

CHIPPING AWAY THE PAINT: LESSONS ON BECOMING AN AUTHENTIC LEADER

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The Problem

Given the reality we face of having to do more with less these days, the question becomes: how can water and wastewater utility leaders effectively transform their organizations to meet current and future demands?

On a global scale, one can easily become discouraged hearing the negative news of the day; home foreclosures, bank bailouts, corporate buy-outs, two wars, mismanagement, political scandals, environmental disasters - the list goes on and on. In the midst of these events and the challenging economic conditions, it is easy to get caught up in the distress and see no way out.

On the local workplace level, these national and global problems will impact utilities for years to come. In fact, we are feeling some of the aftershocks in the form of layoffs, furloughs, reductions in force, buy-outs, budget cuts, early retirements, no pay increases, etc., so that even the strongest in the water industry can become disheartened and even cynical.

These uncertain times can also lead to dramatic operational changes resulting in overworked, underappreciated employees and negative attitudes. As a result, we can no longer afford to remain status quo and run water and wastewater facilities as in the past. A 2009 Gallup poll found that nearly 70% of the workforce is not fully engaged in their work and almost 20% of these folks are actively disengaged. In other words, nearly 1 in 5 employees simply don't care and are more of a detriment than a help to the organization costing the U.S. \$300 billion annually in lost productivity. With the vast majority of Americans believing public leaders don't care, it's no wonder public confidence and trust in institutions is at an all-time low.

Surveys show that employees today get limited or no feedback, are not challenged to try new things, and don't get proper information or recognition. Only a small percentage of managers ask their employees what motivates them or how they can help them achieve their goals. And, very few managers invest time in building relationships yet the manager/employee relationship is often considered to be the largest factor in employee engagement and retention.

These events and statistics have awakened us to the fact that many organizations and individuals are on the wrong track. Herein lies the problem. Numerous researchers have found that leaders rarely fail in technical competence; they fail in human skills, communication, judgment, character, attitude, ethics, and relationships and many of these failings are self-inflicted. Some are so eager to win approval and avoid rejection that they cover their shortcomings to gain acceptance. Others feel they have to appear to be on top of everything and a few are actually not very nice to be around. This self-serving style will not work in the 21st century. Today's employees demand more personal relationships before they give themselves fully to a leader or organization.

Technical vs. Relational

If you are like me, most of us got where we are because of our technical abilities as Biologists, Chemists, Engineers, etc. along with being good at what we do. But as supervisors and managers,

you've probably wished at times that the people or soft-side of doing business would just go away. Increasing responsibility usually brings more difficult decisions and stressful personnel matters that can rob you of time and energy. It's through these events I've learned that the so called "soft stuff" is the hardest part of management. Keeping up with technology and water infrastructure needs are critical to our future but all the engineering we do will fall short if it isn't built on a sure foundation. In our quest for operational efficiency, better treatment techniques or cost saving measures, learning to balance both technical expertise with relational skills is the key to success.

Building good relationships means to act on your dreams, share your life, and surround yourself with high quality people. Don't let others drag you down or make you feel inferior. Self-serving leaders talk about themselves and rarely develop strong relationships. Some are so full of themselves that they devalue others, blame, and make excuses. Steer clear of those with rotten attitudes, they are infectious and can suck the life out of you and the organization. Instead, become a better person by associating with better people, take every opportunity to learn more and develop productive habits. Avoid those who can't control their tongue, who curse, argue and complain as these are signs of weakness, not strength. Guard your relationships and be with winners not whiners. Focus on why a relationship is working and build on it. Be excited about life, family, work, your organization, even our Water Environment Federation and the Ohio Water Environment Association. If you aren't, how will anyone ever become excited or interested in what you do and who you are?

Authentic Relationships

Many believe that to effectively transform an organization you must first close the financial gaps, flatten the organization, restructure or add technological improvements. While these are worthy endeavors, before you can change the business you must change the relationships. One way for water leaders to begin this process is to literally change our attitudes. It's been said that life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it. I agree. How you relate and react to people and circumstances has a direct impact on your ability to grow professionally. You can choose to be negative, blame others, and be bitter or you can buoy-up others and become better. To create a supportive culture and provide long-term solutions for organizations requires the building of authentic relationships - the cornerstone upon which all other management skills are built.

There is a great need for authenticity and an "other-directed" approach today to create pockets of wellness in our organizations and take our profession to a higher level. Historians have recorded that one of our greatest public servants, Abraham Lincoln spent 75% of his time listening to, visiting with, and encouraging people. So great was his genuineness and impact on others that even his enemies spoke highly of him. Consider those who forged relationships with you or someone who took the time to listen to you, helped shape your career, appreciated you, kept their commitments, even set you straight when needed. These people demonstrated authenticity with you.



