

Talk about change – or else!

In my last article I discussed the negative effects of micromanagement on staff by board or council members. It is only fair to discuss the opposite side of the situation – where the staff isn't forthright with the board/council.

Changes in our water or wastewater utilities and communities are constant. Change cannot be stopped. Whether it's upgrades, regulations, deterioration of system components – changes are an everyday occurrence. Employees of water and wastewater systems are on the proverbial front lines every day. Their jobs are the most notable in a city or rural water district because everyone has an interest in what they are doing. From the

operators in the field driving to a job site to office personnel working behind a desk at city hall or the RWD office, people notice them.

The employees are also the first to field complaints. Many times, the complaints are from very irate

customers. How complaints are handled is vitally important to the smooth operation of the system. Ignoring a complaint by a customer will only bring on further complaints higher up the chain of command. Genuinely listening to the customer, logging the complaint, following up with an investigation and reporting the results to the customer all go a long way to maintaining

confidence in the staff person and in the utility. It's essential to be courteous to every caller – and it's essential to check every complaint.

key to a smooth operating system. Hiding or neglecting to provide information often can result in innuendo and backstabbing.

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The need for information

Staff persons also need to notify the board or council members of the complaint and the actions taken. While the governing body may not want to be so bothered, it's appropriate that a report is provided to them. This eliminates the customer

Employees of water and wastewater systems must provide complete and accurate information to the governing body so that they can do their jobs. Here's an example. A water system has two pumps that fill the water tower. One pump requires maintenance two or three times a month. The



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complaining to the board or council that the staff person did not give adequate consideration to the complaint.

Keeping the lines of communication open between the governing body and employees is

operator goes to the board/council and tells them they need to spend \$5,500 on a new pump, that the old one keeps breaking down.

This board/council needs more information. A maintenance record should be available to demonstrate

that the pump and motor have been serviced according to manufacturer's specifications. That record should include the number of repairs made on it, the cost of those repairs and how often the repairs are being made. By providing everything possible to justify the expenditure of \$5,500 for a new pump the board can make a decision much quicker. The staff member should also have several bids for the new pump.

Who's indispensable?

Job descriptions of water and wastewater personnel vary greatly across Kansas. However, there is one aspect that is the same for each system. Maintaining accurate maps is critical for everyone. I have conducted water loss surveys in several water systems in Kansas and have found that most systems have at least a base map or an original map of the system. However, changes or improvements to the system that

Conference topics for the board/council

The 2007 KRWA conference has several sessions to help out with Human Resource (HR) issues.

These include:

- HR Fundamentals on Tuesday, 3/27 beginning at 10 a.m.
- Alternative Dispute Resolution, Tuesday, 3 /27 at 10 a.m.
- KanCap: Improvement Management of Kansas Water Systems, Tuesday, 3/27 at 10 a.m.
- Micromanagement: Counterproductive Control on Wednesday, 3/28 at 1:30 p.m.
- Developing Employee Handbooks: A Common Sense Approach on Thursday, 3/29 at 9:30 a.m.

These sessions are among many opportunities to help all of us perform our jobs more efficiently and to learn how to deal effectively and responsibly with issues and people. I hope you will attend these and the scores of other sessions at the conference.



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have been made are usually not noted on the map. The operator may know what changes have been made but no other person does, let alone where the changes are. Well, new lines that were added after original construction are not ghost lines that deliver water to houses.

The reasons for not having updated maps vary widely. One operator once told me that if he had the maps updated then he would no longer be important to the system. In other words, he knows where everything is by memory and is therefore viewed as indispensable. His actual words were, "If I ever get fired or decide to quit, this system would be up the proverbial creek without a paddle." I wondered at the time if he could swim!

Attitudes like that only create hard feelings and lead to bigger problems. No matter whom anyone thinks they are or how sophisticated they might believe

themselves to be, no one is indispensable. Kansas is a Right-To-Work state, which means that anyone can be dismissed with or without cause. That attitude is enough to warrant dismissal in my book.

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I would like to say that I don't believe attitudes like this develop overnight. I believe it comes from a long time of pent up frustration on the part of the employee and the board or councils. Problems that are not addressed adequately in the beginning are the main factors that begin to harbor ill will.

KRWA Annual Conference

The upcoming KRWA Annual Conference has a preconference session, "KanCap, Improving Management of Kansas Water Systems," that will answer many questions pertaining to working

with a board of directors. The day-long session is presented by John Haas, Ranson Financial Consultants, Wichita and Cathy Tucker-Vogel, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Topeka.

A conference registration form is on page 82 of this magazine. I hope to see you there.

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**Remember to mark
your calendars
for the
KRWA Annual
Conference
March 27-29, 2007**

**It's the
40th
annual!**