

LEEWAY

Leeway, a longtime Ranger and DPW member, has been a cornerstone of the Burning Man community since 2009. Starting as an electrician, he quickly advanced to become the Power Manager from 2016 to 2021, where he led a team of technicians and volunteers to build and maintain the city's essential power grids. In March 2022, he transitioned to the role of DPW Personnel Manager.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2018. Most of Flo's questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



I am the operations manager of the DPW power crew. I work together with Easygoing. Together, we coordinate the efforts of 7 technicians and 4 volunteers to build the power grids that service the essential functions of Black Rock City. The fire stations, the hospitals, the Ranger stations, the essential infrastructure. 2009 was the year that DPW Power went from being three guys and a truck to a full crew with a much bigger job.

My very first day here, there's a guy named Peter Mars who was my first manager. He drove me around. He drove me out to Playa, he drove me to the ranch, he introduced me to this place. He said, “You know, you're going to have a radio. You're the only electrician. Everybody is gonna want to talk to you. But, Lee is a terrible radio handle!” That's my given name. Lee is one syllable. It's soft. Terrible on the radio. Nobody hears it. So, he just starts riffing on every word he

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can think of that has Lee as a syllable. Leeway was the first one where I was like, “Ok, I can deal with that.” At that time, the DPW had a reputation for giving new people TERRIBLE names. We still do. So, I clung to Leeway. I started introducing myself as that to everyone.

A lee is a protective place. Like right now we're next to the shipping

container, and there's wind blowing against the shipping container? We're on the lee side of the container, where the wind wraps around. Right? And doesn't really touch us. When you give somebody leeway, you give them slack. You give them breathing room.

So, it turned out to be a good namesake, because that's what I did as an electrician. I gave people what they needed to live well and do their jobs. What I do as a manager is give them the leeway that they need to do their jobs and enjoy themselves. And to do things well, and to... you know, live out their hopes and dreams while they're out here. Anyway. That first year, Easygoing could only come in on weekends, but I stuck around. I learned to manage a crew on a boat. I used to sail tall ships. Sail riggers

off of the coast: the West Coast of America. Those boats were run as socialist dictatorships. The captain had unchecked authority. But, that authority was bent into the service of the wellbeing of the crew and the work that we were doing. We had a saying on the boats that you had three priorities, in order: to your ship, to your shipmates, and to yourself. Right? And I carry those ideas in my head when I manage a crew here.

You know, Burning Man is... You look around and you think, “This place is built out of wood, and rope, and plastic, and fuel, and metal. But, it's not. It's really built out of people. Without the people, nothing happens and it all goes away. So, my first goal as a manager is to take care of people. Because somebody who is doing well is going to take better care of their crewmates and they're going to do the work better. So, I ask myself, “What does my crew need in order to be happy and in order to do their work well, and how can I provide that for them so that they don't have to worry about it themselves?”

So, every day I start my day with a morning muster. I get the crew all in one place and we talk about what we're going to do that day. I, before the muster, get on our database and I look up what is slated to come up that day. I maintain a situational awareness and I share the benefit of that with my crew. That's really what I do. So, in my database I have a list of what needs to happen and when and the people involved, and the dependencies. And where it's happening. So, in the morning I can turn to one of my technicians and say, “In the morning you are going to be working on this grid and talking to this person, you're probably going to be using this equipment, and you need to know about this, this, and this, these things might trip you up.”

The idea is that they don't have to look up that information themselves. I provide it for them. One of my other jobs is to manage our information database. We have a Google drive that everyone has access to. So, any one of them at any given time can look this information up, can double check me, or look for context. Ideally, what I do is boil it down to the most actionable pieces, give it to them, and then they can with it. At the end of the day, if they need something that they don't have, it's my job to help them get it, or to empower them to get it for themselves if they don't think they can.

So, I should note first that I have always been a DPW member first and foremost. Rangering is a thing that I do with my spare time. That isn't to say that I haven't been deeply invested in it. But the Rangers knew from the first day that I walked a shift that if anything went seriously wrong in the city, was going to put on the orange, and I was going to walk away as an electrician.

I became a ranger for two reasons. The first was that you can be a DPW member in good standing and not be a burner. It's possible. Most of DPW doesn't work during Burning Man. You could go to Reno if you wanted

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to and come back for teardown. Especially when I joined the DPW, a lot of members did not consider themselves burners and there was antipathy between the DPW and the rest of the event. I hated that.

I became a Ranger because the Rangers, of all the groups of people, seem to know best what the hell actually goes on during the event. Most people have no idea. We make best guesses. There's so much happening all the time. The rangers seem to have the best handle on it and they cared for the social infrastructure of this place the way that the DPW cares for the physical structure. I thought that it was a good dichotomy.

The DPW builds the things. Most people in the DPW couldn't give a damn what people do with them as long as people don't break them too badly. The rangers care about what actually happens between people in the spaces that we make. Very much so. And mostly, the rangers are there for when things go wrong, right? Because we don't want to tell people what kind of experience to have: we just want to pick them up when the experience that they have had is overwhelming to them.

Most people who find themselves in those situations think that they're out of options. They think that they're stuck. We help them get unstuck. We give them options and we get them in a place where they can move forward and make different choices or make the same choices in better ways or whatever.

So, this one time, I'm walking around and I'm on shift. I come upon a guy on the ground screaming his brains out, thrashing around. He's surrounded by like six people around him, looking down on him, all pretty close. So, I look around and I make sure that there's nothing



Photo credit: unknown, 2016.



Photo credit: Robert Pierce, 2016.

bigger going on here and that it's safe to approach. I walk up and I look at one of the people looking at him and I'm like, "Is this your friend?" The guy says yeah.

