

Succession to Transit Twitter Chat January 28, 2020

Summary

Transit organizations need to develop an effective succession plan while still meeting the demands of the job. Organizations must prepare leaders for tomorrow's challenges. However, many people are not aware of the essential things to do in succession planning. National RTAP hosted a #Succession2Transit Twitter Chat on January 28, 2020 from 2:00-3:00 PM ET moderated by Dr. Mike Mowery of Strategic Government Resources. Participants shared best practices, pitfalls to avoid, and practical tips to prepare the next generation of leaders.

Visit the [chat transcript](#) for questions asked during the chat and attendees' replies. Answers to chat questions are provided below.

Question 1: What are common ingredients and keys to building a succession plan that doesn't overwhelm the organization?

Answers:

- The best laid plans of programs and managers need back up plans. People are unavailable randomly as well as on schedule.
- You really should always consider succession planning when doing strategic planning, and often the isolated employees feel and are the most vulnerable to bad planning.
- Florida RTAP recommends establishing a mentoring program that allows employees to become familiar with processes enabling them to move up in the organization.
- Mitchell Shubert feels that consistently having open form discussions, and over-communicate with each other about what is needed is a good strategy.
- Metro Magazine asked leading public transit general managers, "[What is your succession plan?](#)" and they replied with helpful answers.
- For HIRTA Public Transit, it's finding the time. Rural systems have so much going on with so few people to do it, that this is an easy thing to keep putting on the back burner.

- The reality is that people don't understand what everyone else does, and that means they are losing out on the big picture of what the agency does. We have all staff ride the bus so they know the riders are why we do what we do, whether you're in dispatch or accounting.
- Don't forget about social media succession planning. Tweetmasters should schedule as many tweets ahead of their last day and have a plan in place for the next social administrator.

Question 2: How can you develop a succession plan when the landscape of rural transit is changing so much and so rapidly?

Answers:

- You have to get your big rocks in first and help everyone that you can have a way to move up within the organization.
- Build on your existing planning. Emergency Management plans should support staff isolated or made unavailable by the event. National RTAP provides [emergency response checklists](#) that can be available to all staff should any situation arise.
- SEPTA [identified high-priority jobs](#) that would need to be filled immediately if someone left. Then they gave internal candidates the skills and experience to move into one of those positions if needed.
- Everything is more complex today, and teams, flexibility, and technology help us cope.
- The time it takes will pay dividends in morale, understanding, and perspective. It will probably build a lot of relationships, too.
- Julia Castillo, executive director of HIRTA Public Transit feels that you should continue to revisit and modify your succession plan every year just like your strategic plan, you have to make sure you're still on track and make adjustments when needed. Nothing stays the same, so you have to constantly reevaluate the needs.

Question 3: How do you help current employees feel welcomed while onboarding new hires?

Answers:

- Florida RTAP recommends to have all levels of leadership participate in the on boarding process, establishing a relationship of trust. Have an open door policy. Follow up with new employees to ensure they are on the right track.
- Julia suggests to include them in the process - no one knows their jobs better than those who do them every day, so they need to be part of the onboarding process. Unless of course they have bad habits that you don't want passed along. People will often rise to the expectations you have for them if you mentor and show you appreciate them.
- National RTAP's [Roles and Responsibilities of Transit Managers](#) advises about asking current staff for opportunities for training and development, such as taking on new assignments, developing new skills, or participating in teams.
- Define the orientation process and the orientation roles not just for new hires but for other positions. Orientation changes as roles, technologies and the rural transit industry changes.
- Existing employees need to continue to feel wanted as new ones are hired. Morale can sink quickly from neglect.
- NADTC provides helpful onboarding tips for mobility managers in a series on New Mobility Managers: An Introduction ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)).

- Mike believes that we should see it as part of our role to challenge current staff to rise to the next level. Train them first...and develop through delegation. He also thinks it's important from the beginning to teach new employees the "Why." Show the big picture. Make them see what they do really matters!
- Set up a peer support system and mentoring from the beginning if you can. But make sure you're only using employees with the right attitude. Peer support can work on many levels. National RTAP provides that service through these chats, peer roundtables, peer matching, and [technical assistance](#).
- A supervisor who sets high standards AND really cares about people, can make such a difference in other people's performance and career.
- You can use succession planning as a way to keep improving, instead of institutionalizing mediocrity - if you listen to employees.
- Onboarding doesn't end the first day. It's a continuing process.

Question 4: How do you sustain a succession plan over several years when there are so many other pressing priorities?

Answers:

- It should be part of your culture and mission. If people believe in the plan, they will know they have potential growth.
- One thing that Mike has found that is very important is not to try to do so much that it becomes overwhelming. Keep doing a little every year and pace yourself.
- Deborah Bach of New Mexico DOT started cross training her staff so multiple team members have project training in order to keep things moving forward during change. From the National RTAP [Time Management for Rural Transit Managers](#) technical brief.

