

## CREATING A SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION THROUGH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AT COBB COUNTY-MARIETTA WATER AUTHORITY

By  
Glenn Page, General Manager  
Cobb County-Marietta Water Authority

Richard Gerstberger, President  
TAP Resource Development Group, Inc.

Serving one of Atlanta's largest suburbs, Cobb County-Marietta Water Authority (CCMWA) has a big job. And with a core purpose "to provide sustainable and reliable drinking water that supports public health, public safety and the economic vitality of the region," CCMWA has established equally large expectations of themselves.

As with any organization in today's changing environment, CCMWA needs to have a view toward the future, which can seem overwhelming while running a complex business day-to-day. In creating their Strategic Plan and 9 Strategic Initiatives, CCMWA realized that having a well-trained, engaged, and prepared workforce is the most crucial component to upholding their values and vision for the future.



While always important, Workforce Development (attract, develop and retain top talent), became a priority in the face of a wave of imminent retirements. CCMWA needed to take action to ensure a depth of knowledge and commitment to the strate-

gic plan so that they will remain a sustainable and viable utility.

The threat of critical workforce related trends is very real. Consider the following forecasts:

- Over 30% of the current workforce in the water utility industry will retire before 2020.
- Directors, managers and supervisors make up the largest percentage of those departures.
- The competition for qualified employees is increasing, making the organization vulnerable to losing staff to other government agencies and private companies.
- Many water agencies have not documented their processes in ways that capture instructional knowledge and facilitate fast on-boarding, leaving them vulnerable to ineffective employees and unexpected separations.

To continue its stewardship as the second largest supplier of safe drinking water in Georgia, CCMWA reached out to TAP Resource Development Group for a comprehensive workforce development plan. Over the last 20 years, TAP Resource has worked with many managers in a number of public works, utility, and other local government organizations. With over 250 organizations as customers, they came to the table with a clear Workforce Development plan that aligned with CCMWA's needs and Strategic Plan.

CCMWA General Manager Glenn Page stated,

*"I have been aware of TAP Resource's work in the water industry for a couple of decades, and was convinced that their expertise could effectively assist us in developing and executing a detailed plan to meet our workforce development goals."*

The Workforce Development goal would revolve

around the initiative of making CCMWA “an employer of choice,” appealing to the best and brightest in the industry, and providing CCMWA’s employees with a rewarding career full of opportunity and professional growth.

An effective Succession Plan created the foundation for CCMWA to identify the positions, skills, and numbers needed for the organization to accomplish its Core Purpose, Initiatives and Goals within the context of the Values identified in the Strategic Plan.

There were three Strategic Goals identified:

- Develop a highly competent, committed and supported workforce
- Improve employee engagement and morale
- Improve workforce diversity

CCMWA’s Workforce Development Plan was primarily designed to address the first of the three Strategic Goals by including: Succession Planning, Knowledge Management, Leadership Development, and Organizational Change. And because development initiatives within an organization are interrelated, accomplishing the Action Items in the first Goal have an impact on the subsequent goals.

## SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT

Comprehensive succession planning involved aligning leadership with the organization for which the leader is responsible. Leadership and management positions need to be filled based on talent, fit with the needs of the position and be based on how the organization provides for the needs of its customers. For that reason, a six-step process that involves the entire organization was used for effective succession planning:

1. Understand the organization.
2. Analyze risk with a focus on mission critical positions.
3. Develop competency models for the affected positions.
4. Create an integrated and individualized leadership and supervisory development pro-

gram.

5. Identify and remove barriers to effective succession planning.
6. Implement a management system to ensure success of the succession planning process.

Succession planning at CCMWA considered knowledge- and skill-based requirements, as well as leadership and management needs. In both cases, succession planning was founded on a risk management approach. CCMWA began with an assessment of the current workforce situation, as outlined below.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The Organizational Assessment phase looked at workforce outflows (from retirements and other departures) that create the need for new employees, plus staffing demands created by growth and other changes. The successful creation of an effective succession plan is dependent on having a firm understanding of the organization and its purpose, culture and degree of alignment. For this reason, an organizational assessment is critical to successful succession planning. This type of analysis accomplished the following:

- Involved a large part of the organization in understanding the organization and its current situation.
- Enabled the leadership team to get below symptoms and identify core issues.
- Identified strengths and barriers to successful implementation of the succession planning process.
- Encouraged clarity of strategic focus throughout the organization.

Through the assessment process, the leadership team gained an understanding of the organization’s focus, culture, leadership, the alignment of culture and leadership with the organization’s purpose, and the level of integration among elements of culture and leadership.

