What Every Operator Needs to Know About Leadership and People Management

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Knowledge	Principles	Practical Considerations
Why are leadership and people management important for operators?	Leadership and people management are complex topics that require flexibility to adapt to each unique team. This article breaks leadership and people management into six core knowledge categories: guiding principles, human resources, conflict resolution, communication, workforce development, and time management.	As operators grow in their career, they may become responsible for leading one or more direct report(s). It is important for team leaders to equip themselves with skill sets that will lead the team to work together to achieve the desired goals.
Guiding principles	Each organization has various policies and guidelines in effect that shape how leaders function. Such policies and guidelines may include • compliance; • missions and vision statements; and • operational sustainability, fiscal sustainability, and responsibility.	Leaders should be familiar with the policies and guidelines that affect both their role and their direct report(s). In some cases, leaders may not have a direct role in shaping organizationwide policies and guidelines but still are responsible for working with their team to follow them.
	Compliance. A water resource recovery facility (WRRF) is responsible for meeting permit requirements such as the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System and air quality. These permit limits are enforceable and may result in fines if violated.	The overriding goal of a WRRF is to ensure compliance through proper treatment practices, permit knowledge, and proper infrastructure. Leaders may be responsible for ensuring their team meets one or more limits within the permit by operating the process properly. Leaders should use the available resources to meet permit or work with their supervisors to acquire the necessary resources to complete the work.
	Mission and vision statements. A mission or vision statement sets the expectations for a utility to achieve the goals of permit compliance and ensuring human health through effective treatment. It also sets the stage for how employees operate to achieve this goal.	Leaders should know the mission/vision statements and understand how their team's role helps the organization achieve the statement with their actions. It is critical for leaders to "see the big picture" and communicate it with their team to inspire their best work every day.
	Operational sustainability. Operational sustainability is an important part of the overall operational philosophy.	Utilities have best practices for operations that incorporate sustainability, through monitoring chemical use, recycling, and hazardous waste minimization, among other things.
	Fiscal sustainability and responsibility. The purpose of fiscal sustainability and responsibility is to ensure the organization is operating in a manner that allows it to meet its financial obligations now and into the future.	Fiscal sustainability and responsibility are critical elements of leadership, to ensure accountability to ratepayers and other stakeholders, and continued operations to meet current and future regulatory requirements.

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Human resources (HR)	HR departments exist within organizations for several reasons. A few functions that leaders may use when developing their teams include • interviewing, • onboarding, and • employee retention.	It is important for leaders to use HR when completing interviewing, onboarding, and retaining employees. HR personnel not only ensure policy and guidelines are being followed, but also help leaders put their best foot forward when building and developing their team.
	Interviewing. In addition to completing interviewing in accordance with local, state, and federal laws, it is important to conduct interviews to ensure the candidate is a suitable fit for the role (technical skill sets) and the workplace (nontechnical skill sets).	To identify the best fit when filling vacancies, ensure that interview questions tie to responsibilities outlined in job descriptions. A mix of technical and nontechnical questions will help recruitment decision-makers ensure an inclusive work center. A scoring matrix can help leaders objectively evaluate candidates during the decision-making process.
	Onboarding. When new employees start their role on a leader's team, it is important to make them feel welcome so they are comfortable asking questions or for help, as needed.	First impressions are the first step in building relationships, and this holds true for new hires when going through onboarding. These procedures should include communication on the guiding principles (mission and vision) of the organization, clear communication on training goals and expectations, and adequate training.
	Employee retention. Retaining members of an existing team helps reduce the amount of time invested in retraining personnel for various roles. In addition, effective mentoring not only is critical for new employees but also can help with employee retention by providing support and reinforcement of the reason behind the job.	Leaders who have empathy and flexibility, within policy, will facilitate buy-in and dedication as well as employee retention. Ensuring employees feel value through recognition, for not only time on the job, but also meeting expectations, can be a factor in employee retention.
Conflict resolution	Conflict can happen in a workplace when people care about what they are doing. Conflict may arise due to different personalities, work habits, and unmet expectations. Methods for resolving conflict at a work center include • active listening, and • emotional intelligence.	Conflict is not always the result of a negative event, but it must be resolved through effective leadership using objective skills to ensure everyone is heard and that the outcome is a solution that everyone can understand and buy into as an appropriate resolution.
	Active listening. Active listening essentially means that leaders should spend about 80% of the time listening, and 20% of the time responding as well as focusing on the person talking and being present in the moment of the conversation.	Active listening allows team members involved in a conflict to express their perspective and feel heard. Active listening sessions may need to be completed one-on-one or as a mediated session where two or more team members are involved.
	Emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a tool that involves using emotions to positively communicate, relieve stress, and have empathy for others in resolving conflict.	Using these tools to navigate through conflict will result in a better understanding of root causes and how decisions are made.

