BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS TRAINING PROGRAM
Foo Ma and Barbara Schmoyer are part of the expert team that has transformed training at NW Natural. With their fellow training professionals, they have helped make the company an industry leader in training.

A VISION FOR EXCELLENCE

Rewind to 2009: NW Natural had no standard training model across Field Operations. Two full-time construction trainers and one Customer Field Services trainer offered classroom and lab training to new employees. Only Construction employees received periodic refresher training. Employees from all other field groups received on-the-job training from supervisors and peers and many groups did not have documented standards, policies or procedures.

In 2010, the company launched an aggressive initiative to standardize, formalize and bring more rigor to training. The effort was led by Cari Colton, now director of Utility Technical Services, and sponsored by Jon Huddleston, director of Gas Operations, and Grant Yoshihara, senior vice president of Operations.

“Our goal is to provide all field employees with consistent, well-designed and ongoing training opportunities,” Colton said. “By doing so, we ensure all employees understand the company’s standards and expectations and develop the skills they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. Our focus on continuous learning is an essential part of maintaining a high-performing, up-to-date workforce.”

Today, the Field Operations Training team has expanded to include two supervisors and 11 trainers working under manager Bill Rehse, plus three instructional systems designers. At any given time there are also up to three field employees in Temporary Development Opportunity (TDO) positions.

When Foo Ma came on board as a trainer in 2012 – and Barbara Schmoyer joined as an instructional designer in 2013 – industry leadership was part of the vision for NW Natural’s training program. Both were hired to help bring training in line with the company’s goal of becoming a high-performance utility.

By Claire Levine

Barbara Schmoyer and Foo Ma have been effective collaborators.
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When Schmoyer arrived, she led creation of formal training for leakage inspectors and locators, and in 2015 she and Ma teamed up to revamp construction training – a project that earned them Above & Beyond awards last year.

"Foo is a subject matter expert with a disciplined, organized mind, and he's a visual thinker," Schmoyer said. "Together we produced a great deal in a short period. Our talents synched up very well."

The courses they created include materials for the classroom, labs and Training Town, as well as a series of videos that Ma is featured in and helped create.

With Gloria Goodman and Vanitha Shedden, the other two instructional designers, the team is developing formal training for Specialty Construction, Transmission Maintenance, System Operations Maintenance and Measurement, Transmission Construction (C4), Field Support 2 and 3, and Industrial Techs in 2017. By the end of 2020, the team expects to include all remaining field operations work groups.

"Today, our team trains work groups representing about 80 percent of all field employees – Construction, CFS, System Ops, Locates and Leakage Inspectors," Rehse said. "They all use the same Field Operations Manual and receive identical training for common tasks, with unique training for specialized tasks."

The program prepares new employees to do their jobs and keeps skills current with quarterly refresher training. New tools, methods, systems and initiatives are also introduced via quarterly training.

"Allowing time out of the field for continual learning is a big commitment on the company's part," Rehse said. "And it makes a huge difference."
The training team has its sights set on tracking, measurement and evaluations. Colton and Rehse are looking at using technology—ranging from smart boards (high-tech interactive displays) to electronic testing—to support standardization, learning and efficiency. And they are part of a company-wide initiative to develop an online learning management system that will automate training schedules and curricula.

Utilities across the country look at aspects of NW Natural's programs when they want to standardize operations and improve safety and emergency responsiveness. But for Colton and Rehse, being an industry leader isn’t enough. They are setting their own standards of excellence and are committed to meeting and surpassing them.

First responder training

The first of its kind in the Northwest, NW Natural's Training Town provides field employees with training in emergency response and operation and maintenance of our gas system. The mock neighborhood offers hands-on, scenario-based training and replicates real-world conditions with functioning underground natural gas lines, house meters and a variety of gas appliances inside the homes.

- Each year 20-40 new employees complete their initial three-day first responder training. All employees complete a two-day refresher training at least every three years.
- Employees appreciate the hands-on nature of the experience—such as seeing and hearing a gas-like vapor blowing from a mock excavation site, or practicing mock interactions with residents, contractors and emergency services personnel.
- They also like training with employees from other work groups so they can learn how different job functions interact in an emergency setting.
- After field operations employees complete training they are capable of being first responders, which boosts the company's response times and effectiveness.
- Firefighters use Training Town to learn the basics of natural gas incidents, with an emphasis on how to interact with NW Natural personnel in a gas emergency.

Bryan Baker, now a service tech supervisor at Sherwood, was an experienced service tech when he became a trainer. "You learn the whole job all over again: the tasks, the code, the policy," he said. "And you learn it all to the nth degree because people are depending on you to explain it to them. Now I really understand the need for consistency in training."

Wendy McDowell spent eight years in construction and four years in the Resource Management Center before becoming a technical trainer. She brought a lot of expertise and knowledge to the job. But it was her drive to help others succeed that made her a great trainer and led to her current job as construction supervisor at Parkrose. "I'm kind of a helper soul," she said.

"It's been great to hear from people who come up against a tough problem in the field. When they come back and say, 'Hey, you really helped me out,' I know I did my job."