

Surviving or Thriving in the Realm of Public Agencies

The Public Agency Council is for ITE members with an interest in identifying, developing and delivering relevant products on management, leadership, organizational, or institutional issues affecting ITE members in their employment in or interaction with the public sector.

Each year, the Public Agency Council sponsors sessions at ITE's Technical Conference and Exhibit and Annual Meeting and Exhibit and publishes newsletters containing useful information for members working in or with the public sector. The Public Agency Council is open to all members of ITE, regardless of employer. Anyone who wishes to join the council should contact ITE Headquarters.

This feature is a compilation of three newsletter articles that Nazir Lalani, P.E., immediate past chair of the Public Agency Council, felt would be of interest to all ITE members working in the public sector.

How to Communicate with Elected Officials

BY JOHN MASON

INTRODUCTION

Frustrated with the difficulty of getting elected officials to follow the obviously correct technical course of action? Wondering why elected officials do not take the time to hear your discourse on “optimizing system performance,” “changing the operations paradigm,” or “fulfilling customer responsive performance”?

This brief feature is aimed at transportation professionals in public agencies, especially transportation engineers and planners in management positions. The intent is to help transportation professionals communicate better with decision-makers—senior appointed officials and elected officials. To do that, transportation professionals need to have a better understanding of the perspectives that tend to drive elected officials' responses.

My observations come from the perspective of having spent four years as a city council member, followed by 12 years as a mayor and a member of the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board, the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the Washington, DC, USA, region. During that period, I focused on local and regional transportation issues. The Washington area certainly afforded plenty of challenges.

THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

In improving communication with elected officials, it first is helpful to look at the environment in which most elected officials operate when dealing

with transportation decision-making.

Contrary to what the media may lead the public to believe, most elected officials want to do good, are well intentioned and are not dumb. Of course, a few officials may not be as well intentioned and some even may be dumb (as in any walk of life), requiring transportation professionals to exercise some care or caution in dealing with them.

Elected officials represent constituencies—jurisdictions, voters and advocacy groups—to whom they are accountable and who want results, preferably tangible or visible results. For example, from a regional perspective, efficiency for commuters on arterials may sound logical. However, from a local jurisdiction's perspective, it may run counter to community goals (such as limiting speeding through traffic and ensuring pedestrian safety).

From a technical viewpoint, signal preemption for emergency vehicles is easy to support. However, signal priority or preemption for transit buses raises an issue because most taxpayers (drivers) see priority given to a small segment of the traveling public (those in buses). The policy issues are totally different.

Elected officials tend to be respectful of their colleagues' turf and generally are reluctant to intrude on other officials' prerogatives, especially in a multi-jurisdictional environment (such as an MPO).

Aside from a natural tendency to be polite and respectful of other views, the reality is that, to be effective, most boards (especially multi-jurisdictional boards)

need to have a reasonable degree of consensus on main issues. Elected officials and senior appointed officials operate in an arena of competing imperatives. These include:

- Environmental concerns versus economic development and needed tax base
- Transit versus roads
- Residential quality of life versus commuter cut-throughs
- The “American dream” (a single family detached home with a swing set in the backyard) versus sprawl
- Expanded services versus anti- or no-tax advocates
- Air quality requirements versus mobility needs
- Social imperatives and school needs versus transportation needs

Elected officials have limited time in which to address transportation issues. In fact, they have limited time in which to address most issues. For typical, part-time elected officials with no personal staff (who constitute the vast majority of elected officials), this amounts to perhaps 2 hours per month for 9 months in an MPO environment—while thinking about other duties and earning a living.

Elected officials also tend to specialize. They have natural interests in selected areas, such as affordable housing, the environment, education and social services. Therefore, relatively few are “experts” in transportation (other than the focus driven by constituent unhappiness over congestion).

Elected officials are driven by process. They want to feel comfortable that laws and regulations are being followed. They want to “get through the right hoops” and are reluctant to exacerbate a process that already is overburdened with hoops. In this regard, federal rules dealing with transportation, such as the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, drive much of the process.

