

Public Works Supervisory Academy prepares municipal employees to manage public dollars

Municipal supervisors and managers who are unprepared for their roles cost taxpayers money. The Public Works Supervisory Academy (PWSA) offered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Continuing Studies prepares supervisors in 10 skill areas to address this public need. This training has helped more than 2,000 participants deal more effectively with problem employees, communicate with citizens and employees in a more professional manner, and more effectively assist their departments in purchasing and budgeting – thus saving money.

Situation:

Many municipalities find that their supervisors and managers have not had any formal training in the responsibilities or expectations for these positions. Lack of skills results in the individual either replicating “what we’ve always done” or asking other supervisors, who also may not be trained, what to do. The Wisconsin Chapter of the Public Works Association and the League of Municipalities both have found that unprepared supervisors and managers can result in lost time and production due to grievances and poor employee relations; complaints from residents; and difficulty with budgeting, purchasing, and general management processes. While it is essential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of frontline supervisors, few municipalities are large enough or have the internal resources to provide training.

Response:

The Department of Professional Development and Applied Studies within the UW-Madison Division of Continuing Studies developed a Public Works Supervisory Academy to prepare supervisors for their position and responsibilities. The first workshop was offered in May 1997. In order for the participants to graduate from the academy, they are required to complete all 10 workshops for a total of 60 hours. If the participant chooses to enroll in the Certified Public Manager Program, these 60 hours contribute to the 72 hours required for Phase I of that program. Workshop topics are Basic Leadership Skills, Work Planning and Goal Setting, Customer/Resident Relations, Effective Communication Skills, Budgeting, Fund Accounting and Grant Administration, “Nuts and Bolts” of Personnel Management, Managing “Troubled” and “Problem” Employees, Labor Relations and Negotiations, Workplace and Equipment Safety, and Purchasing and Inventory Control.

An advisory group from the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Public Works Association assists the program instructors and director in reviewing the workshops’ content. Each of the daylong workshops is delivered in West Allis, Beloit, Appleton and Menomonee Falls. Participants can attend workshops at any of the sites in order to accommodate work schedules and crises such as snowstorms or water-main breaks common to public works.

As of April 1, 2004, the Public Works Supervisor Academy has offered 177 workshops with a total enrollment of 2,547 supervisors. This represents 15,282 training hours. Eighty-four

supervisors have successfully completed all 10 sessions with 313 more supervisors currently enrolled in program.

Impacts:

An e-mail survey sent in January 2002 to 67 public works supervisors enrolled in the Academy found the training has helped participants become more effective supervisors.

- 93% reported that the training was very helpful in improving how they interacted with people, both the general public and their employees.
- 76% reported that the training has motivated them to continue formal training, specifically the Certified Public Manager Program. As of April 2004, nine PWSA graduates have successfully completed the Certified Public Manager Program.
- At least 12 of the graduates have been promoted since completing the Academy.

Success stories:

PWSA participants said:

“The workshop on Purchasing and Inventory Control gave me information that I used when purchasing 10 trucks for the department. I saved \$2,500 per vehicle by purchasing them off of the “State Bid” – a total savings of \$25,000!”

“These courses have helped me in all aspects of my job. I have more confidence in dealing with people and my work skills. I often refer to the material. Further, it has helped me financially in meeting goals on my evaluation.”

“I have learned that managing is actually a skill that can be learned. I have had supervisory positions before and not done as well as I thought or wanted to. In just taking the few courses I have taken, things have really improved. I now understand that managing is work. This program is really the only way that I can get this training. Thank you!”

“We had some real problems out here. Now I am better able to judge the output by how someone receives my instructions. Also, I feel I can talk to the most troubled person in the park and still hold my cool.”

“The classes were very timely. As I started the program I was the Highway Superintendent for our town. At that time we were in the middle of negotiating the first union contract with our employees. The skills learned helped me through that process. When I had completed about half of the courses I was promoted to Director of Public Works. I no longer was in charge of just one department but now oversee other departments in the town and have work schedules and goals to set for all of them. The work Planning and Goal Setting Program helped me out. It is a great program that I would recommend to anyone.”

Contact: Gregg Miller, Program Coordinator, UW-Madison Division of Continuing Studies; phone: (608) 263-8256; e-mail: gmiller@dcs.wisc.edu

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