Are you happy with your long-distance plan?

Managing facility managers from afar brings unique operational challenges

William Luksha

Managing a facility is no easy task. Keeping staff motivated and clients happy while complying with environmental regulations and standard business practices is challenging when a facility is nearby, but the job is even more difficult when the facility is more than a quick car ride away. However, the long-distance experience can be rewarding for everyone involved when the utility or company charged with operating and managing the facility is dedicated to effective hiring practices, developing staff, communication, and teamwork.

Finding and Keeping the Right People

A successful project starts with getting the right people on board from top to bottom. Plant managers should be people managers, public speakers, client relations specialists, regulatory experts, and operators. They also must have skills pertaining to communication, financial planning, safety, and computers. It is equally important that they be responsible, loyal, and conscientious team players. A staff is only as good as its manager, so it is necessary to hire a qualified professional to fill that key position.

It is important to know what a manager is worth in the marketplace and compensate the person in that role accordingly. Sometimes, this requires paying more than the budgeted salary to get the right person, but the efficient operations made possible by a more experienced manager will make it worthwhile in the end. Likewise, an incentive program for managers can help encourage them to exceed budget projections.

In addition to salary, benefits should be evaluated annually. When a company provides the best benefits possible for the lowest cost to the employee, it shows that there is a genuine concern for the staff's well-being. When selecting a benefits package for a remote location, consider the specific needs of those employed there, as these may differ from what's required in your location. If some employees choose not to participate in the company-provided insurance plan because they can utilize other benefits available to them, compensate them for that. All these considerations will benefit the manager directly and indirectly, as he or she will have to deal with fewer employees' complaints.

©2006 Water Environment Federation All rights reserved

Perhaps the easiest way to establish a salary and benefits package is simply to ask the manager what he or she is seeking. As long as the request is within reason, there is no better way to show managers, from the beginning, that their voice is heard.

In some cases, it may be necessary to settle for somebody with little managerial experience. This doesn't have to be a detriment; it can be an opportunity to promote an employee from within and give him or her the tools needed to become an effective manager. While this may take additional time and effort, it ultimately could yield dividends for both the company and the individual.

In a situation where a facility's operation and management are being taken over from a municipality, be patient with the existing staff and recognize that they are in a state of transition. The first year under new management undoubtedly will result in growing pains, but by effectively managing — even from a distance — it shouldn't take much longer than the first year to adjust and make necessary staff changes.

Show Them You Care

Give employees more incentive than a paycheck to do a good job. Some valuable managing tools are to help employees map out their career paths and set goals. Let them know where their hard work can take them within the facility or, perhaps, elsewhere in the company, if they achieve their goals. Provide incentives for acquiring and upgrading professional licenses, as this benefits both the company and the individual. Consistent internal training and exposure to such external training as classes and conferences are necessary for professional development, which often leads to personal gratification. Happy people make for happy employees.

Likewise, empowerment is essential for motivation: Don't be a micromanager. Managers should feel able to make day-to-day financial decisions without supervisory input while realizing it is important to include supervisors when a decision will have a large effect on the budget. The manager should know what is expected of him or her in this capacity. If a $400 power washer is going to save man-hours and keep employees happy, it makes sense to buy one, even if it wasn't initially included in the budget.

Also, a comprehensive safety program that provides a secure working environment is an essential key to supporting managers. The safety program must be enforced and should constantly evolve to affirm to the manager and staff that safety is a priority. Incentive programs should be developed to garner staff support and input on a regular basis. Compliance must be tracked and discussed with managers regularly and at performance review periods.

Make sure the manager and staff know whom to contact at the main utility district office or company headquarters for issues related to human resources, accounting, marketing, and other core concerns. Those departments serve as support staff to the entire company, including the remote locations, and should be utilized to the fullest extent.

