

Customer Delight: It Starts by Investing in your Management

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ABSTRACT

Public transit customers deserve the best service that can be delivered. Customer delight makes all the long hours and hard work seem worth it. Are you on the road to customer delight? Do you have a culture rich in providing customer delight or action rich in talk? It all starts with leadership.

Leaders within our transportation industry have consistently stated that employees are very important. In the past few years, our transit association has defined two main strategic goals on the development of our industry's workforce. Our transit system leaders spend endless hours on the topic of retention, recruitment, and development, and have stated that training and development is the core requirement to any system to achieve long-range success.

It's time to ask yourself, "Why is it so difficult for training and development plans to receive a higher priority when budgets, goals, and legislation is being implemented? Do you have problems with attracting and retaining transit workers that are skilled to your needs? Why is our industry so slow to accept the fact that having certified transit managers would provide the motivation for a vision to become a reality, our systems to offer partnerships and growth, and our employees to become recognized and rewarded. Isn't it time we focus more on development and teaching our employees how the future vision, mission and values statements must link to our every day goals of running the business well?

Many leaders underestimate the importance of designing an organization's future with this in

mind. However, let's challenge ourselves to take the steps to have these goals and take part in a fundamental approach of recognition so that it is a way of life in everyday operation. Having these goals that invests in our staff, will sustain long needed success for the growth of our industry and customer delight for our patrons.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on the creation of an industry's commitment to look beyond the annual budget cycle. It will involve one's employees in the decision of investment and won't let the words alone solve our industry's people and performance initiatives. Moreover, this paper will demonstrate actual results and testimonial feedback when the elements of care and recognition are dedicated to the workforce of our industry.

We all want similar improvements for our organizations. For example, we want to improve our employee involvement through participation, we want to empower our workforce, we want to develop succession planning, we want certifications and enhanced technology that improves communication and training. What stops us from achieving these goals? The answer is simple. Our leadership must make the shift from traditional methods to more proactive innovative ways to sustain improvement. This will reinforce our desire to improve the quality of our services, while decreasing the cost of providing it.

This paper will also demonstrate how educating the workforce generates desire to work smarter and more efficient. How teaching the right thing clearly means the incorporation of

employee feedback. In addition, that listening to employees feedback about education and training, creating focus groups, working closely with the educational institutions, and onsite programs – get employees energized and motivated to do a great job for one’s company – and will instill customer delight every time.

Finally, the results of linking everything one does to their strategic development goals, improves the services provided and gives the workforce the tools needed to achieve results. As I have stated in the past, customer delight must be a performance beyond words!

FOCUS ON THE FACTS

Organizations ponder over the need to invest in training and development. Research shows that very few systems link the training they currently purchase and/or approve to accredited programs or acceptable college credits. The attention is on the short-term fixes, rather than the long-range outcome. Hence, the reason why we spend so much time trying to recover from lost talent, or short retention.

In our industry’s effort under (PT)², it is clear that informing everyone about the basics, the benefits, the opportunities, the choice, and the freedom are vital for making communities stronger and more vibrant. Anyone managing a multi-million dollar public transit operation today realizes that this industry employs over 450,000 people in North America and moves over 10-billion people annually. Ensuring our employees have the tools needed to be successful, improving their skills through assessment, and development will pay dividends.

What does the question, “Are employees most important?”, mean to your employees? In a recent survey conducted by Booz Allen and Hamilton, they stated that the workers feel engaged when the senior level management is not so fluid and constantly changing. Does this sound like your organization? Regardless of the approach and one’s intuition that employees are most important – we must ask ourselves to define the answer of what this means for our

employees and our customers.

For years we have talked about the ability for one to repeat their company vision and mission statements word-for-word. Most can not, because we have lost sight of why we exist. Over 80% of our industry is made-up of front line workers and front line supervision. Making the commitment to improve this industry by training, developing and creating a sense of urgency about recognition, will bring our future reality into perspective. Careful planning, endless communication and dedication to change the paradigm, is what gets us to the next step of improvement. As Dr. Covey’s habit number three states, “Put First Things First”, we too must do the right thing.

