

One Water Insight Interviews:

# EMERGING LEADERSHIP EDITION

Lessons from the 2020–2021 One Water Mentoring Connections Program Cohort



The US Water Alliance’s [Insight Interviews](#) portray the power of the One Water movement—a growing chorus of people, ideas, and action shifting water management to sustainable, integrated, and equitable approaches. Insight Interviews usually highlight an individual network member, their stories, struggles, successes, and insights on One Water innovations. This special edition on emerging leadership is brought to you by our [One Water Mentoring Connections Program](#) and features insights from [10 Rising Professionals across the nation](#).

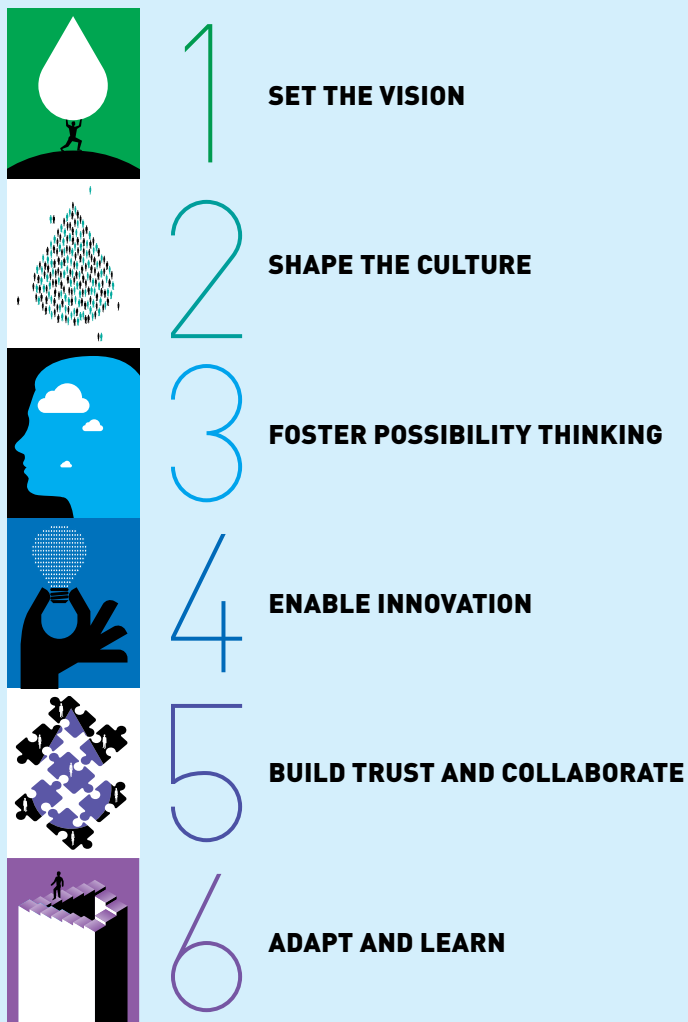
Underlying the growth of the One Water movement is a story of change leadership that is shifting the water sector toward more holistic, sustainable, and inclusive water management. While technological advancement is a key variable contributing to change within the sector, the human dimensions and essential capacities that successfully drive culture change are equally important, though often overlooked. This special edition of One Water Insights dives into these elements, specifically from the perspectives of emerging leaders in the field.

The water sector will need to replace nearly three million workers over the next decade, with some areas experiencing staff vacancies up to 50%.<sup>1</sup> Many utilities are already experiencing significant changes in executive leadership teams and specialized departments. While this “silver tsunami” is putting the sector on edge, a “rising tide” of inspiring young and mid-career professionals is already stepping up.

The US Water Alliance believes that everyone can and must be a One Water leader. Leadership is not a position on an organizational chart. It is a practice that is grown and exercised.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of position, title, organization, or sector, everyone has a role to play in the transformation to One Water.

The sector can help emerging leaders develop the essential capacities—the knowledge, skills, and attitudes—to drive One Water change, strengthening the rising tide, and securing a One Water future.

