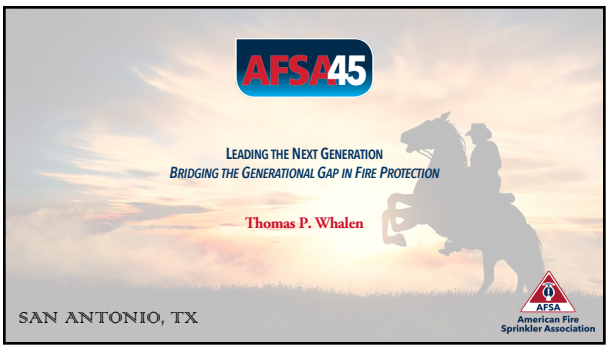
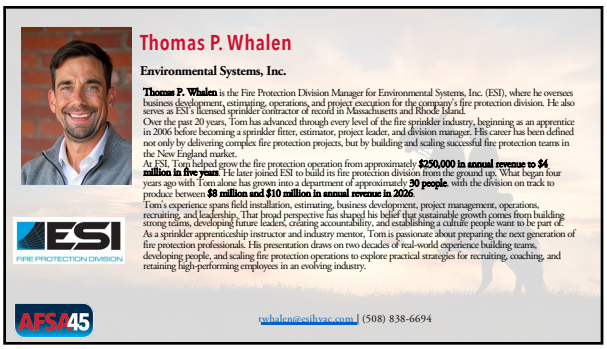

AFSA45
LEADING THE NEXT GENERATION
BRIDGING THE GENERATIONAL GAP IN FIRE PROTECTION
Thomas P. Whalen
SAN ANTONIO, TX
AFSA
American Fire Sprinkler Association

1


Thomas P. Whalen
Environmental Systems, Inc.
Thomas P. Whalen is the Fire Protection Division Manager for Environmental Systems, Inc. (ESI), where he oversees business development, estimating, operations, and project execution for the company's fire protection division. He also serves as ESI's licensed sprinkler contractor of record in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.
Over the past 20 years, Tom has advanced through every level of the fire sprinkler industry, beginning as an apprentice in 2006 before becoming a sprinkler fitter, estimator, project leader, and division manager. His career has been defined not only by delivering complex fire protection projects, but by building and scaling successful fire protection teams in the New England market.
At ESI, Tom helped grow the fire protection operation from approximately $250,000 in annual revenue to $4 million in five years. He later joined ESI to build its fire protection division from the ground up. What began four years ago with Tom alone has grown into a department of approximately 30 people, with the division on track to produce between $8 million and $10 million in annual revenue in 2026.
Tom's experience spans field installation, estimating, business development, project management, operations, recruiting, and leadership. That broad perspective has shaped his belief that sustainable growth comes from building strong teams, developing future leaders, creating accountability, and establishing a culture people want to be part of.
As a sprinkler apprenticeship instructor and industry mentor, Tom is passionate about preparing the next generation of fire protection professionals. His presentation draws on two decades of real-world experience building teams, developing people, and scaling fire protection operations to explore practical strategies for recruiting, coaching, and retaining high-performing employees in an evolving industry.
ESI
FIRE PROTECTION DIVISION
AFSA45
twhalen@esihvac.com | (508) 838-6694

2

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The authority on fire, electrical, and building safety
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3

People Problems & The Generational Gap
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4

Our Industry Has Never Been Stronger
But we've NEVER faced bigger people problems
Skilled labor shortage
Aging workforce
Knowledge leaving with retirements
Recruiting younger workers
Retaining talent
Leadership development
Field vs. office divide
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5

The Labor Shortage Isn't Coming...
It's Already Here……..
Every contractor is hiring.
Everyone is fishing from the same pond.
Wages alone won't solve it.
Recruiting is only half the battle.
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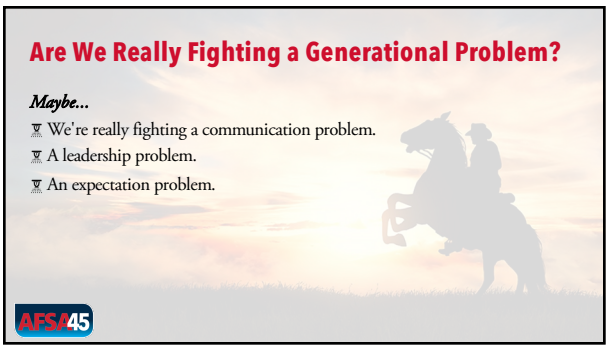
6


