

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Palpable Outcomes: Team Learning and Leadership in Transportation

Past President

Ron Deverman

Recently, I participated in the Transportation Research Board (TRB) Environmental Analysis Summer Workshop in San Diego. I was involved in three presentations: one was an overview of a unique public/private rail improvement program in Chicago, another featured a precedent-setting environmental justice policy associated with that program, and the last was a presentation on the cross-disciplinary collaboration that is necessary to effectively evaluate health outcomes associated with a proposed transportation project. This year's TRB theme was "Better Transportation and Environmental Outcomes Through Effective Partnerships." The theme of partnerships and working toward better outcomes permeated many of the presentations and hallway discussions. The luncheon keynote speaker, Michael Beck, who is the San Diego Director for the Endangered Habitats League (EHL), spoke on partnerships in habitat preservation. EHL is dedicated to protecting diverse ecosystems and native landscapes where wildlife can thrive. Mr. Beck talked about the successes of the unique partnerships of resource agencies, planning organizations, and environmental interest groups in working together toward the shared goals of preserving native landscapes and connecting greenway habitats in Southern California.

I was reminded of the poet Gary Snyder, a pioneer of the bioregionalism movement and someone who has been called the "Poet Laureate of Deep Ecology." Over 40 years ago, Snyder noted that a region is made up of parts, each of which is a whole in and of itself. He believes that, for us to truly find our connectedness with a place, we must start with the part we are whole in. I have always

believed that, within every aspect of our lives, we must be connected with the urban and natural surroundings that make up our "place"—our part of the whole: plants, animals, rivers, oceans, trees, soil, and humans. These connections ground us in the community, both human and natural, and community is the bridge to finding our greatest purpose.

US Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx has called upon state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) to look beyond their state borders. He has challenged the transportation community to develop a systems mindset that incorporates not only road, bridge, commuter, passenger, and freight rail travel, but also air and maritime travel, into a national, interconnected transportation system. The moment in which we fully realize the need for comprehensive, multi-modal travel systems that offer us better travel choices while reducing pollution levels has finally arrived. We are redefining how we travel, and, in so doing, we are redefining our relationship with the earth. For example, over the past several decades, other countries have seen the value of high-speed rail as a preferred mode of efficient travel. In the US, California, Florida, and Illinois are striving toward that vision. Upgrading our nation's roadway, air-shed, and maritime infrastructure, as well as creating a new rail culture, will take a staggering amount of money. That is why many state DOTs have already sought the legislative authority to seek increased investment monies from a variety of sources—road tolling, private investments, new taxes, bonds or referendums, and public/private partnerships (P3) among them. P3 partnerships enable stakeholders to invest in infrastructure more quickly, so that more of the system is up-and-running in less time. In P3 partnerships, investment risk is also transferred from public transportation agencies to the private sector, thereby putting less public funds in jeopardy. At the end of the day, to accomplish the vision of transportation system interconnectedness, there must be both a solid business plan in-place that meets the public demand

as well as legislative commitment to this vision.

How do we continue to build strong teams and enduring partnerships that result in more effective, cost-efficient outcomes? Secretary of Transportation Foxx, as well as various State Transportation Secretaries, are now looking for delivery innovations, using multifaceted teams committed to stringent, goal-oriented outcomes. Clearly, the goal of coming together needs to be holding a dialogue. As early as 1914, philosopher Martin Buber defined the term "dialogue" as a "mode of exchange among human beings in which there is a true turning toward one another." Fostering such exchanges should certainly be our first steps, as project and team managers, in our efforts to create synergies within our infrastructure projects. We are striving for shared meaning and deeper understanding of key issues that enhance project decision making. There are many reasons why we, as human beings, have a hard time dialoguing with one another. Barriers to effective dialogue can be as simple as a failure to pay attention to or listen to others. However, they can also be as complex as deep-seated social prejudices or viewing others through a mirror of our own lives. To dialogue with each other effectively, we should always have empathy for others and look for the human story *behind* a person's words.

Team learning is a guiding skill that builds upon the skills of dialogue and collaboration. Twenty years ago, author Peter Senge's brilliant book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, became the definitive primer on team learning techniques. Team *learning* is

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not team *building*—it is, instead, a learning process that enables a group of active participants to progress from fearing one another's ideas to achieving a collective mindfulness, and from having several diverse mindsets to developing a shared vision. Team learning also creates a setting that emphasizes collaborative interaction, values risk-taking, and has a high tolerance for error as part of the learning process. About a decade ago, author Tom Peters, in his insightful book *Re-imagine! Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age*, noted that, to effectively respond to the exasperating demands of business, individuals need to be organized into multidisciplinary teams that creatively take on projects. These dynamic project teams must be focused not only on meeting the project's challenges, but they must also be focused on the experience of making a difference. As environmental professionals in an interconnected transportation world, we operate in a team environment on a daily basis, experiencing life as it is, with its challenges, anxieties, and fears. We also work on a daily basis within an interdisciplinary team setting that places great value on relationships, creativity, and making a difference in order to successfully complete projects.

