

# Pioneers and Pathfinders: Melissa Lauderdale

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## Steve Poor

Hi, this is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

I'm joined this week by Melissa Lauderdale, a true force in legal innovation. Melissa has spent her career transforming how legal teams operate, driving efficiency and building inclusive, high-performing teams in the fast-paced world of energy and corporate law. From her work modernizing legal operations at Exelon to securing industry-first regulatory approvals at Constellation, she's been at the forefront of reshaping compliance and legal processes through technology and smart strategy. Melissa continues to lead change, designing risk mitigation strategies, automating compliance systems, and helping her organizations stay both agile and accountable. She has also earned honors for her work in DEI, like the 2023 DEI Champion Award and 2020 ACC Value Champions. Additionally, she frequently shares her insights in legal ops leadership with top-industry forums.

In today's episode, Melissa shares her journey into the energy sector, how she inspires legal teams to embrace technology, her approach to building inclusive workplaces, and the principles that have guided her leadership along the way. It was a conversation full of practical insights and inspirations. I hope you make the time to take a listen. Thank you very much.

Melissa, welcome to the podcast. Thanks so much for making the time.

## Melissa Lauderdale

Well, thank you for inviting me. I've really enjoyed listening to your other guests and I'm thrilled to be a part of the conversation. I think a lot about what a great career I've had, how I've gotten to do really interesting things, and how we can continue to make it a great career for everyone going forward.

## Steve Poor

Yeah, you've had such a fascinating career. It's so multifaceted. When you went to law school, was this the way you thought it was going to play out?

## Melissa Lauderdale

No, I know some of your guests, like, had a family member, lawyer and I did not. I was sort of reflected on it. I went to law school because I thought it was a safe thing to do and it would pay the bills.

## Steve Poor

That sounds familiar to me.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Yeah, my father was killed in a car accident when I was an infant, and my stepfather was in the oil industry and got laid off when I was in middle school in a real slump in the oil industry. And I think I desperately wanted the security of the job, so I did the joint degree program with the LBJ School of public affairs at UT because that was my real interest, and I literally took as few classes as I could possibly take in the law school and still get a JD.

**Steve Poor**

What was the public affairs program focused on, at least in the way you designed it?

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Right. It was kind of an MBA, but for government, so it's actually turned out to be a good preparation. And then as a regulatory and compliance lawyer, I've spent a lot of time trying to influence policy, you know, through legal procedures. So, they turned out to be really a great pair for me.

**Steve Poor**

Did you think that energy was one of the industries that you would spend your career in?

**Melissa Lauderdale**

So, my mother thinks it was Karma, so I had one grandfather who ran the water utility and one grandfather who was the chairman of the electric co-op. And then when I was an undergrad at UT in Austin, I applied for all of these jobs for summer after freshman year, and I put in an application with the city of Austin and the job I ended up with was at what is now Austin Energy—the city-owned municipal utility and it just ended up that way I wanted. I wanted a job in Europe. That's really what happened, and for my first job, and I had done an LLM through UT at the University of Edinburgh and I did this big networking trip, and I looked up. Somebody went to high school with and some UT alums who were working in Europe and I got through referral. An American lawyer working for Enron in London called me I think really just to be nice. In the pre cell phone days and I had to say, you know, I've got to run to the train station because I'm going to this conference, I'll call you back and I called him from the lobby of his office building because that's where I was going to run him for the conference. And I talked myself into being invited upstairs. And I pestered him until he gave me a job. And it happened to be in energy.

**Steve Poor**

Well, there you go. Was the job with Enron?

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Yeah, I started right out of law school with Enron.

**Steve Poor**

It's been a fascinating experience, given everything that ultimately became of Enron.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Indeed, I did leave before the bitter end, but I it was quite a place on the upside as they hired really smart people, and you find people throughout the energy industry who worked at Enron because they really hired people and they gave them space to go try things. Now, obviously there's some big downsides when you don't have appropriate control. But it also meant, as a young lawyer, I had a lot more opportunity than I would have had any place else.

