

# Honorable Mayor / Board Member

by Dan Tousley,  
*Circuit Rider III*



Our mission statement at New York Rural Water Association is: “To provide our members with the expertise and training to meet present and future challenges and to represent our member’s interest at the local, state, and federal levels.”

We strive to share our knowledge (and what we learn from you) and to provide training, both formal (classroom) and informal (on site). It is with this intention that this sorely needed article is written. We, you and I, have a ‘present challenge’ that really needs to be addressed.

To be declared ‘ignorant’ is not an insult. It simply means not informed, not aware. Webster’s says ‘without knowledge or education’. Only when one chooses NOT to be informed, and to remain ignorant, does ignorance become a discredit to a person.

As I travel our state, I hear of an alarming number of our operators and laborers who are truly misunderstood, underappreciated, and underpaid. Please think for a minute how YOU would respond to this treatment. Wouldn’t this be enough to lower your morale and produce an attitude of disappointment, discouragement, and unhappiness?

Believe it or not, it is not always a dollar figure causing unrest between you and your employees.

My daughter, Danielle, is a Registered Emergency Room Nurse at Thompson Health Hospital. As her father, I am very proud of her and her accomplishments and value her medical counsel. “Hey!” “Don’t eat that dad, it’s bad for you!” She is a New York State licensed professional and directly contacts perhaps an average of 8 to 12 people each work day with her field of expertise and caring.

Now think about it. Your water and wastewater operators are also N.Y.S. certified professionals directly contacting the lives of each resident, from newborn to elderly in your water or wastewater systems. Hundreds? Thousands?

Your most valuable material asset is your water and perhaps wastewater system(s). Do you believe just anyone can safely be entrusted to operate these systems? This appears to be a prevalent attitude that I see and it is alarming. Perhaps even you or your loved ones are partaking of the fruits of their labors. Is the general attitude from management that qualified, responsible,

certified operators are standing on any corner and easy to hire if needed, ‘A dime a dozen’ so to speak?

It is not ‘constructive’ just to raise an issue without offering solutions, so here goes.

Remember you have the authority but THEY have the RESPONSIBILITY! If they were to fudge the reports or to allow or cause an unsafe situation to exist, the State of New York will prosecute them with fines and possibly jail time. They are certified by the state and they are accountable to the state. True effectiveness or success is a result of the BALANCE of this AUTHORITY and RESPONSIBILITY.

COMMUNICATE with your employees. ASK questions and then LISTEN to them. They are intelligent and have considerable worth.

INVOLVE them in decision making. They are intimately aware of how your system works and what adjustments or changes should be made to improve things.

APPRECIATE the considerable investment you have in the development and training of your people.

TALK with them, not to them. Seek their input and involvement in your projects and operations. If they truly feel respected and involved, you will have created a team- Your team. Not opposing forces.

I do occasionally encounter operators with dedication and devotion to their work but sadly and tragically it is a waning attribute.

When I do meet a happy, successful group of employees and managers it is truly a breath of fresh air. I think to myself: “What is different here?” I find that most of the recommendations in this article are in place and positively effective. I find happy people, mutual respect and support, camaraderie, success, no back stabbing (even without the boss present), an enjoyable environment for all, top to bottom, all inclusive.

Now in retrospect, does this sound like your work force or is there room for improvement?

Most employees will usually talk freely with me about their feelings and concerns yet they are intimidated and conditioned NOT to speak frankly with management.

I am very concerned about the existing state of affairs I see in most civil service situations out there. Perhaps even in your system(s). Rural Water is deeply

concerned with the aging work force in our professions. Look at the gray hair (or lack of any) from the back of our training classes.

Our present operators desperately need to be properly paid, respected, valued, and offered the consideration their certified professionalism deserves. Please consider how we are going to attract, and keep, young talent into this critical field. The benefits will outweigh the costs!

New employee:

**Job Requirements:**

- Obtain and maintain NYSDOH operator's certification
- Must have mechanical abilities - some carpentry, welding, good w/ misc tools
- Must have middle management skills
- Produce, maintain, and issue monthly reports in a timely manner
- Keep abreast of ever changing health regulations and maintain compliance with very minimal funding
- Establish and perform a maintenance program and keep records
- Maintain basic, necessary inventory
- Maintain and operate within a tight budget

- Maintain availability. Stand call at all hours of the nights and weekends
- Beg for permission to attend required training classes for certification renewal
- Subject to micro management
- Etc. Etc. Etc.
- List subject to change/addition without notice

**Job Rewards:**

- Minimal wages
- 'Atta Boys' as required and when necessitated
- Privacy a.k.a. 'Remember your place, stay there!' 'Shhhh.'

Consider this, are you interested in applying or do you want to look elsewhere?

Well, I hope this point is well received. I do not simply mean to criticize but to speak on behalf of the employees with constructive criticism. Somebody has got to speak out, we don't want anybody 'ignorant' of these issues.

Ask yourself, are you the responsible Mayor/Board Member doing the job you were elected or appointed to do? Are your people truly happy? You have certified people trying to do the job you have hired and entrusted them to do, would you like to keep them?

Really now, how are things going? 💧