Finally, the true test of success is when the “buy-in” occurs from one’s employees and results one never thought could be achieved become the way of business. Are your employees prepared for the change? What do they think customer delight is? Do your survey’s say we don’t need to listen or get our employees involved? Is recognition through a certified workforce part of your plan? Do the right thing and create the investment in your employees by making this a critical path item for every level of your organizations.



Figure1- Bloom’s Taxonomy Model

DESIGNATED DRIVER

In April, 2000, Judy Williams wrote an

expert advice article about professional certifications and the use of designations. She went on to explain certifications as a license which represents a standard of professional requirements that enable one to perform a certain job or function.

For example, in 1985, the Convention Liaison Council, has sponsored the Certified Meeting Planner (CMP) designations, representing the most important function of a professional meeting planner. She went on to state, "It represents the standard of excellence in today's industry." Over 5,457 planners worldwide have earned the designation. The designation means one has minimal experience, education and training, including being employed in that industry.

The lasting effects of certification designations truly mean something. Most industry professionals in that industry have now considered a high level of support, citing advantages from improved knowledge, confidence, peer recognition, respect, and an innate gratifying sense of satisfaction for setting such a goal and achieving it.

Transit certifications, like the meeting planner certification, is structured to ensure intellectual competence is combined with the appropriate understanding of the industry, and includes a broad base of hands-on experience.

While the merits of obtaining a designation are still too new to report, many transit personnel agree that the steps along the way to become a recognized seasoned professional in the transit industry is the step in the right direction.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Corporate support for employee study programs, partnerships with educational institutions and the mass of e-learning programs available today is where our industry must envision its attention. Like figure 1 suggest, online learning is becoming a common way to learn.

It's always exciting to be involved with a

new strategy and a new beginning, but being sure that our industry's definition of education is in place, takes careful planning and understanding from the start. The timing is perfect to move ahead with new innovations and programs – as initiatives for workers retention, initiatives to educate the public and a new federal government to support our industry is a great beginning.

Continuing education must have meaning and supported by the need to learn something. In addition, it should always add value to our goals, whether personal or business. Most organizations are weak to support the notion that a core course requirement should be a standard for our industry. Allowing staff to take courses that don't add value to an organization is a waste of time, effort and money. Few organizations have made the commitment and include the goals and programs specific to help educate their work force.

Here is a recent example from the Globe and Mail newspaper about a CP Rail employee named, Chris. Chris worked for CP Rail right out of high school in 1978. He got an entry-level position and tried for years to help himself grow. He attended many courses in the evening, and elected to try and get a degree. However, balancing the family, kids, work, and home made it virtually impossible for Chris to see the end. In this case, the end was graduation day in the year 2006.

CP Rail had generally supported efforts by employees to seek self-education by allowing a tuition refund program. However, in 1995, the company took a giant leap forward. They partnered with the local electric company and started a pilot program at Simon Fraser University, that entailed having employees attend an on-campus three-days a month program including Thursday through Saturday for one-year. The results included education in business, language, critical thinking and enable the employee to concentrate on the specific areas of need for the position he was seeking in the future. The program ends with employee knowledge that allows company success, employee success and the steps for achieving

certification and/or a degree.

The structure of the program and the employee involvement was critical to this employees' success. It recognized the differences in employees who want to do the right thing – but don't always have the ability on their own without company sponsored programs.

Chris went on to get his certification and degree in real estate and is now the manager of real estate marketing for CP Rail.

In this environment of hurry-up and learn for the sake of reporting a completed goal – it is time to rethink how our educational goals are setup.

