

THE PEOPLE SIDE OF ASSET MANAGEMENT: SOME THOUGHTS FROM A WATER UTILITY OPERATIONS PROFESSIONAL

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There are many definitions of **ASSET MANAGEMENT** thrown at utility professionals every day. It is the new “buzz word” in the water industry. But what does it mean to water utilities in terms of doing a utility’s daily work?



What about the PEOPLE asset? Water Utility Industry Professionals, have been “out of sight, out of mind” for too many years. It is time for utilities to help educate our public to the importance of safe drinking water and the investment of funds and PEOPLE necessary to protect and manage that asset.

The first people to respond to a complaint from a customer are the face of that utility. First impressions are very important, and it is essential that each utility staffer remember this as they deal with customers who are upset, irate or distraught because they do not have water in their homes, or flooding, or a variety of other reasons. What is the appearance of the crew and the equipment that

rolls up to the problem area? Are they reasonably neat and the equipment in good working order? Is the staff polite to the person who has called in the problem? Nothing will give a utility a “bad rap” quicker than a field crew that is obviously sloppy and unclean, lazy, belligerent, lackadaisical or worse, rude.

If a crew is going into an area to do a condition assessment of the pipes and appurtenances, does the utility notify the customers in the area that may be affected by its activities? Letting the customers know in advance goes a long way toward building a good public working relationship with these customers. The customer is one of a utility’s greatest assets in this industry.

When a person makes a decision to become a water utility operator and gets the basic training to work at a treatment facility, does the utility allow this person to learn more skills and work in a variety of areas or settings? Sometimes the staff will get stuck in a rut and think there is only one way to do a job. The fresh eyes and thoughts of a new employee should be encouraged, even if they are not completely correct about specific issues. Utility managers should look upon these instances as opportunities to train and provide additional skills, but many times cannot get out of their own ruts. So, it is incumbent upon utility managers, as the professionals and the mentors in the industry to be open minded to new ideas and new people, while at the same time, guiding them so that they will

learn new things without jeopardizing the health and safety of coworkers or the public.

The importance of the **PEOPLE ASSET** in the water utility industry cannot be downplayed. As utilities look for a new generation of professionals for all aspects of the business, from field personnel all the way to the management of these utilities, they **MUST** provide the training, skills, knowledge and a fair and reasonable living salary that will attract talented, intelligent, motivated

skills sharp and continuing to learn new skills? As utility managers and the public rely on these staff to protect the public health and the environment around them, the **VALUE** of these **PEOPLE ASSETS** becomes even more important. Take a close look at your own utility. How you can improve this valuable asset may be right there, just waiting for you to see it.

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young people to this industry. This “generational crossroads” for most utilities means that many of their experienced staff will retire within the next 5 years. There will be a large influx of new staff that need the training and guidance, with commensurate opportunities to grow and commensurate salary structures to provide fair, appropriate wages for skills earned and learned.

Does your utility have a Performance Management System, where staff can take advantage of the opportunity to learn new skills and thus be available and ready to step into more responsibility when they are needed? Do you have a way to assess these new skills in order to determine the most efficient use and opportunities for your staff? Are they compensated for keeping their