



THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

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At one time or another, we have all heard the old saying, “the more things change, the more they stay the same”. Words to live by, words that can be both soothing during a highly stressful situation, or disheartening when trying to change opinions and mindsets. I recall hearing my mother say this repeatedly over my youth. She was a seamstress, and as a young boy I didn’t fully appreciate her talent. But as I grew older, I realized the talent and artistic proficiency she captured in every single item she created...a truly talented person. Her niche was wedding dresses, although it seemed she could create anything within the realm of imagination. Many times I would ask her what she was working on, and watch as her ability was on full display. As times changed over the years, so did clothing trends, hairstyles, and virtually every aspect of our society. However, as mom would say, “the more things change, the more they stay the same”. “Ladies clothing may change, but their wedding dress selection will always remain as some version of a classic long gown”. After all these years I still have people tell me what a beautiful dress, one of a kind that my mother made for them.

I was recently reminded of my mother’s words, and how true they are for our industry during a recent training session. At this training, we were engaged in a discussion encompassing operator certifications, succession planning, and the aging workforce. Surprisingly, a young Operations Specialist in the crowd chimed right in, without hesitation or fear of humiliation from the overwhelmingly “long in the tooth” audience we had that day. He told us how he started with the DPW at 20 years old, which was 5 years ago, and how he had worked his way up, and eventually EARNED his wastewater certification. He further explained that now the village is training and preparing him for his water certification, and that both the water and wastewater lead Operations Specialists are expected to retire within 4 years. Is any of this starting to sound familiar? Wait for it, wait for it...Ah, the kicker, he declared that the village will not give him a pay raise until those operations specialists retire! I couldn’t help but think back to my own beginnings in this industry, and how similar his story sounded, and those words my mother use to frequently repeat. Some things will never change!

Technological advances have had a significant impact on our industry, and improvements seem to roll out weekly. These advancements have made our lives easier (in most cases), and have led to decreased staffing in all facets of our lives. On a

lighter note, I still get upset when I go the grocery store and see self-checkout facilities. Are they convenient? Yes, but generally speaking they put someone out of a job. Back to my point, technology is great, but it will never replace the human element, the skilled and trained Operations Specialists for our water and wastewater systems. The knowledge of knowing by sight or sound when something is amiss, the interaction with the people we serve in a polite and professional manner, and the dedication and devotion to a career of protecting public health with little to no appreciation from decision makers.

So with that comes my frustration. This village should be commended for finding and nurturing a very young man into “their system”, with the goal to ultimately become their Operations Specialist. Everywhere I go I hear, “I just wish we could find a young person that we could train to take over when I retire”. This village did, and they brought him along slowly. They encouraged this young man to achieve his full potential, and thereby secured the future operations of the Village for the next 35 years. And now what happens, over \$0.75/hour they have now opened the door... and his mind, to the possibility of leaving. He explained how much he appreciates everything this village has done for him, how he wants to remain loyal, but also describes how other municipalities facing their own succession planning are now reaching out to him to see if he might be interested in a position there. I know I’m preaching to the choir here, but this has to sound familiar to a lot of you reading this article. It’s just more of the same old broken record, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

What is the answer? We here at the NYRWA wish we knew. We have tried outreach to other associations and agencies, education of elected officials, and educational materials for use by all personnel and agencies in an attempt to reach our decision makers. Will this young Operations Specialist remain where he is or move on for more money? Who knows, but we can only hope that someone at the village level will realize the magnificent opportunity he presents, do the right thing, and secure his employment for many years to come.

If you or the system you represent are facing a similar problem and need further assistance, please don’t hesitate to call and we will try to get our personnel to meet with your elected officials, or attend a board meeting to discuss this crucial issue one on one. The problem isn’t going away folks, and all we can do is try, but together we know we can continue to provide...Quality On Tap! 💧💧💧