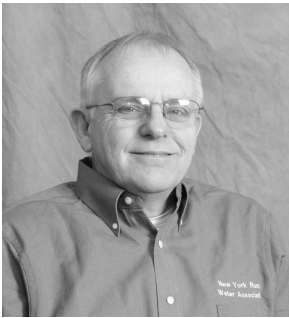


CRISIS MANAGEMENT

By Mike Dill
Wastewater Trainer



Usually crisis management happens after the fact. Reactive rather than proactive. Close the gate after the horse has left the barn. There is a definite situation developing and if we don't pay attention and do something, it will be a crisis. What am I talking about? It is a severe shortage of

qualified operators and is coming to a plant near you, or maybe your plant. Let's talk about New York. Although this a national issue, a large number of our system operators will be retiring. The problem is no youngsters coming to fill the ranks. Plant operations are not attractive to the new work force.

As I am starting to write this article, I am facilitating a training class. There are approximately thirty operators in attendance. Over two-thirds are what I call gray heads. The math is easy. Twenty of those in attendance today won't be here tomorrow. The ranks are starting to thin out. Many have put in their time and are gone. In the next few years, many more will go. How many years is a difficult number to determine, but I am figuring about five to eight years and we could be at the beginning of crisis management.

According to national statistics, in ten years, there will be a real shortage of trades' people. Work with their hands types. Plumbers, electricians, carpenters and system operators are going to be at a premium. Hard to find. Not there to fill the openings. Constant on-line monitoring equipment and computers do have their place, but you still have to have a body coming through the door. Equipment monitors, but does not respond to alarms. Call your computer for the midnight alarm or water leak. Automation does not have operational experience. Experience comes with time. There is no short cut. The unfortunate thing about a trainee is they must wait to gain the experience. Great potential, but no experience.

Our business has a long tradition of mentoring. We all have had someone who "showed us the ropes." Book learning and, practical experience are great training aids. Experience has one drawback. It's the time factor. Nothing replaces experience and experience is gained through time.

To become a certified operator in New York, the first requirement is three years experience, half of which can be education, however, the other half is experience in a treatment facility. In other words, eighteen months on the job under the supervision of a certified operator. That's the rule, no exceptions.

We are good at what we do. Maybe too good, because we make it look easy. That may be one of the reasons people don't realize how technical, or at times demanding, the position of operator can be. I have said this before and will continue to say, "Get the mayor or board involved." The community has invested millions of dollars in infrastructure and treatment facilities and you cannot hire someone off the street corner to operate them. Qualified operators are not born; they are made with training and experience.

You say so what, we have five years and then we will deal with it. I don't want to offend anyone, but that's not smart. Putting that many dollars of investment into untrained hands is a recipe for disaster. Believe it. In this business, five years is a heart beat. The need is now. To start the process of training and experience takes three years to reach certification and throw in learning budget process and the community and five years is now.

As operators, we must encourage young people to get into the business. That's a hard sell. Harder yet, will be to raise salaries to the levels that will attract young people. Budget and administrative issues are the Boards' part. No one said this is going to be easy.

As I have said before, if you are having a communication issue with the Board, let me know, I would be happy to introduce you to each other. The start of a beautiful relationship? Happy retirement, but if your replacement isn't on board yet, we are in for a lot of crisis management and that has proven not to be best management practices.

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