During my career, one of the most interesting real-world examples of team learning that I have experienced was working with the Arts in Transit programs throughout the country, in such notable cities as Chicago, Denver, Portland, and New York, among others. In these innovative transit planning efforts, unique collaborations of artists, musicians, engineers, planners, architects, and community residents come together to develop the design and aesthetics of rail transit systems, especially surrounding station locations. Those involved in the planning and design process will tell you that, in the beginning of these projects, the artists, musicians and engineers speak different languages and even use different vocabularies. The engineers talk of geometrics, design, schedule, and budget, and the artists and musicians speak of color, aesthetics, soundscapes, form, and quality of place. These diverse opinions and fearful mindsets, ultimately, through team learning, progress to a shared vision, one that results in commendable examples of public art and urban design in people-oriented spaces that contribute to the social, economic, and

aesthetic experience as well as the well-being of the communities where they are built.

Collaboration is another guiding skill that can help us develop effective teams and partnerships that result in positive outcomes. Collaboration blends thought and intuition, logic and emotional intelligence, and brings these qualities to bear in a group setting to create innovative solutions to long-standing challenges. Collaboration is part communication, part relationship-building, and part creative problem solving. Daily, all of us are exposed to fast-paced life events, a barrage of advertising sound bites, and entertainment images that continuously bombard the senses. It is this split-second immediacy of our lives that dulls our true senses and our ability to think creatively. I believe it is important to build "bridges of interest" between the sciences and the humanities, and between mathematics and the arts. To be truly creative and experience the spark of collaboration, we need to have our emotions, our intuition, and our rational mind working together. We often limit ourselves through self-imposed boundaries placed on our imaginations. Fortunately, in recent years, many excellent techniques for stimulating the collaborative process, from the wisdom of authors to computer technologies called "groupware" and "shareware," have been developed and espoused.

As transportation and environmental professionals and as travelers utilizing transportation systems, we need to incorporate both national and global experiences to find positive solutions and outcomes. To address the environmental challenges that result from transporting people and goods in various ways throughout our country, we must be courageous and more forward-thinking. Our current travel context is not working as effectively as it needs to get us to our home destination. I believe that to experience a "breakthrough," we need to "break with" convention and traditional ways of thinking. We must turn our experience and our knowledge into breakthrough acts of leadership. True leaders exemplify the correlation between words and deeds, knowing right and wrong, and embracing relationships within the ethics of trust. Leaders also exemplify compassion, what I call "showing a heart for others," and what author Julia Alvarez has called—"having

an enlarged feeling for others, putting the 'e' in human"—in other words, being "humane" to other human beings. Throughout my life, I have found myself in places of leadership, and have always viewed being a leader as a life-long learning opportunity. Moreover, earlier in my career, when I worked for the state transportation agency in Illinois, I strived to develop relationships in which I served and aided others. Lance Secretan, in his powerful book *One: The Art and Practice of Conscious Leadership*, states, "Service is the purpose of life. We exist in order to make the world at least a little better than we found it. Our lives relate to the world in terms of how well we serve, and the legacy of each of us will be measured accordingly." Relationships in which we do not serve others only separate us from others. The more connected we are to both the human and natural landscapes, the more we can move toward the new horizon of helping others and creating the greater good.

Traveling back to Chicago from the TRB summer workshop in San Diego, I reflected on Tony Hiss's book *In Motion—The Experience of Travel*, in which Mr. Hiss talks about the experience of "deep travel." The point of travel is more than getting from Point A to Point B. It is, first of all, an experience, the experience of traveling to planned destinations. And then, it is something more—the experience of the unplanned encounters and realizations that happen along the way. We can teach ourselves to have more deep travel moments – both far from home and close to it. We can learn about the human dimension of travel and the emotions associated with the choices we make. Today, creating responsible, multi-modal, choice-driven infrastructure means finding solutions that save money, save time in the development process, and evoke creativity and connectivity in design and construction, while also preserving and enhancing sensitive habitats and resources. Creating livable communities with integrated transportation infrastructures that preserve and, in fact, enhance our quality of place is a collective, collaborative process, and it will take all of us to realize its far-reaching benefits. We only need to be leaders and step forward, set high standards, and then exceed them. Within this deep travel journey, we will make decisions that are compassionately intelligent, while creating experiences that are palpable and have lifelong effect.