I say, "He looks like he might have eaten something that's disagreeing with him."

The guy says, "yeah, that's a pretty good guess."

"So professional curiosity here, can you tell me how much he took? Do you know?"

The guy looks at me with these deep clear eyes, pupils wide as saucers and says, "About as much as I took!"

"Oh. First time?" [laughs] The guy says yeah. [laughs] This guy is screaming at our feet the whole time.

And this guy is pretty mellow, but the other people around us are looking pretty jumpy. I say, "Ok, do you want some help?"

The guy is like, "I think we got it for now."

I say, "Ok. I'm going to circle around for a little bit. If you're still here, maybe we'll talk."

"I'd really appreciate that. Thanks."

So I leave. Then I come back about half an hour later. The guy is not thrashing around anymore. He's not screaming. He's up against a piece of large art, curled up, snoring. He's asleep. And his friends are sitting next to him looking exhausted. So I go up to them and ask how's it going. "We finally got him to go to sleep."

"Cool: its getting cold. He's gonna get real cold if he stays here. You think you wanna get him back to camp?" They're like, "we just got him to sleep. We don't want to move him at all." I'm like, well, I got a space blanket. I'm a ranger, so I always got a space blanket on me. So, I'm like, 'let's wrap this around him'. That's something we can do right this second. So we wrap the space blanket around him. He doesn't wake up. But this is only a temporary solution! We can't just leave him here! So we can't get him back to camp: what can we do? As a ranger, I let people find their own solutions, but sometimes if they're really stuck you give them a leading question to jumpstart the process. They're like, "we could bring blankets to him!"

"That's a great idea. Who wants to go get blankets for him?"

Two of the friends are like, "Listen, we just wanna go party. We didn't wanna do this."

"You know what, guys, I got you. Go party. You didn't want to be here, you didn't want to deal with this, this is too much for you, just go party. I don't want you overwhelmed."

They're like, "thank you so much" and they leave.

One of the friends stays, and it's the one I was talking to earlier. I caught on pretty quick that these guys are best buddies, and this guy is the one who gave this guy stuff that he's freaking out about, so he feels a lot of responsibility. He's worried about his friend. So I look at this guy.

"Do you think you can make your way back to camp and back here? Can you find your way back?"

"I think I can."

"Can you get a blanket? Cool. I'm going to sit here and stay with your friend. I will still be here when you get back. It's what I do."

And he leaves. So I sit around. I call in and I say I'm involved in a situation, and I don't know how long its going to take. Dispatch says it's

cool. About 10 minutes later, this guy wakes up and I'm just thinking, oh, here we go! What's it gonna be! Psychedelic roulette. He just sort of takes himself awake, and snorts, and takes off the space blanket and is a little disoriented. But he doesn't start screaming, which is a great start! He sits back against the piece of art, looks around, and he sees me. I'm like, "how's it going, man?" "Kinda weird."

"Cool. Hey check out the stars. Isn't it a beautiful night?" [laughs] That's one of the best things to do with high people. People that are too high. You just distract them. Point them at something pretty. Get them focused outside themselves. So, we spend a few minutes just talking about the night sky. Ok cool. So, eventually he gets curious at me and he's like,

"What do you do here?"

"Well, you know, my job is to wander around, find people who are having a bad time, and help them have a better time."

"... Cool... Wait. ... Are you being here for me right now?"

"Yeah. That's what I'm doing."

And it's like he melted. All the tension just left his body, and this smile appears on his face.

I could just see this thought appearing in his head. Somebody is taking care of me: I'm going to be ok. He relaxed enough that could start asking him about himself, and how he found his way here. He you know, he had never done anything like this before. He had never eaten anything like this before. It was all incredibly new to him. We talked about that some. Then we got him back around to this place where we could see this as an adventure. Eventually he's like, "I'm getting really cold."

"I totally understand. You might want to wrap that space blanket around you. But, you have a buddy who is coming back with a blanket. Your buddy really cares about you a

whole lot. He's only gone because he is getting a blanket for you."

"Oh. It's getting real, real late and I just wanna get to bed."

At this point, it's been an hour since this buddy left. I'm pretty sure the guy just got lost or wandered off or something. So, I'm like, "Can you find your way back to camp?"

"I think so..."

"Ok, here we go! This is gonna be a fucking adventure, alright!"

Getting a high person back to their camp can take hours!! But, whatever. The journey is the point. Legitimately, walking around with somebody is one of the best ways to get them out of a bad space. So, we start walking back towards his camp and there's moments where he's like, "Ok, yeah its this way, I recognize that landmark, no, that's a wrong turn, we need to go back this way." He's with it enough that he's finding his way back. It's cool. I think, ah, well, this isn't going to be so long after all. We're remarkably close to his camp when we see his buddy turn

a corner and almost run right into us. This guy is out of breath, and he's got a quilt in one hand and pillows in the other. He's like, "Thank God I found you! I got lost!" [laughter]

I'm like oh, good! We're like half a fucking block away from this guy's camp. [laughter] The guy's like, "I'm just gonna go to bed."

"Ok, here's your quilt!"

[laughter] So, we get the guy back into his bed, and we tuck him in, and I tell him a bedtime story. We legit put him to bed. He is snoring when we leave. And his friend hugs me, and thanks me. [laughter] And I walk away.

If you want a satisfying start to finish story that is the best one I got right there. I totally made that guy's night. He wrote to us later, naming me—or Leeway, anyway... and he wanted me to know that the rest of the event went really, really well, and that was his starting point. He was so grateful that there was somebody there for him.



Photo credit: unknown, 2015.