Are We Really Fighting a Generational Problem?
Maybe...
We're really fighting a communication problem.
A leadership problem.
An expectation problem.
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7

Understanding the Generations
Who's On Our Team?
Baby Boomers
Generation X
Xennials
Millennials
Generation Z
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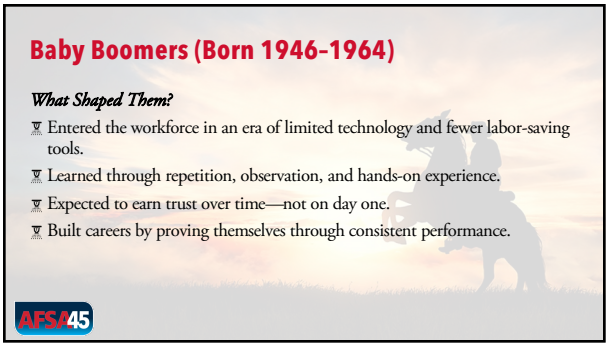
8


Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)
What Shaped Them?
Entered the workforce in an era of limited technology and fewer labor-saving tools.
Learned through repetition, observation, and hands-on experience.
Expected to earn trust over time—not on day one.
Built careers by proving themselves through consistent performance.
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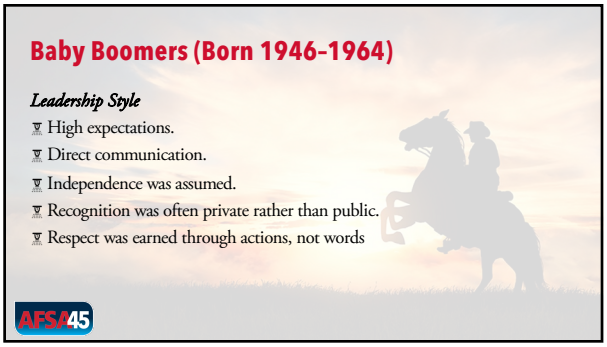
Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)
Leadership Style
High expectations.
Direct communication.
Independence was assumed.
Recognition was often private rather than public.
Respect was earned through actions, not words
AFSA45

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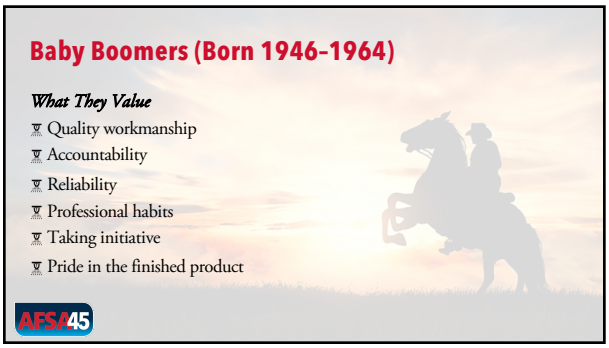
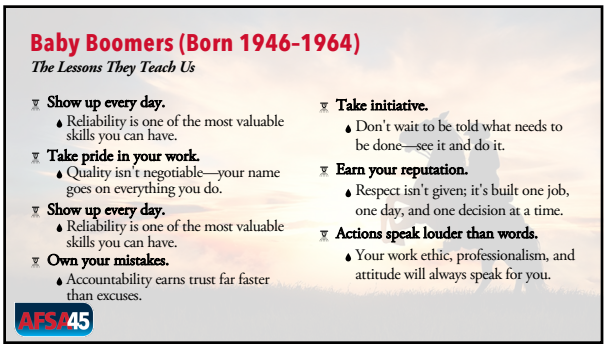

Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)
What They Value
Quality workmanship
Accountability
Reliability
Professional habits
Taking initiative
Pride in the finished product
AFSA45

11


Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)
The Lessons They Teach Us
Show up every day.
Reliability is one of the most valuable skills you can have.
Take pride in your work.
Quality isn't negotiable—your name goes on everything you do.
Show up every day.
Reliability is one of the most valuable skills you can have.
Own your mistakes.
Accountability earns trust far faster than excuses.
Take initiative.
Don't wait to be told what needs to be done—see it and do it.
Earn your reputation.
Respect isn't given; it's built one job, one day, and one decision at a time.
Actions speak louder than words.
Your work ethic, professionalism, and attitude will always speak for you.
AFSA45

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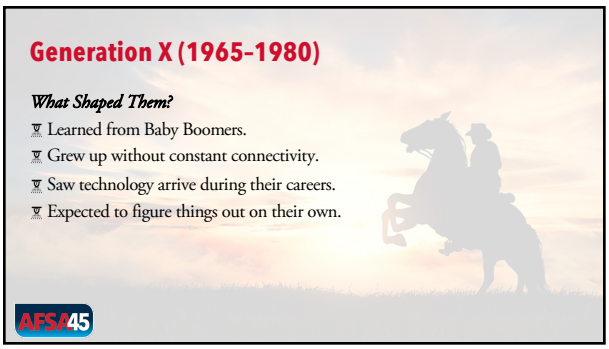

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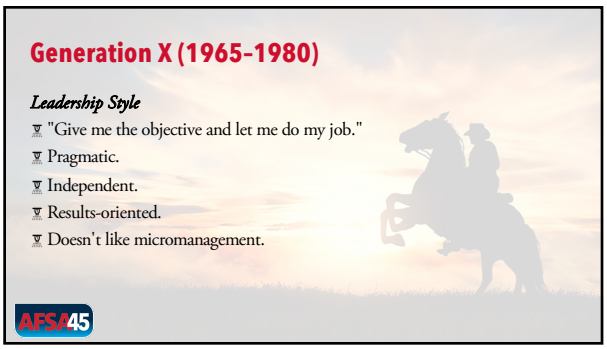

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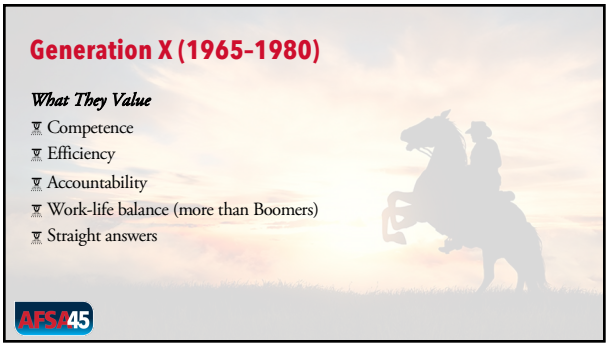

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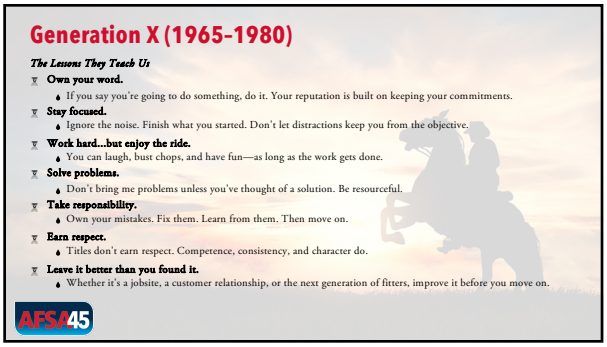

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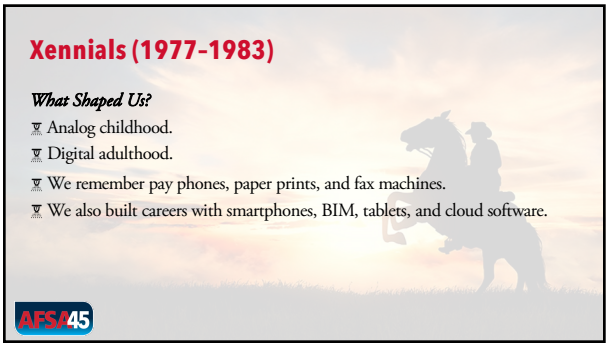

