

Course Title: ASCEND: Advancing Supervisors through Coaching, Engagement, Networking and Development (A Maine Rural Water Association Leadership Academy presented by Career Management Associates)

Course Description: The purpose of this course is to develop the practical leadership, communication, supervisory, organizational, human resources, and financial skills needed to lead modern water and wastewater utilities. The academy is designed for technically capable operators who are moving into leadership or seeking to strengthen their effectiveness as supervisors and managers.

Program Learning Outcomes:

- Make the transition from technically skilled operator to credible, consistent leader.
- Communicate expectations clearly and use active listening during routine, difficult, and emergency conversations.
- Conduct fair employee performance assessments and create professional growth plans.
- Build trust, accountability, engagement, and shared purpose within utility teams.
- Recognize, de-escalate, and resolve workplace conflict using a structured process.
- Organize work, manage competing priorities, delegate effectively, and protect time for high-value leadership responsibilities.
- Recognize common human resources and employment-compliance risks and know when to involve HR, senior management, or legal counsel.
- Understand basic budgets and financial statements and explain the financial case for an operational improvement.
- Apply curriculum to a real utility issue and present a feasible, measurable improvement plan.

Program length	Nine months; one class per month
Program dates	October 2026 through June 2027 Second Tuesday of the month (except Tuesday 12/1, which is the first Tuesday)
Class hours	Classes 2–8: 2 hrs. each; Classes 1 & 9: 3 hrs.
Total contact hours	20 classroom hours
State Agency Approval:	Maine BLSWO 20.0 TCHs for Water Operators Maine DEP 12.0 TCHs (6 Operations & 6 Management) for Wastewater Operators
Location	All classes will be held in person at the Maine Rural Water Association Office in Richmond 254 Alexander Reed Road Richmond, ME 04357

Monthly class structure: Each class will begin with formal instruction, followed by a roundtable discussion, and conclude with case studies/scenarios. The classes will require active participation from the students. Detailed content for monthly classes is in the table below.

Breakdown of Monthly Content:

MRWA ASCEND LEADERSHIP ACADEMY
CLASS 1 (3 hrs.) – October 13, 2026 Operator to Leader: Making the Transition from Skilled Operator to Credible Supervisor <i>Purpose:</i> Help experienced operators transition from peer and technical expert to credible leader by developing the mindset, relationships, expectations, and practical skills required to lead others. <i>Learning Objectives:</i> • Distinguish between the roles of technical expert, supervisor, manager, and leader and understand the shift required to lead others. • Recognize common mistakes of new supervisors and establish appropriate boundaries and expectations with former peers and coworkers. • Build leadership credibility through consistency, trust, accountability, ethics, and follow-through. • Identify personal leadership strengths, blind spots, and development priorities. • Apply key leadership concepts to a realistic case study, bridging the gap between theory and real-world leadership practice.
CLASS 2 (2 hrs.) – November 10, 2026 Communicating and Listening with Confidence: The Conversations that Keep Utilities Safe, Compliant, and Trusted <i>Purpose:</i> Strengthen leaders' ability to communicate clearly, listen actively, confirm understanding, and navigate workplace conversations that build trust, accountability, safety, and effective working relationships. <i>Learning Objectives:</i> • Apply active-listening techniques to understand facts, concerns, assumptions, and different perspectives. • Communicate clear expectations and confirm understanding to reduce confusion, mistakes, and miscommunication. • Adapt communication style and method based on the audience, situation, and sensitivity of the message. • Translate technical or complex information into clear, concise language appropriate for employees, customers, regulators, and other stakeholders. • Navigate difficult or high-stakes conversations professionally, using a utility-based case study to bridge communication concepts with real-world practice.

CLASS 3 (2 hrs.) – December 1, 2026*

*NOTE THIS IS THE FIRST TUESDAY OF THE MONTH (RATHER THAN THE SECOND)

Conflict Resolution: Deescalating Tension and Solving Problems Before They Damage Operations

Purpose:

Prepare leaders to recognize, address, and resolve workplace conflict using practical strategies that reduce tension, strengthen relationships, protect operations, and support effective leadership.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the type, source, and underlying dynamics of workplace conflict before determining the appropriate response.
- Separate facts, assumptions, emotions, expectations, and operational needs to better understand the issue.
- Use active listening, neutral language, de-escalation, and boundary-setting techniques to manage difficult conversations.
- Apply a structured problem-solving approach to move conflict toward a practical and sustainable resolution.
- Recognize when conflict requires documentation or escalation beyond the leader's role.

CLASS 4 (2 hrs.) – January 12, 2026

Team Building: Building Trust Through Accountability and Mindset

Purpose:

Help utility leaders build high-performing teams through trust, accountability, engagement, and shared purpose while strengthening the collaboration and leadership practices essential to reliable service.

Learning Objectives:

- Build trust through consistency, fairness, communication, and leadership follow-through.
- Establish clear expectations and accountability while creating ownership rather than blame.
- Strengthen engagement through delegation, recognition, inclusion, and shared purpose.
- Use cross-training and collaboration to build team capability, resilience, and professional pride.
- Apply team-building and accountability concepts to real-world utility leadership challenges through a practical case study.

CLASS 5 (2 hrs.) – February 9, 2027

Beyond the Annual Review: How to Give Feedback, Manage Performance, and Stay Compliant

Purpose:

Equip leaders to manage employee performance through clear expectations, ongoing feedback, effective coaching, appropriate documentation, and consistent follow-through while supporting fairness and compliance.

