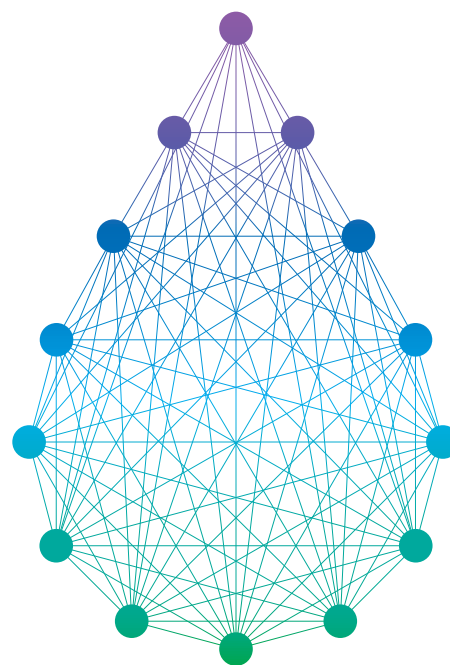


Mentoring Connections:

INSIGHTS FROM RISING ONE WATER PROFESSIONALS

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Mentoring Connections for One Water Leadership

Change leadership is the process of leading an organization through significant organizational shifts or transformations and is essential in realizing the promise and potential of One Water innovations. In 2023, the US Water Alliance’s Mentoring Connections program worked with nine “Rising Professionals” to help them develop their leadership capacities—supporting them as emerging One Water leaders. The Mentoring Connections program matches Rising Professionals with utility CEOs and other senior water leaders, referred to as “Changemakers.” Through focused one-on-one mentoring relationships, pairs work together to prioritize areas for leadership growth depending on Rising Professionals’ career goals and interests and develop strategies to strengthen their capacities to affect change in the water sector.

The 2023 [Rising Professionals cohort](#) included participants from diverse professional backgrounds throughout the water sector, all holding different visions for their future roles in the One Water movement. The 2023 cohort was eager to learn how exceptional leaders meet current challenges in the field head-on and overcome them. Changing how we view, value, and manage water is not a simple task. Water sector [challenges](#) vary from place to place, and our laws and regulations can constrain innovative approaches to integrating water policy horizontally (across water sectors) or vertically (aligned with other investments in infrastructure, agriculture, environmental protection, and social equity). Learning about generating ambitious One Water innovations, approaches, and solutions is key for the next generation of water leaders.

In Their Words: Leadership Insights from Rising Professionals

As part of their program wrap-up and to benefit others on their own leadership development journeys, the 2023 Rising Professionals reflected on their experiences, where the sector is headed, and what support this next generation of leaders needs to meet current and future water challenges. Below are the reflections of cohort members. With such authentic, thoughtful, and passionate professionals preparing to take the reins, the future looks bright!

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The Mentoring Connections program helped me focus on the workplace and world that I believe is possible, articulate that vision, isolate the barriers, and clarify how I can be an actor in making it real. It further equipped me with frameworks and tools to cultivate and usher through change and fostered relationships I would not have otherwise had.

1. UNDERSTANDING CHANGE LEADERSHIP

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One area that I learned to appreciate more was the process of change. Often, I feel that excitement about change implies that it can happen overnight. However, the “states of change” discussions that occurred through this program really helped inform me that change is a process with many different stages, with some stages often being messy and disorganized but necessary to make a positive difference. Understanding this process will equip me to promote and enact the One Water approach and keep me motivated to continue promoting positive change when it may seem difficult to do so.

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I appreciate the extent to which we focused on change management through this program. Having engaged in change management in previous roles, I had familiarity with multiple elements of how to foster and shepherd change through an organization. However, I’d transitioned into a different kind of role in a new organization, and with that shift my role within change management was also different. It was helpful to go through some of the basics again and have space to think about how to effectively support change through my day-to-day and future work.

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My engagement confirmed that my plans to conduct more training on what One Water means, why it is beneficial, and how to begin these conversations with clients will be a critical step to beginning culture change internally. Further, my discussions also confirmed that many of these opportunities will require sparking conversations within water systems as opposed to waiting for funding that says “One Water” to appear. We need to take the initiative to drive and create these opportunities if we want to help push the industry into embracing more effective approaches to water resource management.

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The focus on the transformation process was encouraging as we learned the various states of change. The guidance on how to navigate the process was helpful. Though we may encounter challenges, we must persevere and shouldn't forsake the vision. The dialogue about culture provoked deeper thought into the work we do and aspire to do by tapping into the artist within us.

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The framing around the capacities for One Water change leadership—building trust, collaborating, and fostering possibility thinking—has always resonated with me in my approach to community engagement. This program reinforced these capacities as guiding principles that, if applied to all my work, will result in community-led, equitable, and holistic solutions to water challenges across the country.

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This experience helped prepare me for challenges I address within my position by thinking about different ways to implement programs to ensure customers are not overburdened while simultaneously allowing them to reap the community benefits of green infrastructure, water quality, or reliable services of capital improvements in their area. Attending One Water Summit provided great insight in this regard, as I was able to hear firsthand how other utilities are tackling this issue. Additionally, my experience has also changed my thinking of how important it is to work with other utilities to obtain funding and share project costs.