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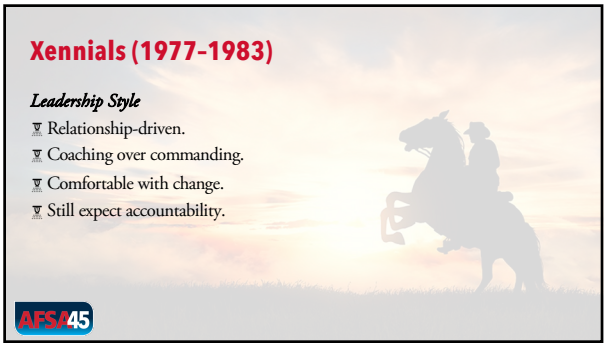

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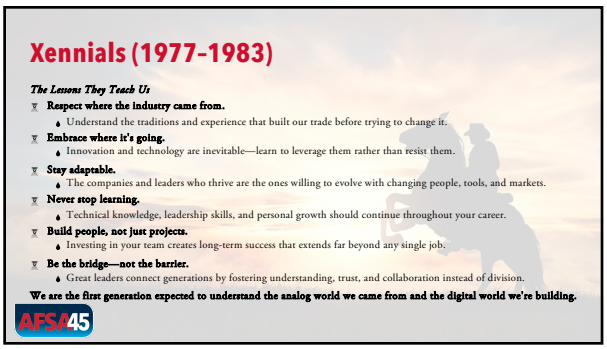

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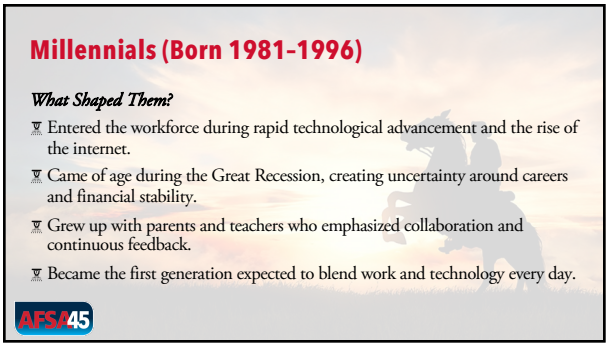

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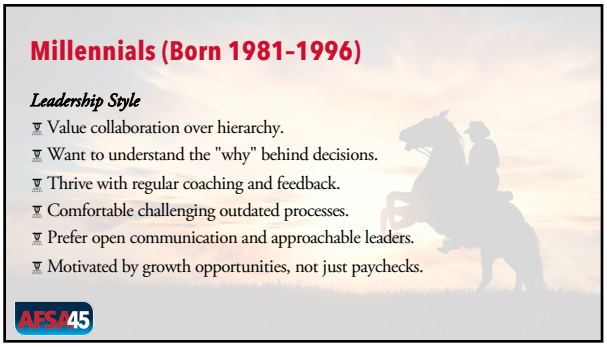

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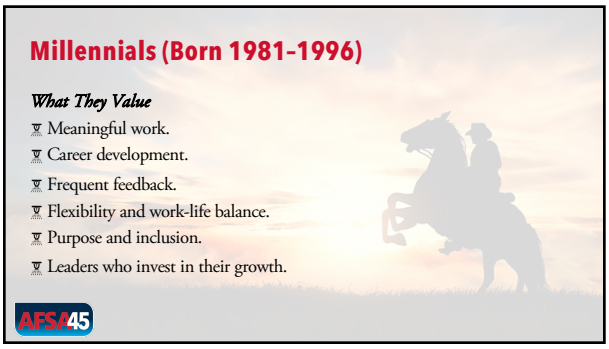

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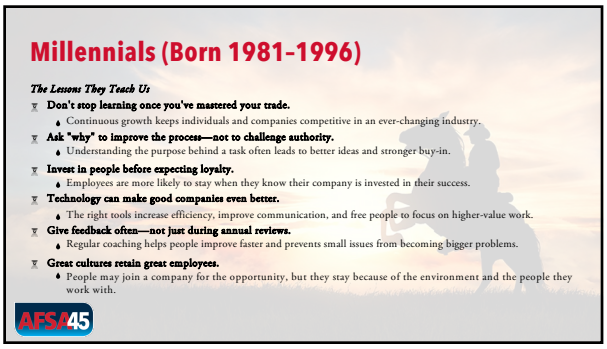

24

Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)

What Shaped Them?

