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From Hendrix to Floyd— Rethinking Innovation Leadership in Organizations

By John Kuosman

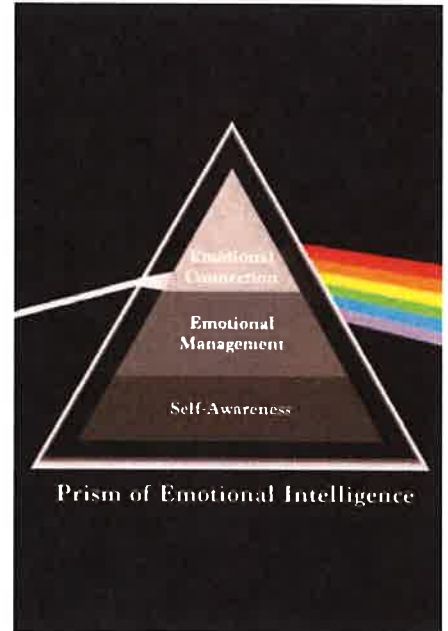
THERE IS SO MUCH TALK THESE days about innovation being the key to the water industry. Historically, the term innovation referenced emerging technologies and the technologists who translate their promise into actionable results. It is so easy to think in these terms when technologies are coming to market at an alarming rate and our training programs are producing so many outstanding technologists. And let's be real here, who doesn't like to occasionally throw out terms like reverse (or forward) osmosis, ultrafiltration, advanced oxidation, and ballasted flocculation in mixed audiences to demonstrate the depth of our scientific prowess? The ego is strong in all of us!

That aside, it is my humble opinion that terms like vulnerability, adaptability, impulse control, empathy, authenticity, and coaching might actually be more important to our water industry innovation vocabulary. As I put these words to paper, I can hear those "salty and seasoned" industry veterans laughing and

saying back to me lyrics from Jimi Hendrix's song Little Wing: "You're walking through the clouds, with a circus mind, that's running wild. Butterflies and zebras and moonbeams, and fairy tales; what you are talking about is riding on the wind." I also don't recommend using these terms at dinner parties as using them will not likely get you an invitation back!

That aside, having worked in various roles across the water industry, I consistently see that the limiting element for really capturing the value of innovation is the ability to translate ideas into connections with people. It is not a lack of technologies or experienced technologists; it is the inability to connect the value of innovative ideas with the full diversity of water professionals.

When I think about innovation implementation, I like to use the analogy of a prism (think Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* album cover). In this manner, an innovative idea comes into the prism as white light, and the properties of the prism



allow the amplification and translation of that light into the rainbow of our industry. Any innovative idea must be translated by leaders to regulators (red), financiers (orange), politicians (yellow), operations (green), maintenance (blue), laboratory and compliance (Indigo), the public and media (violet), and all the various shades in between. Leaders in the water industry must be able to amplify innovative ideas to each of these stakeholders (rainbow colors) recognizing that each of them thinks in different terms and speaks a different dialect of the same language.



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So when it comes to hiring leaders into an organization, or determining what training will really transform an organization, I visualize the "Prism of Emotional Intelligence." The Prism of Emotional Intelligence can act as a Rosetta Stone, allowing leaders to translate innovative ideas into the varied dialects of the water industry.

Emotional Intelligence encompasses several skill groupings that build on each other. The lowest level (foundational) skill grouping is *Self-awareness*. Self-awareness includes internalizing feedback on our individual performance, the ability to monitor our own emotional state in a variety of settings, our ability to be vulnerable, and the ability to recognize our level of optimism and self-regard. Self-aware leaders quickly and accurately appraise new situations because they can accurately identify their emotions in the face of a challenge, they open themselves up to seeing broader reality because of their willingness to be vulnerable and accept feedback, and they tend to act affirmatively because of their ability to apprise themselves and others.

The second level skill grouping is *Emotional Management*. Only with a firm grounding in self-awareness, can a leader begin to manage his or her emotions, begin to focus on the needs of others, and seamlessly blend into a wide variety of settings. In this stage of leadership development, the leader is able to depersonalize (dis-

tance themselves from) the situation with impulse control, adaptability, authenticity, and a drive to produce an outcome beyond their self-interest. Innovation outcomes that were never possible before begin to surface at this stage of leadership development.

The third and highest level skill grouping is *Emotional Connection*. Having mastered Self-awareness and Emotional Management, a leader in this stage of development is now able to forge those emotional connections needed to implement innovation. Emotional connection occurs through empathy, listening, communication, and coaching/mentoring. This stage of leadership produces the tangible results that all stakeholders demand.

When hiring innovation leaders in the water industry, the primary criteria for selection have historically been years of experience and technical excellence. Although these are vital elements to consider, other competencies may actually produce better results for your organization. A truly innovative organization creates alchemy by hiring (or developing) leaders who possess the trifecta combination of technical skills, professional experience, and emotional intelligence. Interviewing candidates for leadership roles should focus on experience and technical prowess, but also determining where the potential leader resides on the Prism of Emotional Intel-

ligence. In the case where individuals do not have the full trifecta, organizations should strongly consider establishing clearly defined (and separate) career tracks for technical leadership and emotionally intelligent leadership.

Maya Angelou said it best when she encouraged us to "Be a rainbow in someone else's cloud." I encourage you to rethink innovation leadership in your organization and view leadership development through the Prism of Emotional Intelligence. I sincerely hope this shift in mindset will allow our industry to move beyond butterflies, moonbeams, and fairytales; and forge the connections needed bring innovative ideas to the rainbow of people that ultimately make them successful.



John Kuosman is Director of the Littleton/Englewood Wastewater Treatment Plant. He brings to this role a passion for connecting with people to inspire change, build partnerships, create alignment, and positively serve the South Platte watershed and its communities. Kuosman has an undergraduate degree in engineering from the Colorado School of Mines (CSM) and Masters' degrees in business and civil engineering from the University of Colorado Denver. He is a periodic adjunct professor at CSM teaching team-building, problem definition, stakeholder engagement, and communications principles. He can be reached at jkuosman@englewoodco.gov or 303.762.2602.



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