The mandated planning process, overlaid with state rules and procedures, is complicated, cumbersome and time consuming. Most appreciate that it exists but few understand the details. It is helpful to know how an initiative fits in a process and how to move it through that process.

Transportation professionals must understand the responsibilities of local elected officials, which differ from state to state. In Virginia, for example, the state is responsible for all highways and roads in counties; cities and larger towns are responsible for their own highways and roads. In Virginia, talking to a county elected official about road construction and/or maintenance is not as meaningful as talking to an official from a city (who has direct responsibility).

Elected officials recognize that interpersonal relationships are important and that a good working relationship, especially in a multi-jurisdictional environment, is key to getting things done. They also prefer plain-speak. Like most people, their eyes glaze over at much of the transportation jargon, such as signal optimization versus signal coordination.

Elected officials rely heavily on professional staffs, especially part-time, elected officials who have no personal staffs or advisors. Finally, elected officials like to get re-elected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given these observations and the enormous challenges in dealing with transportation issues, following are a few suggestions and technical recommendations for transportation professionals.

- Transportation professionals must understand that leadership is critical at both the elected and the senior appointed levels. It is difficult to convince a city council, county board, or MPO to buy into a major new program if there is no advocate. This suggests the value of identifying an advocate or leader for an important initiative. If the initiative is successful, that leader should get the credit. That is, if the mayor likes the idea, it is now the mayor’s idea and the transportation professional must put aside any notion of publicly claiming credit.
- Not much can be done in legislative or board environments these days without ensuring stakeholder engagement. Remember the observation by President Lyndon B. Johnson about the tent.
- Transportation professionals should

not put elected officials in an awkward position with their constituents. If it is necessary to do so, they should provide a strong rationale. It must be recognized that, no matter how technically worthy a recommendation or program may be, it will be evaluated in the context of the competing imperatives faced by elected officials. It rarely will be seen in isolation.

- Transportation professionals should try to relate regional benefits to local concerns. As one of my colleagues says: “I believe it is always best when an elected official can relate the regional perspective to the local. In some respects, it boils down to what is in it for my locality, or the region benefits and so does my city/county.”
- Transportation professionals should never surprise elected officials. If a professional is implementing a new idea (such as pedestrian countdown signals at crosswalks), elected officials should be informed in advance and given a photo opportunity.
- Transportation professionals should be careful with media. It may sound glamorous to have pictures in the newspaper, but it should be remembered that the media look for an angle that sells papers. That angle may not be good. Elected officials should not be upstaged. It is best to seek the advice of a community relations or public information officer before venturing out on this limb.
- Transportation professionals should use plain-speak—words that elected officials can understand and pass along to constituents. For example, “congestion” is easy to understand; “CONOPS” and “ITS” are not. Remarks and briefings should be prepared with the audience in mind. Generally, decision-makers are interested in bottom lines, costs, effectiveness, down sides and liability. They rarely are interested in the esoteric models and algorithms used to achieve the solution. Those should be saved for off-line discussion with an elected official who may have a personal interest. In urging a course of action, it should fit into the goals and/or objec-

tives of the decision-making body, be consistent with policy (or, in a few cases, urge a change in policy) and be legally sound.

- Process is important. Transportation professionals must understand how their brief, idea, or program fits into the process in which the council, board, or MPO is involved. Most organizations have an annual work plan or calendar that schedules budgeting for a certain time of the year. The groundwork for participation can be laid if transportation professionals understand where the city, county, or regional board fits into federal and state policies and procedures.
- Good technical support is essential and, as noted above, elected officials rely heavily on it. Transportation professionals should develop trust and confidence in their advice (and discretion). Again, as one of my colleagues says: "I have found that some transportation officials are more trustworthy than others, or some have credibility with me on one project that carries on to others. When an official gets off on the wrong foot, it is hard to redeem yourself."
- The staff's job is to provide advice. Transportation professionals cannot get frustrated or upset because every idea is not adopted immediately. It should be remembered that elected officials are working in an arena of competing imperatives.

