

Leadership Profile of Bill Teichmiller

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Since 2002, Bill Teichmiller has served as the CEO of EJ Water Cooperative Inc. (EJ). During his tenure, EJ has grown from a very small water utility serving fewer than 1,000 customers to one that serves more than 18,000 homes, businesses, and farms in South Central Illinois. Bill is a graduate of Eastern Illinois University and has lived most of his life in rural Illinois. Early in his career he worked in business and brought this perspective to his leadership at EJ as CEO.

In order to get to know Bill better, I decided to make a trip to Illinois. I was not required to do this for my work or for any other course, I just wanted to see what makes him tick and drives his success. In large part, the answer is Bill Teichmiller. There are several things about Bill that I think make him a Level 5 leader. When I first ran across EJ and began to learn about it, I thought that the reason for its'

success had a lot to do with its status as a non-profit water cooperative with a cost of capital advantage. Yet, as I looked more and more into the details surrounding the success of EJ, I came to believe that most of its' success has to do with the leadership at EJ.

The first thing about Bill is his energy. It is abundant and very positive. He's very talkative but is not the kind of person who seems to just like to listen to himself talk and pontificate. He likes to dig into the details of things, and he often says that what gets him most excited is when the people that are served by EJ are delighted with the service that they receive. His energy is infectious and can be felt palpably when you walk into the offices of EJ. Bill designed these offices. It's an open space, but there are a lot of glass partitions. There are really no walls for anybody to hide behind. His office is literally a fishbowl in the middle of the floor plan. Right outside of his office is another fishbowl, the conference room, and people are constantly streaming in and out to check in and seemingly just to feed off his energy. His energy is also spread to others in the industry. He frequently speaks at conferences and is a leader in several industry associations. Granted, his positions in these associations do give him the luxury to travel to conferences and speak and receive accolades, but it seems like he does it more just to spread the good news about how cooperatives can bind together as communities to create regional systems that really work well for people. So, his energy seems

other-focused and not just about self-aggrandizement. I'd say he's humble, in that regard.

The second thing about Bill that I noticed is that he likes to have fun. He talks about it a lot and it's kind of an ethic at EJ. The people are excited about the mission of providing good drinking water and healthy wastewater systems, but they seem to enjoy each other and want to have fun achieving the organizational mission. This philosophy has been very intentionally cultivated by Bill. Part of it is kind of a Midwestern thing. People there are pretty happy in these towns like Dieterich, where the economy functions well. This area of southern Illinois is a little sleepy, but it's not depressed in any way. Bill says that he expects people to work hard, but he also wants to celebrate frequently when good things occur. When I was out there visiting, I was fortunate to attend a local Rotary conference where Bill had been asked to speak along with other local leaders about what it takes to achieve success. Having fun was one of the big themes of his presentation.

Another theme in his presentation was innovation. He emphasized a willingness to try things and accept failure and learn from it. He encourages people in his organization to look for new and better ways to do things, introduce them, and execute them to find out if they will work. He believes in constant innovation, and he's always looking to evolve his organization. There's no standing still and being happy with things just the way they are. There's no complacency even though he could just sit back and

be quite comfortable as one of the best paid people in town with a very stable and reliable income and a lot of job security. But that's not the way Bill is wired. He uses his security as freedom to innovate and seek new horizons. The latest thing is that he wants to be a leader nationally in helping to lead the way in how to create more efficient and affordable water systems. It's not clear what's motivating him to do this, but I think it's just a drive that he has within him. Maybe it's that indomitable will thing that Jim Collins talks about.

It was my great pleasure and privilege to meet and interview Bill. He's a nonprofit leader that I admire and expect we will all be hearing more from.

Author bio

William Senft is a nonprofit entrepreneur in the water industry. He brings his background as an attorney, CPA, and mediator to solving the problems of smaller rural water systems in the U.S. He is author of *Being Relational, Seven Ways to Quality Interaction and Lasting Change* and serves as the executive director of EJ Water Trust. William can be reached on Twitter @ejwatertrust.