



Four Things in Aquatics that Need to Change

By George Deines

I've heard the world of aquatics described by my aquatic professional colleagues across the country as multifaceted, ever-changing, demanding, sophisticated, rewarding and fun. I agree with all these descriptors and because there are so many descriptors, aquatic professionals must remain proactive and constantly think about ways to change, evolve and improve their operation to ensure the safety of their guests and the success of their operation.

I believe there are four areas in which the aquatics industry must change to maintain its relevancy for the next 10 to 20 years. While not everyone reading this article may agree with my assessment, I hope at a minimum that it will spark

discussion to help aquatic professionals think about and continually analyze and evaluate their aquatics operation.

I also see this article reaching three different audiences:

- professionals ahead of the curve who

have already taken a proactive approach to the areas I mention

- professionals who have addressed a few of the areas, but need some help in implementing all of them
- professionals who have recently inherited an aquatics operation and need to address these areas.

Community Outreach and Drowning Prevention

The first area where I see the need for immediate change is in the relationship



between aquatic professionals and their approach to community water safety and drowning prevention. I believe that local aquatic professionals should lead the way and “hold the torch” in their community for the education of parents and children about water safety, both in the commercial and residential setting. They not only should emphasize water safety at all their facilities and in all their programs, but also should develop and implement water safety events at their facility and develop partnerships with the local school districts in order to present assemblies to students and workshops to parents.

From the facility point of view, many agencies have an annual or semiannual water safety community outreach event where they have booths set up that each emphasize a different aspect of water safety, from how to safely take your children

to the local pool or aquatic center, to the layers of protection needed at residential pools to ensure children do not get into the backyard pool without adult supervision. Several avenues for materials exist, including the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) *Pool Safety* campaign (www.poolsafely.gov), as well as the World Waterparks Association’s annual World’s Largest Swimming Lesson™ (<https://tinyurl.com/ya5ln5ta>).

As a former municipal aquatics manager who developed and presented a 30-minute water safety presentation for local schools, I found that school districts will gladly welcome you into their school during the month of May to present this information to their students. Not only does it coincide with *National Water Safety Month*, but more and more states now include water safety standards in

their curriculum. For example, the State of California specifically calls out water safety information, “Evaluate the risk and safety factors that may affect participation aquatic activities throughout a lifetime.” A partnership with local schools establishes a win-win situation for everyone and allows you to teach students how to be “SAFE” in and around the water:

- Stay with children – Parents must be with their children at all times.
- Always be attentive – Parents must not only be with their children, but be attentive to them at all times (i.e., not on a cell phone).
- Fear the water – Parents must teach their children the dangers that are present with any body of water.
- Educate your children – Parents must proactively teach their children about how to properly behave around the water.



Portraying Aquatics as an Essential Service

“But, how much will the aquatic center cost to operate and what percentage of its costs will it recover?” This question comes up in 99.9 percent of public meetings where I present various options for a new or renovated aquatic center. It’s a great question; however, I’ve seen the question asked disproportionately about aquatic centers for the past four years, but not asked with regard to other municipal services, such as libraries, the arts and even non-aquatic recreation centers.

Elected officials or the general public ask this question because, I believe, they inherently view aquatics as a *nonessential* service to their community. I also believe they hold to this position because they have not been told about the true value that an aquatic center brings or could bring to their community, value that they should not measure in annual expenses versus revenues. Unfortunately, they do not see the value of aquatics because their local aquatic professionals, aquatic user groups or parks and recreation leadership have not adequately explained it to them and shown them the difference aquatics makes in their community.

A great example of this occurred one summer when I coached a summer league

swim team. One of my swimmers won an event at the state meet, and I found out that our city council wanted to recognize that swimmer. This achievement spurred a keen interest in the value of aquatics in my city, which eventually led to me presenting to the parks and recreation board about the tremendous impact our summer swim team had on the community. The program grew from 40 swimmers to 250 over the course of seven years and expanded from a summer-only program to also include a winter season and spring stroke clinics in anticipation of summer. Now, the impact of the swim team existed whether or not we had a swimmer win the state meet, but that event proved to be the catalyst to publicly promoting the value of aquatics to a much wider audience than we had previously done.