- Civility and courtesy are important at all levels. Unfortunately, in today's world, many graduate from college and subsequently engage in important technical and staff work without the foggiest notion of how to behave in a mature environment. Transportation professionals should learn the correct titles of officials they are going to brief. A mayor is "Mr. Mayor" or "Madam Mayor." A chairman, chairperson, or chair is "Mr./Ms. Chairman" or "Madam Chairman" or "Madam Chair," depending on the preference of the elected official. Just recently, I saw an advertisement for a high-school level military academy with a picture of cadet responding, "Yes, sir." Below the picture was the tag line, "We require that every cadet learn this foreign language." An interesting commentary on our times.
- Patience is needed. Most innovations require considerable incubator time. There must be a solid technical solution, then comfort with where it fits in the policies of the organization and how it will "fly" with the public and, of course, the fiscal implications.
- Funds are a tremendous stimulus. States, regions and localities all are strapped for revenue. An idea that either includes revenue generation or can be implemented with someone else's dollars (such as the feds) is easier to sell than one that requires

elected officials to rob Peter to pay Paul. Imagine an elected official justifying taking money from all-day kindergarten to install traffic signal preemption systems!

There is no single answer for how best to communicate with elected officials. Hopefully, these observations will give transportation professionals some pause to think about how good technical solutions can be advanced by understanding the environment in which most elected officials operate.



JOHN MASON
was a council member for four years and the mayor of Fairfax, VA, USA, for 12 years (1990-2002). While mayor, he was a member of the regional

MPO (serving as chairman in 2001); the board of directors (serving as chairman in 2000) of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations; vice chairman of the Transportation Coordinating Council of Northern Virginia; and on the National League of Cities Transportation Infrastructure and Service Committee and the Virginia Municipal League Transportation Policy Committee. Professionally, he was vice president and director of the Transportation Policy and Analysis Center of Science Applications International Corporation.

Robert's Rules: Managing to Survive in the 21st Century

BY ROBERT C. WUNDERLICH, P.E.

INTRODUCTION

Managing a municipal transportation agency in the 21st century is a challenge. Elected leadership is demanding responsive government, citizen expectations are rising and resources are not necessarily expanding to meet those expectations. In this environment, it is essential to develop a set of guidelines by which to manage.

This brief feature presents my rules, which really apply only to me. I presented these rules at a session where one of my colleagues remarked that the actual rules

do not really matter; what matters is that a personal code is developed for conducting business. My hope is that you will read something that helps you manage to survive. I sat down with my city manager before I prepared these remarks to see what he felt was critical for success. Perhaps these rules will give you some insight into your own management.

RULE 1: IT IS THEIR CITY

The city and its transportation system belong to the citizens and their elected

officials. As traffic engineers, the transportation system is not ours alone. When we become possessive, we start to take things personally, which leads to a lot of heartache and trouble. The elected leadership is the final policy-making body.

RULE 2: USE YOUR EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE TO MEET COMMUNITY GOALS

This is a lot different than taking the philosophy that your job is to "keep them from screwing things up." If you

have any doubt about who sets the goals, see rule 1. However, this does not mean accepting bad ideas. It means that when no meaningful alternatives to a bad idea exist, a vacuum is created and more bad ideas rush in. People tend to define their problems in terms of solutions. Therefore, it is essential to determine the core problems and concerns and develop good ways to address them.

RULE 3: TELL THEM WHAT YOU THINK

I consider it my duty to make objective, reasoned recommendations regarding issues before elected officials. I also think it is critical to make these recommendations in a succinct manner. I generally use bullets in my written reports and avoid long, tedious paragraphs. Regardless of how information is conveyed, it is important not to beat elected leaders silly with it and not to embarrass them if they ask what seems to be a less than perceptive question. In the end, on policy matters and important issues, I make recommendations and they make the decisions.