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Authenticity means being genuine, trustworthy, sincere, a truth-teller. Authentic people are the same at work as at home because there is no separating personal from professional life. The choices you make at work or outside of work do affect your career and life. Authenticity means going beyond the Golden Rule to include compassion, self-sacrifice, humility and brotherly love - the missing element in business today. Think about it, everything we do involves relationships which are essential to our well-being. No matter who you are, each of us has been influenced by others. Our individual achievements are linked to the influence of others in our lives. None of us are self-made or exist as islands unto ourselves. We all rely on others and behind every great organizational success story are people who helped others advance.

Occupation or Vocation

Building authentic relationships begins with a self-assessment by asking; what are my personal goals, my vision, and my core values? Then ask if they match those of your employer. People marry because they are in love and are compatible. So be honest with yourself, do you love what you do, are you in the right position? Do you have the education and qualifications needed to be successful? Do you have the desire and the passion to do more, to live life fully or are you merely in it for a paycheck? Are you doing all you can to make a difference, focused on what you are called to do?

Answering these questions means to first understand the difference between occupation and vocation. Occupation is an activity or task that we occupy ourselves with and are paid for. It's also defined as "a place to take up space." Sadly, many are just doing that. Vocation on the other hand means, "To call." It is an occupation to which one is specifically drawn, suited, and qualified to do. If your vocation matches your occupation, that's great, this is where you need to be. But if not, you need to reassess where you are and why. It's not whether you are in the right seat on the bus but are you even on the right bus? Are you going in the right direction, on the right road? Start with the personal assessment aspect and the rest will follow.

AL's

So you believe you are in the right place. That's great, but how can you be more genuine and authentic toward others? If you are a leader, how can you be an authentic leader? Authentic leaders (AL's) lead from the inside-out, from the heart and demonstrate their leadership in words and actions. They realize leading means

serving and bringing followers along with them. They know it's not about "me" but about "we." AL's encourage, persevere and take time to listen and engage, prepare for the future and never stop learning. They don't burn bridges, but build them.

While companies are cutting staff and benefits, Delta Airlines recently came back from bankruptcy without layoffs by reconnecting with their people, taking care of their own, and admitting mistakes. Chick-Fil-A just completed 42 consecutive years of sales growth because of a very simple philosophy. Know your values, share them, live them, earn trust and shape the culture. SAS Institute Inc. nearly doubled staff, expanded benefits, and more than doubled revenues by creating a supportive, respectful environment that attracts and keeps talent. Authentic leaders put others ahead of self and serve without expecting in return.

As AL's, our role is to be caretakers, stewards of the resources we've been entrusted with, to connect with stakeholders, to educate and inspire. This involves creating an environment of cooperative trust through authentic relationships. As Robert Greenleaf noted in his book, *Servant Leadership*, "service to others is the leaders' primary purpose." *Good to Great* author, Jim Collins found that the primary difference between great and not so great leaders is humility – having a focus on others rather than self. It doesn't take much effort to help people feel important. AL's climb the ladder of success and take people with them while counterfeit leaders knock people off the rungs behind them. Authentic leaders realize that few things pay bigger dividends than the time you take to understand and invest in people. Simply put, authentic leaders love their people more than their position.

My Journey

To create a real relationship involves taking a risk, being willing to reveal who you are, being open and connecting with people. Some of you may be able to relate to my story.

First of all, I am not an engineer, like my grandfather who emigrated from Germany, and who instilled in me a love for the outdoors and taught me how to shoot, fish, and hunt. I am also not a professional athlete like my dad wanted me to be. He was drafted by the Philadelphia Phillies to play baseball. While growing up he pushed me hard to play sports. Though I tried, I just could not grow to his height or live up to his standard. Week after week he would keep me after practice and hit ground balls and line drives to me until my hands hurt and tears ran down my face. I did my best but my heart wasn't in it. I competed but spent most of my time on the bench where my mind would often drift away to a nearby stream, river, or lake. It wasn't until my dad had a life changing heart attack when I was 17 that he told me, "Whatever you do, make sure you really enjoy it." So I heeded his advice and became the only senior in my high school taking biology. I now pass the same advice on to my children. You see, my dad never did what he really wanted to do or was called to do – to be a coach. Shortly before he died I asked him why he didn't become a coach and he said, "Someone in college talked me out of it and said I could make more money in business." He was never happy and died too young at age 41.

Prior to college I was determined not to go down the same path. Unfortunately, my goal was postponed. Being the oldest of three and with a mom who had never worked outside the home, my college courses were pieced together with numerous jobs over a

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ten year period to support the family. Whether you are new to the water or wastewater field or been in it for 30+ years, each of us is unique and has a story to tell of those who helped clear a path in difficult times.

I recall an ODNR manager who gave me a fisheries position, an OSU professor who awarded me a scholarship at Stone Lab, a Monsanto chemist who taught me atomic spectroscopy, others who pushed me to complete my degrees, even our former Senior WEF delegate, Steve Morrison, who actually hired me twice, first as a Lab Technician after I was laid off and then some years later as Lab Manager where I served for 16 years. Numerous friends strengthened my spiritual walk and I would be remiss if I failed to mention my biggest cheerleaders – my family, especially my wife Karen who has been an encourager, teacher and steadfast partner for nearly 25 years.