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Communication	Communication involves distributing and receiving information. Communication among teams occurs in various forms. Common methods of communication include • written and verbal communication, • organization, and • knowledge sharing.	The manner in which leaders communicate with their team and direct report(s) affects the workplace experience, thereby having an influence on employee retention.
	Written and verbal communication. Both written and verbal communication are critical components of effective leadership.	Leaders should maintain regular channels of communication, both written and verbal, with their team and direct report(s). They also should understand when it is important to have in-person meetings rather than written correspondence, as there are many nonverbal cues that are communicated in that setting.
	Organization. It is important to communicate with staff on how their role is meaningful, not only through emails or posters but also through general conversations in the workplace.	When personnel understand how their job contributes to the success of an organization, it will lead to higher morale, better teamwork, and overall improved performance.
	Knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing should not only be done when someone is retiring or leaving an organization. It is an important aspect of building a collaborative team and ensuring effective operations.	When personnel know more than their key responsibilities, it is much easier to cover operations in the event of an unplanned absence or departure from an organization.
Workforce development	Workforce development is important for keeping personnel educated on the latest water sector developments and engaged within the water community. Methods for workforce development include • professional development, • mentoring, and • community outreach.	Workforce development offers personnel the opportunity to gain new skill sets and insights for their role. These new skills also may allow team members to gain promotions and transfer existing knowledge to new personnel.
	Professional development. To have a workforce that continues to meet the demands of the water sector, employees must have opportunities for professional development. Professional organization involvement may occur within the Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Virginia) or its Member Associations (MAs). Involvement may include attendance at conferences, participation on MA committees, or even problem-solving groups or teams within a work center.	Effective leaders need to recognize strengths in staff and ensure the professional development opportunities offered match the interests of their staff. In addition, there are many opportunities for mentoring and community outreach embedded within these professional development activities.
	Mentoring. Mentoring is important in developing employees and is different from training. Mentoring is more of a relationship in which guidance is offered to help individuals meet their performance and overall career goals.	Mentors do not always need to be supervisors. They can be others in the organization who may offer a different and helpful perspective.
	Community outreach. Leaders can plan community outreach events to strengthen partnerships as well as provide opportunities for workforce development.	Community outreach events can range, for example, from a touch-the-truck event where community youth are invited to tour trucks used by operations and maintenance personnel, to participation in Operations Challenge, which easily lends itself to community education through demonstrations and presentations.

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Time management	With a fixed schedule that is typically associated with operator schedules, it is important that leaders help their team develop time-management skills. Leaders may leverage a variety of approaches to do this, including • scheduling tools, • prioritizing, and • delegation and accountability.	When personnel are able to use the available time-management tools, they may be able to complete their assignments in alignment with their leader's guidance.
	Scheduling tools. Organizations may have scheduling tools to allow leaders to communicate roles, responsibilities, and timelines associated with specific tasks.	Clarity provided by scheduling tools may allow team members to better understand timeline expectations and who is responsible for each distinct task.
	Prioritizing. Leaders should focus on the main priorities of the utility and not let the distractions get in the way of their purpose. Learn to say "no" to something that is not a priority. Use scheduling tools and an electronic calendar to block time for critical tasks, and to make sure the necessary time is available to meet work center goals.	Leaders or team members can use tools such as an Eisenhower Matrix to set the priority for a task. This tool plots tasks based on urgency and importance. The most urgent and important tasks should be completed immediately, and nonurgent and less important work can be completed later.
	Delegation and accountability. Delegation is an important part of being a leader. Leaders should rely on the team around them and trust that team members are capable of the tasks being assigned. This gives the team a purpose and allows them to learn and grow. Accountability is important to celebrate successes and learn from mistakes. In order to have accountability, leaders need to set clear expectations, goals, and timelines. They should hold everyone accountable for accomplishing these goals.	As leaders develop in their role, it is important that they become comfortable with delegation. This helps ensure the leaders' workload is manageable and their team members continue diversifying their skill sets. Leaders should communicate when and how particular activities went well so the team can reinforce these actions. Conversely, leaders should communicate how to improve activities that resulted in an unfavorable outcome. This level of accountability also may require follow-up actions such as mentoring or additional training to ensure the activities are completed properly. When things go well, give away all the credit. When things go poorly, take all of the blame. Own everything every day, all day.

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