**Steve Poor**

As you look back over your career, you've worked at a number of regulated industries. A number of companies, has been a theme for you as you sort of look back on it? I mean, I know we sort of make moves based on the entities of the current circumstances and we look back and go, huh, that may not have made sense at the time, but looking back on it, there was a common thread in all that.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

I guess maybe the two common threads are people and you know opportunities to see my work have an impact. So sometimes I took a job I wasn't really expecting that I would really want because I had a great conversation with the general counsel. When I worked for the Edison Electric Institute for a while, that trade association for investor owned utilities and the general counsel who hired me was really interested in having somebody with a different background, and he and I hit it off. And that's why I took that job, you know. Another job I took, I had two job opportunities, a smaller job at a big company or one and build the real touring compliance team for a smaller company. And I thought I could have more impact at the smaller company. So I do think either that that great personal connection with here's somebody who's going to give me some runway to try things or just a place where I think the scope is there to try things.

**Steve Poor**

One of the areas of expertise you bring is the application of technology to the efficiency and effectiveness of the legal departments that you've worked with over the years. How did you become interested in technology and sort of how has it changed over your career?

**Melissa Lauderdale**

So I started UT as a computer science major.

**Steve Poor**

Oh.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

So started that interest early on and I decided I was capable of staying up all night early, but I didn't really like it. So I set. That aside, and really came back to it when I ended up with the job as chief of staff to the excellent General Counsel and as part of that role that ended up being VP of Legal Operations, I became responsible for technology and I started learning more about. All of the great technology that was available, I was very fortunate to work. With Christmas star, who probably everybody in your eDiscovery world would know, and she taught me so much about technology and the capacity to change the legal profession, and I really took it on to figure out how to get lawyers to use technology, which way I know your other speakers have had similar challenges. Is with how do you actually get lawyers to use technology? And in some, one of the upsides on COVID was that it finally got lawyers to focus on technology. So I led ... We had weekly calls with the legal department at Exelon and we would do 10 minute tips on how to use teams, how to show a PowerPoint. What happens if I need to print when I'm in another? I'm at home, but I want to run to the office and print, but it's not the office that I normally go to. How do I do mobile print? And I did these really blog posts that went out to the department that were part technology tips, but I sort of drew people in by writing about my own sort of human struggles with COVID and tried to sort of show people that everybody is struggling. But there are ways to make it better and try to provide those tips.

**Steve Poor**

You look back on it, and it's just sort of an amazing time. Not amazing in a good way, but amazing in terms of something I never thought we'd have to live through. But you did see people able to adapt to technology more rapidly than they've ever had before because they had to. So you're right. It did accelerate. I think the adoption of technology, at least by lawyers and I think probably across industries.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Yes. So it showed that lawyers could do it. We just need to figure out how to get them to do more of it.

**Steve Poor**

Right. And how to sustain them doing it?

**Steve Poor**

As you look at sort of how a legal department operates, how do you sort of approach making it a great place to work? What are the challenges and opportunities that you see as a general proposition?

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

So that's something I think a lot about, cause I I've had such an exciting career and I really love that I have autonomy in my work, right. I get to drive to a certain extent, you know what projects I take on or when I work on things and I have a lot of opportunity. To have a direct impact on the business and both of those are very rewarding, but I do think we have to do better about everyday life. You hear a lot about AI is going to take away jobs. And I'm really not worried about that at all. And you hear about burnout. And I think rather than just having a conversation about how to stop burnout. We should be thinking big. Like how can we really make what is fundamentally a cool job, a great job? And there are, you know, a couple of things that have been successful for me, I guess and one really is getting everyone to embrace technology. And I think that really has to come from the top that really convincing lawyers that spending small amounts of time on training, even if their time is in short supply, will yield benefits in the long run because the truth is the demands of the business are such that if you're not using technology, you're always going to feel like you're behind. Because the demand for legal services is so high and I don't think that's ever going to change. So embrace technology and see that as part of the job. I also think lawyers really need to own budget management as part of the job. And that relationship with outside counsel. Managing the budget is just as important, really, as managing the job, and I find lawyers sort of resistant to that. But if you embrace that that's part of the job and understand the tools and the expectations, then you really make yourself look good internally and you make the whole process run more smoothly.

### **Steve Poor**

Picking up on that point before you move to the next point, sort of on the budget management piece ... Are there areas of improvement you normally see lawyers needing, whether in-house or outside in terms of defining the scope, creating the budget, having a hard conversation around exceeding the budget, etcetera? Are there areas that consistently pop up as needing improvement?

