



Millennials, Purpose and Culture: Three Vital Topics for Today's Utility Businesses

by John Egan

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When you go to a localized utility conference, such as the annual conference of the [California Municipal Utilities Association](#) (CMUA), some of the presentations may focus on developments within that particular state, like legislative and regulatory updates. But some of the presentations may also concern broader, nearly universal, topics that apply to utilities regardless of where they operate.

Today I'll summarize three important talks I heard last month at CMUA's 86th annual conference: **developing your workforce to include Millennials, living a purposeful life and rebooting a utility's culture.**

Attracting, Motivating and Retaining Millennials

I blog about [utility employee engagement](#) every now and then. Like [here](#). And [here](#). I'm not an HR or organizational behavior expert, and I stay in my lane by emphasizing the importance of communications in hiring, keeping and inspiring utility employees.

It's always a treat when I can hear, and share, a practitioner's thoughts on this subject. Kaylee Weatherly (*right*), a public information officer at Long Beach Water, talked about hiring, motivating and retaining Millennials. Those much-written-about but often-misunderstood cohort of people born after 1980, also known as digital natives, are increasingly seen as a vital part of many utilities' workforces. But she said there are several common misperceptions about Millennials.



Credit: Long Beach Water

More numerous than Baby Boomers and Generation Xers in the workforce, Millennials also are better-educated than those other cohorts, with nearly 40% earning a bachelor's degree.

Kaylee, a Millennial herself, shared her thoughts on what Millennials want in their work life. Loyalty, creativity, flexibility and collaboration were four must-haves for Millennials. What will they give in return? Loyalty, she said, and an unprecedented familiarity with technology. But they need more frequent feedback than the traditional annual performance review, she cautioned.

In other words, invest in me and they will invest in you. Crazy, huh?

Above all, Kaylee said, Millennials seek purpose in their work. Purpose is elegantly found at the intersection of four work attributes, shown below:



Source: Kaylee Weatherly



Leading a Significant Life

It's always nice to see when a friend has shifted careers and found success at something new. I got that treat when I saw [Erick Rheam](#) (*left*) speak on the five elements of a significant life. A powerful and engaging speaker for as long as I have known him, Erick has gone to another level as a professional motivational speaker after a long career in and around utilities.

Source: Erickrheam.com

Using stories drawn from his life as well as inspirational quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King, Maya Angelou and Mark Twain, Erick took the CMUA audience on a powerful journey. He began, and ended, by showing there were five key aspects of leading a significant life:

- Spiritual
- Self
- Influence
- Encouragement, and
- Communications

Drawing on his passion for running, his graduation from the United States Military Academy and work at a utility where he said he had the organizational impact of a dumpster fire, Erick told the audience, "When you lose your 'why,' you lose your way."

Fortunately, Erick has found his why. A big part of that journey, he said, was marrying his strengths to his passions. Being really good at something that has no broader impact is the definition of a life that is empty, unsatisfying and wasted.

I don't have to worry about stealing Erick's thunder because I can't. But if you are part of a group planning a conference, **I urge you invite Erick to speak**. Let him take your audience on a riveting journey into their hearts to show what a significant life looks like.

Rebooting Your Utility's Culture

Someone once told me that culture was the most important factor in determining whether a company soared or sank. I agree, and I believe this is true for utilities no less than manufacturers, financial-service firms or consumer-product companies.

Culture can be easy to take for granted. It takes sustained, conscious effort to change it. Like air, it permeates a business, touching everyone, conditioning decision-making and defining what is OK and what is not. Organizational culture is the way a business chooses to do business.

Dan Beans (*right*), is the director of the [Redding Electric Utility](#) (REU), which also is a client. I think he and I are on the same wavelength on culture. He's doing something exciting — and challenging — at his utility: a full-on reboot of the culture.

Dan was named director last summer. What he inherited, he said, was an organization in transition from an awkward structure, a high vacancy rate and a lack of teamwork and accountability. Organizational silos still existed everywhere.

An employee survey from 2015 said REU's management was dysfunctional. Dan, a big believer in straight talk and accountability, agreed.



Credit: Redding Electric Utility

“We needed to implement a culture that rewards collaboration and weeded out those who were not team players,” he told the CMUA conference. “We needed to transform the culture.”

One way to do that was to remove what Dan called “non-team players” from the organization. That process has been underway for some time, and there’s no clear end in sight.

In seeking to create a cycle of virtue, Dan identified four elements of an optional workplace: teamwork, creativity, customer service and consistency through accountability.

It’s not easy and it won’t happen overnight. But the benefits already are evident: costs are declining, productivity is improving, job vacancies are falling and momentum is building. “These are the measurable differences we are seeing,” Dan said.

Oh, and by the way, unlike a lot of utilities I know, REU is not having any trouble getting and keeping linemen.

The insights shared by Kaylee, Erick and Dan should interest a wide range of utilities, no matter where they’re located, regardless of whether they’re owned by investors or those they serve, and irrespective of whether they deliver electricity, water or natural gas. Because they are universal truths, I thought I’d share them with you.