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Operator Training

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What you need to know to get the best operators.

There are a lot of things agencies need to get the best operators driving their buses. Starting with the right candidates, giving them the right skills through training and keeping up with the training are all key elements transit professionals point to for getting the best results.

Starting on the Right Foot

The data is clear when it comes to training; you can't train a poor performer and make him or her exceptional. Instead of throwing your agency's dollars at people thinking the training is what will make them successful, you have to start with the right person.

"You can't take an average employee and make him exceptional with training," says Select Advantage President Geoff Rodgers. "They have to bring something to the equation."

What Rodgers recommends is looking at the behavioral mindset. "If you look at your top-performing bus drivers, they're going to come in a variety of personalities, but the common denominator is going to be in the choices they make; how they look out for the public, how they look out for their riders, how they look out for other drivers on the road, and how they represent and support the organization's goals and missions.

"They will be accountable for their actions and decisions. They'll go the extra mile without having being asked to. It's just, in a sense, how they are wired," he says.

After meeting with peer-nominated top performers, Rodgers says he and his team were able to pick the brains of these top performers to "build," as perfect as they could, an operator on paper.

"Rather than throwing training at people and seeing what sticks, there is a different method that we use," he explains. "What we've done, we help screen people into the process by helping them identify, before they get into the training process, which is the best fit for the job from a behavioral standpoint."

He continues, "There are some people that love working with the public and serving them and there are others that could care less."

He quickly adds, "It doesn't mean they're a bad person, it just means it isn't the best fit for them, and ultimately you are doing your agency and the applicant a service by helping match what is required for success in the job with what they are bringing to the job."

With three different assessments, there is a lot of variation between bus operator, paratransit operator and transit supervisor. Rodgers mentions that many agencies cross train operators for regular fixed-route service and paratransit operations. "I promise you, that agency would rather have that individual on one side or the other because it is a better fit."

When developing the paratransit operator assessment, he says he thought there would be about a 60 to 70 percent overlap due to the similarity in the jobs. However, there is only a 30 to 40 percent overlap. "Your clientele is different, there's a different level of customer service and there's a different level of responsibility and ownership for the ridership," he states. "We thought it would be closer than it was. They proved us wrong."

Implementing a behavioral-based hiring system can make a big impact. "These people absorb training better, they are willing to change, they are teachable." And the people that are going to see the impacts more than anybody else at your agency are the trainers.

"If you don't tell them what you're doing and you implement a tool like this, they are the ones that are going to come to you saying, 'that is the best group of people I ever had.'" He stresses, "They notice it right away."

Valuing Diversity

An important part of providing excellence in customer service is the ability to work together productively and communicate effectively. With different people having different perspectives, sometimes those differing views can get in the way.

"Diversity can mean of myriad of things," explains Tracey Partee, senior training instructor for the National Transit Institute (NTI). "At its base essence, diversity is the differences and similarities that everybody has and how that impacts our ability to get our job done." More than simply knowing people of different cultures, it addresses all differences and similarities; culture, sex, occupation, religion and whatever else it may be. Partee is the course trainer for the diversity workshop at NTI. The program is an initiation in diversity, to help organizations understand and appreciate differences in order to help organizations be more efficient and support excellence in customer service.

In the training class, people get to discuss differences that impact them on a day-to-day basis and have others in the room hear it. "They're not doing that in a way that actually creates additional issues," says Partee. "Some diversity trainings do that. They go through a diversity training session and people say some pretty horrible things in class where, when they leave, they're like, 'OK, now I really don't like you because you said something bad about my race or my culture.'"

The class has three main modules; the business case for valuing diversity, defining and exploring diversity issues and recognizing diversity issues in the transit workplace.

"In the first module we debunk the myth of why there's diversity training, what it means, but more importantly, that module shows them there is a real value to understanding and appreciating diversity for all employees in a transit organization," explains Partee. This includes looking at some diversity success stories.

"Some organizations reported to us how they valued diversity, they went above legal compliance issues to really impact working together productively and supporting excellence in customer service." She adds, "If they don't understand why they're having the training and why it's important to them day in and day out in their business, then there's no reason to have the diversity training."