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This program reinforced that leadership does not have to do with a title, but rather that leadership comes from within by understanding one's own power and self-worth. This niche field is mostly white—except for those who may be in the “field.” As someone who manages a program and also performs site work, I often do not interact with people who are similar in age to myself or share my background. But coming to the room with the perspective of a thought leader and showing up as myself is a way to harness my power and skills to be an effective practitioner and push the status quo in my position that is amenable to creativity.

2. ADDRESSING ONE WATER CHALLENGES

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I want to continue to embed One Water thinking into every project, program, and policy initiative that my company is involved in—and in the community I live in. This experience motivated me to continue the path I'm on and keep going no matter what.

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I was surprised to learn that organizational challenges such as workforce development, equitable capital improvements, and reshaping internal culture are present in most water utilities across the country. My assumption prior to participating was that these challenges were unique to specific organizations and regions. This understanding further supports the need for a One Water approach, and it connected the dots for me that the industry needs to work together to solve these common issues.

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I really want to focus on promoting what One Water is within my organization. My organization is large and can be very siloed between departments, and it is very easy to get lost in the daily tasks and forget about the big picture. I plan to focus on starting at the bottom—getting peers thinking about the big picture and helping them understand how our duties apply and relate to the goals of One Water.

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I found it very beneficial to hear real-world examples of problems that were solved through One Water practices and ones that are currently being faced. It was also very interesting to see the challenges different organizations are facing around the nation and notice how they are simultaneously similar yet different. The goal is always the same but the path to get there is variable.

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I was pleased with discussions with Changemakers and was particularly impressed and inspired by the insights shared on innovation and creating a culture of change. There was time to discuss my challenges with roadblocks in internal culture and receive feedback and strategies for addressing them.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER EXCHANGE AND MENTORSHIP

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My mentor helped me bring calm, stability, and longevity to my work. They provided executive coaching from a workplace therapy and balance perspective during a time of instability in my life. Strategic planning and visioning are things that I tend to struggle with. Learning that the nonlinearity of projects is okay, focusing on communication is important, and flexibility is key and moving deliverables and dates when something is not critical is not a failure was especially important. My mentor guided me to think of work from a perspective of energy and motivation rather than tasks, wins, and failures.

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I started this program when I was at a pivotal moment in my career where I needed guidance to steer its trajectory towards management and elevate my leadership skills. Previously, I struggled to find the right mentor who not only had a robust understanding of and demonstrated experience in implementing One Water strategies but was also an expert in water equity. I feel that I couldn't have had a better match than with my mentor. We were connected during a transitional point in my career, and they provided insights that started me on the right foot into a bigger role with more responsibility than I'd had before. We had very honest and vulnerable conversations about our trials and triumphs working in this sector and regarding our racial and gender identity, and we connected about our views on equity, shared life experiences, and goals for the future. I felt that they invested in me (with time, energy, and guidance) and helped grow my professional network in a very meaningful way.

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I am immensely grateful for the conversations with my mentor in the way that they focused not on my current role as the starting point but instead on the impact I want to leave in the world. Our mentoring conversations started with that larger purpose and then worked backward towards how I can maneuver and be intentional today to ensure that no matter where I am or what I am doing I can continue towards that ultimate desired impact.

With that purpose clarified, we next looked at the kinds of roles I want to play towards that broader purpose and articulating the theory of change that I hold. Then, we delved into how what I am currently doing fits with that theory of change, who inside and outside my organization are important for making the theory of change actionable, what is working for and against me, and what (and who) is missing. This painted a picture of how I could focus my professional growth in the coming years either through or outside of my current role, including clear steps I can take immediately.

This was a powerful and inspiring exercise that took place over the course of several meetings, and it came at a crucial moment in my career. These conversations with my mentor helped me center myself and see the ways that my new role still fits my long-term purpose and provided opportunities for further professional growth. I felt motivated and reenergized, and I wanted to share that with others.

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At the time of starting this experience, I felt like my power was not being used in the way I would've liked and responsibilities were piling up. Going through this program showed me the nonlinearity of work and life. The Changemakers that spoke helped me contextualize and humanize my work and harness my power and energy in a way that is healthy rather than agonizing over every detail.



I was not only able to visit and communicate with people regarding their approach in leading One Water principals, but I was also able to meet and communicate with counterparts that do essentially the exact same job duties as myself but in different markets across the nation. This created a foundation for future conversations and relationships that I will keep with me for my entire career. We were able to talk about One Water initiatives, how each of us did things differently in our own jobs to gain new ideas, and improvements to apply in our respective organizations.



Working with my peers—rising water leaders from different backgrounds and experiences—gave me a sense of community and reinforced innovation. The cohort represented the totality of water, reinforced the Alliance’s One Water framework, and is hopefully representative of the future of water. It’s very clear to me that this is an extraordinary group of peers connected over our ambitions and views about what we will contribute to a One Water future.

Interested in learning more?

Rising Professionals were presented with diverse resources to provide guidance on leadership and change management, including:

- [*One Water Change Leadership for Utilities: Six Essential Capacities*](#) from the US Water Alliance
- [*Emergent Strategy*](#) by Adrienne Maree Brown
- [*Cultural Reflections*](#) from Benny Starr
- [Change management resources](#) from ProSci



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