

YOUR WORLD -THEN. YOUR WORLD NOW: Michigan Chapter GLX Conference May 2024 Keynote Topic.

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So, public works leader-supervisor, as you drove to work this morning, yesterday, or whenever, how many times did you say to yourself: "Today I am going to get 'A, then B and C' done today? Then, 10 or 12 hours later, as you drove home, not only did you not get "A, B, C" done, you didn't even get a chance to think about, let alone do, A, B, and C. Sound familiar? Welcome to the world of public works leadership!

In the approximately forty years that I have watched you, this and other phenomena have happened to you. Your world and realities are very different today than four decades ago. And in many ways, "you" are different. To be sure, you and the teams you lead continue to be successful despite any new or old challenges that may come your way.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to focus on just a few changes that have changed your world and impacted you and the people you lead. If you attend the Michigan APWA Chapter GLX Conference at Boyne Mountain on May 22, 2024, we will have a chance to discuss these and other changes in greater depth.

Reactive versus Proactive

Your past does not have to be long in public service to realize that the demands on you and the people you lead are much higher today than they were even ten, let alone forty, years ago. On many occasions, I have asked public works leaders at MPSI and other venues: **Please name one area where the demands on you and your people are less now than when you started work.** Crickets! The truth is you can't. We expect more from you and your teams at every level than your predecessors. The public wants faster, better, more ...fill in the blank. And by golly, "I want to talk to the boss right now" is the demand of the dissatisfied resident. Or "The mayor or manager called. People are upset about the trees being trimmed on Elm Street. She wants you to handle it right away."

So, handle the reports, requests, and performance appraisals piling up on your desk or computer and be responsive and transparent to your bosses, the staff, and most certainly the citizens simultaneously. "And yes, please give us your plans for improving services over the next five years."

Clearly, reactive mode has always been present in any public works operation. You are the first responders to the biggest and most disastrous events-storms, floods, etc. That type of reactive mode has not changed. In fact, because of technology and planning, we have improved in that area. What has changed and intensified greatly are your day-to-day operations and schedules. Many contributing changes have helped intensify reactive mode for public works leaders. Some of these include:

Digital Technology

Your predecessors were able to hide. You can't so much. Think about how we can access you, from cell phones to text messages to email. Back then, pagers, landlines, pay phones and radios. Many of them were defeated by living or being in remote areas. Today, we reach you at all hours of the day and night and virtually anywhere in the world. What does that do to you? Answer: you rarely really relax and breathe down to your belly button. You can be on the most wonderful beach in Maui, drinking your umbrella drink and getting that text- "We need you to call in." Relaxation quickly becomes tension. Unlike your predecessors, you carry your work in your pocket everywhere you go. Of course, one of the upsides is greater flexibility and mobility.

In the early days of the digit-verse, the speculation was that technology would make our work easier and we would have lots of free time. The easier part is true. What was not anticipated by many prognosticators was how much **more work** we would be doing. Productivity has been up everywhere. And so have the demands to track, record, analyze work patterns, and respond to increased requests, regulations, policies, and protocols. This has been true especially for non-bargained for employees. Rather than deal with a contract, we turn to leaders and ask or order them to do this extra job. Indeed, because you can, you may be doing the work of several past team members.

Staffing

Another big contributor to your intensified reactive mode level is staffing and the confluence of three staffing factors. First, **staffing levels** have proportionally dropped in many DPWs. As we increased people's digital abilities, we proportionally decreased the number of people in our DPW organizations. The big drop occurred in the 2009-10 recession. Because of budget exigencies, many teams across the state pushed early retirement, didn't fill positions, and let people go. Today, most organizations have not regained the staffing levels they had 15 years ago. Still, they are providing more services and doing more work than they did a decade and a half ago.

The obvious impact has been increased pressure and stress on everyone –especially leaders. Contributing to this is the reality that most of you in leadership don't have a key word in your vocabulary. That word is NO! Rather, your motto tends to be "Get 'er done." Typically, you get it done without much complaining or educating elected leaders in City Councils, Road Commissions, etc. As a result, they don't really know or understand what you do or that you and your team are stretched, and they often allocate needed resources elsewhere.

A second factor is the **work-related mindset** of many of the critters that have joined your organization today compared to the past. Comparatively, young staff are more demanding and have more employment rights and expectations than their counterparts of another era. They take more time and attention. Many younger workers (please, not all) **expect** to be given explanations and do not have the fear or regard for their bosses that previous generations had. This can be very good. Nonetheless, this is a huge, time-consuming change in the workplace. Combined with the historically ever-present older problem employees and low performers, the new group's expectations and demands can be daunting to over-extended supervisors. The bottom line, however, is that the time it takes to deal with all of their demands and expectations, plus handling the questions from HR, can be huge distractions from the mission for leaders and supervisors. Correspondingly, it is also true that many young workers continue to be great contributors to the success of the teams that you lead.

