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LEADING THE RURAL TRANSIT ORGANIZATION



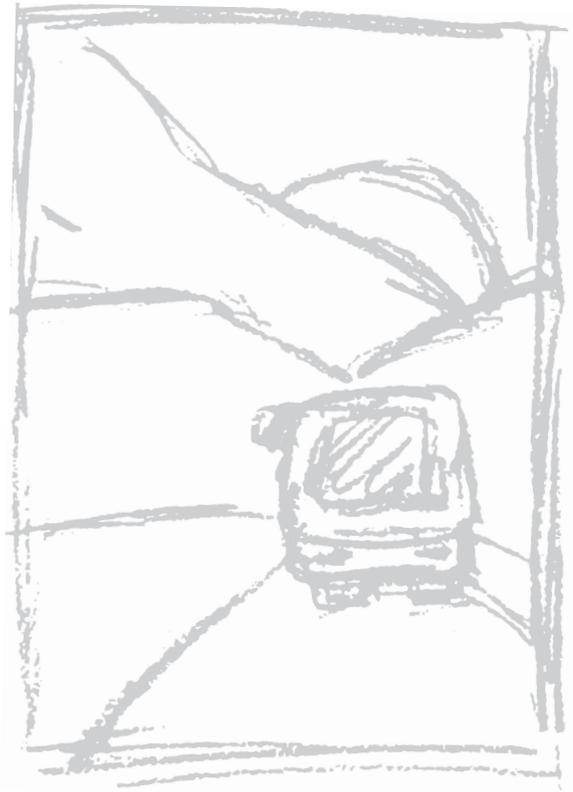
As the head of a rural transit agency your position involves more than managing operations; you are responsible for achieving your personal best and for bringing out the best in everyone within the organization. Whether you run a community transit system that serves a single town, or one that covers multiple counties and ridership demographics, your success depends on understanding and putting into practice principles of leadership.

“The challenge is to be a light, not a judge; to be a model, not a critic.”

Stephen Covey, Principle-Centered Leadership

This Rural Transit Assistance Program technical assistance brief introduces concepts that will help transit leaders incorporate vision and values into decision-making, set goals and priorities, and make their agency’s mission statement a part of how and why they do business.

Management expert and author Stephen Covey says, “if you manage by practice and lead by policies, your people don’t have to be the experts; they don’t have to exercise judgment, because all the judgment and wisdom is provided them in the form of rules and regulations.” A better model calls for people to use a set of principles and values to create positive outcomes. When principles are internalized into habits, they empower people to deal effectively with different situations. Successful transit leaders will identify



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and implement those principles and values that work best for their organizations.

Effective leaders will also assume the role of communicator and coalition builder. Communicating the many benefits of transit is critical to gaining or sustaining the support of various community stakeholders, including customers, human service agency partners, governmental entities, and business leaders. This brief will discuss ways to enhance your system's community outreach efforts.

Whether your agency is just starting out or has been operating for years, the concepts and lessons outlined in this brief can be applied the same.

A BUSINESS MANAGEMENT MODEL

It is important for transit leaders to be familiar with contemporary management thinking and to learn from the best practices in both the public and private sector. Strategies that have the greatest application for community transit are ones that focus more on people than on buses or vans; on long-term solutions rather than quick fixes; on relationships rather than rigid practices; on values and principles rather than on activities; and on mission, purpose and direction rather than on rules and regulations.

The Transit Cooperative Research Program provides in Report 8, "The Quality Journey: A TQM Roadmap for Public Transportation," a business model for leadership that applies to transit.

Put Customers First

Customers are the foundation of your business. Everything you do as transit leader should be geared towards meeting and exceeding the expectations of your customers so that they become regular users of the system. Satisfied customers become supporters of the agency and

spread the word in the community.

Manage and Improve Processes

From dispatch to maintenance, your agency runs smoothly because of processes and procedures that are in place to help your employees do the best possible job. Concentrate on making the processes work for your staff and your customers – not on the processes themselves.

Manage by Fact

Decisions should be based on things you can quantify and count – not on feelings or impressions. Make evaluations that are informed by both quantitative (numerical metrics, such as ridership and fares collected) and qualitative (value metrics, such as comments from employees and customers).

Cultivate Organizational Learning

Organizations, like people, should always learn from past mistakes. Become a transit system that is flexible – open and able to change – and one that helps to foster ongoing learning and ensures that problems are not only solved, but also avoided when possible.

Train, Empower, and Recognize Employees

People want to work in an environment that gives them the tools and the confidence to do a good job. Help people understand that they are part of a mission and an organization that transcends their individual tasks. Empower your employees to discuss and suggest possible improvements or enhancements throughout the organization. Recognize and reward people for innovative thinking and quality performance. Other employees will see that putting in the extra effort is worthwhile and appreciated.