Something as small as buying lunch for the staff once or twice a month can go a long way to make employees feel appreciated. Make sure managers and staff at remote facilities have company apparel to wear, just as those at nearby facilities would. Remember, these people get up in the middle of the night and go into the sewers when something goes wrong, just as staff at the local facility do.

The Art of Communication

The key to any successful relationship is good communication, which long distance can complicate. Consistent personal contact regarding the general welfare of the remote manager and his or her staff is an essential part of effective management. When face-to-face contact is not an option, be in touch with them as often as possible, either by phone or e-mail. While technological advances, such as teleconferencing and e-mail, are extremely useful in many situations, relying solely on a phone or computer to exchange information can lead to misinterpretations due to lack of body language or misunderstood tone. To alleviate this, it is important to visit the manager and staff onsite at least quarterly.

The rest of the time, it is critical to get the most out of the communication you have with the manager. Listen to what he or she says so the necessary support can be provided, ask questions to gain insight on what might be going on in the facility, and encourage the manager to give feedback on what the company can do for him or her. It is pivotal to know the general mood of a facility and its manager. While this can be established relatively easily at a nearby site that is visited regularly, it is much more difficult to gauge at remote locations that aren't visited as often. Once a rapport is developed, the manager will understand that the utility district or company values its people as much as it values the project.

Sincerity is essential in gaining the manager's trust — simply going through the motions is not enough. Genuine caring must be the motivating factor. If it doesn't feel too intrusive, ask specific questions about what is going on in the remote manager's personal life. As a long-distance manager, sincerely caring about the remote manager's personal life,

©2006 Water Environment Federation All rights reserved

work challenges, and career development will go a long way to show that he or she is an important part of the company's culture — a key ingredient to a successful project. Managing a project from a remote location is less about managing the project than it is about caring about the people working on the project, developing and coaching them so they can recognize and develop their potential, and putting that potential to work for themselves and the company.

Fighting 'Outpost-itis'

When a manager and his or her staff feel that they are not part of the team, separation anxiety can set in. *Outpost-itis* is a term used to describe feelings a remote manager may experience as a result of being separated from direct supervisors and managers. One way to fight outpost-itis is to bring in managers and other key staff members for annual meetings at company headquarters to affirm that remote-facility staff members are an important part of the overall team. Let them know where they fit and how everybody plays an important role in the success of the project and the company as a whole.

Remember never to underestimate the importance of staying connected, even when it isn't possible to be in the same place at the same time. With technological advances available today, lack of opportunities for communication should never be used as an excuse for not staying in touch.

Also remember that not all facilities are the same: Don't force a plant in New Mexico to fit the same mold as a plant in Maine. Different projects face different issues, and different people require different management styles.

A company can be just as successful operating remote facilities as it is operating local facilities. The same basic management principles apply regardless of location, but when longer distances are involved, special considerations have to be made. Ultimately, a facility manager and his or her staff determine whether they will be happy, but there are things that can be done to help them get there. Invest in people, and the project will be a success.

William Luksha *is a vice president and senior area manager of contract operations and management services at Woodard & Curran (Portland, Maine). He has more than 25 years of experience in the operation, maintenance, and management of municipal and industrial wastewater treatment facilities across the United States.*

COLLECTION SYSTEMS 2006

Infrastructure Stewardship: Partnering for a Sustainable Future

CONFERENCE TOPICS

- Great Lakes Issues: Regional Concerns
- Wet Weather Control Technologies: How to Address CSO/SSO/Stormwater Concerns
- System Operation and Maintenance: How to Maintain the Necessary Controls
- Workforce: Maintaining Stability and Quality in a Changing Environment
- Public Engagement: How to Get and Keep the Customers on Your Side

For more information and to register online, please visit www.wef.org and go to "Conferences and Training"

Water Environment Federation® Preserving & Enhancing the Global Water Environment

mwea michigan water environment association

This conference and exhibition is held in cooperation with the Michigan Water Environment Association (MWEA).

©2006 Water Environment Federation All rights reserved