



Commentary

Doug Eadie on Leadership

The CEO as Innovator-in-Chief: Talking with PAAC's Steve Bland

In these rapidly changing, always challenging, and frequently threatening times, one of the public transportation CEO's top-tier responsibilities is to lead large-scale innovation and change efforts.

Standing pat clearly won't cut it in these turbulent times, and the nonprofit and public organizations that thrive will be the ones that have learned how to take command of their own change, under the leadership of a CEO serving as the "Innovator-in-Chief," working in close partnership with a strong board of directors.

Steve Bland, chief executive officer of the Port Authority of Allegheny County (PAAC), certainly takes his Innovator-in-Chief role seriously, teaming up with his Board of Directors to launch a number of high-stakes strategic initiatives over the past few years. With a fleet of 861 buses, 83 light rail vehicles, and 48 mini-buses, PAAC provides transportation services to the residents of a 775-square-mile area in southwestern Pennsylvania, including the City of Pittsburgh and all of Allegheny County. PAAC's 2,750 employees serve approximately 230,000 riders daily and more than 70 million annually.

I recently chatted with Steve about his work as PAAC's Innovator-in-Chief.

Doug: Steve, what would you say have been your principal contributions to the strategic change process at PAAC, as its CEO/Innovator-in-Chief?

Steve: In the first place, Doug, I've always been keenly aware that leading and managing change is a true team sport, if there ever was one. I learned early in my career that a CEO who wants to be a major player in the innovation and change game will work in really close partnership with his or her board and the executive team. Keeping this in mind, my unique contribution to the team at PAAC has been three-fold:

1. I make sure that everyone involved thoroughly understands the context we're working in—the big picture, if you will. So I function as an intelligence gatherer, bringing together the diverse pieces of the change puzzle: community needs and expectations; organizational strengths and weaknesses; the PAAC Board, in terms of its members' expectations and its culture; the critical stakeholder organizations that need to be involved; and the shifting priorities of PAAC's funding and regulatory agencies.

2. In addition to helping everyone involved to understand the context, I function as a structure and process designer, making sure that we're well organized to manage our own change process. This isn't as easy as it might sound, because the field of strategic planning is going through a gigantic

transformation: moving away from old-time comprehensive long-range planning with its pounds of paper and millions of words to a leaner, meaner process focusing on the highest-stakes issues and a small number of critical change initiatives. By the way, the key piece of the change leadership architecture at PAAC is our Board's Planning and Development Committee, which is responsible for overseeing the whole change process and ensuring that the whole Board is involved at the right points in the right way. I'm fortunate to have a Planning and Development Chair, Guy Mattola, who built a highly successful office equipment distribution company, has keen entrepreneurial instincts, and relishes playing a leading role in getting change initiatives launched.

3. And third, I'm a facilitator/traffic cop, helping my Board members and senior executives participate productively in key planning and development meetings. I pay lots of attention to making sure that the right people are sitting around the right tables at the right times in our planning process and that these planning sessions achieve their objectives.

Doug: Tell me about some of the highest-stakes initiatives that are in PAAC's change portfolio right now.

Steve: We've launched a number of exciting initiatives in the recent past that have or will yield a powerful return on our investment of precious time and money. Let me tell you about a few of the most important. Our Service Development Plan, which is the first comprehensive review of PAAC's overall service structure in 30-plus years, is intended to overlay changing demographics and development patterns in the Pittsburgh region, with detailed operating characteristics of our existing service network, in order to recommend changes aimed at improving both efficiency and effectiveness. As part of this wide-ranging process, we're considering "rapid bus" alternatives in key travel corridors, transit centers as areas of service interaction and neighborhood development, and community-based alternatives for low patronage services. Another important

initiative we've launched is our automated fare collection/smart card system, which will replace our antiquated fare collection system with new hardware, while simultaneously developing a regional smart card involving PAAC and the nine other carriers in the Pittsburgh region. Our North Shore Connector, another major initiative underway, will extend PAAC's light rail system, the "T," 1.2 miles from the Gateway subway station under the Allegheny River to the North Shore area of Pittsburgh. We're also working closely with the Allegheny County Department of Economic Development, exploring opportunities for joint development of unused and underutilized PAAC real estate parcels, with the twin aims of generating ongoing revenue streams and upgrading passenger amenities. There are other change initiatives underway, but these are some of the biggies, Doug.

Doug: PAAC obviously has a full change plate that you, your Board and executive team are managing. As you reflect on your Innovator-in-Chief role, Steve, what attributes and skills have proved most important to your success?

Steve: I've already talked about being a structure and process designer. Other skills that have served me well include: communicating clearly to diverse audiences about the intended impacts of change initiatives (primarily in person, rather than relying on the written word); maintaining effective media relations (PAAC attracts lots of media attention!),

getting across the points we need to make effectively; analyzing the financial and technical alternatives involved in large-scale change projects; and negotiating with key stakeholders whose support is essential to getting initiatives off the ground and fully implemented. And I can think of two attributes that have really helped me play the Innovator-in-Chief role successfully at PAAC. For one thing, I'm not an excitable guy; I have a pretty calm demeanor and you can't easily get me riled up. This is really important when you're dealing with a wide variety of people under stressful circumstances. Another attribute that has helped me is that I'm willing to take the inevitable heat that comes with change without wilting or lashing out. My mantra is "It's not about me, and I don't have any reason to take it personally."

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ISSN 0364-345X

The Source for Public Transportation News and Analysis

VOLUME 67, NUMBER 17

ESTABLISHED 1943

Published bi-weekly by the American Public

Transportation Association, 1666 K St.,

N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006; (202) 496-4800;

Fax (202) 496-4321; www.apta.com

It is the mission of *Passenger Transport* to communicate news and information about public transportation and to serve as the voice of the public transportation industry.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: *Passenger Transport*, 1666 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Periodicals Postage paid at Washington, D.C. and additional mailing offices.

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