Aquatic professionals should proactively communicate the value and impact of aquatics in their community with their upper management. They can accomplish this by regularly sharing the number of swim lessons taught, adults in water fitness classes, daily lap swimmers and so on. This will help provide your city’s decision makers with the information they need to ensure they view aquatics as an essential service — not just something that’s nice to have.

Enhanced Standards for Aquatic Safety and Risk Management

Safety should be atop the list of most important keys to a successful operation for any aquatics professional. Sometimes, whether intentional or not, they deemphasize it. But, how can aquatic professionals unintentionally deemphasize safety? They do so by not stressing the simple fact that “something could happen today.”

As I visit aquatic facilities across the country, I have noticed a common theme: lifeguards who are distracted. It’s important that lifeguards maintain the primary signs of vigilance: a “res-

cue ready” body position, attentiveness to the swimmers in the pool and their designated zone, and changing their position every few minutes to stay alert. Unfortunately, lifeguards exhibit these distracted behaviors because they have become learned behaviors as a result of poor training and/or not being well-supervised. Well-trained lifeguards are the result of vigilant and dedicated supervisors who model the type of behavior they would like to see exhibited by their staff and hold them accountable for their behavior, training and actions.

Whether you use the American Red Cross, StarGuard, NASCO or Ellis & Associates as your lifeguard certification agency, any of these groups can help you implement a risk-management program. I’ve worked in the aquatics industry since my first summer lifeguarding in 1994, and I don’t know of a good reason for not working with your certifying agency to perform unannounced facility audits on your lifeguards and facility operations. Obtaining an outside professional audit, ensures you and your facility have implemented the highest standards for safety and risk management. Audits give you a snapshot analysis of your operation so that you get an outside opinion on any unsafe behaviors exhibited by your lifeguards and supervisors, on outdated training methods or programs and on proper documentation of your daily operations. Audits should be the standard, not the exception!

Developing Aquatic Facility Middle Management

Every aquatic facility should develop and implement an aquatic supervisor training program that adequately teaches part-time and full-time supervisors the demands and importance of their job. When you see an aquatic supervisor sitting on the job, scrolling through their mobile phone, reading a book or doing anything other than actively walking their facility

and supervising their team members, the need exists for a supervisor training program at that facility. Unfortunately, I see the above-mentioned behaviors far too often when visiting aquatic facilities.

During my time as an aquatic director, I had an experience that served to change my approach to aquatics operations forever. It happened at the end of a busy weekend at the beginning of the summer, when, except for one individual, my lifeguard team members and I started to clean the facility. That individual just sat on a bench watching everyone else work. When one of my part-time supervisors noticed him and asked, “What are you doing?” without skipping a beat he replied, “I’m training to be a manager.” While he responded in a somewhat snarky tone, the truth behind the comment was startling. From his limited time working under the supervisors

that I had hired and trained (not very well apparently), he viewed them as lazy and complacent. And, he thought that if he stayed around long enough, then he might be promoted to supervisor, and he could act just like them.

At that moment, I knew that something had to change, and I went to work creating a custom, weekend-long, supervisor training program that encompassed not only the ins and outs of their position and daily responsibilities, but also the “why” behind those responsibilities. Merely training my supervisors on how to do everything would not be enough, I had to train them on the importance of those things. The culture of our operations and the engagement and productivity of our supervisor team immediately skyrocketed, evidenced by our lifeguard and guest services retention rates and lifeguard audit scores. Through this process, I came to

the following three conclusions:

- The culture of your aquatics operation depends on you developing a great one.
- The success of implementing your culture depends on middle management.
- As Sasha Mateer from Deep River Waterpark likes to say, “Great lifeguards don’t always make great supervisors.”

Conclusion

While these four areas I’ve detailed are not the only area in aquatics that need to change, I think they all need attention from aquatics professionals across the country. We must remain proactive in our thinking and innovative in our implementation to ensure we keep our guests safe and our facilities operating at the highest level possible for years to come. 🌿

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