

The Power of **AND**

Some complex issues facing municipal utilities don't have an "either/or" solution. Rather, they require an approach that incorporates competing goals. An APPA program helps managers learn how to manage these issues.

By Alice Clamp

Not all issues facing public power utilities today lend themselves to an easy or simple solution. They seldom can be resolved using traditional problem-solving approaches. Instead, they require utility managers to take a step back and see the bigger picture.

Indianola Municipal Utilities in Iowa has been grappling with how to empower individual staff members in a centralized decision-making structure.

"As a small utility, team members have a large influence on positive outcomes because of the breadth of their jobs," said Todd Kielkopf, the utility's general manager. "Likewise, we rely on each other to avoid negative project outcomes and relationships because they impact many team members." Both empowerment and centralized decision-making have a time and place within the organization, he said. "The two approaches must coexist." But how?

Kielkopf learned the answer to that question after taking part in APPA's Public Power Manager Certificate Program. The program, which was launched in 2009, requires participants to complete three courses. The courses, held at least twice a year, run



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for five days and comprise an introduction to power operations, a session on financial planning, budgeting and performance, and a three-day session on strategic management. The strategic management course, taught by

Margaret Seidler, cultivates the skills that public power utility managers and supervisors need to manage complex issues.

"Some issues are chronic and ongoing, with interdependent solutions that need to be addressed simultaneously," said Seidler, an organization development consultant and master trainer. These issues—or polarities—cannot be easily resolved. Instead, they must be managed. That's where the and comes in.

Recognizing a polarity—"It's easy to have an 'either/or' mentality when it comes to looking at issues, solving problems or creating opportunities," said Susan Wisecup, business manager for Longmont Power & Communications in Longmont, Colo., who attended the certificate program session earlier this year. And, she added, there are issues that have a definite factual yes/no answer or are very short term.

"But it's essential to have 'and' as your default," said Wisecup. "You're able to address many more interests when you think along the lines of 'we could do this and this and this.'"

Another certificate program participant, Sandy Richter, said she has learned to recognize as polarities those issues where both choices have positive potential. "That's when I ask: can we have it both ways?," said Richter, manager of public communications at Middleboro Gas and Electric Department in Massachusetts.

Like the issues for which it is used, polarity management is neither quick nor easy. Speaking of Indianola Municipal Utilities' approach to the individual work/teamwork issue, Kielkopf said, "It takes effort to find a quiet time to take stock of both what is being done by a team or organization and how it's

Both empowerment and centralized decision-making have a time and place within the organization, Indianola General Manager Todd Kielkopf said.



Intentional Management of a Polarity Over Time

Action Steps

Action Steps to gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on Humility:

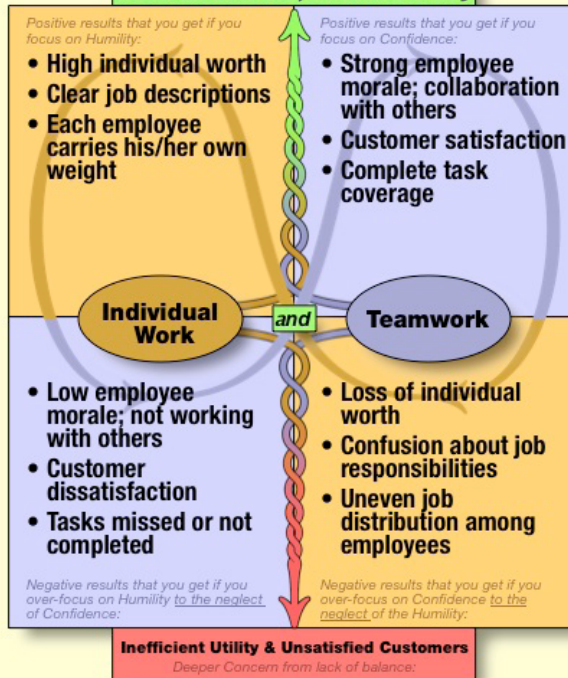
1. Maintain job descriptions
2. Conduct quality annual employee evaluations
3. Individual employee training
4. Recognition for excellence
5. Recognize chain of command

Early Warnings

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of Humility:

1. Increase in customer complaints
2. Animosity between departments
3. Less communication between departments, supervision and management
4. Silo mentality. "It's not my job" in the vocabulary.