Improve Labor-Management Teamwork

Everyone in the agency, from drivers to

dispatchers, should take part in the decision-making process. Full representation gives everyone a stake in the outcome. Believe in your employees, inspire confidence, have patience, show empathy, and always work in a team environment.

Lead the Change in Organizational Culture

One of the best ways to change an organization for the better is to lead by a set of principles and values. Values such as honesty, trust, integrity, and caring must never be compromised. These are the values that define a transit system's visions or mission. Transit leaders should inspire people with their vision and create trust, loyalty, and confidence among their employees. Guiding principles may include:

- Providing strategic focus
- Ensuring fairness and equality
- Espousing humane values
- Encouraging civic-mindedness
- Promoting personal and professional integrity

The key distinction between management and leadership is that when you lead, you are empowering others to do great work.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION: VISION AND VALUES

An organization without vision and values is like a ship without a rudder – you still move, but you are at the mercy of the prevailing currents. A foundation of well-developed vision, mission and values gives you, your employees, and the community a rudder.

Vision: Where You Want to Go

Imagine your organization at some time in the future being the best that it can be. What elements would factor into that picture? They may include the following:

- Customer satisfaction is high.
- Public, private, and human services agencies coordinating resources so that transportation is provided to all, service is more efficient, and duplication is avoided.
- Specialized transportation and services meet the needs of senior citizens, the economically disadvantaged, and physically handicapped individuals.
- Emphasis shifts from providing rides to managing the mobility needs of people.
- Technology centralizes all functions and makes it easy for customers to access the system.
- Employee staff turnover is low and there is ample opportunity for employee growth and development.
- Mobility is recognized as an essential part of life and is supported by public officials, community leaders, and human service managers.

This visioning exercise should be done in concert with your board and your managers or supervisors. After there is consensus about what the organization aspires to become, you need to put that picture into words. But a committee cannot write a vision statement. Select a good writer who feels strongly about the vision, and then have the group review and comment on it. A vision statement should inspire and motivate. It should be easy to remember and easy to quote. An example in simplicity comes from Virginia Regional Transit in Loudoun County:

To provide quality transportation in the region.

To be recognized as the Best System in Virginia.

Or here is an example from a leading entertainment company:

We exist to make people happy.

While there are no rules about this, many organizations choose to distinguish vision

statements from mission statements and/or value statements, and they develop and promote all three. A mission statement is a directional tool for identifying why an organization exists. It lets everyone know what your organization expects to do in the near-term to move it towards the vision. A value statement, on the other hand, describes core beliefs (as outlined in the next section) and principles that guide your organization. It expresses the concrete effect you want to have on your stakeholders.

When creating or re-creating a mission statement, it is helpful to keep the following points in mind.

- Keep it brief, no longer than a paragraph
- Use concise and plain language; avoid adjectives and adverbs
- Use the active, rather than passive voice
- Focus on results, not activities
- Use unifying principles

Transit is ever changing and growing. If your agency has moved on, your mission statement should reflect that. And, if you are in the process of reviewing or rethinking your mission statement, be sure to involve you employees in the process. One transit system found that few people knew the organization had a mission statement, let alone knew what it was. In fact, the system's mission statement hung prominently over the reception area in the front office.

To put meaning behind your mission statement, it needs to be part of how and why you do business. Review the statement with prospective job candidates and use it during employee evaluations to reinforce positive feedback or to explain a disciplinary action. In the later case, employees need to understand that action is being taken because they may have violated a core principle of the agency's mission. The mission statement should be visible throughout your organization. Put

it on walls, on the back of business cards, on your Web site and throughout your communications materials.

If a clear and motivational vision and mission are one side of a business equation, the other side is values.

Values: Decide What Matters

Values are those central qualities that enable the organization to realize its vision and its mission. Again, these have to be more than words on paper. A transit leader has to embrace the values and put them to work every day. If employees see a leader doing something different than what is written or said about values, then they will likely conclude that the values are meaningless.

What are some of the values identified by successful transit leaders? Tom Cheeseman, administrator of Middletown Area Transit in Middletown, Connecticut, identifies the following values as being most important to his agency:

- Empowerment
- Integrity
- Empathy
- Dedication
- Team decision-making
- Caring
- Honesty

Cheeseman credits emphasis on vision and values with a major turnaround for his agency. Through a team-decision-making process, his employees mounted the "March of Excellence" program to improve the image of public transit in their community. The first order of business was to make a list of everything positive and negative about the agency. From the top down, everyone had to give an honest assessment. Then plans were formulated to eliminate the negatives. Employees took responsibilities, helped each other, and were

dedicated to making progress. The result was nearly a 100 percent reversal of public opinion after a two-year effort. And the agency continues to enjoy a high level of respect from passengers, local government officials, and the business community.

