



From Hired to Higher: Department of Public Works

Room 108



CONNECT **351**



MMA CONNECT 351
Mass Highway Association

From Hired to Higher: Department of Public Works Recruitment, Retention, and Succession Planning





Moderator: Roby Whitehouse

ASSISTANT PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR IN YARMOUTH,
President of the Massachusetts Highway Association



Jen Breaker

Assistant Town Manager,
Danvers



Ricardo Morales

Commissioner of Public Works, Pittsfield



Andrew O'Malley

Deputy Chief of Police,
Yarmouth

Laying the Groundwork



AGING WORKFORCE & SUCCESSION GAPS

Many municipalities face a wave of retirements in public works, creating urgent needs for succession planning and knowledge transfer.



UNFILLED POSITIONS INCREASE WORKLOAD AND BURNOUT RISK

As DPWs struggle to recruit and retain staff, existing employees face heavier workloads, leading to burnout and further attrition.

COMPETITION WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Municipalities struggle to compete with private industry wages and benefits, especially for skilled trades and CDL-licensed positions.



RETENTION HINGES ON CULTURE & CAREER PATHWAYS

Municipalities that invest in employee development, mentorship, and internal promotion pathways see stronger retention outcomes.



Rethinking Succession Planning

Succession Planning Is a Risk Management Strategy
Not Just a Hiring Tool

Transparency in Hiring Is a Best Practice
Even When It's Hard

Union Contracts Can Be Navigated, But Should Not Be Avoided



How Danvers Built the DPW Pathway Program





Town of Danvers
Office of the Town Manager

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www.danversma.gov | jbreaker@danversma.gov

Memorandum

To: Mark Lentine, AFSCME Union President
From: Jen Breaker, Assistant Town Manager
Date: April 5, 2022
Re: Proposed Pathway Program – Water & Sewer Operator II Position

As you know, recruitment is currently challenging, and finding qualified candidates is extremely difficult. The Town has committed to thinking creatively about ways to reach new candidates and fill positions.

Specifically, the Operator II positions with the Water & Sewer division have been vacant since 2020. While discussing ways to fill these positions that require several particular licenses and training, we developed the idea of a Pathway Program.

The Pathway Program would allow the Town to hire an entry-level position (Laborer) with the ability to train and educate that employee and progress them to the Operator I position and into the Operator II position. Below is a summary of expectations for this program.

1. The Town will advertise the position as a pathway position that will start as a laborer and progress to Operator I and then Operator II. Progression will happen along a specific timeline and with pre-determined qualifications.
2. The expectation is to hire someone as a laborer, move them to an Operator I within 24 months of hire, and to an Operator II within 18 months of the move from Operator I. If the employee meets the qualifications for movement before the maximum timeframe, they could be moved sooner.
3. There will be specific qualifications for movement (determined from the job descriptions of the Operator I and II positions). If the employee fails to meet the minimum requirements, they will be terminated from the program and may be terminated from their employment with the Town.
4. The Town will include the program details and timeline in the advertisement and the offer letter to the candidate.
5. This Pathway Program will only progress someone to the position of Operator II. After completing the Pathway Program, the employee would be eligible and follow the typical promotional process.
6. We are seeking support from the union for this trial program and the ability to:
 - a) Automatically move the employee hired into the Operator I and then Operator II position (without posting)
 - b) Ability to terminate employment if the employee fails to meet the pathway program deadlines at their fault. If a class or program isn't held or dates changed, that isn't considered the employee's fault. The Town would provide additional time to complete the training - just as we do now.

We have been working on a revised Laborer job description for the Water & Sewer division, which can be provided within the next few days. The Pathway Program for the Operator II position would be a trial program with one candidate. If successful, we would be looking to schedule additional discussions about using this program again in the future.



Details...

Union involvement from the start

Financial Analysis - can we afford to do this?

Ensuring proper protections are in place and agreed to

Clear timeline for the review process

Key responsibilities tied to the proposed role

How the change supports long-term stability for the town



Town of Danvers
Human Resources Department

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June 7, 2022

Dear Mr. [REDACTED]

I am pleased to offer you the position of Pathway Program Laborer for the Town of Danvers Water and Sewer Department with a six-month probationary period. If you accept this offer, your starting date will be **June 27, 2022**, and your starting rate of pay will be \$22.9994/hourly (Unit A, Grade 8AX/Step 2). This is a benefitted position that works 40 hours per week (Monday through Friday, 7 AM to 3 PM.). This position will be required to work through the Pathway Program into the positions of Operator I and Operator II. To move to the next position, the requirements described below will need to be successfully completed. You will have the ability to move to the next position sooner if licenses are obtained before the deadline.