- Grew up with smartphones, social media, and instant access to information.
- Entered the workforce during or shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Learned through digital platforms, videos, and interactive technology.
- Experienced a world of rapid change, uncertainty, and constant connectivity.

25

Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)

Leadership Style

- Prefer coaching over commanding.
- Expect clear expectations and consistent communication.
- Comfortable learning through technology and visual instruction.
- Value authenticity and transparency from leaders.
- Thrive when given opportunities to contribute early.

26

Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)

What They Value

- Purpose and meaningful work.
- Continuous learning and development.
- Honest, timely feedback.
- Flexibility and work-life integration.
- Technology that improves efficiency.
- Leaders who are approachable and invested in their success.

27

Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)

Lessons They Teach Us

- **Meet people where they are.**
  - Great leaders adapt their coaching style without lowering their standards.
- **Technology is a tool—not a shortcut.**
  - Use it to improve communication, learning, and productivity without replacing craftsmanship.
- **Feedback shouldn't be annual—it should be ongoing.**
  - Frequent coaching builds confidence, competence, and stronger relationships.
- **Develop people early.**
  - Responsibility and ownership should begin on day one, not after years on the job.
- **Never stop improving the workplace.**
  - The next generation expects companies to evolve, and that mindset drives innovation.
- **Every generation deserves a chance to prove itself.**
  - The leaders we depend on tomorrow are the apprentices we're developing today.

28

What Every Generation Has in Common

- Every generation was shaped by a different world.
- None of them are wrong.
- As leaders, our responsibility isn't to change generations— it's to understand them, develop them, and build one team

Leadership isn't about managing generations.
It's about bringing generations together.

29

Leadership & Team Building

30

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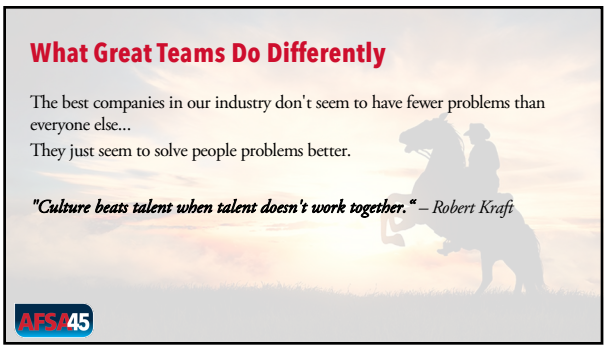

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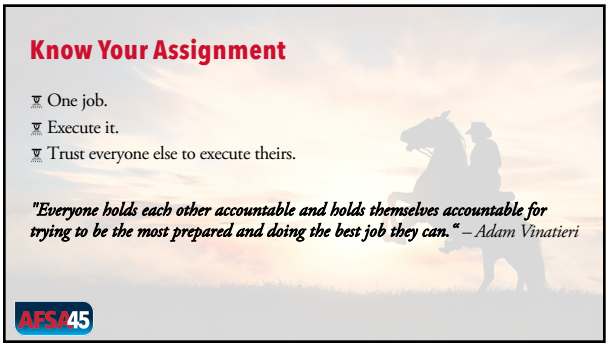

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36

Situational Leadership

Football teams practice...

- Goal line.
- Two-minute offense.
- Third and long.
- Red zone.
- Clock management.

Great companies practice...

- Shutdowns.
- Hospital work.
- Commissioning.
- Difficult customers.
- Schedule recovery.
- Emergencies.

