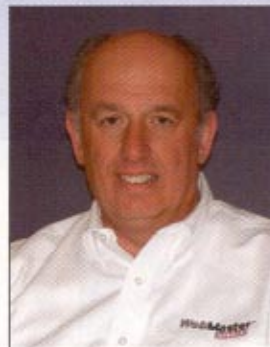


Guest Column

Volunteerism – A Stimulus for Creative, Fresh Thinking

Ron Yates, President & CEO, Iwaki Walchem Corporation



Grow professionally by putting your mind and talent to work outside your day-to-day workplace.

What is an article on “volunteerism” doing in a trade publication like *Pumps & Systems*? Why is it so important that people respond affirmatively when they’re asked to participate in activities outside of their immediate corporate world?

The answers to these questions are simple. I believe active participation and hands-on engagement in organizations outside of direct employment puts mind and talent to work in different ways. It creates opportunities to expand thinking and learn new skills, stimulate creativity and provide a basis to have a fresh outlook and perspective that can be applied to work.

Volunteerism = Networking

I am convinced of this out of personal experience. On the business side of things, my involvement with the Hydraulic Institute (HI) serves as a good example. HI provides a business-related venue for becoming involved in activities that are diverse and stimulating. Participation on a committee, especially a non-technical one, creates opportunities for exposure to a wide range of perspectives and experiences that are not available from one’s own company alone. It is not just the knowledge one can gain from working with colleagues from other sectors of the industry, but also of seeing how other people approach problem solving.

In spite of mergers, acquisitions and consolidation throughout the pump industry in recent years, corporate membership in HI has increased. At the same time, though, it has become increasingly difficult to get direct participation from CEOs. Recent economic and business pressures have exacerbated this trend. What many CEOs are missing, however, is an opportunity for learning, networking and obtaining fresh ideas that can be applied to their business. Moving outside of one’s current role and environment can stimulate a more creative outlook. New friends can be made, and contacts that lead to meaningful strategic business alliances can be developed.

Interestingly, CEO behavior tends to have a trickle-down

effect within the corporate organization. An attitude that discourages managers and/or engineers from participation in professional development activities such as those provided by HI can ultimately be damaging to a company. These are the very people who can derive the greatest benefit from seeing and hearing things from a broader perspective, especially in the case of smaller companies.

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Setting Priorities in a Changing Industry

If any of this applies to you, at this point you may be protesting, “but, I don’t have the time.” My response would be that you just have chosen different priorities—priorities that you might want to rethink, in light of current developments in our industry.

During the late 1990s, there was a flurry of merger and acquisition (M&A) activity, as well as a consolidation of much of the pump industry. While acquisitions have been a major strategy for growth for many companies, the post-M&A integration of these companies has been a real challenge that has led to difficult adjustments for many people.

It is not surprising, then, that momentum is building to improve manufacturing and operating aspects of businesses,

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with programs such as Six Sigma, lean manufacturing and continuous improvement. There are, however, external forces at work that require more out-of-the-box thinking that focuses on business expansion and growth.

Explosion of Internet usage is presenting new and creative ways to interact directly with customers. Most pump companies are still trying to figure out what it all means to them, in a practical sense, and how to deal with the new technology. At the same time, issues that can be quite troublesome to most companies also are surfacing. These include a sense of loss of control over sales channels, and what to do about years of infrastructure that have relied heavily on distribution.

Of course, an even more complicated trend is the increasing integration of technologies such as sensors, instrumentation and pumps. Interest in remote monitoring, electronic controllers and sensors, along with other smart devices integrated with pumps, will require application and development of new technologies. Emphasis on software rather than hardware will achieve more efficient operating systems, seamless information retrieval and systems consolidation, if not miniaturization. Migration to these combined technologies is new to many in the pump industry. It requires knowledge and perspective inherent in the fields of instrumentation, software and telecommunications. The impetus for this combined technology will come from systems thinking and optimization—the need to address fewer qualified operators in the field, the need to make product application more efficient and reliable, and the need to use available information as knowledge, which can then be translated into value. A broader perspective and more nimble thinking than merely dealing with traditional pump industry issues will be mandatory.

Everyone Benefits

Engaging in activities outside of the daily work cycle can be an excellent stimulus for developing a wider outlook. In my own case, the importance I place on volunteerism and the redefining of priorities originate from my involvement with Habitat for Humanity over the last two decades. Activities associated with building housing with the poor on both a local and international scale are diverse and challenging—quite different from those that I face on a daily basis in the pump industry. I believe that solving problems and working with people from all walks of life in this endeavor have contributed greatly to my personal development.

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or a non-profit organization like Habitat for Humanity provides a tremendous forum for development of leadership skills. Dealing with volunteers who have different viewpoints and backgrounds in order to achieve common goals can be a wonderful way for young managers to learn how to be effective in leadership roles. This type of experience is especially important when it comes time for a company to identify potential leaders within the organization or to interview for new talent. Corporations know that the ability to address industry-wide concerns or social problems can stretch an associate's creativity, innovation and selling—all of which have direct application to any business environment.

Volunteering opportunities are widespread and readily available. Furthermore, the rewards associated with serving others can be significant and unpredictable. They can benefit you in the business environment in ways that are not easily imagined.

For example, I know of no better way for an individual to grow professionally, obtain perspective and hone leadership skills than to volunteer. An inevitable result is the gift of being able to take a fresh look at problems and issues and revitalize personal energy.

Another reward can be the development of new and diverse contacts that can be useful in any number of circumstances, including finding people talent, business financing, technology sharing, marketing, investment strategizing and developing specific knowledge beyond areas of current expertise. Often, these contacts hold high-level positions, which, in turn, can lend weight in positive ways.

But, there's even more to it. One of the biggest benefits comes from an enriching, healthy and broad viewpoint on work and life in general. Whether it is working to develop educational programs and industry standards, or witnessing first-hand the severe hardships and disadvantages that so many people must deal with forever, your outlook is changed by the perspectives and experiences of others. This fact alone provides relief from pressure at work. That's because you quickly come to the realization that, in the grand scheme, some things just aren't as important as they seem.

The artist George Fredric Watts tried to say something along these lines by painting a king in his casket, with all the symbols of his pride, wealth and power spread around him on the floor. But, up above the dead monarch, in dim letters, were these words:

"What I saved I lost; what I gave I have."