Module 2 is about defining and exploring diversity issues. This includes putting a definition around diversity, asking the class what it means to them and reviewing the agency's diversity policy. "It's all about exploring stereotypes and assumptions that we all make on a daily basis that may impact our ability to work together productively," says Partee. Through various exercises, employees explore for themselves where they may have stereotypes and how that affects what they do.

Recognizing diversity issues in the transit workplace in module three looks at case studies, true stories about how diversity impacts employees working together. From operator to rider, maintenance to operator, union to nonunion or even first shift to second shift, the module looks at the different perspectives of different groups and how that can affect communication in the agency.

Partee mentions two misconceptions she often sees when people attend the workshop. "No. 1 is that they come in thinking that the reason that the organization is doing diversity training is that there is some legal mandate to do so." She adds, "We quickly talk about how diversity is not a legal-compliance training program, it is something that the organization is undertaking to be the best in their area in terms of being the best employer and to be the best mode of transit for the customers.

"The other issue is, some of them come in thinking we're going to tell them what women want, what African Americans want, how they think, and that's not the training program either," explains Partee. "Diversity is such a broad concept that we kind of have to wrap our arms around the idea that differences include even occupational differences.

"There can be misunderstandings between maintenance operators and bus operators and that can be a diversity issue." She adds, "We look at how can we understand and appreciate those differences in even job occupations to get to a better level in working together productively."

The best comment Partee hears after many of her workshops is that everybody in the organization should go through the program. "What's really interesting in the training program, you get out of it No. 1 what you put into it, but No. 2, it might be different than the person sitting next to you because that is part of diversity as well." She adds, "Each of my training classes are slightly different depending on who is there.

"Oftentimes you talk about diversity and most people are like, 'oh, that is something that higher-level managers have to think about, that is something that human resources has to think about, that is something that doesn't impact me as a front-line operator or supervisor,'" says Partee. "We really try to talk about how differences impact the entire agency. We are seeing a different customer base every year with changes in demographics, whether it is more minorities, more disabled passengers or differences in how we operated 20 years ago; it is impacting the ability to stay in business now for some transit organizations."

Partee adds, "This should not be a one-shot deal. They should try to have some programs later on that reinforce what they think diversity means to them. They should be tying it in to their core business values."

By contacting the National Transit Institute's workplace safety and security division, most transit organizations can participate in the workshop for free.

Providing Guidance, Not Just Discipline

Simply handing out disciplinary notes doesn't build excellent customer service. The Fort Worth Transportation Authority (The T) has found a successful approach in building customer service through providing supervisors as mentors, not disciplinarians.

"Our Customer Service Initiative Program started in 2005 with a series of meetings," explains The T's President and Executive Director Dick Ruddell. "It was a year developing a plan and looking at deficiencies." At the end of the year they came up with a list of improvements to make and a structure to achieve it. "Mentoring was a big element of that plan," he states.

A large part of the program was determining who the customer is and how to provide excellent customer service. The T's Workforce Development Manager Terry Moore says, "We have a two-prong approach, our internal and external customers." Joan Hunter, communications manager, adds, "Customer service is every employee's priority. You're supporting it whether you are in the back office or on the street - customers first." The coaching and mentoring program falls into the internal customer piece.

The training program started in 2006 with two days of customer service training focused on who the internal and external customers are. Following that, the supervisors had 12 hours of coaching training. "It focused on building relationships with employees," explains Moore, "building relationships instead of handing out slips of paper."

As a result of this training program, in 2007 The T rolled out the one-on-one mentoring program for supervisors to implement coaching behaviors. They do performance coaching, which consists of the supervisor meeting with the employee to work through behaviors and then Moore meets with the supervisor to discuss the outcomes.

The program was piloted with four participants, four dispatchers that were promoted to supervisors. From their feedback, the program was refined and offered companywide.

"We have 10 supervisors in the program now and they are from all over the company," says Moore. With maintenance, custodial, operations, union and nonunion participants, it provides a unique mix. "It presents challenges with different situations and it offers unique perspectives," she adds.

As a result of the one-on-one mentoring, The T is noticing multiple benefits. One result is that the supervisors have better relationships with employees. "We change the perspective of the relationship. Coaching and mentoring is not discipline," Moore explains. "It has reduced the turnover of employees and now they go to the supervisors for help. It is more proactive."