To better understand the capacities that enable One Water leaders to drive organizational and sector-wide change, the US Water Alliance conducted in-depth interviews with 10 utility executives known as transformative leaders in the water sector. While this research focused on leaders in the utility space, the six leadership capacities distilled from these interviews can be applied across the sector. These capacities, as well as strategies to embody them, are detailed in the Alliance’s [Six Essential Capacities](#) report.



## Mentoring Connections for One Water Leadership

In 2020, the US Water Alliance launched an inaugural Mentoring Connections Program to advance the development of these leadership capacities in emerging leaders, referred to as Rising Professionals in the program. The program matches water leaders in high-level positions such as CEOs and general managers, referred to as “Changemakers,” with Rising Professionals early on in their One Water leadership development. Through focused one-on-one mentoring relationships, pairs work together to prioritize areas for leadership growth and then develop strategies to strengthen their capacities to affect change.

The 2020/2021 [Rising Professionals cohort](#) included 10 participants from diverse professional backgrounds, all holding different visions for their future roles in the One Water movement. Rising Professionals came from various roles within utilities, environmental organizations, and private companies across the water sector. One common motivation, however, was to learn how exceptional leaders meet and overcome the current challenges in the sector. The One Water movement is reaching for goals the sector has yet to achieve, so learning in real time about generating innovations, approaches, and solutions is key for the next generation of water leaders. Rising Professionals were further motivated to join the program with opportunities to expand their network and gain exposure to new ways of thinking.

## Leadership Insights from Rising Professionals

Throughout the Mentoring Connections Program experience, Rising Professionals gained valuable insights about seasoned leadership strategies and how emerging leaders like themselves are approaching One Water leadership differently than those that came before them. Their insights tell the story of where the sector is headed, and what support this generation needs to meet our current and future water challenges.

### 1. Equity is central to the One Water movement.

The inaugural Rising Professionals cohort quickly bonded over a pursuit to ground their work in equity. Conversations about diversity, racial equity, inclusion, and water justice empowered their One Water visions and built confidence to continue these important conversations within their own organizations, knowing that they had support from peers and counterparts in other cities and organizations. This connects back to the One Water leadership capacity to “Set the Vision,” committing to One Water transformation by repositioning as an anchor institution and environmental steward, inspiring and including others along the way. The Rising Professionals did not just see equity as a vision for themselves or their individual organizations, but as a shared necessity for the future of One Water across the nation.

Water equity is at the forefront of the One Water conversation, and many of the sector’s leaders have had to move into executive positions in order to advance this issue effectively. Yet, Rising Professionals and their peers across the nation are working to center equity as non-negotiable throughout their One Water work. They are seeking to embed this vision from the onset of their careers, pushing internally and externally for equitable processes and solutions.

### 2. Embracing failure advances individual leadership and sector growth.

We all know that failure provides learning opportunities. Yet, stories of failure are not the ones told at conferences, read about in reports, or celebrated in sector prizes. “Taking measured risks as part of the innovation process” is a key aspect of enabling innovation.<sup>2</sup> Successful leaders design work structures that nurture innovation, including room for risks, failures, and adjustments.

Despite Rising Professionals’ discomfort with the idea of failure while advancing their careers, one-on-one conversations with Changemakers reaffirmed the importance of embracing failure as a part of the learning process. Sometimes leaders fail *forward*; other times they do not. Progress comes from taking measured risks and exploring opportunities without the promise of a successful outcome.

Experimentation is valuable, and with every failure we gain new knowledge. By providing a safe space to identify and improve on their weaknesses in real time with their mentoring pairs, Rising Professionals were better able to discuss and reflect on their experiments and failures. This can be difficult to do in relationships with established professionals within the same organization. The cohort found it easier to open up about their shortfalls with an external mentor.

**Rising Professionals and their peers across the nation are working to center equity as non-negotiable throughout their One Water work.**

### 3. One Water is a movement. Leadership is a continuum.

Leadership is a choice, or rather a continuum of choices that require regular practice. Rising Professionals were able to actively participate in this learning process together and with their Changemakers. Karen Nenahlo with The Freshwater Trust expressed one of her key takeaways from the Mentoring Connections Program was that “leadership is a continuous process of personal and professional growth.” The importance of combating the notion of leadership as “all-knowing” emerged as a common theme in the cohort’s work. Kristi Goble of Metropolitan Council Environmental Services shared that before connecting with her Changemaker, “no one had ever reassured me that I don’t have to know everything, do everything, and be everything.”