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

Yes, I think. Lower in-house lawyers know that there are all sorts of financial pressures. On the budget. But I think they don't really know until you've done it a few times how to really scope out the work in phases. Have those conversations with your outside counsel about how you can fix part of the fee or have. Some sort of sharing of risk because really what the business leadership wants is predictability. They know lawyers cost money, right? But the budget pressure is really around. Unpredictability and certainly we don't know how cases are going to unfold, but you can get some, some price certainty around phases, right? And particularly routine things. And I think in-house lawyers don't feel sort of equipped to go and negotiate prices or how they're to think

about the work that way. And that's sort of part of the what I see as the role of legal operations: to equip those lawyers to have those conversations, because we want it to be good for firms and good for in-house lawyers. But the financial pressures in-house to continually decrease the budget when hourly rates are continuing to rise really creates this tension. And ignoring it just makes the situation worse.

**Steve Poor**

It's a difficult conversation, though, isn't it? And people do tend to shy away from having difficult conversations, so I can see how I can see the value for arming them with how do you have this conversation with an outside lawyer who they probably have a good relationship with and probably trust and probably do good work. And that seems to me to be a really valuable role for legal operations to perform.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

It is. I had a conversation this morning and said, you know, I need you to be up front with me when the scope has exceeded the budget. Right. I value your time and I understand how a firm economics work. And I want this to be good for both of us, but we both need to be having a candid conversation about the money because it's a big part of the in-house job really to manage money.

**Steve Poor**

No, it is and it's conversation. Most lawyers and private practice aren't comfortable having either. Frankly, the conversation about rates. Oh my God, I got to fix the price and I don't really know everything I do is magic. It's a really fascinating dynamic, I think.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

It is and you know I used. One of the auction tools, and that was an interesting way to force the issue to get people to focus on the money. And there are different ways to do it, but the in-house pressures on budgets are significant. And I think making the obligation to manage the money part of the job is how we change those expectations. So that everybody knows that you have to be able to talk about the money to do this job well.

**Steve Poor**

You do. Tell me a little bit about the auction tool you use, not necessarily the tool itself, but how did that enhance or degrade the relationship? Tell me about your experience there.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Sure. So we had some really strong savings come out of the tool that were it's you know it's an RFP tool really, but it works by you run conflicts through the tool and you put the project in and then you know the firm comes acts with the assumptions that they're

making and the price. And you did find, maybe this firm has more capacity at the moment, right? So they're willing to do a fixed price for a better deal or, you know, this firm came back with something in their assumptions that we hadn't thought about. And we think maybe they're right. And, you know, we should go with them, even if it costs more. So we didn't necessarily choose the lowest price, but the function of doing the auction forced the conversation around price and force this really being concrete. About what we were buying, because the firms couldn't really provide what we wanted unless we were clear about what services we were buying and that conversation was really valuable and produced results for us as well as creating an automated process to answer questions about who's going to do the work, who's going to get credit for the work. You know, are we getting diverse perspectives on our work?

### **Steve Poor**

Does the use of the tool, how does that impact the relationship side of the attorney-client connection in a positive way? A negative way? I mean business is business these days and it is what it is, but I'm curious as to how you see that factoring into the relationship side.

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

So we did have some attorneys at firms who were not happy and didn't want to do it, and everybody would rather have the business without the tool.

### **Steve Poor**

Of course, goes without saying.

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

Right. I mean, all these companies that sell things right and everybody wants to sell without the middleman, right? And without an RFP, right?

### **Steve Poor**

The good old days.

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

Yes, but when I would talk to the relationship partners and I would say I have to do a call a round of cost optimization every year. You know we spend on the same order of magnitude on outside lawyers as we do on inside lawyers. I have to be able to show that I'm being a good steward of that money and I can't do it, you know, without market, knowing that I'm getting market price and when we come down to it, they could understand my perspective. And would they rather be included or not included in the RFP? They want to be included. So I mean, I will say it was still a struggle to get people involved and the firm that were our core firms got most of that business, but we knew

we were getting it at market prices, so I do not think it really undermined the relationship it just evolved. That in a way that really reflects the pressures that we're feeling.