SETTING THE FRAMEWORK: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Setting vision and values is like drawing a road map. You start by defining a vision and set the guidelines for the path through mission and values. Next you must define the endpoint of your vision in manageable and concrete terms by setting both long-term goals and short-term objectives for getting there.

In its 2000 Strategic Plan, Virginia Regional Transit describes how it would achieve its mission, “to coordinate, promote and provide an efficient system of public transportation to the region,” by focusing on five areas: service delivery, marketing, human resources, fiscal resources and capital resources. Each area has specific objectives, which transit managers may find useful for benchmarking their own goals and objectives.

Service Delivery

- Ascertain and provide the best resource utilization possible to meet need.
- Measure, monitor, and adjust the service model as required.
- Provide for capital development that will meet the long-term rolling capital needs of the consumers we serve.
- Plan, acquire, and implement data handling systems that will provide customer service at the highest level possible.
- Advocate for funding to increase the volume and availability of buses for the citizens we serve.
- Recognize and begin planning for existing urban/rural funding conflicts.

Marketing

- Develop advertising strategies that utilize mass communication to inform target audiences of our services.
- Develop strategies that assist current and future passengers in accessing our services (with the intent to increase hourly passenger usage).
- Use direct mail to deliver more complex and detailed information to inform the public how to access service.
- Educate stakeholders such as politicians, community leaders, and human service managers as to the availability and accessibility of our service.
- Upgrade our public image to be recognized as the single source for transit services in the areas we serve.
- Acquire funding to support a wide market strategy that is ongoing and will keep the public informed.
- Utilize the Internet and communication technology to provide information to people, agencies, and locations we serve.

Human Resources

- Establish a system for recruiting the most desirable workforce applicants to meet the needs of the organization.
- Develop systems to encourage longevity through innovative benefits and retention programs.
- Adapt personnel practice to the diverse regional interests.
- Develop, implement, monitor, and improve training programs that foster excellence in performance.
- Comply with and remain current on ongoing rules and regulations governing employment.
- Maintain staffing levels that provide opportunity for advancement and growth for full and part-time staff.

Fiscal Resources

- Develop, modify, and maximize operating and capital financial resources that will meet the service delivery needs of the association.
- Comply with and remain current on financial reporting and auditing requirements of the community and the industry.
- Establish reporting and tracking systems that adequately inform the board of directors, so that the best possible decisions concerning resources can be made.
- Provide for capital development that will meet the long-term facility and rolling capital needs of the association.
- Create public-private partnerships that will diversify and strengthen the financial base of the association.
- Present realistic fiscal plans for each financial cycle.

Capital Resources

Rolling Stock

- Establish system for monitoring conditions of the fleet to determine the most efficient allocation of those resources.
- Seek funding to replace, as scheduled, the existing fleet and expand to meet changing needs.
- Measure maintenance resource allocations and develop plans that will assess the cost/benefit of certain major repairs.
- Create a fleet of vehicles that will meet ADA requirements and be diverse enough to match the most efficient vehicle to the job required.
- Acquire or develop a regional facility that will serve the administrative and maintenance needs of the association.
- Provide administrative offices wherever

our service model requires in order to support services.

- Become a community resource for vehicle repairs, maintenance, and training.

Goals and objectives should be evaluated regularly with your management team, board of directors, and a stakeholder advisory committee. The evaluation should contain qualitative information that can be used to measure progress. But, remember that not all goals are achievable in the way they were first conceived. Be flexible enough to adjust to changing circumstances and/or needs.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO YOUR COMMUNITY

The principle of “putting people first” involves more than employees, boards, and customers. It also means establishing and fostering relationships with various community stakeholders. Transit leaders must get out of their offices, get to know their stakeholders, and never take them for granted. Most transit leaders can relate to the difficulty of finding time for outside activities amid the pressures and hustle of running the agency. But your participation in community events and efforts to build and enhance relationships with local organizations and business leaders can be just as important as your day-to-day management duties.

Although many residents may know there is a local transit system, they may not be aware of the extent of its service or consider that they could become a rider. A community outreach program helps to educate them about the system, encourages them to ride, asks for their feedback, and highlights your system’s benefit to the community. The following is a checklist for leaders who want to develop or improve their processes for community outreach.

Identify Audiences

Begin by identifying key audiences in the community who should receive messages about your transit agency. These can include, but are not limited to:

- Current and potential riders
- Elected officials
- Potential transit partners
- Human service agencies
- Chamber of Commerce and other business organizations
- Civic organizations
- Health care providers
- Educational institutions
- Aging organizations

Identify Opportunities

The next step is to inventory all the specific ways that you and your agency can reach out to and interact with the community and then decide which combination works best for you.