Women and people of color in all sectors are often held to higher standards in terms of expertise and skillsets. Understanding one’s gaps in knowledge and skillsets is important. True leaders self-reflect, learn, and adapt—one of the six essential leadership capacities. Equally important is surrounding oneself with a team that holds complementary expertise, allowing for successful One Water collaborations.

Interestingly, Changemakers also reported leadership growth within themselves during the program. Many found their one-on-one sessions with Rising Professionals to be a learning opportunity, shaping how they understood and valued One Water approaches, as well as strategies for working with the upcoming generation. These mutually beneficial relationships are a reminder for the sector that even established One Water leaders have room for learning and growth.

The 10 Rising Professionals also fostered important learning opportunities amongst themselves. While the Mentoring Connections Program centered around one-on-one relationships between the Changemakers and Rising Professionals, what quickly emerged was the importance of peer-to-peer learning among the cohort. Peer exchanges provided space to share and receive thoughtful feedback from their peers on engaging effectively with the Changemakers, as well as advancing One Water solutions from lower levels of authority within their organizations.

### 4. Sustaining a support network is critical to grow the One Water movement and its leaders.

“One Water cannot be achieved alone. Networks such as the Mentoring Connections Program are crucial to bringing together One Water leaders to support one another and grow their leadership capacities. Rising Professionals in the cohort viewed this network as a safe space to freely ask questions and openly talk about their challenges with trusted peers.”

The Mentoring Connections Program sparked a network for many that is typically established later in careers. “Early opportunities to build support are imperative for strengthening the kind of peer relationships we need throughout our careers in order to achieve long-term One Water goals,” remarked Anjali Gupta of DC Water. For the cohort, the “Build Trust and Collaborate” leadership capacity expanded beyond a utility-community relationship focus to also embrace authentic relationships with their counterparts throughout the nation. The cohort stressed peer networks as a critical avenue to create channels for honest conversations and to co-develop solutions through continuous relationship building. Such networks are helping to cultivate One Water leaders, while also developing and spreading a shared vision for the sector at large.

**“I have a newfound understanding of the importance of surrounding myself with people that encourage and motivate me. We can inspire each other to do our best and hold each other accountable.”**

—**Holly Rubble**, City of Cedar Rapids, IA; Rising Professional cohort 2020/2021

# Where the Rising Tide Meets the Silver Tsunami: Recommendations to Cultivate the Next Generation of One Water Leaders

The inaugural Mentoring Connections cohort shared their vision for a One Water movement grounded in equity, embracing collective impact, and innovating along the way. Rising Professionals honed the leadership capacities needed to realize this vision and stressed the importance of walking that path together. The water sector can take these insights and further advance One Water leadership through several key actions.

## 1. Expand mentoring relationships and peer networks for emerging leaders.

Over 60 emerging leaders applied to the 2020/2021 Mentoring Connections Program. Despite a growing number of valuable Young Professionals programs targeting early career water sector workers, applicants cited this kind of one-on-one mentoring program to bridge the gap in opportunities for the “mid-career professional,” or those about 5–15 years into the sector. Exceptional future leaders are emerging from student and early-career programs like the Water Environment Federation’s (WEF) InFLOW (Introducing Future Leaders to Opportunities in Water), and various young professional committees within different water sector associations. However, to meet the silver tsunami expected in the water sector, we must collectively cultivate the rising tide beyond this critical onset point and provide continuous learning throughout their careers. WEF’s Water Leadership Institute and Duke University’s Water Innovation and Leadership Development (WILD) Program are two other examples of programs that target mid-career professionals. Offering opportunities to learn and build essential leadership capacities needed to realize a One Water future alongside the development of technical skills is particularly important.

The water sector can also strengthen opportunities for emerging leaders to network, support, and learn from one another. Investments in peer-to-peer relationships are an investment in the One Water movement and the generation that will soon be leading it. Providing resources for emerging leaders to build networks of support, pursue professional development opportunities, attend conferences and events, and participate in water associations and networks will benefit the entire One Water movement now and for years to come.

