

## “The Value of It” By Mike Dill

What’s the value of . . . the bottom line . . . how much does it really cost . . . you get what you pay for.

Several years ago EPA developed a program called Capacity Development, which changed to Capacity Enhancement. The definition of enhancement is: “to raise to a higher degree or to increase the value, attractiveness or quality of, or to improve.” In our business we think of better equipment or expanding the system to increase revenues. New or upgraded equipment is a definite plus, more customers to help offset costs certainly makes it easier, however the biggest and best asset to any system is its people. How often do you invest in your people assets? Probably not as often as you should.

Who answers the phone at the office? This is the person that makes the first impression on who is calling, and can have a negative or positive effect. The customer who calls to say, “ my bill is too high, no way could I use that much water.” The person who answers this call will set the tone of the conversation. Dealing with irate customers is a skillful art. Some people have a gift to (multiple choice question) a: make it worse or b: make it better. Hopefully your system has a b who answers the phone.

Let’s assume that the customer is not satisfied with a verbal explanation, so now someone must go out to that customer and deal face to face. Put on a happy face. You have a choice, do you send the a or b type person. Please refer above for the correct answer. Usually the system operator gets the job of visiting the customer to explain that, yes you did use that much water. Sometimes people need a little education about leaky faucets or running toilets. That can explain water usage and, of course, sometimes not. Sometimes you need to replace the meter to make the situation better. Use of good judgment is helpful. Another positive effect of meters is water conservation. No other tool can promote conservation like a meter. How about when the phone rings and it is a report of water bubbling up on Main Street. Could it be a leak or ground springs rising to the surface? Who deals with that situation, or you need new equipment and some comparison shopping is needed to obtain the best price.

In small systems, usually one or two people are it. They do it all. Operations to billing, you name it, they do it. The larger the system, the more hands are needed to make it function effectively. Do not confuse effective and economical. Sometimes those words can and will collide with each other.

As I mentioned earlier, do you want the a or b type making the first impression or handling that difficult customer. Would you send out an inexperienced person with a hydraulic pipe locator? (that’s an inside joke) It means digging with a backhoe until hitting and damaging the pipe or ripping the pipe out of the ground. That’s a hydraulic pipe locator. How does someone acquire people skills or learn proper operation and maintenance of equipment? The answer is training. Education has a wonderful effect on people. Usually it means we speak with confidence about a subject or perform a task with a pleasant ending. We all talk about things we know nothing about or tackle a project without a clue of how it will turn out. Sometimes we have blind, stupid luck and get it right, and then there’s . . . let’s not go there. Not knowing about something never stops us from talking about it. The guy who thinks he knows everything never has a problem telling you he knows everything. Just ask him. The person who really knows, usually talks little, chooses his words carefully and uses them selectively. “Shooting off the mouth before the brain is loaded, can lead to less than desired results.” “Open mouth, insert foot.” Remember once you say it, it’s said. Sometimes our mouth gets us into to deep do – do. How many times has a situation occurred and after it was over you said to yourself, “self, you could have handled that differently.”

Most communities promote and encourage their people to participate in training . . . while others can’t see the value. A small investment of time can make a big difference in effective and economical operation of your system. You tell me, “What’s the value of it?” Education can and will enhance the value, the attractiveness or quality of, or improve the value of any system. Nuff said.