Active Membership

A good means for building community relationships is through active participation in local organizations. Attend monthly luncheon meetings of the Chamber or the Jaycees where you can network with local officials and business and civic leaders. Join the board of the United Way, Red Cross, or another civic association. Become a membership recruiter for the PTA or the YMCA. It is better to play an active role in one or two organizations than to be a member in name only in many.

Speaking Engagements

Local business groups, civic clubs, retirement homes or senior centers, youth centers, and churches are just a few of the organizations that regularly hold meetings in your community. Schools also look for professionals to visit classrooms and talk about their job responsibilities. Speaking to people in the

community helps generate exposure for your system and also can boost ridership. Often, a phone call is all it takes to arrange a presentation.

Community Events

Your community has fairs, festivals, arts and craft shows, sporting events, and charity events. These events present a great opportunity to meet people and to distribute flyers, exhibit at booth, provide special shuttle services, display new vehicles, and generally make your system more visible to large crowds. You may also want to explore trade-outs, where you offer event organizers advertising in your vehicles in exchange for program ads or sponsor designations.

Local Government Involvement

Transit leaders need to lend their voice when local government officials are deciding funding issues or discussing issues that could impact their operation. Taking time to make effective and well-organized presentations to government groups is an important way to gain support for your system. Consider sending out informational updates to political leaders and others who might benefit from your insight. Offer your expertise in transit issues to county and city transportation planning commissions. In addition, encourage your local governing body to proclaim a “Try Transit” day or week and involve them in as many transit activities as possible during that time.

Volunteer Programs

Volunteering and encouraging your employees to follow your lead demonstrates that your transit system is a good neighbor. Encourage the formation of a volunteer committee that identifies community needs and recruits transit system volunteers to help out. Look for opportunities to provide free shuttle services for special events.

Business Promotional Tie-Ins

Transit messages and logos on grocery bags and milk cartons and in utility bills and company newsletters are just a few examples of how community-minded businesses have helped agencies spread the word. Some businesses have even featured transit leaders in their television advertising.

Open Houses

Opening your facility and/or vehicles to the public allows you to interact with current and potential riders and gives them a chance to see your operation in action. Periodic open houses with invitations to the media, government officials, and business leaders are also a means for educating and building relationships with these key stakeholders.

Direct Mail

Many systems find that direct mail is an effective means for communicating with riders as well as with others in the community. Building and keeping lists update-to-date are keys to successful direct mail. Ask your drivers, dispatchers and phone operators to encourage customers to get on your mailing list. Bulk-mailed postcards are a relatively inexpensive way to get your message out. Utilities, school systems, senior groups and clubs, and other organizations that do regular mailings are worth approaching about including your inserts with their materials.

Local Media

Transit managers need to have good working relationships with the local media to generate positive news about the system and to provide comment or information in critical situations such as accidents or funding disputes. But

transit leaders can also use the local media as a vehicle for community outreach. Some transit leaders write weekly or periodic columns for their newspapers. They also appear in public service advertising and as guests on public interest radio and television talk shows.

Plan and Evaluate Progress

To be most effective, community outreach needs to be a planned process. At the beginning of the year, list all the different ways you will reach out to the important audiences in the community and set goals for what you hope to achieve. Monitor your progress and then make an evaluation at year's end. A systematic process for community outreach will help build recognition and support for your agency; but it will also help you identify the needs of the community and your passengers as you plan for the near and long-term.

CONCLUSION

Lessons learned from the corporate world provide examples that are valuable to rural transit agencies in creating a culture of success. Strategies that have the greatest application for community transit are ones that focus more on people, on long-term solutions, on relationships, and on values and principles. Establishing a sound vision and set of values gives a directional compass by which both a transit leader and employees can navigate. A system is best managed by establishing goals and objectives that can be evaluated and measured, but that can also be adjusted when needed. One objective of a transit leader should be to build bridges to the community. Can a transit system run if the principles presented in this brief are not followed? Of course, but you will find that the result of this discussion is a transit agency that is people-focused and driven by sound values and vision. Keep in mind the Steven Covey quote at the beginning of this brief, and don't be afraid to be a light that guides the agency's direction.

RESOURCES

The National Transit Resource Center maintains a peer-to-peer technical assistance network, tapping into a wealth of experience from professionals in the community transportation field. For more information, visit the CTAA Web site at www.ctaa.org/ntrc/services, or contact the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

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For more information on many of the issues presented in this technical assistance brief, consult the “Role and Responsibilities of Transit Managers” video and workbook training package available through RTAP.

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