A third staffing factor contributing to increased reactive mode is **work-life balance issues**. Most of our home lives have changed over the past four to five decades. In the mid-1970s, the workforce started to change. Mom went to work outside the home. The rise of two-income families peaked in the early part of this century. As a result, time became everything. In society, we saw the rise of quickie oil changes, fast food emporiums everywhere, and the local grocery store changed to a pick-up the evening meal place. Everyone was/is in a hurry. The annual Christmas party and organizational family picnic disappeared in the workplace, as did the after-work socializing and "painting Sam's house" events. We just don't have time.

Unlike in the past, now, many workers avoid overtime. They prefer repayment with comp time rather than money if they must work overtime. This trend has put all kinds of stress on everyone. In already short-staffed operations, tensions between members within the team have increased. In some cases, it has pushed supervisors into asking workers and themselves to provide coverage that is overwhelming personal lives. And in some cases, potential employees have been discouraged from applying because of the time commitment.

Younger employees feel less vulnerable to the boss's demands in many ways. "My wife-girl friend-husband-significant other has a great job. I can always get another job somewhere." Becomes the refrain of some employees. The result is leaders who must cover more demands with fewer people. This can become very problematic during periods of high demand, such as major snow events, storms, or system failures.

Smart planning and technology have helped fill some of the gaps in personnel. GPS is great for planning everything from snow routes to daily work. Citizen requests/demands are often handled with an A.I.-based technology program. Computers aid in scheduling people and crews much more efficiently and effectively. These are all good changes. Yet overall stress levels and burnout rates among leaders continue to increase.

So What Can You Do About It? Four Ideas

Sometimes, when working with you and your team, I am reminded of the boiling frog story. As the story goes, You throw a frog in boiling water, and it immediately jumps out. You throw a frog in tepid water and incrementally increase the heat-it boils to death. Are you and your team boiling to death? You might consider doing the following.

- 1. Share the Challenges-Discuss them with Your Team.** We humans hate the idea or sense of being out of control. If we are in a non-influential position (team member), we sometimes overreact or act badly when we feel controlled-as opposed to valued. The days of top-down decision-making, do what I tell you, started a slow death in the 1960's. Start involving your team. Discuss issues and challenges, listen, and then decide. Then share your reasons and expect 100% follow-through, no games. Today, effective teams are built on involving team members before making decisions.
- 2. Create-Find your Islands.** Your predecessors from decades past had natural built-in islands. They were harder to reach when they left work or went on vacation. Where and when are your islands? In many cases, you are your own worst enemy. When you came home from school as a child, your mother may have said: "Change your clothes, do your chores and your homework, and then you can go out and play." Well, that message may have stuck with you as an adult. So, you think you can't go out and "play" or relax until the work is done. The problem is that your work will never be done. You will never leave your office with a "clean desk." That is your reality.

So, get your digital calendar out and identify your islands. Identify when you will eat lunch away from your desk, take a four-day weekend, or use those vacation days you have accrued or lost. Islands can be short and long. If **you** don't identify and take them, who will? The work will always be there. It will never get all done.

3. **Create Team Islands.** Stop the engine every once in a while. Buy some bagels and donuts and talk for a while longer before taking on the day. Cooking burgers and hot dogs in the summer back at the shop. “Last week was insane. You guys did an amazing job. Thanks.” What a powerful message coming from the boss. Clearly, you have to deal with a person when they mess up. Recognize them when they do the job. At MPSI, I frequently play a game with one of the participants. I ask them to pretend that I am their boss and that I am passing them in the hallway. We have another person time the interaction while the rest of the Institute observes. So, as I pass the person, I compliment them about something they did. Average elapsed time: 24 seconds! If it goes to 30-plus seconds, it becomes excessive and embarrassing. Get it? Those twenty-four seconds will make their day and help you to stay balanced.
4. **Cards on the Table.** So, you give everyone in your team, including yourself, a stack of large index cards with instructions to write their name in the corner of each card and the major jobs/functions they do on each card. Using the copy machine would not be a major job in this exercise. Now, get a large table or tables and have everyone put their cards on the table. Everyone walks around the tables for a while, then ask these and other questions:
 - Are all of the cards necessary anymore?
 - Are the cards in the correct hands? Should some cards be moved?
 - Is there an unnecessary overlap?
 - What cards are high, medium, and low priority?
 - Are there times when one team member will be better equipped to help another member?

This is a terrific exercise in defining a new position or filling a vacated one. It will also give you and your team a greater appreciation for each other and a greater sense of control over the jobs that you all do.

Change is inevitable. I look forward to seeing you at Boyne Mountain on May 22, 2024, to discuss these and other strategies for thriving in these changing, challenging and exciting times.

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