Infrastructure Asset Management Alberta Hosting Workshop

Mark Wednesday October 11 on your calendar 8:45 to 3:00 and attend the IAMA workshop in Red Deer sponsored by *Alberta Municipal Affairs and the City of Airdrie.*

Benefit from key presentations 'Advancing Your Asset Management Programs' at the Town of Devon and the Town of Edson to be presented by Matthew Van Dommelen of Public Sector Digest (PSD), an update of activities of IAMA from Russell Crooks, latest AM news corner from Elena Loukin and 'TCA Reporting Policy Update' from Bret Dykstra of the City of Calgary.

Please register at   www.assetmanagementab.ca with a $30 fee +GST payable upon registration.

Reflections of Intergenerational Learning, or Not?

By "old guys" Kim Stephen, Partnership for Water Sustainability and Wally Wells, Asset Management BC and the 'young guy, Cory Sivell, Urban Systems.

Context

This article elaborates on challenges that the co-authors identified in their previous Op-Ed, published in the June 2016 Newsletter. Asset management and water sustainability, they wrote, are both top priorities for local governments. But the primary challenge is 'integration' and getting every discipline or department within an organization to recognize the contributions of the others plus get the organization working together on a common path. Another major challenge is communicating and understanding the message. The work environment is changing with time as are the methods of communicating and the form of the messages.

BC is progressing. Yet, persistent challenges for practitioners to adopt, change or evolve standards of practice means there is still a substantive disconnect between **UNDERSTANDING** (i.e. knowing what to do) and **IMPLEMENTATION** (i.e. doing it). This disconnect provides the backdrop for this article.

The Discussion

So, if asset management is so simple and logical, why are we not getting it? Words like 'collaboration' and 'integration' are being tossed around loosely and we all buy into them…or do we?

Two very mature guys (meaning 'old guys'), got discussing this at length. We were fortunate to have a young guy join the conversation with a whole bunch of fresh new ideas and thoughts. Yes, all three of us are engineers but we come from quite different generations. We quickly realized that, while we needed to understand the same things, the way we traditionally communicate is quite different. Therefore, the interpretation or understanding of the result can be quite different without really even realizing it.

See us old guys looked for a career, not a job. We tended to stay with the same employer, not move around five or six times during our career. We, us old guys, were not raised with social media and instant communications like 'tweets'. But our young guy grew up with social media, cell phones, e-mail, instant communications, mobility and a different understanding of both the content and the form of the message, not to say anything of the instantaneous potential for the timing of the message.

Recently there was a news item about bad science and what should we really believe. Testing of older, accepted but poorly researched theories has challenged the validity of the science behind theories which are supposed to be absolute. Yet today, we can 'tweet' a message in an instant and we are all supposed to believe every word. How can we balance instant information with information accuracy, especially if it is action-oriented?

This led us into musing about what it means to be a professional engineer. Historically we have been trained to be applied scientists. This meant that the essence of being a good engineer is whether we have the ability to observe and deduce, and can then apply what we have deduced. This is the foundation for creative thinking and informed problem-solving. This requires that we ask the 'right questions' and we solve the 'right problems'.

But these are acquired skills. Today, how does any young professional truly learn his or her trade when so much of daily life revolves around the use of 'apps' for instant answers or solutions? And how does he or she know if they have solved the wrong problem or arrived at a wrong answer? We, the old guys, remember the dawn of the computer age. We quickly learned the meaning of GIGO –

'garbage in, garbage out' and a *'mouse'* does not necessarily have four legs and a tail!

The conversation with the young guy took an interesting twist when we old guys recounted what the world was like at the beginning of our careers. We were called junior engineers and we were mentored by senior engineers. In that era, we explained, the accepted wisdom was that it took 5 to 10 years on-the-ground experience to develop professional judgment and mature into a fully rounded 'project engineer'. As the young guys, we were the sidekicks. This supporting role gave us ample and varied exposure to real-life situations that allowed us to observe and learn on the job, take on increasing responsibility, and bring forward new ideas. And we had confidence that our mentors would be there to back us up or bail us out, as needed. Organizations invested time and effort in us, the young guys, because we were there for the long-term. The outcome of the process was that we grew as professionals.

After we old guys painted this picture, which is centred on the notion of 'serving your time', the reaction of the young guy was immediate. "That is not appealing, it is not exciting," he stated. Is the nature of your response a reflection of the *instant gratification* ethic that characterizes society today, we queried? Yes, he acknowledges, partly, but also being listened to and appreciated. New ideas and changing times need to be reflected. After all, us 'old guys' were not raised with cell phones, instant messaging and 'fake' news. All good points!

The conversation continued. The young guy told us that his peer group changes jobs frequently because, he explained, old men are running organizations and their prevailing mentality is old school. Yet, he emphasized, his generation does aspire to a work environment that inspires, enables and stimulates.

What insights does this anecdote provide? What questions does it raise?

- What caused the apparent change in focus from career to job? Have employees responded to a change in attitude on the part of employers, or was it vice versa?

- If a priority for young professionals is recognition and inclusion, does this indicate either an impatience vis-à-vis long-term and intergenerational learning (mentoring) in the work environment?

- If a prevailing view of the world is based on short-term thinking and a need for instant gratification, then how would it be possible to build long-term trust that is at the heart of true collaboration?

- And in the different view of a long-term commitment to a shared vision, how do we create a work environment that inspires, enables, stimulates and is inclusive?

To provide a starting point for addressing these and other related questions, we can look to and learn from our ancestors. It is all about perspective and time. The grand creations of antiquity were not designed and built with instant gratification, a quarterly report, or a 4-year election term in mind. The builders of great cathedrals in medieval times thought in terms of multiple generations carrying out their work, to complete a dream that would not be realised until long after the originator's death. This is known as 'cathedral thinking'.

In a recent Op-Ed published by the Manchester Guardian newspaper, Stephen Hawking observed that

> *"a shift in behaviour inspires some ground-breaking new ideas. Termed 'cathedral ideas', these are the modern equivalent of the grand church buildings. These ideas are started by one generation with the hope a future generation will take up these challenges. Cathedral thinking means collaborate, with a shared vision and cooperative endeavour."*

The foundation for cathedral thinking is a far-reaching vision, a well-thought out blueprint, and a shared commitment to long-term implementation.

The reality today is a very different work environment then what we 'old guys' grew up in. That leads to a required dialogue of what communicating really means and how the message is received and interpreted by different generations. Maybe, just maybe, we take too much for granted based on what we individually know in trying to communicate asset management.

So, if asset management is so simple, why are people not getting it?

We need to think very hard about the way we carry the message - with, I would suggest, more thought to the perception of the listener.