Suppose you have played by the rules and made your recommendations. You know it is their city. You have made a reasoned, rational and objective recommendation, and they still reject it for something else. What do you do?

RULE 4: GET OVER IT

In the words of my former boss, declare victory and move on. It is all you can do and it is what you should do. Accept the decision and implement it. Dwelling on it and saving it to agonize over is not productive and tends to create problems the next time an issue comes up.

RULE 5: SEE THE BIG PICTURE

Believe it or not, traffic is not the only consideration in public policy-making. Other factors, including economic development, aesthetics, citizen desires and land use compatibility, are legitimate influences on decision-making. Make an effort to learn what is important to the entire community and then find ways to support those factors with good engineering.

My closest colleague in the city is the director of planning. I often use him as a sounding board for ideas and positions. Planners often have a keen sense of com-

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munity values; that is why you see a lot of planners in positions as city managers and in other key administrative roles in cities. I believe there is a lesson for engineers here.

RULE 6: THINK POLITICALLY, ACT APOLITICALLY

This is my city manager's favorite admonishment. I believe he means that you must understand the ramifications of your actions and recommendations in the political environment. Part of seeing the big picture is knowing who the winners and losers may be and how they might react. Approach and timing often are critical. Nobody likes surprises, especially politicians.

Acting apolitically means acting objectively, with no favorites and without anticipating what you think the decision will be and molding your recommendation to it. This is key in developing relationships.

RULE 7: RELATIONSHIPS ARE CRITICAL

Building trust is essential to working with elected leadership. You do this by being objective, truthful and cooperative and by following through with commitments. Fights break trust, so pick battles carefully. You do not want elected leaders to cringe when you appear before them. Know when to step off the tracks before the train runs you down.

RULE 8: FIND AND DEVELOP GOOD PEOPLE

Easier said than done, but set high standards and select the best. Then:

Rule 8 Corollary: Get Out of Their Way

Micro managing is second (first?) nature to engineers. In a management position, you are involved in too many issues to be involved in every detail. Learn to resist the temptation.

RULE 9: JUST DO IT

Studying, planning, designing, processing, reviewing and re-reviewing are necessary. However, those activities by themselves do not make life better for the residents of your community. Implementing does make things better. The challenge is to work together at all levels to shorten the lead-time for projects that improve people's lives (our projects) on the ground.

SUMMARY

My city manager tells me that the two hardest positions to fill in a city are:

- Economic development directors, because they think it is all art and no science (in other words, smoke and mirrors).
- Traffic engineers, because they think it is all science and no art!

These nine rules constitute some of the "art" I think is necessary not only to survive but to thrive in the 21st century. Good luck!



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Doing More with Less—An Opportunity to Excel

BY WAYNE K. TANDA, P.E., PTOE

DOES “DOING MORE WITH LESS” sound familiar? It should. According to last year’s Public Agency Council survey, 98 percent of respondents expressed concern over the public’s growing expectation for more and better transportation services.

At the same time, we know that gaining additional resources to meet the growing demand for services is problematic. Popular and political support for safety services (notably police and fire), which compete for limited public resources, has never been higher.

Think outside the box, and imagine the impact of a hit television series about the transportation professional. Imagine, for example, “Dragnet—Life in the Fast Lane,” starring a veteran Los Angeles, CA, USA, traffic engineer and his sidekick, the transportation planner. Each week, the duo relentlessly seeks the truth, avoids corruption and finds clever solutions. Mel Gibson is cast as the charismatic traffic engineer; Julia Roberts is the transportation planner who no one understands but everybody loves. I can see it in my dream—which is as far as it ever will go. For now, let us look elsewhere.

Let us look at “doing more with less” as a serious opportunity. Many years ago, I did exactly that because I misunderstood the direction. I thought the call to action by San Jose, CA, City Manager Les White was to “do more with Les.” Over time, it became evident that Les actually meant “less,” but my perception had been cast.