This offer of employment and the effective date of hire are contingent upon the following:

- Favorable pre-employment medical exam and drug test conducted at the Town's expense by the Town's agent(s)
- Favorable results of a reference check
- Favorable results of a CORI

As discussed, you will be expected to complete the following licensures no later than **July 1, 2025**. Once these licenses are obtained you will be moved to an **Operator I**. Failure to meet these requirements can result in termination from the program and employment.

- Commercial Driver's License (CDL) with Airbrake Endorsement
- Hydraulics License

After completing the required licenses for the Operator I position, you will have 18 months (December 21, 2026) to meet the minimum requirements for the Operator II position. Failure to meet these requirements can result in termination from the program and employment.

- Grade II Water Distribution License
- Successful Experience in water and Sewer Division

This offer includes a comprehensive benefits package:

- Eligibility for health insurance coverage through our provider, Blue Cross Blue Shield. There is no waiting period. The town pays 70% of the premium cost each month. The Town offers 2 different health insurance plans, a Benchmark style plan (low deductible and co-pays) and a High Deductible plan (with HSA contribution from the Town). The monthly breakdown for each plan is below and more information will be provided to you on the Town's health plans during your onboarding process:

Coverage Type	Network Blue New England (Benchmark HMO)	Blue Care Elect (Benchmark PPO)	Access Blue N.E. Saver (HDHP HMO)	Blue Care Elect Saver (HDHP PPO)
Individual	\$272.21	\$371.68	\$257.85	\$350.98
Family	\$682.80	\$883.66	\$646.77	\$834.37

- Blue Freedom Dental, through Blue Cross Blue Shield:

Coverage	Standard	Premium
Individual	\$10.60	\$16.68
Family	\$33.76	\$53.13



- Blue 20/20, a voluntary supplemental plan for vision through Blue Cross Blue Shield:

Coverage Type	Monthly Cost
Individual	\$5.83
Family	\$16.03

- Health Equity FSA, LPFSA, and/or HSA for medical expenses and/or dependent care.
- Retirement plan: A public employee in Massachusetts does not contribute to Social Security. Rather, you will have mandatory deductions made into the Danvers Contributory Retirement Plan with a percentage based on when you became a member (members enrolled contribute 9% with an additional 2% on all retirement applicable pay above \$30,000 in a year). You must contact the Danvers Retirement System with any questions and to set up an appointment to sign the appropriate forms by contacting Susan Little, Retirement Manager slittle@danversma.gov or 978-777-0001 ext. 3044.
- Direct deposit required for payroll (up to 3 accounts optional).
- Participation in the credit union, with the option of an automatic savings plan via payroll deduction.
- A voluntary deferred compensation plan via MissionSquare.
- Aflac (policies available through payroll deduction).
- Life Insurance program.
- Sick leave: During your first year of employment, sick leave is earned at a rate of ten (10) hours per full month of service. Effective January 2022, sick leave is earned annually on January 1 at a lump sum of 120 hours. Please reference the union contract, available at danversma.gov/collective-bargaining-agreement/, for information on the sick leave bank.
- Personal days: Upon hire, you will have ten (10) hours of personal time available prorated on your start date. Effective January 1, 2023, you will receive Twenty-four (24) hours per the calendar year. Personal days cannot be carried forward and must be used in the year they are awarded.
- Vacation Accrual: Upon hire, vacation time is pro-rated, and you will have (33) hours available for use at the end of your probationary period. Effective January 1, 2023, you will accrue two weeks (80 hours) of vacation annually. Please reference the Unit A contract, available at danversma.gov/collective-bargaining-agreement/, for additional information on use and earning of vacation accrual.
- Thirteen (13) paid holidays: New Year's Day; Martin Luther King Jr. Day; Presidents' Day; Patriots' Day; Memorial Day; Juneteenth; Independence Day; Labor Day; Columbus Day; Veterans' Day; Thanksgiving; Christmas Eve; Christmas Day.

If you accept this position as outlined above, please sign a copy of this letter and the enclosed job description return them to the Human Resources Department by **June 14, 2022**. Keep the original copy of this letter for your records.