Sandy French, a Toronto based president of Northern Lights Communications Group, believes strong support for continuing education has to be given in the successful corporate culture today. On the other hand, he states that empirical evidence suggest that, something like a person going off for a two-day seminar or course, is not something that can change or improve a company very quickly. He states, "Companies at the top have goals and objectives that need to be translated down to individuals. They should be asking, what core competencies does one need to help achieve our business results?"

Corporate support for employees' education – whether through partnerships with an institute, university or e-learning – has to move up a notch and be recognized as a driver for better performance, employee commitment and employee retention.

THE EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGE

This past summer, the APTA Business Members newsletter, August 2001, featured a story about workforce development initiatives. Stephanie Pinson, Gilbert Tweed Associates wrote the article.

We all have a challenge. The challenge of improving our national investment in transit, when "growing pains"; "high turnover" and worker "scarcity" are at unprecedented levels.

How do we expect our people structure to operate successfully in an increasingly technological workplace? The article expressed the need for a core issue to be on everyone's mind. How do we improve our ability to attract and retain talented, highly educated and motivated employees into the transit industry better than we do currently?

Years ago I learned a phrase that I can't help but to restate here. "If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you always got." In other words, we must change what we have been doing to retain and motivate workers – and create new innovations and pioneer new methods to address this issue.

The Transit Research Board (TRB) has announced a TCRP project F-11, which includes Human Resources Study of Workforce Development in North America Transit Industry. The study will have a benchmarking focus, an essential part of addressing transit workforce issues, as solutions can come from both public and private sector.

Look at your own organization and first seek to understand – what has your company done different in the last two-years to address this issue? What goals are set for your organization that link to this issue? What employee involvement has been coupled with the creation of the objectives to achieve success in retention and motivation?

Let's look at MARTA in Atlanta. They have instituted employee development that links employee assessment to the course requirements. They give incentive to the workers to achieve a professional certification at the successful completion of the training. The elements of change are done through grass roots methods. Employees are getting trained in areas they need to be trained. The results will be profound in the years to come.

At Long Beach Transit, they are looking to include a structured tuition reimbursement program for transit certification. Once the employee completes the program, they are rewarded and recognized for completion of a

program that demonstrates knowledge and commitment to the transit industry.

TRANSIT CERTIFICATION

Like any organization that seeks to improve the services they provide, the goal setting element tends to be an area that most people believe they either understand or have a – “been there done that” mentality. Therefore, most people disregard the complexity of the entire process of goal setting and goal monitoring. I suggest that one test their staff to really see how well they understand the goal setting process – and don’t accept the “we know how to do that” answer.

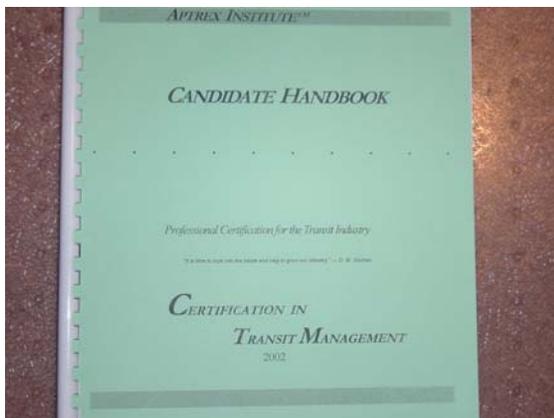


Figure 2 - Candidate Handbook

The goal is to be certified and recognized as a leader in the industry. What is a transit certification for management? In 1993, the American Public Transit Exams Institute, an arms-length organization, began to conduct research on the topic of education, training and development. The results were very clear. Little was done to link assessment, training and development to industry knowledge based programs. Further, the evidence suggested that the budget dollars for training, tuition reimbursements and development were constantly challenged and reduced. Years of attempts to create transit certification programs were rejected because of the misunderstanding, poor development and lack of desire to be innovative on the “soft- skill” topics.

