

An Amalgamation that's overdue – its 'gotta' occur

The water industry has been faced with many amalgamations over the years, and most have been successful, when done correctly. A common theme with amalgamations seems to be one of larger, better-resourced organisations, taking over smaller, less funded neighbours, who are struggling to carry out their day to day operations and fulfil their compliance obligations.

Taking the amalgamation story from 'between' organisations to 'within' organisations, a similar thing has evolved between OH&S and water quality sections within many organisations, where the OH&S department receives a large proportion of the resources and budget, at the expense of the water quality section. Why has this occurred? It has to do with 'gottas' - most OH&S issues are enacted by law and enforced by state-based Work Cover agencies, Unions and local worker representatives...so organisations have 'gotta' comply.

Water quality on the other hand, is often only protected by recommendations and guidelines. In many cases, there are no 'gottas' that an organisation has to really comply with and for anyone not following through with accepted water quality obligations, the penalties are pretty soft. It would be highly unlikely that anyone would go to jail if unsafe drinking water was supplied to customers, but if you are deemed responsible for the death of a worker, then you could very easily spend time in the 'Big House'.

This is not to say that there should not be very serious sanctions if a worker is injured or killed at work – no one should ever go to work expecting to get hurt, but, equally, no customer should be put in a position where they are made seriously ill because they were supplied with unsafe water.

A recent inspection revealed a significant, unsealed hole in a tank roof, where a safety anchor point had been fitted. The manager explained it away by saying "I've gotta have an anchor point fitted to all the roofs". There was no consideration given to the possible water quality impacts of the unsealed roof area, because there are no 'gottas' when it comes to protecting water quality!

So let's consider a long overdue amalgamation – OH&S departments merge with water quality sections in order to apply equal attention and diligence being enforced on managers, supervisors and water industry workers.

Such a merger could also be a good thing for the OH&S industry as well. There is only so much they can do after a while, when everyone is becoming safety conscious and aware of everyday hazards. OH&S people have done such a good job with steel capped boots, Hi-vis clothing, documented work systems and training, that they risk becoming redundant sooner or later. How about offering them a whole new set of issues to resolve?

So instead of water quality being looked after by 'recommendations and guidelines', let's have some 'muscle' injected into the cause. Let's install some 'gottas' into the water quality arena, and then let our OH&S personnel go out there and do what they do best – putting some backbone into the system and getting some real results for a change.

The training industry can create a whole new range of products, OH&S personnel can now wear a white coat (with Hi-vis features of course) and everyone that drinks water will be comfortable in the knowledge that "things are improving".