



By George Deines



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Facing and fixing the top aquatic challenges

As the president of the North Texas Aquatics Association, I recently surveyed aquatic professionals in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, as well as some colleagues on the World Waterpark Association's Public Sector Committee to determine the challenges and obstacles they are facing. As the results came in, I quickly realized the majority of the challenges fell into three categories:

- Staffing
- Finances
- Facilities.

Staffing

Staffing issues top the list of challenges, mainly because of the nature of the positions and hours offered to prospective employees. Operators need staff members from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday

through Friday, and most of the weekends. However, sometimes staff members are only needed for a few hours at a time (programming, noon lap swim, etc.), and it's difficult to find dedicated and engaged employees who want to work a staggered schedule. As a result, employee turnover and competition from other less-stringent jobs stood out as primary challenges. Throw in the lack of buy-in from younger employees, and the complexities of recruiting, training, and motivating staff members, and it's easy to see why aquatic professionals have a difficult task ahead of them.

Finances

On the financial side, challenges include the rising cost of equipment, supplies, and labor—something I noticed over the course of my days as a public-sector operator. From 2007 to 2014, the cost of calcium hypochlorite rose from \$166 for 100 pounds to \$193;



Asking questions will help to develop a framework to tackle even the most difficult aquatic questions.

that's a 14-percent increase during times of shrinking budgets. Couple these rising costs with aquatic staff being given unrealistic cost-recovery goals for the facility and decreased annual operating budgets, and staff members quickly become frustrated as they are commanded to generate more revenue with fewer resources.

Facilities

Operators continuously struggle with maintaining aging facilities at an acceptable level without the finances to do so. Aging pools built in the 1970s and 1980s face physical (aging infrastructure) and functional (lack of features) obsolescence. As a result, these facilities suffer low attendance, which puts revenue at an all-time low, while their costs continue to rise. Add in changing codes and legislation to the mix and now operators are being asked to patch a 40-year-old pool merely to get it into compliance when the pool really needs a complete renovation.

Tackling Issues

With this list of challenges identified that hinder aquatic professionals, a framework can be developed to start tackling the issues. First, ask some questions:

- 1** What difficulties does this challenge pose?
- 2** How does the challenge affect the organization and operation?
- 3** What are the benefits of overcoming this challenge?
- 4** How do I overcome it?

Let's use training and motivating staff as an example:

1 What difficulties does this challenge pose?

Aquatic operators lack the time and resources to fully train staff members, primarily because of many other responsibilities. Recruiting, hiring, programming, payroll, and maintenance all take time, which leaves little time for training. Lack of funding also impacts training and motivation because training funds typically are the first to go when a budget gets slashed.

2 How does the challenge affect the organization and operation?

The lack of training and motivation means that operators sometimes receive poor employee behaviors that can put guests at risk, as well as provide them with poor service. Without training, employees are less likely to buy-in to the vision and culture of the organization, which means they leave sooner, resulting in a high employee turnover rate. That circle means less time to train and motivate because of the time spent recruiting and hiring.



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Photo: Counsilman-Hunsaker

3 What are the benefits of overcoming this challenge?

The benefits of training and motivating staff members far outweigh the time and resources it takes because of more efficiency in time management. Some responsibilities can be delegated to more proficient staff members, and the good behaviors start to flow from within the team. The result is a safer facility with employees who provide better overall service. They start believing in the philosophy and vision and so consequently stay longer, which reduces turnover and allows more time to focus on improving the operation instead of just getting by.

4 How do I overcome it?

This is probably the toughest question to answer, but it's also the most important. Operators should create a training calendar that covers all of the topics that need addressing on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis with each of their levels of employees. Once complete, the importance of training to achieve the organization's vision is realized (don't forget to



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make attendance mandatory). Also, make sure to hire individuals who share the same values, a positive attitude, internal motivation, and great communication skills. These individuals are easy to train. The hiring process might take more time initially, but it will save time in the long run. Training is merely an extension of the process, so it's important to show organizational purpose and vision in the interview, as well as every day on the job. Disclose expectations on the front-end of employment, communicating to individuals what to do, how to do it, and why it matters. Buy-in, loyalty, staff retention, and employee engagement await!

Overcoming challenges and obstacles can be a difficult process, but a worthwhile one. Improving operations just a small amount at a time will yield big rewards and prepare an organization for success for many years to come. **PRB**

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