to speed with the ever-changing landscape of regulations and legislation. We have a full-time department that deals with quality, environment, and health and safety, but we recently split that into two so we could have a greater focus on the individual quality and WHS&E.

We're also heading towards ISO accreditation by June 2014. Many years ago, I think organisations got the ISO accreditation because they thought they needed it to secure work. We're at a point in our journey where we think it'll give real value to our customers and is a key pillar to our theme of raising the game.

To stay on top of regulations and legislation, we've dedicated people to it so we can not only understand it but also be ahead of the curve. We actually work with a lot of other industry bodies and lobbyists to try and understand as well as get visibility on the future landscape of where this might go. We're not just hearing about and

implementing changes; we're actually reading the landscape and having a look at the future vision so we're best placed to deal with those changes as they come.

**What sorts of changes do you think the industry will see down the track?**

I think the harmonisation of the workplace and health and safety is far more reaching across the industry given the broader scope of coverage, increased responsibilities, and greater penalties. I also think we're going to see more of a focus on that in our specific industry in the oil and gas and power-generation sectors. Given our ageing infrastructure, we will see more and more deregulated and embedded remote power generation around Australia.

Looking at the controversy surrounding coal-seam gas, there's a real disparity between the states. In New South Wales, there's a moratorium on coal-seam gas, and in Queensland, it's an 80 to 100 billion-dollar industry. I think we'll see a bit more alignment from a federal level as opposed to those state-based legislation issues in the future. This is all coupled to the backdrop of proposed changes relating to the treatment of carbon

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*- Greg Columbus*

Typically, we'll have a panel for each category of supplier or subcontractor, and then we work with them closely to ensure they understand the scope and the intangible scope, like that incident- and injury-free principle, and develop it with them. It's not just about price or value; it's about how they behave, and ensuring that their behaviour and culture are aligned with ours.

**Where do you see Clarke Energy going in the future?**

I think Clarke Energy will continue to provide a class-leading service in the fields that we operate in, supported by the GE technology. That said, I think industry changes will continue. We're a very nimble private business, so I think we read that landscape very well and we're quite forward-thinking. We work very hard at trying to understand and have that early vision of where the future is going. Being a private yet global company, we'll continue to demonstrate that we're flexible enough to adapt to changes, to implement them, and be best in class in doing that. That comes with hard work, the right skilled staff, and actually understanding how and when that landscape is going to change. •



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