



"I'LL SEE YOU NEXT WEEK" THE UNEXPECTED JUSTIFICATION FOR SOP'S AND REDUNDANCY

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Starting at the beginning of every quarter here at NY Rural Water, I start to plan to write an article for the upcoming Aquafacts magazine. This quarter was no different, I start with a few ideas for topics and thin it down to one I feel is currently relevant. I was almost finished with my upcoming article and had let it go for a few weeks when a series of events transpired that would influence my decision to change the article I wrote and rethink my priorities in life.

Friday afternoon in the middle of January, I was finishing up some paperwork and responding to some last minute emails for work. The end of a work week. As some of you know, I still operate a water and wastewater plant in Western New York and every week I stop in to the Village office and talk to the Clerk to get caught up on anything I may need to address over the weekend. Just like every other Friday, a fifteen minute conversation with her about filing the monthly reports, putting out quarterly bills and some light hearted conversation about plans for the weekend. Ending with..."I'll see you next week". Unfortunately, next week would never come. At 9 a.m. on Saturday morning I got the call that my clerk had passed away unexpectedly in the night. I've known her for almost twenty years and it was a difficult loss for me personally. More to the point of this article, is the loss that is being realized by the Village.

Villages and towns throughout the state have come to depend on employees who have been in their respective positions for decades. Many are recognized in magazine articles and at retirement parties for having worked for 30 or 40 years in the same office or position. As we dealt with the loss of a friend and coworker, the realization of the gravity of the situation would take a little longer to sink in. As in many small villages with limited income, we relied on a few people to do many jobs. After the clerks passing, the mayor and board are now tasked with not only replacing an employee but also trying to train that new employee without the aid of the person experienced in the position. A truly daunting task to say the least.

What the loss of my friend and colleague has made ever too clear to me is the glaring need for, and lack thereof, cross training and redundancy in our positions. As you read this article take a few minutes to reflect on your responsibilities and requirements in your day to day life. If you were to disappear tonight, how many of you who have coworkers who could step in and, with minimal time and upheaval, continue with your job as if you were still there. Chances are very good that a majority of you are the only operator who knows many of the process adjustments required to

keep your plants running smoothly, the only one who knows the passwords or sign-ins for monthly reporting or even more urgent, the only employee.

There are many ways municipalities can provide for the untimely loss of an employee. Whether from an unexpected death or from termination of employment. There should be proactive plans in place to allow for smooth transition in operations. Redundancy and cross training employees is an important first step towards making a seamless transition if unexpected events occur. Cross training provides an employee with the opportunity to learn coworkers' specific job requirements, and given the opportunity, step in to provide coverage during the time they are gone.

Another way municipalities can provide for unexpected absences is to produce specific SOP's "Standard Operating Procedures" which include specific step by step instructions for daily operations and required tasks. The more complete your SOP's, the easier it will be for another operator or employee to step in during an emergency and safely operate your plant and provide for efficient operations. SOP's can be produced for any position. Include pages that have passwords and instructions on how to log in to computer programs. Work with employees in critical positions and have them carry a notepad to jot down important facts that they think of throughout the day. Standard Operating Procedures are not meant to be a document that gets filed in a cabinet never looked at once they are completed. They should be looked at as a fluid guide to running your community's utilities.

Unfortunately for our village, we are going to be reactive in this process rather than proactive as I would like to see all of you be. Moving forward, I hope that many of you work with your experienced operators, and boards to develop plans while the knowledge is available to you. Templates for SOP's and Emergency Response Plans are available on our website. Assistance is also available from our Water Circuit Riders and Wastewater Technicians.

Until next time "See You Next Week". 💧💧💧