If you attended this year’s American Water Works Association (AWWA) conference, ACE14, in Boston, I hope you attended the opening general session. The Florida Section had a good turnout. Our own executive director, Peggy Guingona, somehow had us up front and center for the best seats in the house. Each year this session seems to be getting better and better, and this year was no exception.

Jim Chaffee, AWWA president, opened with a greeting, followed by David LaFrance, AWWA’s executive director. Dave was wearing what looked like an official Boston Red Sox shirt with ACE14 as the number. Awards were distributed and dedicated service was recognized. Our own Jeff Nash garnered thanks for his service as an AWWA vice president this past year. He made the Florida Section proud!

After a few more short speeches and remarks, the keynote speaker was introduced to a standing ovation: the former mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani. The crowd became electrified (a little dangerous around water folks!).

The mayor spoke about his role in response to the 9/11 attacks, subsequent rescue efforts, and massive cleanup. He mentioned that his team of city officials had done quite a lot of planning for various possible crisis scenarios, but nothing as monumental as the collapse of both Twin Towers at the World Trade Center.

As resources were mobilized, they all realized that the planning they’d done would indeed be put to use. Police and rescue personnel training, evacuation plans, auxiliary power, purchasing procedures, and a myriad of other support services were simultaneously employed. New York City’s response to the worst attack on U.S. soil in this century was exemplary.

Hearing a firsthand account of such an effort was one of those lifetime memorable events. The mayor didn’t stop there, however; he continued by describing how to be a successful leader. He’s written a book that includes all his experience and ideas, and here is an abbreviation of his abbreviated version:

“Before you do anything, you need to first ask yourself, ‘What are you’re trying to accomplish?’ Then think, ‘How are we going to solve this?’ Remember that every problem has a solution or approach.”

He then described the six characteristics of a successful leader:

- A leader should have strong beliefs. Do what’s right. It may not be popular. You may be criticized. You may even lose your job. But if it’s the right thing to do, do it.
- A leader must be an optimist, a problem solver. The world is full of naysayers telling you why you can’t do something. Optimists have a lot more fun getting things accomplished!
- A leader must have courage, be willing to take risks. A leader can’t be afraid to challenge the status quo. It’s okay to make some mistakes along the way.
- A leader must understand the value of relentless preparation. Prepare for the uncertain. Learn to think on your feet.
- A leader must fully appreciate and practice teamwork. It’s not about you, it’s about them. Know your weaknesses and complement your team with people who have strengths in those areas.
- A leader must communicate effectively. Communication is both letting someone know what you know, as well as learning what someone else knows. Questioning, listening, and absorbing what you’re hearing are key qualities of a successful leader.

Many of you may say, “I’m not a leader.” Leaders come from everywhere to meet challenges. You never know when you’ll find yourself in a situation where you are the leader. In our field of supplying water to our customers, every day there’s the possibility of an event that will require you to take the lead.

Here’s an ultra-abbreviated version: Open your ears and be fully prepared to optimistically work with others to bravely do what’s right. All inspired by a man, Rudy Giuliani, who’s now a part of history.

I can’t wait for ACE15 in Anaheim. Make an effort to be there and attend the next opening session!