I look forward to working with you in this position.

Sincerely,

Jen Breaker
Jen Breaker
Assistant Town Manager

Enclosures: Job Description

I, [REDACTED] do hereby accept the position of Pathway Program **Laborer Position** for the Town of Danvers Water and Sewer Division as described in the above offer letter. Further I understand the timeline and requirements for the successful completion of the Pathway Program

Signature _____

Date _____



DPW Pathway Program: Considerations



Secure Sustainable Funding Early

Require upfront investment in training, mentorship, and licensing support. Budgeting for these costs ensures the program is viable and scalable

Link to Succession Planning: Invest Early, Invest Often

These programs are not just about filling today's vacancies. They're about building tomorrow's workforce. Embedding them in your long-term succession strategy helps future-proof your department

Lead by Example

Municipal leaders must model the mindset shift: embracing new approaches, supporting internal growth, and being transparent about expectations—even when it's uncomfortable.

Create a Clear, Visual Roadmap

Employees and candidates need to understand the path ahead. A transparent timeline with milestones and qualifications builds trust and keeps participants motivated.



Streets Division Pathway Program

CONSIDERATIONS

- Licensing and Training
- Budget Impacts
- Operational Continuity

REQUESTED BY DEPARTMENT & EMPLOYEES

- Employee Feedback
- Department Needs
- Retention Motivation

WHY THIS MAKES SENSE

- Build on Proven Success
- Future-Proof Workforce
- Cost-Effective Strategy
- Culture & Engagement



Danvers Other Considerations

- Sign On Bonus Program
- Compensation & Classification Studies
- Review of job descriptions
- What can we do in-house and pay stipends?
- Do employees know the path forward?
- Commitment to training and development



MMA
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Mass Highway
Association

Recruitment
Retention
Succession
Planning

Pittsfield Public Works

Challenges

Recruitment

- Entry-level skill gaps
- Seasonal labor shortages
- Licensed operators and skilled trades
- Below-market pay for engineers



Retention

- Low pay vs. regional peers
- Limited incentives for licenses/certifications
- Heavy overtime concentrated on few staff (burnout risk)
- Reactive workload due to thin staffing



Succession

- Aging workforce in skilled roles
- No structured training pipeline
- Limited supervisory development
- Unclear career paths



Vision and Goals

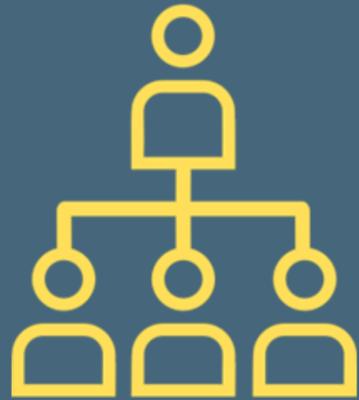
Strengthen
education and
training
funding

Collaborate with
the Union to
support workforce
development

Expand
departmental
opportunities for
career growth

Strategy

Horizontal Growth



Added more divisions to create leadership pathways

Entry-Level Base



Established positions requiring no special licenses (labor roles)

Career Ladder



Enabled progression from entry-level to licensed operator roles

Training & License Assistance



Established a path for employees to obtain licenses paid by employer in advance



Horizontal Growth

Expanded the department with new divisions and positions that opened paths for staff to step into leadership roles.

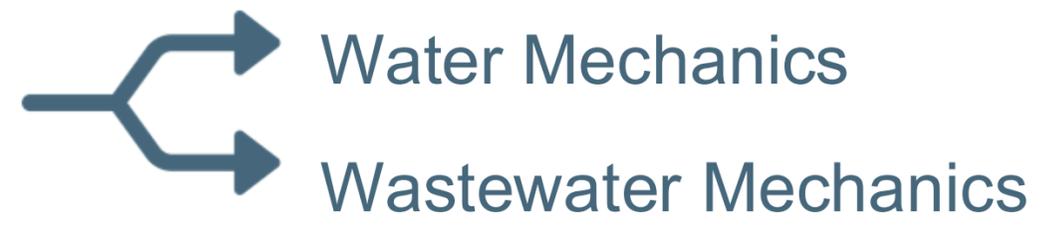
Highway Division



Water Division



Utilities Mechanics





Entry Level Base

Create base roles in each division that need no special licenses and give a clear starting point for entry-level staff.