**Steve Poor**

The pressures are real, and they're not. They're not going away, are they? They sort of took us down this tangent. Sorry about that. Let me sort of back up to some of the things you're talking about making the working and legal department a great place to work better than good. But great. One of the areas you've been recognized for is your work in DEI. What's the rule that equity and inclusion play in making legal department a great place to work?

**Melissa Lauderdale**

So I think to get the highest level of engagement out of teams, you have to have an inclusive workplace that people feel like it's fair and equitable. So I think in terms of outputs, those things are really fundamental and you know the McKenzie study. There's plenty of studies that show that that's the case. But I think it needs to be in a very granular level like we need to stop talking about lawyers and non lawyers and in-house legal departments. You know, we have legal departments, right? And we have employees and the accountants don't say the CPA's and the non-CPAs. And there is no other place in the company where there's that type of class distinction. There are levels, right? We know the vice president is different than the analyst, but, you know, they're people doing big deals and they don't segregate their staffs like lawyers do. And I think, you know, that just needs to go by the wayside. So you know, I've gone to places where in the beginning you're being a staff meeting and the lawyers were the only people who actually were allowed to speak. The other people just sat there and listened.

**Steve Poor**

Oh my goodness.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Or hey, we only, if you're an admin, you can't be promoted unless you work for Vice President. And sorry, your office doesn't have a vice president, so no matter what your skills are, you can't be permitted that type of inequitable treatment just really undermines morale, and it's so unnecessary. People bring different things to the table right and the person who can help you design your eDiscovery search using the newest technology is bringing potentially as much value to that piece of litigation as the legal strategy. And we just need to get our egos out of the way and be a team and I saw getting some of the other legal professionals who didn't go to law school promoted and giving them more responsibility resulted in such engagement. They felt so valued. They want to put in that extra mile, right. But to really make that happen and have that type of workplace where everybody's in it together, we need to get rid of this outdated distinction that, you know, you're magic because you went to law school.

**Steve Poor**



It's so interesting here. You say that we've been having that discussion in the profession a long time and you got to bear with me. This is going to seem like a winding road to get to the point I'm going to make. So I apologize. But he used to get asked questions about the Big Four moving into the legal profession and what advantages they have, other than the massive capital advantage that they have. And I've always been believed that the one of the advantages the Big Four has is they have been far better about doing exactly what you just described about creating multidisciplinary teams across professions to service their clients needs, than the legal profession has been, and I think that's a necessary learning for us because of the value people bring who are trained in other aspects of business and getting past it with lawyers is always a challenge. Isn't it?

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

It is and I you know that I think needs to start earlier in our careers and changing expectations. But one of the business books that I really like is Free Thinking Leaders. And, you know, they had a podcast, but one of their core tenants is that you need to stop trying to make. Everybody look the same, right? And telling everybody you need to be equally good at all of the same things, when in reality you need to do is find out what people are really good at. It and give them more of. Right. You know, one person who works for me now and probably listen to this and he'll laugh, but he is an infinite social battery and I do not.

### **Steve Poor**

I know people like that.

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

Right. I do not. So I have to be a lot more judicious about what I go to and where I spend my time, right. And if I need somebody to go talk to 100 people and go to some conference. I'm not the best person to go. Who, right? I should send the person who's best. If I have somebody who's really has that brain that they can see that what type of technology can solve the problem? Right. They're really good at digging in and asking all those little questions and figuring out this is really the problem we're trying to solve so we can go find the right technology. That's a great. Skill and we need to embrace that diversity and say, you know, let's figure out what you're really good at. And obviously we all have to do things that we aren't good. At and don't want. To do but you when I'm trying to really maximize that diverse brain, that diverse perspective, that diverse experience, I think one of the, I mean I'm a, I'm a lesbian. I'm neurodiverse. I'm a woman. I got all kinds of diversity, but some days, I think what matters the most is that I've worked a lot of places. So I've just seen more than somebody who's been at one place for a long time. That's an aspect of diversity.

### **Steve Poor**

I knew that you your focus on diversity has covered a long period of time. We're in a moment now where just sort of the term has become a cultural flashpoint. How do you

advise other professionals in the DEI world to sort of approach this moment? How do they think through what it means to them and what it means to the business goals you're trying to achieve.