## 2. Provide opportunities for emerging leaders to practice and demonstrate leadership.

It is up to the current and outgoing One Water leaders to prepare the upcoming generation for the work ahead. Early opportunities for practical leadership experience are crucial to building these skills. These experiences can vary for emerging leaders, such as participating in a water association or sector working group, or leading a project with an experienced professional in a supporting role. The US Water Alliance works with many emerging leaders that are gaining practical leadership experiences through the Water Equity Network and Water, Arts, and Culture Accelerator programs. Emerging leaders are offered the opportunity to share their skills, expand their knowledge, and build relationships with counterparts across the country.

Practical leadership opportunities for emerging leaders also benefit the sector’s current leaders as they prepare for retirement. Cultivating future leaders across all levels of water sector organizations will better prepare them to transition into leadership roles when the silver tsunami hits. Current One Water leaders can cultivate the next generation through actions like taking the initiative to interact meaningfully with lower-level staff and taking emerging leaders to important meetings or external site visits. Those who are taking over will be better prepared to secure a sustainable water future for all.

## 3. Recognize and celebrate the successes of emerging leaders.

Recognition is an important way to support and celebrate emerging leaders and their growth. The sector can recognize emerging leaders on both local and national levels by nominating them for water association prizes, internal organizational awards, or even recognition lists such as “30 under 30.” Speaking opportunities at conferences and other events are also a great way for emerging leaders to be recognized for their work. Emerging leaders are commonly given moderator roles or speaking opportunities to talk about emerging leadership to their peers. However, the sector can also make space for speaking roles alongside experienced leaders. Their voices are shaping our sector’s future and must be included in the forefront of water conversations now.

In 2021, the US Water Alliance created a new category for the US Water Prize for Outstanding Rising One Water Leader to provide more recognition opportunities on a national stage. The US Water Prize celebrates outstanding achievement in the advancement of sustainable, integrated, and inclusive solutions to our nation's water challenges. The inaugural winner of this prize was Dr. Lindsay Birt, client solutions manager at Xylem, and a Rising Professional in the 2020/2021 Mentoring Connections cohort. This US Water Prize category will continue in 2022.

## Dr. Lindsay Birt

Outstanding One Water Leader



US WATER PRIZE  
2021



Lindsay Birt, PhD and client solutions manager at Xylem, exemplifies what it means to be a leader in One Water. Through her technical expertise in agricultural and biological engineering, Dr. Birt fosters innovations in agricultural water, surface water, wastewater, and stormwater management. With a 'watershed state of mind,' Lindsay emphasizes engagement and partnerships with stakeholders across the water sector to achieve comprehensive solutions to pressing water issues. Additionally, Lindsay is a staunch advocate for the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices and initiatives throughout the water world. Read more about Dr. Birt's work in her US Water Alliance's [blog feature](#).

Recognition also comes from individual interactions. Many Rising Professionals emphasized their direct connections with Changemakers helped establish greater confidence in themselves as leaders. Karen Nenahlo shared, "my confidence in my capabilities was reaffirmed through the recognition I received by a trusted, admired industry leader." The water sector should not overlook the significance of these moments and should instead seek opportunities to cultivate them. Confidence in oneself as a leader is an important pillar on which the essential leadership capacities rest.

**Join the next One Water Mentoring Connections Program cohort! For more information and to apply, visit <http://uswateralliance.org/about/mentoring-connections-program>.**

## Acknowledgments

The US Water Alliance thanks Morgan Brown, senior program manager, Katy Lackey, director of climate action, and Sarah Huckins, program manager, for their contributions to the Mentoring Connections Program and writing of this insights brief. The Alliance also thanks Maggie Rwakazina, program officer at Spring Point Partners, for her thought partnership in developing and strengthening this initiative. Support for the Mentoring Connections Program was generously provided by Spring Point Partners.

## Notes

1. Kane, Joseph, and Adie Tomer. "Renewing the Water Workforce: Improving Water Infrastructure and Creating a Pipeline to Opportunity." Brookings. 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/water-workforce/>.
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