Learning Objectives:

- Set clear performance expectations and establish shared understanding of what successful performance looks like.
- Give timely, specific feedback that reinforces strong performance and addresses concerns before they escalate.
- Use coaching conversations to improve performance, encourage employee ownership, and support continued development.
- Document performance issues objectively, consistently, and appropriately while recognizing when HR involvement may be necessary.
- Apply performance-management principles to a realistic case study that connects course concepts to real-world leadership situations.

CLASS 6 (2 hrs.) – March 9, 2027

Empowering Teams and Enhancing Leadership Effectiveness

Purpose:

Equip leaders to empower and develop others through effective delegation, purposeful meetings, clear expectations, shared accountability, and leadership practices that strengthen team and organizational performance.

Learning Objectives:

- Delegate responsibilities with clear expectations, authority, and accountability.
- Use delegation to develop employee skills, confidence, and ownership.
- Lead purposeful meetings that encourage participation, decisions, and action.
- Build accountability through effective follow-up, feedback, and support.
- Focus leadership time on priorities while leveraging the strengths of the team

MRWA ASCEND LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

CLASS 7 (2 hrs.) – April 13, 2027

Finance for Non-Financial Leaders: Budgeting Fundamentals and Financial Statements

Purpose:

Build financial confidence so utility leaders can understand financial information, evaluate operational investments and tradeoffs, and clearly communicate the financial rationale behind sound business decisions.

Participants will be able to:

- Understand key financial concepts, including operating and capital expenses, revenues, reserves, cash needs, and budget variances.
- Read and understand the purpose and relationship of basic financial statements, including income/activity statements, balance sheets, and cash-flow statements.
- Participate more effectively in budgeting and use financial information to support operational planning and decision-making.
- Evaluate proposed investments using lifecycle cost, return on investment, risk reduction, and the potential cost of delaying action.
- Develop and communicate a clear financial case for operational or organizational improvement.

CLASS 8 (2 hrs.) – May 11, 2027

Leading Consistently and Compliantly: HR and Employment Law Essentials

Purpose:

Equip leaders with practical HR and employment-law knowledge to manage employees consistently, recognize workplace risk, document appropriately, and know when to seek professional guidance.

Learning Objectives:

- Apply sound HR practices to common employee situations.
- Recognize employment-law risks and workplace red flags.
- Create clear, factual, and consistent documentation.
- Address complaints, performance issues, and discipline appropriately.
- Know when to involve HR, leadership, or legal counsel.

CLASS 9 (3 hrs.) – June 8, 2027

Utility Improvement Project Review

CMA reviews standards for executive presentations, decision requests, implementation readiness, constructive feedback, and professional response to challenging questions.

Instructor(s):

David Cuillo, CEO, Career Management Associates

David is a dynamic Business and Executive Coach, Speaker, Trainer, and HR Consultant with a proven track record of delivering effective and innovative HR strategies. As the CEO of Career Management Associates, a leading HR consulting firm in Northern New England, David is recognized as a trusted advisor and leader in the HR field. He blends practical knowledge with strategic insight to create meaningful, result-driven solutions.

David's commitment to the HR profession is evident in his roles as a thought leader and active community board member. He serves as a Board Member and Past President of both the Human Resource Association of Southern Maine (HRASM) and the Maine Institute for Family-Owned Business (IFOB), contributing to the growth and success of these organizations. His tenure on the Maine State Civil Service Appeals Board underscores his dedication to promoting ethical and effective HR practices. Additionally, David is an experienced radio host, having led the acclaimed HR Power Hour radio and podcast show for over 13 years, sharing valuable insights with professionals nationwide.

A graduate of Norwich University with a BS in Business Administration and a minor in management and was officer in the Norwich Corps of Cadets. David is also a Dale Carnegie graduate, certified in Creative Training Techniques, an Eagle Scout, and a Black Belt in Tae-Kwon-Do.

Ashley Adams, Managing Director, Career Management Associates

Ashley is a proactive, strategic-thinking professional with over 13 years of experience in human resource consulting, employee management and recruiting. Ashley is the Managing Director of Career Management Associates (CMA) and has navigated companies through a multitude of employee issues affecting business performance during business turnarounds and in tough business environments. Ashley partners and coaches' employees, managers, and executives to increase employee engagement and organization-wide performance. Ashley's prior experience as an Account Talent Manager for a global staffing firm ensures that she understands the challenges and immediate needs of each client and the urgency and balance needed to help organizations. Ashley holds a bachelor's degree in business administration with a concentration in Human Resource Management and a Minor in Organizational Leadership from Southern New Hampshire University and is also a member of the National Society of Leadership and Success.

Kirsten Hebert, Executive Director, Maine Rural Water Association

Kirsten is the Executive Director of Maine Rural Water. She is a registered professional lobbyist and enjoys shaping environmental policy issues. Kirsten spends many hours assisting Boards of Trustees understand their roles and responsibilities, answering Freedom of Access questions, as well as personnel inquiries.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Individuals registered for one of MRWA's training classes or seminars will be charged the class fee if we have not received notice of cancellation at least five (5) business days prior to the class. Anyone contacting MRWA to cancel enrollment in a class will receive a cancellation number. In the event of an emergency, which would prevent attendance, please contact us at 207-737-4092 as soon as possible.