Today, the certification process has several

extensive steps to be taken before one can be certified.(see figure 2 – Candidate Handbook for Certification). The first step begins with an application and reference letter submission. The application is then reviewed and points assessed to determine eligibility to test. The review consist of several steps including one’s experience, education, contribution to the industry, participation, budget, people responsibility, internal and external responsibility. Once eligibility to test is complete, the test is taken. The test is a two-hour exam inclusive of multiple-choice, reading comprehension and a written exercise. Once the test is completed, a candidate must meet the minimum required points to become certified in the category one is seeking. Moreover, the accreditation is conducted by the ITCRB (International Transit Certification Review Board), which governs the entire certification process from application review to final certification approval. There are six levels of certifications offered to the transit industry and they are as follows:

- CERTIFIED TRANSIT FIRST LINE MANAGER - CTFMSM
- CERTIFIED TRANSIT SECTION MANAGER - CTSCMSM
- CERTIFIED TRANSIT DIVISION MANAGER - CTDVMSM
- CERTIFIED TRANSIT DEPARTMENT MANAGER CTDMSM
- CERTIFIED TRANSIT EXECUTIVE MANAGER - CTEMSM
- CERTIFIED TRANSIT BOARD MEMBER - CTBMSM

The years of research and development conducted by the Institute remains the key ingredient that enables the transit industry to receive the benefit of knowledge-based testing. In addition, this information is used to further the requirements for assessment, training, development and certification criteria.

The certification results achieved to date provide invaluable information to transit systems looking for ways to educate and motivate the workforce. As of this publication, (179) certification exams were in the planning stages, with (78) transit personnel filing applications and being approved for taking the examination. (69%) of the personnel achieved successful scores and earned certification. (19%) of those registered are still in the testing cycle, and (31%) of the personnel that tested did not achieve a certification. There are (101) tests remaining a

work in process.

The second key element in the certification process is the feedback assessment given to each individual. We call this element the time to be a “meaningful specific”, instead of a “wondering generality.” The feedback informs the candidate the exact areas of strength and weakness. Working on one’s weakness through this method is a form of self- assessment. An employee is not being told by their supervisor, or at a performance evaluation session. The results are their own. In addition, the transit systems’ training department also gets feedback to understand the specific training that they should be offering to their workforce. Again, a wonderful feedback mechanism that tells the story where one should be spending their time and money on training and development. Finally, most workers are motivated to get a certification, or keep their certification, because the requirement forces education in the right areas. For example, to re-certify in three years – one must demonstrate that they have achieved 10 units of continuing educational credit. Others go out on their own to get the training they need.

Win-Win!

LEARN SOMETHING EVERY DAY

One will know that when they are called a professional student, they realize that the dedication to learning has been met. We should foster the same challenge in our workforce to become professional learners and learn something new every day.

In recent years, the transit business has not experienced rapid growth in employment. The employee development programs were always the first to be cut. Systems emphasized their commitment by allowing the one-day seminar to be the training instrument and this resulted in expensive training with little results. The current employment condition in this industry has caused a disincentive and has brought a burgeoning need to improve the level of training and education within the transportation sector. Our transit associations have expressed a high level approach to improving workforce initiatives, such as, training, hiring, and

retention. The key element begins with knowledge based understanding and feedback from those that live it everyday. Processes aimed at these objectives can assist the industry with an on-going credible process to instill success.

What have we learned from the process of transit certification? Our statistics tell the story and give us the information required to make improvement where improvement is needed. Spending the limited resources in areas that give us the best payback. Why would we not take advantage of this approach? Does it appear too simple? Look at your own system and determine the factors that lead to this conclusion.