Question 5: How do you get senior leadership to commit to a succession plan and stay with it?

Answers:

- "Accountability seeds action. If it is part of your planning and procedures it lives every day," Robin Phillips, National RTAP Executive Director. "Accountability breeds response-ability." Steven Covey, author.
- Radical Collaboration is a major key. Make sure "your" plan becomes "our" plan when it comes to senior leadership.
- Senior leadership needs to know the value of the duties, tasks and responsibilities a person does, so they understand what they lose when that person is no longer there. An involved leader will already know that.
- Senior leadership needs to be exposed to what people are doing so that they appreciate everyone's roles more.
- The best leaders have a bigger mindset than just their organization. They are the ones raising the next generation of leaders and they are talent magnets and launch pads.
- HIRTA has learned staff sometimes don't know what leadership does either - so they are sharing more about that with them too - and it's made a difference because they feel more valued that leadership trusts them with information about the whole agency. 15 minutes a week with BIG payoffs!

- When management at Strategic Government Leadership sees what people do, up and down the organization, they have a greater appreciation for their pressure points. But leadership needs to lead in that way.
- Develop a plan that supports the agency's mission and vision. Vermont Agency of Transportation's [Employee Retention and Knowledge Management Study](#) developed a plan that addressed turnover's impact of knowledge loss on operations.

Question 6: Why should we invest time, energy, and money on employees that may leave in a few short years anyway?

Answers:

- "Increased investments in employee development now will yield a future public transportation workforce with the knowledge and ability to serve rural America for generations to come." See UGPTI's [Workforce Development and Succession Planning to Prepare the Rural Transit Industry for the Future](#).
- A lot can happen in a few short years, and if it's the right fit that person add enormous value and change to an agency. They can also be valuable to networking giving the agency access to more talented future employees.
- Mike always wants people who leave his organization to be his top references for when new people apply. He wants them to talk to them and hear that they had a great experience.
- If you don't invest in people you will never be able to attract, much less keep, the best people.
- If you don't invest time, energy, and money, then you're stuck with an under-performing employee. What's worse than training them and watching them leave? Not training them and watching them stay!

Question 7: How do you attract and keep emerging leaders when there aren't enough high-level positions to promote them all into?

Answers:

- TRB has produced an inspiring video: [Your Future in Transportation](#). This is an exciting time for young people to consider transportation as a career path and this video hones in on the opportunities

Question 8: How do you determine what you really need to pass on to the next generation, and what are some tips for better communication with millennials, Gen X, etc.?

Answers:

- Read FTA's [Response and Recovery for Declared Emergencies and Disasters: A Resource Document for Transit Agencies](#).
- Transfers Magazines article, [Mentoring the Next Generation of Transportation Professionals](#) shares how mentoring can prepare them to be “ready and capable of tackling the transportation challenges of the coming decades.”
- Julia gave some sage advice. “Communicate with a person, regardless of age, in the manner in which they listen. This only comes from talking to them on a regular basis and learning

about them. You have to learn what is important to them, and how they interact. One-on-One's are priceless.”

- Florida RTAP talked about developing listening skills and not developing an answer before you have heard the message/issue. Mike agreed – “All good leadership begins with good listening.”
- As Mike asserts, “Succession Planning rises or falls with 3 things. Your business values, your internal culture, and a process to pass it on. It really comes down to being committed to healthy relationships AND innovative change for the future. Both require a commitment to the growth of others.”

Question 9: How can you change the culture in your organization to better prepare for the future?

Answers:

- Satisfied employees are key to agency success. Read Transit Talent’s [Job Satisfaction at Transit Agencies Ticks Higher over Past Year](#).
- Mike and Julia discussed their ideas - Involve people and make a working plan! Have a Strategic Plan that is shared with all the staff so they are part of the culture! talk about that plan often. Organizations become what you talk about! We can't just make plans to decorate our bookshelves. They have to be kept in front of all of us. "We" is always smarter than "me"! It took me awhile to realize that in my career, and oddly enough when I did--I started accomplishing more! Imagine that?!!!

Question 10: Where do you start in succession planning? Most staff have no knowledge of the how or why.

Answers:

- Mitchell felt that for succession planning to be effective, companies must be willing to adapt and engage on a consistent basis.
- UGPTT's [Workforce Development and Succession Planning to Prepare the Rural Transit Industry for the Future](#) is a helpful resource.

Question 11: What staff should be involved in the planning?

Answers:

- Mike answered that HR should certainly be involved. My experience is that unless upper levels of management are included in the plan and the process, it will not make any progress.