

## How a California Water Utility Keeps Innovation Flowing

*Transparency and Engagement Sustain the East Valley Water District Through an Historic Drought and the Struggles of the Local Economy*

Managing government employees presents special challenges; and when times get tougher, so does the task. The [East Valley Water District](#) in southern California has been faced with seemingly every imaginable obstacle, yet it has twice been named a [Press-Enterprise Top Workplace](#) in California's Inland Empire.

The East Valley Water District is succeeding on the strength of its willingness to be transparent with employees, keep them informed, help develop their careers, and innovate based on their input.

Robert Lavinga, HR director at the University of Wisconsin and the author of a book on engaging government employees, [has written in Harvard Business Review](#) that "... there are no secrets to maximizing employee engagement. Great management always begins with understanding the unique characteristics of the workforce, figuring out what makes employees tick, and creating the environment in which they can and want to do their best work."



At the East Valley Water District, that work is providing water—15 million gallons a day—and sewer service to more than 100,000 California residents in Highland and parts of San Bernardino, 65 miles east

of Los Angeles. A large portion of the service area is economically disadvantaged and many customers pay in cash. Nonpayment can lead to these essential services being shut off as the utility relies on its ratepayers for revenue.

“The drought emergency changed things for our entire community,” said Kerrie Bryan, the water district’s Human Resources/Risk and

Safety Manager. In the blink of an eye we had to implement strict water guidelines that impacted our customer’s daily lives. Our staff stepped up and were all willing to become conservation experts virtually overnight in order to support the people we serve.”

## Part of the Big Picture

Transparency at the East Valley Water District starts at the top with General Manager and CEO [John Mura](#), a former Marine who has made honest communication the foundation of his approach to leadership. Mura meets monthly for breakfast with the entire staff of about 70.

“The general manager gives updates on everything that’s going on within the district,” Bryan said. “He’s very candid and very open. Normally, employees in non-managerial positions don’t know the high-level details or the politics of what’s going on in organizations. John shares that freely with them. They feel like they’re a part of the big picture.”

*“When asked to evaluate the statement ‘I feel well-informed about important decisions at East Valley Water District,’ employees agreed at a rate 80 percent above the benchmark for local government organizations. The district’s scores in this area were up 16 percentage points in its second engagement survey when compared with the first.”*

Bryan said, "We're all familiar with studies showing how important pay and benefits are to an organization, but beyond that is feeling included in the organization and the feeling of being in the know. I think this definitely helps us."

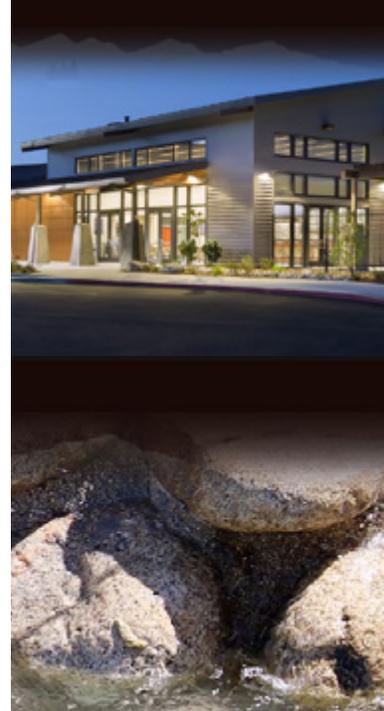
So too does management's work in career development.

"We are an organization that thrives on continuous improvement, and that includes our staff," said Kerrie Bryan. "We have a Cross-Training Program and a Leadership Academy to encourage our employees to feel confident in their goals of moving into leadership roles." This past year succession planning was one of our biggest focuses," Bryan said. "I think that probably helped to improve the results of our engagement survey this year, because employees were able to see how much we were investing in them."

*“ Asked to evaluate the statement ‘My manager helps me learn and grow,’ the district’s results were 37 percent above the benchmark for local government organizations. The latest results showed a 7-percentage-point gain in just a year.”*

That's important with Baby Boomers retiring and government pensions bring retirement closer than it appears to many in the private sector. Bryan said, "By empowering these employees and giving them opportunities to learn leadership skills, we'll be better positioned in the long run to address some of those future vacancies."

Bryan said she is confident that when new leaders get their opportunity, they will make the most of it. "Innovation is very big for us," she said. "Thinking outside the box and coming up with new ideas are encouraged. In public service there are plenty of rules and regulations, as well as bureaucracy that can stifle innovation, but it doesn't have to be that way. Here everyone can contribute ideas; and that ultimately leads to the success of the organization."



*“On the survey statement, ‘New ideas are encouraged at East Valley Water District,’ the organization scored 66 percent better than the Local Government benchmark and saw an 7-percent improvement year over year.”*

## How Could We Do This Better?

Those contributions of ideas don’t just happen; the district’s management works hard for them. It has created an environment in which more than 90 percent of employees participate in the annual engagement survey, the results of which are used to further refine ideas for improvement.

“After we receive the survey report, we conduct focus group meetings of 10 to 15 employees from different departments. We tend to get better results when we mix up the groups. There I’m able to pick their brains and say, ‘Well, what would you like to see? How could we do this better?’

“That feedback goes to the managers and supervisors, and we create an action plan for improvement. I think it has definitely paid dividends in helping us get to where we are.” Looking forward, Bryan sees the utility becoming more involved in its community and capitalizing on its reputation as a [Top Workplace](#).

“Giving back to the community is a big focus for us,” said Bryan, noting the district’s support of a local elementary school with drives to gather school supplies, backpacks, coats, and other clothing. It’s all part of an effort to make real our stated mission: “To enhance and preserve the quality of life for our community through innovative leadership and world class public service.”

And while Bryan is pleased with Top Workplaces awards because they are a point of pride for current employees, as an HR manager, she’s glad to have one more recruiting tool.

“In my two most recent recruitments, both of the candidates we selected mentioned the recognition. They saw the logo that’s on our brochures, on our website, and in our lobby. It really is having an effect for us; and it’s exciting to see that.”