

## **BAYWORK Training Buffet 2017**

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### **39 Years on the Rock Pile**

**All the stuff no one told me (or I didn't hear at the time!)**

**By Paul Gambon**

This isn't meant to be a comprehensive outline for supervisory training. Rather this is a synopsis of observations and learning through my career in Water Treatment Operations. Some of this may seem obvious, that's good, you're ahead of the game! Hopefully, you can get some insight from my experiences.

- 1) You can learn from your own mistakes (the hard way) or learn for other's mistakes (easier!). You actually learn this very early in life. You see the kid next to you stick his fingers in the electrical socket. His screams tell you it's not a good idea. For me it was Russell Peters running into the piano in Kindergarten and splitting his head open. I don't think I'll be going there! Anyway, it seems we forget this as we grow up. Look around and learn from others, it's so much easier (and less painful).
- 2) Procedural Training is a Legal Requirement: If someone is injured, or worse, and it ends up being resolved in our legal system, the first question is always: "is there a written procedure?" This is a basic right for industrial workers. It only takes a little reflection to understand why. If you have a task, say washing a filter in manual, and you ask five operators to explain the procedure you will surely get five different versions! Operational procedures are challenging to develop. There's a lot of nuance involved that's difficult to capture, but it is definitely possible. Don't believe anyone who says you can't write a procedure for a certain operation. If there are written procedures for flying 747 jets and the space shuttle, then it is possible to write procedures for anything we do. Written procedures don't replace the knowledge and experience you've developed over your tenure, rather it captures that knowledge for the benefit of both present and future operators. PS; if it's not documented, it didn't happen!

- 3) Incident Reports: Capturing the facts needs to be done ASAP after an incident. You will get the best memories while the incident is fresh. The IR is critical if the organization is to improve. If only a few people know what happened and why, only those people will benefit. The worst possible outcome is when an incident happens again because no one took the time to document and analyze it the first time. Worse yet, something is damaged or someone gets hurt in the process! The most important section of the IR is the “corrective action plan”.
- 4) Incident Investigation made easy: three questions tells the story. 1) Is there a written procedure? 2) Has staff been trained to the procedure? and 3) were staff following the procedure at the time of the incident?
- 5) Automation: because we can! Well, probably because we're human. Once you know something can be automated, doing that task becomes mundane and beneath one's dignity to perform. Do you really want to go to the creek and fetch a pail of water? So much easier to turn on the faucet. Plus it frees you up to do more important things.
- 6) Human response to change: Denial, Resistance, Acceptance, and Planning: Think about it, we all follow the same path. Some of us get to the end sooner. Some are destined to never get past denial. As Supervisors we are paid to get to the planning stage, quickly. It's important to share your ideas and make sure they are, if not incorporated, at least heard. Remember, as supervisors (leaders) you are proponents of change. If you don't institute change, it won't happen! An organization that doesn't change will fall behind and eventually become obsolete. Who wants to work there?
- 7) Appraisal cycle: This is a critical step and basic to employee relation theory. Why do most employees laugh at the notion of PAR? Because they aren't accurate. The worst review I ever received had the highest ratings in all categories. That didn't help me grow. I found the experience unsatisfying. Keeping your employee's informed about their performance is critical. If an employee only gets feedback once or twice a year at appraisal time, you've failed as a supervisor. They should routinely know how they are performing. The PAR review shouldn't be a surprise.

- 8) Leadership: what it looks like and what it isn't! The number one characteristic of a leader is someone who walks the path. Probably the biggest mistake you can make is to let your staff see you doing the wrong thing. If you've made mistakes in the past you can either a) change or b) live your life afraid of the hypocrisy of change. In other words; what rules your future; your past or your desire to improve?
  
- 9) #1 biggest mistake for a supervisor to make (and the most common!): The supervisor that focuses purely on the technical aspects of their job and ignores the human side is failing, miserably. Technical problems are fun to solve. There's always a solution and you can pick and choose those you wish to spend your time on. Conversely, the supervisor/employee relationship can be difficult and sometimes the conflict or resentment that develops will never be resolved. Still, your staff is your greatest asset. You're paid to supervise and must accept the challenge as such. It's not easy and not always fun but if you want to be successful you must focus on your staff.
  
- 10) Mentoring/staff development: If your staff is number one and you care about them, this should come easy. Of course, you need to make, not find the time. Taking an employee aside and discussing their future or taking them to a high level meeting can have a powerful impact. If they believe you have faith in them, they will be more likely to reach higher to get your approval. Think of those special people in your life, did they make time for you?
  
- 11) Communications: the number one cause of failures and problems! Can't say enough about the need for clear concise communications. Want to get to the top? Start writing. Let it sit overnight. Have someone proof read it for you. Take a writing class or ask for help. Writing is a skill you need to practice. Verbal communication is equally important. At the end of a conversation, always frame what was said and get agreement. If you sense the other parties aren't getting it, go back and find out why. Often times it is best to send out an email with your understanding of the conversation. Time consuming, but worthwhile.
  
- 12) Organizational Skills: often lacking in even long time supervisors. Time management is critical. With numerous issues and changing conditions, constant reassessment your priorities is necessary. Many tools are available; from pencil and paper to electronic note pads. Pick something that works for you and commit to keeping it up. Don't constantly change methods.

- 13) Nike: “just do it!” A horrible way to direct your employees but a great self-motivational tool.
  
- 14) Some things to avoid: Things to avoid: giving your superior “half baked” ideas or inadequate background when making a request. When your supervisor adopts your suggestion it becomes theirs. Give them the best. Vet the idea before presenting it. If your idea goes down in flames, they will be less likely to call on you the next time.
  
- 15) Attempting to circumvent the system. Don’t repeat actions that failed in the past hoping no one will catch it. This is not supervisory level behavior!
  
- 16) Edward Demming: “Focus on the process not the individual.”. Most often it’s not the employee who’s a fault when something fails. It’s usually the process that’s flawed. Most employees a) want to do a good job and b) feel that they are doing a good job. Typically, either the procedure is flawed or there’s a lack of adequate training. I’ve found a real complicating factor in our industry is the 24/7 nature of our work. Keeping 24/7 staff trained and ready to respond is a huge challenge. Good procedures and training are the key to a well-run operation.
  
- 17) “Finding engineering solutions because you don’t trust your employees is going in the wrong direction”. This quote by Robert Renner, Executive Director, AWWA Research Foundation, points to training, staff development and just knowing your staff. There are plenty of reasons to find engineering solutions, just make sure they are the right ones and you’re not ignoring staff development!
  
- 18) “The Water Treatment Plant Operator has his finger closer to the pulse of public health than any other member of our society,” - R.Renner. Another great quote from the master. Think about this for a while and consider the level of responsibility we all need to live up to. This job is much bigger than you or I. In many ways our success will be measured by what we leave behind. If you’re to be successful, then your staff will have to be too!