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

Yes, well, this start probably starts with a big sigh, right? And find it very distressing that we are where we are and I think a little bit of why we are where we are is because we didn't do a good enough job explaining what we were trying to do and in the short term that is going to mean that we change the language and how we talk about things a little bit. But I read a Harvard Business Review piece some years ago where they had sort of they do the two perspectives on the topic and one of them was, you know, should we be looking at diversity writ large like here, the company stats or is diversity sort of at the team level and? I've always thought that we're talking about diversity of perspective and experience, and that's at the team level. So you know it might be me hiring a man if my team is mostly one right brings more diversity, but I think the first thing we need to do is to regroup and focus on tying what we're doing to the business, right. So I'm not looking at what are the stats, what large I'm looking at. That how do I get more diverse experience and perspectives on my team where I'm trying to solve this problem and that lines of diversity includes can include everyone, right? I, you know, teasing my colleague, I went to the University of Texas and he went to Texas A&M. Right. So if I hire an Aggie, that's diversity for me, right? Because our schools are rivals. We need to talk about diversity in a way that more people can understand. So working on that and also trying to talk about the inclusion piece with more around the language of we're trying to learn about our colleagues and aspects of their identity. Because we're all one team and we're all working together and we want everybody to feel included and engaged. And if I learn more about you and what's important to you, then I can support you and your goals in life and you can support me and we have to learn and engage with each other in order to have that maximum relationship in the business world. And these events that we have around identity are really opportunities for that. So we're going to you know we have a Hispanic heritage event. And we organize it around teaching people how much American music has been influenced by Hispanic music. So we've got an education component. We have some Hispanic employees who can be sharing their excitement about their culture. We're having those events, and we want to use the language so that people feel included and feel that it's about learning about their colleagues so that we can have a greater look environment and less about the hot button language that people I think misunderstand.

### **Steve Poor**

That's a great point. The concept of inclusion, I think is so critical to enable people to bring their true and best self to work and feel comfortable in the environment and that's going to result in better service levels, better productivity, better creativity, better innovation. There's no question about. So as you look back over your career, your experience has been various sectors and roles. Has there been a guiding principle that you've brought to the various personas you've embodied over the years there? Are there certain tenants that have anchored the way you've approached your various jobs?

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

So the first is care about people as individual. So whether they're going to work for me long term or they're not, I want to help them grow and learn over the course of their career. And that really builds this loyalty and these long term relationships, which are just as beneficial to me as they are to them. And then curiosity. I ask a lot of questions, and have little tolerance and patience for things that seem incredibly inefficient, so I'm willing to take a risk and try and take on big projects, even if they're really hard because I'm impatient.

### **Steve Poor**

Curiosity is such a critical component these days, isn't it? We don't really attribute that to lawyers, but it's so important. It's just amazing to me. Is there a piece of advice you've gotten over the years of leadership that has stuck with you that said, oh, I can learn from that. I can adapt that. I can make that part of my contribution to my business.

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

So I think one piece of advice that I got was a leader who really answered the question about how do you get to work-life balance and his answer was you need to decide what your boundaries are and stick to them and companies will take everything that you will give and you have to decide. What it is that you're willing to do? Because if you work every weekend from the start, then you will work every weekend forever. So I work very hard, but I do have boundaries about what works for me and what doesn't work for me, and I try hard to be consistent about those. Because I really enjoy the impact that I make at work, but I need to manage my health issues and my other concerns and I can only do all of those things if I'm taking care of myself and respecting my needs as well. You know, as well as the business needs.

### **Steve Poor**

Requires a strong sense of self to do that, though, doesn't it?

### **Melissa Lauderdale**

It does, and that's gotten easier as I've gotten older. Maybe I just. I think I've gotten to the point where I know that it will all work out, so I'm going to stick to my guns and do what's right for me. And if it turns out this isn't the right place for me, then it's not the right place for me.

### **Steve Poor**

It is one of the few benefits of getting older. I can speak from experience. Melissa, thank you so much. I really appreciate it. You've done such wonderful things of your career, and we'll continue to do such wonderful things. Thank you for that. And thank you for your time today.

**Melissa Lauderdale**

Oh, it's been an absolute pleasure, Steve. Thank you so much for inviting me.

**Steve Poor**

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