

Certified to Lead

By Gary Wollenhaupt

When Todd Kielkopf became general manager of Indianola Municipal Utilities in Iowa, he was looking for tools to help him be a more effective leader. He found them in the Public Power Manager Certification program from the APPA Academy. The weeklong program gives managers an overview of the public power industry and introduces them to Polarity Management, a set of principles and tools for dealing with ongoing issues.

After he took the class, Kielkopf taught Polarity Management techniques to his senior staff so they would have a common language for dealing with situations that seem to have no clear-cut answer.

“We won’t be able to solve all problems; instead you can use the system to your advantage to work toward a higher goal. You and your stakeholders, whether they are employees, the city council or a strategic partner, can share a level of understanding so that when issues arise there’s not a lot of finger-pointing,” he said.

The Polarity Management technique helps focus attention on finding the best solution in situations where there might not be one right answer.

Launched in 2009, the Public Power Manager certification was designed to help mid- to senior-level managers in public power organizations face the complexities and changes in the industry, said Ursula Schryver, vice president, education and customer programs for the American Public Power Association.

To earn the certification, students attend a week of classes held in conjunction with the APPA Education Institute and, within one year, complete a business plan on a specific issue. To date, about 50 people have attended the courses and 20 have completed the requirements for certification, Schryver said. The program also can be conducted at a utility’s site for customized course content.

The course includes a daylong introductory session on power supply and integrated resource planning, taught by experienced utility consultant Wallace Barron, and a daylong session on financial planning, budgeting and

performance for managers, led by financial consultant Mark Beauchamp.

The final three days are devoted to strategic management, led by master trainer Margaret Seidler. Her course emphasizes leadership development, including self-awareness and learning how to manage complex issues that face public power utilities today. “We’re trying to develop the next generation of leaders in the industry and these are things they need to be successful,” Seidler said.

The course helps managers learn how to approach issues facing many organizations, such as the aging of the work force, as well as issues unique to the industry like transitioning to e-billing.

Seidler helps students understand their own management and communication styles, and then introduces her trademarked Polarity Management system. Through this method, students learn that not every situation can be solved, but instead two or more divergent viewpoints have to be managed over the long term.

“They learn how to navigate competing demands and competing interests so that they can create a win for everyone,” Seidler said.

The key is recognizing that not every problem has a right answer in the traditional sense, Seidler said. “Polarities are chronic, complex problems that require multiple answers simultaneously or over time to keep yourself from creating other problems,” she said.

Jon Hofman, human resources manager at the Holland Board of Public Works, in Michigan attended the course in February 2010. Since then he’s used the techniques to tackle difficult issues at the utility.

“In reality a lot of what we do isn’t fixing problems, it’s managing competing issues or opinions or priorities, and until we learn how to manage those well we’ll experience a lot of frustration,” Hofman said. “This program sets up individuals for success in managing the complexities of their jobs.”

In her 15 years in the industry, Jaime Cranmer, customer service and communications manager for Emerald People’s Utility District

For more information

Information on the Public Power Manager Certificate Program is available at www.APPAAcademy.org or by contacting Ursula Schryver at uschryver@publicpower.org.

in Eugene, Ore., has seen a lot of change and expects more to come. With the training, she feels prepared to keep the best of the traditional public power industry while embracing new things.

“For people who are feeling stressed with having to deal with a lot of changes, I think this is really good course for them to make decisions by looking at their decision-making process a little bit differently,” she said.

Kielkopf, as well as the other attendees, recommended the program to other utility managers. He said it would be especially beneficial for general managers and department heads as well as city managers to learn these techniques to manage ongoing issues.

“I would encourage them to take a look at it and see how it would be applied to some of their chronic problems,” he said. ■

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