"Great leaders don't have one leadership style. They have one standard—but they know when the situation calls for coaching, correcting, encouraging, or simply getting out of the way." — *Bill Belichick*

37

Practice Creates Confidence

Nobody rises to the occasion; they fall back on their preparation.

- Proactive training.
- Mentorship.
- Mock inspections.
- Dry runs.
- Toolbox talks.

"We practice hard against each other... We want them to make us better." — *Logan Mankins*

38

Accountability Is Love

People think accountability is punishment. It isn't. It's respect.

You hold people accountable because you believe they can meet the standard.

Poor leaders avoid hard conversations. Great leaders have them early.

"The best teams are player-led. Players have to hold each other accountable." – *Rodney Harrison*

39

Standards Never Change

Expectations can be explained differently.

Coaching changes. Technology changes. Generations change.

Regardless of who the player or coach is, the standard never changes.

"The standard is the standard. It doesn't change because of who's available." – *Bill Belichick*

40

Do Your Job

- Do what you said you'd do.
- Do it the right way.
- Do it every time.
- Help the person beside you succeed.
- Let others count on you.
- Never ask someone else to do your job.

"Everybody has to do what they're asked to do. That's how you win." — *Tom Brady*

41

Trust Is Earned Before It's Needed

Championship teams trust one another before the pressure arrives.

Trust comes from:

- Competence.
- Communication.
- Preparation.
- Accountability.
- Repetition.

"Trust isn't something that just happens. It comes from working together every day." – *Tedy Bruschi*

42

Leadership Multiplies Talent

Leadership is the multiplier

- Average leader + Great people = Average results.
- Great leader + Average people = Outstanding results.

"Iron sharpens iron." – *Julian Edelman*

43

Great Teams Build Leaders

Not followers.

Every apprentice...should become a fitter.

Every fitter...should mentor someone.

Every foreman...should create another foreman.

Great organizations reproduce leadership.

"This process of playing this game is about building relationships and connections with players and coaches alike." — *Mike Vrabel*

44

Recruiting the Next Generation

Stop searching only for experience.

Look for:

- Work ethic
- Coachability
- Competitiveness
- Accountability
- Team-first attitude
- Willingness to learn

"Everyone deserves a chance to prove they can do something special." – *Tom Brady*

45

Recruit Athletes

(Not necessarily the most athletic people.)

People who understand:

- Preparation
- Discipline
- Coaching
- Competition
- Accountability
- Teamwork
- Bottom line: **Hire for character. Train for competence.**

46

Friday Night Lights

Every Friday night, young men and women across this country are proving they can show up, take coaching, work through adversity, compete, and sacrifice for a team.

And on Monday morning, our industry says we can't find anybody……..

"Maybe we're not looking at a labor shortage...Maybe we're looking in the wrong places."
— *Thomas P. Whalen*

47

The Legacy We Leave

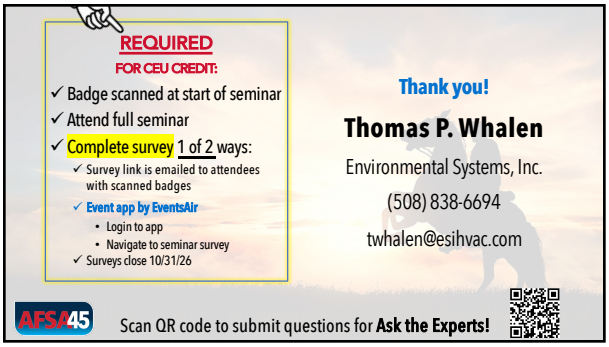
We don't just install sprinkler systems. We don't just build businesses. We build people.

Twenty years from now... The projects will be renovated. The buildings will change. The contracts will be forgotten.

But the people we develop will still be leading this industry.

Our greatest responsibility isn't protecting buildings. It's preparing the people who will protect them after we're gone.

48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Thank you!
Thomas P. Whalen
Environmental Systems, Inc.
(508) 838-6694
twhalen@esihvac.com
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Scan QR code to submit questions for Ask the Experts!