**Streets Water &
Sewer**



Laborers

**Highway
Traffic
Parks**



Maintenance
Persons

Pay Scale Alignment

Create pay scales tied to licenses in Water Treatment, Water & Sewer, and Wastewater, including non-operators to allow easy transition to operator roles

Water Treatment and Water Distribution		Salary Grade
Job Title	Full Licensure*	
Plant Operator	No Water Licensure	26
Maintenance Person		
Machine Repair Person	Water Treatment T1	27
Plant Operator	Water Distribution D1	
Maintenance Person		
Machine Repair Person	Water Treatment T2	29
Plant Operator	Water Distribution D2	
Maintenance Person		
Machine Repair Person	Water Treatment T3	31
Treatment Plant Operator	Water Distribution D3	
Maintenance Person		

*Licensure obtained with required years experience or education-experience equivalent based on [257 CMR 2](https://www.mass.gov/doc/257-cmr-2) (Link Below)
www.mass.gov/doc/236-cmr-4-public-water-supply-operator-certification/download
 To be eligible for the salary grade 31, employees must be able to perform the functions of a head plant operator.

Waste Water Treatment		Salary Grade
Job Title	Licensure*	
Waste Water Treatment Plant Operator	Waste Water License Grade 3 or less	26
Waste Water Treatment Plant Operator	Waste Water License Grade 4	27
Waste Water Head Treatment Plant Operator	Waste Water License Grade 6	31

*After Passing Exam and Submitting License Application
<https://www.mass.gov/doc/257-cmr-2-certification-of-operators-of-wastewater-treatment-facilities/download>
 To be eligible for the salary grade 31, employees must be able to perform the functions of an H1PO.

Waste Water Treatment		Salary Grade
Job Title	Licensure*	
Waste Water Machine Repair Person	No Water Licensure	26
Waste Water Machine Repair Person	Waste Water License Grade 1	27
Waste Water Machine Repair Person	Waste Water License Grade 6	29

*After Passing Exam and Submitting License Application
<https://www.mass.gov/doc/257-cmr-2-certification-of-operators-of-wastewater-treatment-facilities/download>

Water

- No license for entry level operators
- 4 grades with highest as a T3 Operator for HTPO

Wastewater

- Requires T3 for entry level
- 3 grades with highest as a T6 Operator for HTPO

Mechanics

- No license for entry level
- 3 grades with highest as a T6 Operator for HTPO
- Does not reach same pay grade unless becoming an operator

Licensure & Salary Grade Track

Match license levels with pay-scale track

Is It Working?

Vacancy Challenges



We continue to face a high number of vacancies, largely due to competing wages offered by neighboring towns. This remains a key area of focus for future adjustments.

License Program Success



Multiple employees have taken advantage of the employer-funded license program, enabling them to advance into skilled and licensed roles.

Internal Promotions



We have successfully promoted staff from within the organization into leadership roles, strengthening institutional knowledge and morale.

Entry-Level Pipeline



Entry-level positions have been filled, creating a strong pipeline of talent. This approach is beginning to pay off as these employees progress toward more specialized roles.

In The Works

Increased Training



Increased soft-skill training for foremen and superintendents

Wage Study



Ongoing wage study will guide future budgets and salaries

Structure Study



Ongoing department structure and efficiency study with Collins Center will inform future adjustments for better outcomes

Future Focus

Secure funding for education and training programs expansions

Formalize partnerships with trade schools

Implement revised pay scales and career pathways





Recruitment Strategies

Identify that recruitment in LE must be re-imagined

Examine what other departments and industries are doing

Value experience (pay, vacation, longevity)

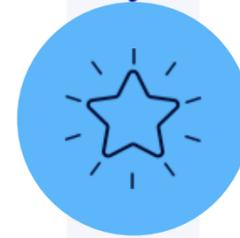
Relax strict hiring procedure

The best recruiters are our current employees!