Higher Purpose - why balance this polarity?
Build an efficient, effective Utility



Action Steps

Action Steps to gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on Confidence:

1. Job Shadowing program
2. Cross-training
3. Regular supervisor meetings
4. Quarterly employee meetings
5. Open and honest communication across the organization

Early Warnings

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of Confidence:

1. Overwhelmed with communication between departments, supervision and management
2. Increase in sick leave
3. Tardy task completions
4. "It's not my fault" in vocabulary

Seidler gives students a copy of her polarity map.

being done." Kielkopf said he's been focusing on polarities that affect how projects and people are managed, "since both are critical given our utility's strategic plan over the next few years."

Many polarities are common to public power utilities across the country. Like Indianola Municipal Utilities, the Board of Public Works (BPW) in Lewes, Del., is seeking a balance between individual work and teamwork, said Darrin Gordon, BPW's assistant general manager and a certificate program participant. "Sometimes we don't give individuals the credit they deserve or help them recognize their personal worth," he said. So the Lewes utility makes certain that individual staff members have clear job descriptions and receive meaningful evaluations while ensuring the continuation of teamwork.

James Ging, assistant director for the electric and water department of Winfield, Kan., said the utility needs to find a balance between being task driven and relationship-driven. "We need to form a bond with our employees, so they don't think that all we care about is the miles of poles set," said Ging, who also participated in the certificate program course.

Course participants mentioned several other polarities that they—and many other municipal utilities—face:

Department of city and utility. A mu-

nicipal utility is independently responsible for providing electricity to city customers, said Longmont's Wisecup. "And yet we are a part of the city with respect to budgets and policies and being part of the city team."

Cost recovery and rate competitiveness. Long-term utility asset investment plans must be balanced with short-term public expectations on rates and service improvements, said Indianola Municipal Utilities' Kielkopf.

Fiscal responsibility and reliability. "We need to be fiscally prudent while providing continued improvements in electric system reliability," said Robert Briggs, senior substation designer for the city of Anaheim Public Utilities in California.

Fiscal responsibility and staff re-

wards. It's a challenge to reward success in the public environment during a time of fiscal austerity, said Indianola's Kielkopf. "Finding that balance will be key in the next two to three years for high-performing staff, given pay scales that must coexist with those of the city government."

Holding information and sharing information. Because her focus is communications, Middleboro's Richter said that deciding how much information to share and how much "to keep close to the vest" is a key polarity.

"For example, we were reviewing the potential of a small wind farm, one with three to six turbines, and trying to decide how much to discuss publicly until we had done more investigation," said Richter. "We didn't want

It's essential to have 'and' as your default, Longmont's Susan Wisecup said.



to surprise the public with a decision, and yet there was a lot of negotiating and study needed before any decision could be made. We didn't want people expressing concerns if there was nothing to be concerned about." The utility didn't provide details to the public, and in the end, decided not to proceed with the project.

Supporting customer needs and Keeping rates low. As interest in renewables grows, Middleboro Gas and Electric is exploring the extent to which wind and solar can be incorporated in a small system, said Richter. "A lot of customers have asked us about solar electric, so we're developing solar tariffs and a net metering policy. But we must balance customers' desire for renewables with the need to keep rates low," she said.

Identifying a polarity is the first step that course participants took. Next, they learned how to "map" that polarity by developing a diagram listing actions required to achieve a positive result. The map also includes early warnings—measurable indicators of a lack of progress. "Mapping gave us the ability to 'see' the polarity," said BPW's Gordon.