49

2027 Training Schedule

WEBINARS

1/6	Updates to NFPA 20
1/20	Calculating Pressure Reducing Hose Valves
2/3	Consumer Alert: Nitrogen in Sprinkler Systems
2/17	Reviewing Hydraulic Calculations
3/3	Updates to NFPA 13, 2028 Ed.
3/17	Updates to NFPA 13R & 13D, 2028 Eds.
4/7	Topic Coming Soon
4/21	NFPA 25: Roles & Responsibilities
5/5	Standpipe Flow Test Procedures
5/19	Storage 101
6/2	NFPA Technical Meeting - Voting Guide
6/16	Topic Coming Soon
6/30	Topic Coming Soon
7/7	Updates to NFPA 14, 2027 Edition
7/21	Adjacent Hazards & Design Methods
8/4	Acceptance Testing
8/18	Modifications to Existing Systems
9/22	Topic Coming Soon
10/6	Seismic 101
10/20	Proposed Updates to NFPA 25, 2029 Ed.
11/3	Evaluating Fire Pump Flow Tests
11/17	Top 10 Tech Reviews
12/1	Designing Water Storage Tanks
12/15	Pump Room Layout

PROGRAMS

Feb 9 - Mar 5 Apr 20 - May 14 Aug 3 - Aug 27** Oct 26 - Nov 19	Beginning Design School*
Apr 26 - May 7 Nov 1 - 12	Intermediate Design School*
Feb 8 - 10** Apr 12 - 14 Jul 12 - 14 Oct 11 - 13	Sprinkler Hydraulics Calculations Workshop
Apr 19 - 21 Oct 18 - 20	Advanced Hydraulics Calculations Workshop
Feb 11** Apr 30 Jul 23 Sep 24	Introduction to the Fire Sprinkler Industry
Mar 1 - 3 May 17 - 19 Aug 16 - 18 Oct 18 - 20**	NFPA 25 Essentials Workshop
Jun 7 - 10 Sep 20 - 23	Experienced Inspector Skills Lab
Mar 4 - 5 May 20 - 21 Aug 19 - 20 Oct 21 - 22**	NFPA 25 Fire Pump Workshop
Spring Summer Fall	ITM Inspector Development Program* *This program is 20 months.*

** Hybrid course **At General Air Products Lab, Exton, PA*

AFSA46

September 8-11	Manchester Grand Hyatt San Diego, CA

For More Details Visit:
firesprinkler.org

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Dates subject to change. Programs subject to minimum registrations.

rev 9/14/2026

Virtual Instruction Path (VIP)

for Sprinkler Fitting Apprentices

Level 1 - Begins January 2027

Level 2 - Begins February 2027

Level 3 - Begins January 2027

Level 4 - Begins March 2027

www.firesprinkler.org/VIP

AFSA
American Fire Sprinkler Association

HANDS-ON WORKSHOPS FOR 2027

FEATURING AFSA'S TRAINING LAB

NFPA 25 Essentials Workshop

Mar | May | Aug | Oct

Description: Understand roles, responsibilities, and NFPA 25 ITM procedures through hands-on testing of wet systems, dry systems, and fire pumps.

NFPA 25 Fire Pump Workshop

Mar | May | Aug | Oct

Description: Develop practical NFPA 25 fire pump ITM skills, including no-flow and full-flow testing, water supply graphing, and performance evaluation.

Introduction to the Fire Sprinkler Industry

Feb | Apr | Jul | Sep

Description: This course is designed for those new to the industry. An introductory, wide-ranging 8-hour course that provides a broad overview of core fire sprinkler industry concepts for those new to the field.

Experienced Inspector Skills Lab NEW

Mar | Sep

Description: Take your ITM expertise beyond the basics. Designed for experienced technicians, this course combines focused classroom instruction with hands-on system lab training to strengthen your application of current NFPA 25 inspection, testing, and maintenance requirements. Refine fire sprinkler testing practices, improve documentation, deliver more consistent service, and help reduce liability while reinforcing knowledge commonly covered on certification exams.

Learn more about AFSA's fire sprinkler lab featuring functional risers, a spray room, fire pumps, and an interactive classroom.

firesprinkler.org/lab