At CCMWA, action plans were then developed and implemented based on the needs identified. The result is the development and implementation of a

comprehensive training plan covering both knowledge and leadership aspects of the organization. This two-pronged approach will provide a sustainable workforce into the future.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

A consistent concern for CCMWA was the loss of knowledge from retiring staff members with extensive system knowledge. Concerns identified included the difficulty in capturing employee knowledge, especially for hands-on positions such as pump maintenance technicians, electricians, operators, etc. This tacit knowledge (also viewed as experience, wisdom, and even art) is developed over a lifetime of service. For example, only experience can provide the ability to tell by the sound of a pump that it needs service, or that changing a setting will impact numerous other processes. Tacit knowledge is the most challenging to capture.

There are a range of approaches to capturing tacit knowledge. One method used at CCMWA is to document information in tools such as Standard Operating Procedures, Geographical Information Systems, and computerized asset management programs. Capture of tacit knowledge, however, often depends on person-to-person exchange, with an ability to hear, observe and experience the knowledge—and a willingness of the experienced employee to share the knowledge.

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SUPERVISOR TRAINING

Training in leadership and supervision should be part of an organization's workforce development program and cover the essential skills and knowledge for employees to understand the important aspects of leadership and supervision.

TAP Resource provided a comprehensive leadership development program including the following steps:

**1. Leadership Competency Mapping.** An assessment instrument and job descriptions were used to determine the various attributes (behaviors) of leadership that are important to the organization, including the appropriate ranges for each of 22 attributes for each position. With this information a Competency Map was created for each leadership position.

**2. Leadership Training.** A training program was established to train members of the leadership team on the important elements of leadership in a utility type organization. The program covered the following topics:

- Leadership fundamentals and characteristics in a utility organization.
- The Organization's strategic focus and why it is important.
- The four core leadership practices and their relationship to culture and strategy.
- The importance of balanced leadership.
- Basics of organizational performance and key results areas.
- Integration of leadership and performance management.
- The importance of individual leadership development.

**3. Leader Assessment.** A 360-degree non-judgmental assessment system was used to provide comprehensive information about a manager's view of his or her leadership attributes, along with the views of their peers, direct reports, and supervisor. This information, along with CCMWA's strategic plan and the competency maps, established the foundation for the creation of individual leadership development plans for each manager.

**4. Create Individual Leadership Development Plans.** Each leadership team manager created a leadership development plan that focused on his or her particular training needs as identified in the 360° assessment process described above. Each plan was reviewed by the manager's supervisor and integrated into the organization's performance management system to track plan completion.

TAP Resource also recommended follow-up sessions to CCMWA's current supervisor training program to introduce more advanced concepts and themes and to provide participants with the opportunity to share success stories, and bring issues forward for discussion.

Topics discussed during this highly interactive four-day session include:

- Role and responsibilities of supervisors
- Practices used by effective supervisors
- Knowledge of self
- Creating a high-performing team
- Situational leadership
- Leadership styles
- Understanding organizational culture

## PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

CCMWA has created a very comprehensive workforce development plan. To be effective, this type of program must be a living document; not one that is created and then sits on a shelf in someone's office. In this case, implementation or development plans were created for each activity, including succession planning, knowledge management, leadership development and supervisor training. They include specific, measurable timeframes and are being monitored on a frequent basis, either monthly or quarterly. Implementation plans include goals, action items and metric or timeframes. CCMWA established an organization-wide tracking, monitoring and celebration system to ensure that goals are accomplished in an effective and timely manner.

## SUMMARY

The foundation of workforce development is an effective Succession Plan: a systematic process that supports organizational stability and sustainability by minimizing disruptions to an organization's day-to-day operations. In addition to a succession plan, effective workforce development includes several organizational action items. TAP Resource worked with CCMWA to recognize their vulnerabilities, develop a customized plan, and create a sustainable implementation and management process.

CCMWA's overall workforce development program has provided the organization with a comprehensive knowledge management and SOP program. In addition, the succession planning program identified 8 'critical to mission' and 5 "important to mission" skill-based positions that need immediate attention. As a result, a succession planning format was developed and implemented for three sample positions. In addition, leadership development and

supervisor training programs were developed and implemented.

The overall plan should be updated at least every couple of years. CCMWA can effectively accomplish this by including succession planning within an overall Organizational Performance Management System of measurable goal setting and planned follow-up.

Call us at (303) 561-3788  
email us at [info@tapresource.com](mailto:info@tapresource.com) or  
visit us online at [tapresource.com](http://tapresource.com)  
to make your organization more effective.