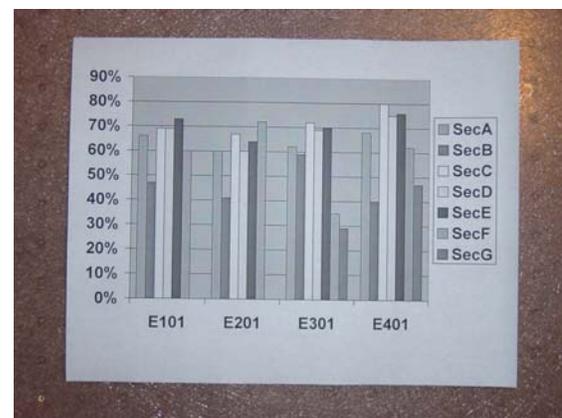


Figure 3 – Certification Results

In figure 3, this chart represents the four series of certification exams taken to date, which range from the entry level E101 to the department head level E401. The bars represent the relative correct answers by section. Each bar represents the different sections of the test, from A to G. While the section topics have some consistency in content, the level of difficulty increases with the progression of the test one is taking. For example, a math problem in the E101 section A, will be more difficult in the E401 exam. However, each exam is different. Levels E101 and E201 do not have a section G.

The results of the examinations taken to date represent a common pattern seen throughout the last twenty-five years in the transit industry. Areas of weakness include, grammar, writing, math, accounting, finance, budgeting, transit governance, statistics, planning, leadership and

strategic planning. Areas demonstrating strengths include, transit terminology, multi-modal knowledge, and basic supervision.

What is very clear in this chart is the division and department level managers show a steep decline in understanding governance, and strategic planning. This means our succession planning requires attention. In addition, that we are not focused heavily enough on developing our managerial ranks to be our transit system leaders for the future.

We learn something everyday. When you have the results --- do something besides waiting for another day. Start now!

CONCLUSION

The North American transit industry has over 450,000 transit workers, of which, 158,000 are supervisory, with over 100,000 in support operations to the industry. These workers have long been known for commitment and dedication for their years of service. They have provided over 10-billion transit trips to their customers in 2001. This 50 billion-dollar industry is lacking the innovation to workforce initiatives that will help us move toward customer delight. Assessment, development and certification are processes that ensure commitment by their personnel, in return, they will provide the quality services to the customers they serve.

The initiative to develop and educate more of our transit personnel can no longer wait. The Institute's many years of research and development have indicated the need to invest in the employees and provide excellence in development. The programs are a unique opportunity that puts together a successful certification process specifically focused on meeting the needs of today's transit managers, as well as, preparing oneself for tomorrow's transit objectives.

It begins now with doing the right thing for our industry. With these principles and sound leadership, we will only succeed, not just for today, but for many years to come. When they

feel good, our customers will feel good. Lao Tzu once said, "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step." Make the commitment to your management team ---- stay focused and do the right thing. Thank you.

TESTIMONIALS

"It is a distinguished honor to receive certification as a transit professional.. The transit based certification process based on experience and education in areas such as business, management, and operations, serves as a benchmark for the organization by establishing a higher degree of excellence in the transit profession. This measure of excellence promotes higher professional standards and achievements for the employee and MARTA, and helps justify the public's trust in our services. Employees receiving the certification are held in high esteem by the organization and serve as role models for others to follow and emulate. This certification process has been a valuable experience that I would encourage and recommend for others interested in distinguishing and promoting themselves as professional managers and leaders in transit organizations." – Kenneth McDonald, MARTA

"The reason that I pursued the CTDM credential is because it reflects my philosophy of continuous improvement. I am an enthusiastic supporter of the transit certification program as it establishes a code of professional standards, allows for recognition and fosters continuing development and promotional opportunities for transit professionals. I believe that the Transit Industry will gain stature and credibility with this certification program resulting in the ability to successfully recruit the highest caliber human capital for its needs." – Manuel Herrera, RTD Denver

"I was very excited about hearing the news that I passed. It was much tougher than I expected, but it was worth it. This is an excellent opportunity for the industry to keep good people. This certification process was very meaningful to me, as it will enable me to keep my skills current and move-up in the transit

business." -- Charles Kalb, AC Transit

Toronto Canada, 1999.

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The views presented in this paper are solely the author's and do not represent those of any of the systems named above.

ENDNOTES

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