I saw an opportunity to do more—by doing less. We could lessen the number of unnecessary bureaucratic processes and eliminate the occurrences of redundant efforts. We could reduce unproductive activities and stop the wasteful practice of “passing the buck.” The savings in time and energy could be put into productive endeavors.

The call to action also highlighted the need to build a stronger team. This philosophy is embodied in the dynasties of successful professional sports teams. The perpetual champions consistently rise above their competition. Players on

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championship teams continually improve on their conditioning. The scouting is more thorough, the calls are better conceived and the management quickly adapts to changes.

In our world, implementing the above philosophies is not easy. There is no cookbook. I have not found the recipe but I have come across a set of actions that make a meaningful difference. These actions are summarized below.

STOP BAD BUREAUCRACY

Although not everyone can change the rules, you can always complain about the bad ones to those who can. Say it loud. If you are the person with the authority, listen. Ensure that the rules do more to add value to a service than add time to perform the service. There is nothing sacred about a rule. In fact, many rules have their origin in a past failure. Far too few rules are designed to facilitate success.

IMPROVE PERSONAL SKILLS

This is similar to athletes becoming better conditioned. It is possible to master

computer applications through application tutorials in the convenience of your home. Write frequently, and have it critiqued. Learn to listen, and then practice, practice, practice. Take the initiative to enroll in courses that are accessible to you. Do not wait for somebody to help you. Just do it.

BENCHMARK

Benchmarking means seeking out how others do what you do, especially those who do it well. Find out how they are successful. While benchmarking can be done formally and arranged between organizations, you can do it yourself through your network of peers.

NETWORK WITH PEERS

If you are a member of a professional organization, take advantage of networking opportunities. Go to local luncheon meetings. Volunteer for a committee. Participate in computer discussion groups. Interact with your colleagues on the job. Among your contacts, help is just a phone call or e-mail message away.

INVEST IN TECHNOLOGY

Remember the slide rule? If you not only remember it but also consider it your preferred tool, you may not be ready for “modern” technology. For everyone else, invest your time and money in appropriate personal hardware and software. If you influence your organization’s budget, champion the acquisition of technology that will assist others in being more productive.

MEASURE PERFORMANCE

Most of us do what is measured. Consider what your customer wants. Does it align with what you measure? This is important because outcomes should drive process improvements. In general, measures should fall into one or more of the following categories: timeliness in delivering a service; staying within budget; satisfying applicable standards and regulations; and communicating with the customer effectively.

IMPROVE PROCESSES

This is the constant process of evaluating, aligning and testing the tasks needed to achieve a desired outcome. Although engineers, in particular, find the diagnostics of process improvements easy to learn, for those who need help, courses are readily available at community colleges. It also is possible to learn the basics from books.

MANAGE TIME

Managing time is easier said than done, but I have seen individuals improve their focus on doing the important things. There are self-help books on the subject. If you tend to be disorganized (which you are, if no one can see you behind the pile of material on your desk), there are books to help you, too. The caution is to read soon, before you lose it.

DELEGATE

For those who have staff, ensure three things before delegating: Be sure the person has the necessary skills for the job; be clear on the mutual understanding of his

or her level of authority; and be sensitive to his or her workload and ability to cope with doing more. Then delegate.

SEEK BALANCE

Doing more often equates to working longer. If doing more means actually *working* more of a 40 hour workweek—good! However, if it means consistently spending an unreasonable amount of extra time beyond the normal workweek, that may not be good. You must make the determination of what is reasonable for you. Balance your commitments to family, friends, community, personal renewal and work. In the long run, an imbalance is detrimental to everyone, including you.

Although the call to “do more with less” generally is regarded negatively—sometimes for legitimate reasons—it also can be viewed as a reminder to be more efficient and effective. It is not a new idea but its stamina suggests that it is not a passing trend. It seems to be a fundamental shift in paradigm within the public sector. ■



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