Engage underrepresented and non-traditional groups with a realistic view of policing

Signing bonus



Lower minimum requirements while maintaining standards



Internship program, community engagement

Retention



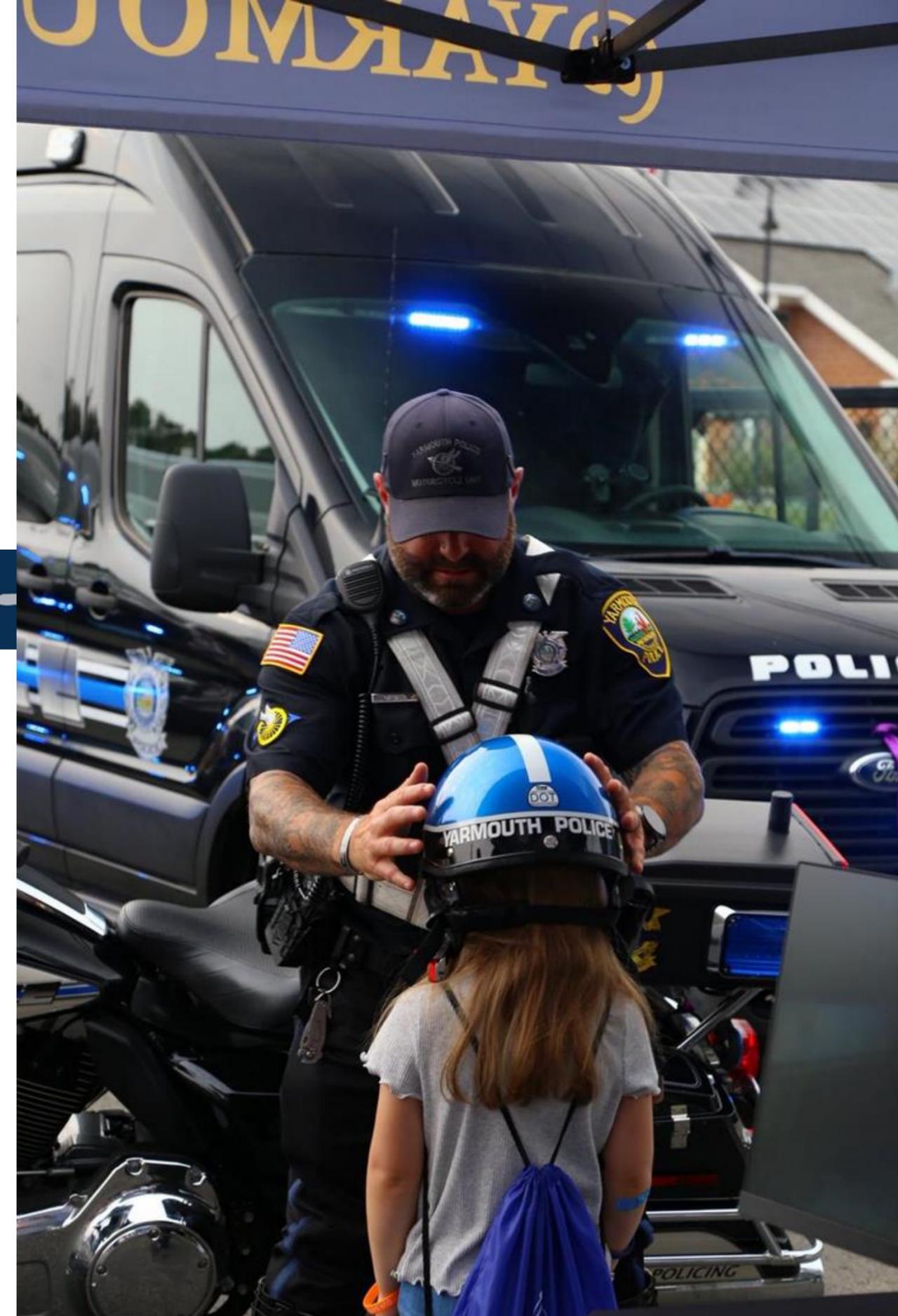
Identify individuals' interests and capabilities

- Pay attention to the small things
- Hold people accountable for how they treat each other (what is tolerated is endorsed)
 - Every employee is valued
- Intrinsic motivation vs. extrinsic motivation



Professional Development

- Training investment
- Promote innovation and empowerment
- Leadership development (internal and external programs)



Succession Planning

Yarmouth Police Department



Identify individuals' interests and capabilities

Engage and allow them to be involved past their current role

- Budgets, procurement, training, program development, etc.
- "DON'T BRING US A PROBLEM WITHOUT IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS"

Share responsibilities and experiences to get others involved

Bring them to meetings, review policies, ask opinions

Meaningful involvement creates ownership and satisfaction

When employees are empowered to contribute to the organization, they are more likely to buy into the mission and vision and see themselves advancing in the department and being part of the future



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Q&A