Longmont's Wisecup soon had the chance to apply her mapping skills. During a discussion with her director about the utility's role as an electricity provider and its role as a city department, Wisecup said it helped "to put our thoughts on paper, to formal-

We all have blind spots, the trick is to learn how to raise your awareness, identify your blind spots and convert them into strengths," said Anaheim's Robert Briggs.



ize—or map—them."

In the meantime, Wisecup has mapped a polarity that she must address: quickly processing customer calls during a power outage while providing good service. "We need to move customers as fast as possible to free up the lines for other calls, and we need to provide the information needed while the customer is on the line."

It's a multi-faceted issue, involving the utility's phone system, its automated outage management system, in-house and contracted call-taking personnel and follow-up customer surveys, said Wisecup. "Every time I think of something to include, I make a sticky note and put it on my polarity file." She has posted the finished map in her office and shared it with her staff.

Polarity mapping is a thoughtful process that cannot be rushed. Indianola's Kielkopf

and his staff spent more than three months mapping the individual work/teamwork polarity "as a team." As the leader, Kielkopf presented the polarity within the context of the utility. He then asked the team for input, and summarized the results. At the next meeting, Kielkopf asked the team to suggest action steps and early warnings, which he then summarized. Not every suggestion ended up on the final map, but the team now has a common platform that it can refer to.

"One of the outcomes of this effort has been more one-on-one direct meetings to provide specific feedback and dispel some conflicts," said Kielkopf. "No execution will be perfect, but it helps that everyone knows what we're trying to accomplish."

Middleboro's Richter said she faces either/or questions all the time in her job. "There is conflict everywhere I turn." That's when she pulls out her polarity map on communications. "It gives me a clear picture of the positives that I need to go for. Polarity mapping is a great tool."

And like any other tool, it must be used and kept sharp, said Anaheim's Briggs.

Practice is essential for developing and honing the skills taught by Seidler, said Middleboro's Richter. "If I don't practice a skill, I won't be able to remember how to do it." And demonstrating a skill can motivate others, she said. "Show, don't tell."

Polarity mapping isn't just for municipal utilities. Longmont's Wisecup is sharing the mapping tool with the city's human resources group. "They may look at its potential application for other city departments."

Seidler begins each polarity management course by focusing on self-awareness. "It's my belief that the more completely people know themselves, the better they can manage an organization," she said. Participants assess their strengths and their values and

Getting Certified

The American Public Power Association's Public Power Manager Certificate Program works. Participants in the first two courses offered as part of the program said they received an e-mail or brochure. Some, like Darrin Gordon, assistant general manager at the Board of Public Works in Lewes, Del., saw a promotion on APPA's website. "We're working to train people, and I realized that this program fit me to a T," he said.

One participant learned of the course in an unusual way. Last year, APPA held a pre-conference seminar before its Customer Connections Conference, and Sandy Richter, manager of public communications at Middleboro's Gas and Electric Department in Massachusetts, decided to attend. The subject—polarity management—was new to Richter. "When I learned that the Public Power Manager Certificate Program explored the subject in more depth, I had to give it a shot."

The program requires participants to complete three courses. The courses, held at least twice a year, run for five days and comprise an introduction to power operations, a session on financial planning, budgeting and performance, and a three-day session on strategic management. The strategic management course, taught by Margaret Seidler, cultivates the skills public power utility managers and supervisors need to manage complex issues.

Information on the certificate program is available at <http://www.appanet.org/education/education.cfm?itemNumber=25290&navitemNumber=25398>.

then move to training in communication and conflict resolution skills.

Winfield's Ging views polarity management as a personal development tool, while Lewes' Gordon uses it to examine both himself and his organization. Both took away a key lesson from the course. For Ging, it was the need to identify and question his "blind spots." For Gordon, it was an awareness of the need to get the best from all the attributes that people bring to the table, positive and negative.

