

Overcoming the Identity Crisis of the Facilities Professional

By J.B. Messer

We come from varied educational, technical, and professional backgrounds. We are supervisors, assistant managers, managers, assistant directors, directors, assistant vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant

or associate vice chancellors, vice presidents, chief facilities officers, and hold many other titles too numerous to mention. We work in facilities, physical plants, operations, and any name that can fit the job description.

Our jobs can comprise so many areas of responsibility that they are frequently difficult to track even when we are doing them. Some of the more frequent include design and specifications, new construction and renovations, project management, space planning, master planning, facilities condition assessments, operations and maintenance, building and campus services, landscape and grounds, athletic facilities, campus residence, aquatic natatoriums, warehousing, surplus, fixed assets, shipping and receiving, transportation, parking, property leasing and acquisition, contract-

ing, printing services, food services, emergency management, safety and security, risk management, environmental health and safety, pest control, waste management, information technology and networks, and associated software systems—along with the

administration, planning, and budgeting for each. And we wonder why there is an identity crisis among facilities professionals!

So how do you overcome these obstacles in order to be successful in your chosen field? Here are just a few factors to consider:

1. **Surround yourself with good people.** Make good hires, and inspire them to be better than they are. Provide them with the resources for success. You can never go wrong with this approach. But when you don't have the opportunity to make the best hires, you need to develop them.
2. **Knowledge.** It's essential to success. I always talk about relevance. You need to seek continuous improvement—always. If not, your peers will overtake you, leave you behind, and then you will lose the relevance of your position. You gain that knowledge through professional development classes, conferences, webinars, research, and professional papers. With that knowledge, you too become teachers and facilitators.
3. **Organization.** Every task or identified discrepancy must be recorded, organized, and prioritized. Each, no matter how large, can be broken down to doable parts, and you can celebrate the victories of accomplishment along the way. But organization goes further than this; it requires that you organize your offices, storage areas, warehouses, surplus, and even the organization as a whole in order to be more effective and efficient.
4. **Attitude.** A positive attitude can go a long way toward inspiring the people you work with each day. Most people enjoy working in an environment that is uplifting and brings joy. Being civil, kind, and positive, and saying the words “please” and “thank you” are all welcoming elements that promote good attitudes. Smile—always—and try to add some humor along with it.



5. **Clear communications regarding mission, goals, and expectations.** This requires the setting of good personal goals for every individual within the organization and frequent follow-up on those goals. Ensure that they are SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) goals. Celebrate the successes.

6. **Leadership.** It's the single most important factor that leads to success. There are so many books, training sessions, and courses on leadership that it is hard to know which model to follow. But after many years in facilities, I have it pretty much figured out—maybe!

The five items just covered are a great start for leaders, but a number of others come to mind: a) know your people, their capabilities, and what makes them tick; b) be calm under fire, even in the most adverse of situations; c) empower your direct reports; don't ignore them, but rather teach, communicate, trust, and provide resources for success; d) let your team know that you care about them and their success; e) be willing to work harder than

anyone on the team—don't ask them to do something that you would not be willing to do yourself; and f) invert the pyramid by being a servant leader.

The fact that our members are continually seeking to grow in these areas is one of the reasons why APPA is our *association of choice*. Through APPA's programming, professional development, certifications, webinars, workshops, and networking opportunities, we can make major strides in improving our leadership skills.

Is this going to solve our identity crisis? Perhaps not. But by working together and taking advantage of the possibilities that APPA offers, we can face all these challenges head-on every day and come out winners. §

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