The latest leg of my journey began in 2002 when I was accepted into a fully accredited doctoral program at the age of 46. With a full-time job, people asked, “Why go back to school? What are you thinking? You’re too old, you have a wife and six kids, it will cost you too much, even, you are crazy!” I realized that all my life I had been pursuing an occupation. Now I had found a vocation, a calling, and there was no going back. So after four of the best yet most difficult years of my life, it’s time to give back to my profession what I’ve been blessed with. Even though there were times when I felt like giving up, when barriers seemed insurmountable, a way was always provided both providentially and through others.

With much help from those who believed in me, I was able to pursue a dream. Three years into my program in 2005, I was promoted to Deputy Director of Montgomery County Environmental Services. I devoted my final research work to help my organization by developing tools to transform organizations internally - from the inside-out, an alternative to standard transactional methods.

Chipping Away

It is said that what you learn is often proportional to what you earn. Well, we would all like to earn more so keep learning, you are never too old. Take the initiative to increase your knowledge, acquire new skills, associate with respected colleagues, engaging hearts and seize the opportunities. Take the risk to chip away the external layers and get to know people. Let me illustrate.

I enjoy collecting antique fishing tackle as a hobby. One cold January day a few years back, my oldest son and I went to an auction that advertised some old tackle. When we got there, all the good lures were gone and the auctioneer was selling choice of what remained for one dollar. I chose one with a bad paint job but it showed some qualities of a collectible lure. I took it home, sat



down by the fireplace and started chipping away the outer layer of paint with a pocket knife only to find a perfectly intact hand painted Pflueger Monarch Minnow valued at nearly \$400.

The same is true of many people we think we know. By taking an interest in others we can find the gems beneath. Don’t underestimate the impact you have on others by simply caring enough to risk getting to know them. Seek out life-long relationships with people who have purpose, who can help you reach your goals.

Make Memories

For the past three years I’ve taken one of my children to the Memorial Golf Tournament in Dublin, Ohio and come away with a memorable story. In 2008 my oldest son met Jim Furyk (the #3 golfer in the world at the time); in 2009, my oldest daughter met Jack’s wife, Barbara Nicklaus. This year, my middle son who was 15 met Ernie Els (the FED EX point leader at the time) who waved him out from behind the gallery ropes onto the 6th fairway while police officers, tournament marshals, and the spectators watched a boy’s dream come true.

There are times when we all need to be reminded of who we are and how we got where we are. Sometimes it means taking the risk to step out from behind the ropes that hold us back. It’s here you find other AL’s modeling the way, encouraging hearts, and making memories that last a lifetime. Our relationships, and especially the close friendships, are the ballast that keeps us at even keel.

You may be at the top of your profession, but don’t forget that the greatest players were once 15-year olds with dreams. I challenge each of you for the sake of our industry to invest in someone around you, reveal your expectations, have a conversation, and forge a relationship because we’re not just government employees, operators, regulators, consultants, researchers or suppliers. Each of us is someone with special gifts and amazing abilities to share.

Be Authentic

Are you living for the 8-5 shift or the 30-year pension? If so, the events of the past couple years should shake you and make you rethink that plan. Our water industry needs people who can create masterpieces, not give half-hearted efforts. We need AL’s who care enough to share the big picture rather than keep information to themselves. The answer to our current problems will not be found in bigger government, but in better government. Not in financial stimulus but in leaders who inspire us. Try sharing your dreams, experiences, instilling trust and demonstrating you care. Having the right attitude and focusing on relationships reenergizes people by unlocking creativity and innovation in some while giving options for others to move on.

So, are you stuck in a rut, counting the days until retirement? Are you regretting that you haven’t lived up to your potential or shown someone else how things work? Are you just going through the motions, blaming others for your situation, disengaged? If so, take inventory of your relationship building and try to follow these simple tips to “Be Authentic.”

- ◆ Be yourself; be open, sincere and humble and consider the effect your life has on others.
- ◆ Enjoy what you do; assess your career, interests, aspirations and pursue your dream.
- ◆ Ask questions; learn about others, peel back the layers, find the gems and build trust.

- ◆ Understand their position; look in their eyes, listen with your heart and follow-up.
- ◆ Take time to give time; care enough to create trophies that will live beyond you.
- ◆ Hone your skills; expand your knowledge, develop productive habits, and polish your attitude.
- ◆ Engage people; give consistent feedback, reward high achievers, and coach low performers.
- ◆ Never band-aid issues; treat the disease without hidden agendas and deal with the hard facts.
- ◆ Tell the story; find common ground and a friend at work to challenge and encourage you.
- ◆ Invest in the lives of others; get to know your team members, believe in them, and serve them.
- ◆ Connect with them; call, write, or personally thank someone who helped you in the past.

We've seen the shortcomings of those who focused on personal power and prestige. So ask yourself, am I on the right path? Am I more focused on people over process, principles over position? If so, enjoy the journey. Don't lose perspective amidst the problems of the day, take time to thank someone who helped you along the way, and strive to leave your names on hearts, not headlines because life is really all about relationships.

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