Anaheim's Briggs said that learning to recognize blind spots was a valuable lesson. "We all have blind spots, the trick is to learn how to raise your awareness, identify your blind spots and convert them into strengths," he said. "It's an ability that would have come in handy before I took the course."

"One's self-perceived strengths can become one's greatest weakness when it is time to lead a diverse team or organization," said Indianola's Kielkopf. "It's important for the leader to be aware of progress toward, and regression from, team members' interpersonal goals to keep everyone engaged in

Participants Give Program An A+

For James Ging, APPA's Public Power Manager Certificate Program came at just the right time in his career. "I'm an electrical engineer," said the assistant director of the Electric and Water Department in Winfield, Kan. "So I needed good training on the management side."

Ging gives the program high marks. "I had a pretty good handle on power supply, but liked hearing different ideas on budget preparation and rate design," he said. And the course on strategic management, taught by Margaret Seidler, an organization development consultant and master trainer "was the best of all," said Ging.

Other program participants offered similar comments. "The program focused on some of the bigger picture issues that I face as a manager," said Susan Wisecup, business manager of Longmont Power & Communications in Colorado. "I was looking for ways to improve how I work with those on the teams I supervise, my peers, and those in positions above me. The three-day strategic management course went much deeper than I expected—good stuff!"

Todd Kielkopf especially liked the fact that the strategic management course was set in the context of the electric utility industry. "That makes it relevant," said the general manager of Indianola Municipal Utilities in Iowa. "You can relate back to real-life examples."

Sandy Richter, manager of public communications at the Middleboro Gas and Electric Department in Massachusetts, appreciated the total immersion aspect of the strategic management course. "We had three days to try on a new skill, to make it custom fit," she said. Another highlight: practicing skills with other participants and talking about issues faced by managers. "We ended up with partners from other parts of the country who didn't share your self-interest. It was a great group, and we gelled."

APPA's certificate program is dynamic, said Longmont's Wisecup. "It keeps you focused, includes meaningful practice on real work situations, and provides you with a great group of peers who will be resources and support as you move forward."

The public power industry needs managers who know how to evolve, said Middleboro's Richter. "This program can light a fire under people who thought that management is too tough."

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the common effort.”

For Middleboro's Richter, the “aha” moment was a different way of looking at utility resistance to new programs or products. She now sees that resistance as a resource. “It is an energy that can help you move forward, get past the roadblocks,” she said. “I realized that there is room for everyone to be right. That's how you grow.”

No more business as usual—The public power managers and supervisors who have attended one of the certificate program courses say it has changed the way they think and work.

“I'm able to slow down,” said Lewes'

Gordon; “I don't jump to conclusions too quickly. And I look for a different way of approaching issues.” Winfield's Ging said he spends more time thinking about decisions and he questions his staff more productively.

Longmont's Wisecup reminds herself that everyone approaches things from a different perspective, and there is a way to marry those perspectives. Similarly, Anaheim's Briggs looks for what he calls the ‘yin and yang,’ recognizing the interconnection of contrary forces. “Complex issues have interdependent polarities that, when identified and managed well, lead to organizational success,” Briggs said.

“I now hold myself more accountable for understanding the complexity of any given challenge—in terms of the people, relationships and organizational structure involved—before trying to overcome that challenge,” said Indianola's Kielkopf.

Middleboro's Richter found Seidler's session very inspiring. “And half the battle is being inspired.” Upon returning to her office, Richter found she needed to use one of the skills she had been taught—collaborative conversation. “Instead of seeing a conflict, you make the conversation work for both of you.” Now a believer in polarity management, Richter plans to do some proselytizing. “I've mapped issues with a few people, and it's opened their eyes,” she said.

Indianola Municipal Utilities issues a quarterly assessment of each functional area, such as generation, distribution, programs and finance, said Kielkopf. “I hope to identify three or four polarities whose management might improve our performance in the coming quarter,” he said.

When asked where she goes from here, Longmont's Wisecup had a simple answer: just keep doing it. ■

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