

Bridging the Mentoring Gap

Bill Edgar

Young professionals (YPs) want to be part of the action, but they often feel shut out by senior professionals (SPs). These observations come from a recent survey of YPs who are members of the Water Environment Federation (Alexandria, Va.).

YPs say that SPs are not interested in them. They say the more experienced people hoard the responsibility or control. Many times, YPs report, they have been told they are too inexperienced to share in making a decision.

Clearly, this is no way to help develop the skills and abilities of the next generation, but both YPs and SPs must take steps to straighten out this problem.

Bridging the gap between the YPs and SPs can be accomplished, but it takes both parties.

One of the survey responses summed things up well: "Instead of trying to point fingers at who is creating the roadblocks in the communication pathways between younger and older generations, we must recognize that both generations have something to bring to the table."

Respect for Tradition

In the early years of the wastewater industry, mentoring, coaching, and sharing experience and knowledge from the senior level to the entry level was the backbone of training. It was common to see the treatment plant manager taking the last hour of the workday to coach and mentor the young, inexperienced operators. The managers worked through step-by-step procedures from training manuals and shared war stories of process failures and successes to help the new generation along.

On top of that, the old plant manager would drill into his employees how important it is to work out the mathematical calculations for the process-control case studies. Practicing the math skills would help operators pass their certification exams.

I am proud of the mentoring I've done over the years. My success at it is based upon the school of hard knocks, learning by trial and error, and the kick-in-the-butt style passed on to me by my mentors. To keep that tradition alive and prepare the next generation, we need to reach out to YPs and help them along the learning curve.

Sharing the Burden

YPs also must play a role. They have to demonstrate their willingness to learn and become a team player. The idea of waiting for the knock at the door is not always the correct approach. Sometimes, YPs must reach out to search for the competent and knowledgeable mentor to coach them along their journey.

Who that mentor should be often is obvious. YPs, take steps to start the relationship — invite him or her out to lunch; spend time developing strong communication. It's not magic; it takes time.

Reach out to the person you want to be your mentor and help you along, show him or her that you do care, demonstrate your willingness to learn and not to be a "desk potato." The successful YP will have reached out to seniors to be included, understanding that it may take them the same amount of time as their senior staff — 10 to 15 years — to obtain their status.

Bridging the gap between the YPs and SPs can be accomplished, but it takes both parties to succeed. For the experienced professionals, it requires making the time to share and teach, as well as listen to the new ideas YPs bring to the table. For YPs, it requires expressing themselves and their desires to succeed.

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