

RI Operator Boot Camp: A Management Succession-Planning Program

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Program overview:

The State of Rhode Island, the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission and the Narragansett Water Pollution Control Association have developed a year-long program to groom front-line and mid-level operators for upper management. “Operator Boot Camp” graduated its first class September 2008, with thirteen participants receiving a broad range of training. While not guaranteeing a promotion, Boot Camp has already received high marks for building the Ocean State’s wastewater management candidate base.

Program Background:

Many communities are facing an exodus of proficient wastewater managers. Succession planning is critical for transitioning current operators into management. Operator Boot Camp is designed to achieve the necessary degree of professional development without a high level of expense or program management.

Program Goals:

1. A focus on self-starting candidates with recognized potential for management.
2. Building candidates’ knowledge base, confidence and contacts.
3. Providing a wide range of training from the highly technical (such as basic engineering, microscopic evaluation, process control and CMOM), hard management skills (such as budgeting and labor relations), and often-overlooked “soft” management skills such as media and regulatory relations.
4. Using local, home-grown, and often volunteer experts as trainers.

Candidate Selection Process:

Participants are nominated and selected by their peers, or they can self nominate—but they must be able to commit to the program’s time requirements of one day per month. Nominations required a letter of recommendation that included pertinent job-history information with a special emphasis on why the nominated individual has the potential to manage, especially at a high level. In final selection, important consideration was given by NWPCA to the following: What skills do the candidates bring to the field? Have they expressed an interest to learn all aspects of wastewater treatment? Do they exhibit a sense of pride with their profession?

Boot Camp Critical Considerations:

- No guarantee of promotions or preferential treatment.
- A safe, confidential training environment must be maintained.
- The operator association should be involved in all aspects of the program.
- Superintendent involvement is critical to passing on experience and knowledge.

Boot Camp Training:

Training is held the last Thursday of every month at various locations to optimize candidate experiences. The inaugural 2008 Boot Camp schedule was:

September and October: *Performance management and labor/regulatory relations.*

A two-day series of trainings on management and labor-relations specifically related to wastewater managers. One to two hours are dedicated to wastewater treatment history since the inception of the Clean Water Act. The remainder (approx. 10 hours) focuses on management and human resources basics. Topics such as the Constitutional bases for labor law, management and disciplinary expectations, as well as communication fundamentals build a foundation of appropriate management and leadership. Total time: 12 hours.

November: *CMOM/RI's O&M regulations.*

An onsite training at a local wastewater treatment facility with an advanced CMOM program, this training involved lecture and field demonstrations of collection system management, operations and maintenance—including GIS mapping, inspection program requirements and pretreatment. The training centers around the RIDEM's requirements for basic CMOM program development. Approx time: 5 hours.

December: *Project management/benchmarking of process control.*

Project management with performance measurement provides wastewater operations professionals with tools to optimize performance. Performance measures will help a manager achieve consistent and reliable performance in many different areas. Performance benchmarking and project management is not a "checklist" of steps; it is knowledge that provides a manager with the ability to understand, conceptualize, develop, and apply site-specific steps that would be considered "generally accepted" by a group of peers but yet are efficient, concise, and applicable to the issue at hand. Some of the topics to be discussed in this session will include project coordination; quality control; communications; team management; consensus versus directed styles; scope management and scope creep; and risk management. Performance benchmarking will discuss how to develop benchmarks; how to normalize your data as compared to other facilities' data; sorting and prioritizing information; and utilizing the results for project management. Approx. time: 5 hours.

January: *Basic aquatic biology, the state of State waters, and the permitting process.*

The latest science of conditions and pollution-related problems of Narragansett Bay is given by a RIDEM-URI researcher. This is followed by a similar assessment of the state's fresh waters, as well as the Total Maximum Daily Loading program. Representatives of the shellfish monitoring program and the RIPDES permit-writing program provide an overview of how water-quality data becomes a discharge permit. The program also provides operators with the big picture of how their work impacts water quality. Approx time: 4 hours.

February: Labor relations in a government setting (half-day) and media relations (half-day) with actual television and print reporters.

1. As a refresher and follow-up of earlier labor-relations training, this class uses state human-resource officials to provide more depth in the responsibilities and requirements of managers. Role-playing adds experiential elements to real-world management/disciplinary conversations. Approx. time: 3 hours
2. Participants hear from actual print and television reporters on the dos and don'ts of working with the media—whether proactively or reactively. Tips on the news industry's needs help operators hone their message. Role-playing confirms their ability to communicate directly with a media representative. Approx. time: 2 hours.

March: Microscopic examination for process control.

Lecture and actual use of microscopes and identification techniques provide operators with real-world elements of the necessary science and art of microscopic examination. An expert employed by the state's largest wastewater utility runs the course. Approx. time: 6 hours.

April: Real-world management and leadership skills.

Returning to balancing act of labor relations, human resources, management and leadership, long-time plant managers and wastewater human resources officials share their experiences and advice. Case studies and role-playing are incorporated into the session. Approx. time: 5 hours.

May: Engineering basics: facilities planning, design and blueprint reading.

A state regulatory design reviewer and a wastewater utility design engineer explain and exercise participants in facilities planning, design and construction skills. Using engineering tools and actual plans of large- and small-scale projects, participants become acquainted with techniques and terminologies useful to work with consulting engineers and government regulators. Approx time: 5.5 hours

June: Operator exchange—participants work with managers at a new facility.

Requested by a participant early in the program, this class sends participants to plants they have never visited. Participants shadow host superintendents and managers for real-world supervision and process-control experience. Approx time: 6 hours

July: Tour of Deer Island WWTF, Boston, Massachusetts.

Participants visit the region's largest wastewater treatment facility, and in the process learn to think big when major problems arise. Approx touring time: 3 hours.

August: WWTF Budgeting, and program overview.

In the wrap-up training session a Rhode Island town manager (and former town engineer) discusses budgeting methodologies, as well as how wastewater managers can best communicate their needs to local officials and the public. Approx. time: 3 hours.

September: Graduation at the association clambake and tradeshow.