Ruddell says, "We also look for the extended results." One example is in the annual customer satisfaction survey. There has been a marked improvement in the customers' relationships with the drivers. "Ridership is the ultimate gauge," he adds. "That has been up strongly the past few years and we just found out that we won the FTA Ridership Award the second year in a row."

The program will continue to expand with offerings to more employees looking to prepare for supervisory positions.

Providing the Basic Skill Set

Another successful program is the Transit Ambassador program at the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA). It is a program that offers skill sets which helps operators make decisions that get the desired outcomes.

Metro Training Manager in the Employee Development Department Jay Uihlein, ME, explains how the program started. "All of the training I do comes with business outcomes, a results-oriented approach." He says, "All training is mandatory. We all get in the huddle or none of us get in the huddle." He emphasizes, "You can't train half the organization and not train the other half otherwise we will play like the Cincinnati Bengals."

The program offers six skill sets, starting with fundamentals. First is how to establish oneself as a professional. Uihlein says, "People make decisions in the first couple of seconds when they see you." He continues, "If you are wearing a crisp, clean uniform and you look the part, people respond well."

Part of this is also greeting the customer. "They make up their minds in five to seven seconds whether they like the way you look, the way you are dressed, the cleanliness of your bus and how they are being treated," Uihlein explains. "Every time you open the door to let a customer get on the bus, it is kind of like throwing out a welcome mat."

The second skill set is communicating, acknowledging customers and responding to them appropriately. Greeting customers and effectively answering questions fall into the second skill set.

Handling complaints is the third skill set. "A complaint is really an opportunity to fix something," states Uihlein. He also explains the importance of how customers are addressed. "We talk a lot about transactional analysis. If we treat people like adults, they tend to respond like adults."

He uses the example of a rider not asking for a transfer when he or she boards the bus. "If we talk down to them, parent to child, 'you know the rules here, you ask for a transfer when you get on, not when you get off the bus,' you initiate a parent-child fight."

Uihlein mentions operators find the information helpful. Often they didn't realize they were inviting an argument and by simply changing what they say, it can have a tremendous impact.

The fourth skill set is responding to special needs, being alert for cues to identify passengers with special needs.

Handling difficult situations is skill set five. Operators learn how to handle them verbally, nonverbally and how to keep themselves safe.

The final skill set is dealing with stress, something operators are all too familiar with. Uihlein reminds employees of the employee assistance program and informs them that what they learn in class, they can apply at home. "The stress management skills work at work and they work at home," he says. "The way you talk to your spouse, the way you talk to your children, it is all going to form something."

The program is in its third year and is going strong. The operators like the program because it is interactive. Uihlein says, "They feel that they can apply the skill sets directly to the situations."

Keeping it Going

You've got a program in place, but how do you keep up the momentum? It is especially difficult when you hope you never have to use the training. Waukesha Metro Director of Administration Andrew Johnson explains that it is important to keep staff motivated when training for an event, whether security-related or weather-related, which may never happen.

"We know as managers that when something like this happens, there is no time to go back and look at the books or hope that the one person on staff that knows everything is there that day," Johnson says. One of the main pieces is simply communication. Communicating what management is thinking about these things in terms of ensuring everybody knows what is expected of them is important. "Making it real for the employees by asking them what they would do if they were the only ones there," is one way Johnson says Metro delivers this message.

Making the training interesting and interactive promotes active participation. "We'll have the SWAT team from Waukesha come out here and actually demonstrate a take-down on a bus using our employees as passengers," Johnson explains. "Things like that make it real for them, lets them know exactly how the police will handle a situation."

Equally important in keeping staff motivated about training is being consistent with what is being taught in the class and what is being done in the day-to-day practice, Johnson stresses. "If they tell you to keep your garage doors closed at all times and secure your buses when they're unattended, we don't let that slide when we come back. We explain to our operators why they need to do the things we tell them they need to do."

Somebody isn't going to retain everything he or she learns in training; learning from day-to-day experiences fills those gaps. "You don't normally have major crises or natural disasters, but every transit system has a series of mini-crises weekly," Johnson explains. "We look at how employees react to those events and highlight the proper responses to those and also look for retraining opportunities when we maybe didn't respond to a mini-emergency as well as we could have."

"When a big disaster hits, you're never really going to know if you are ready for it until it hits, but by looking at our response to the small events that happen, it highlights whether you are ready to respond to an incident or not."

As these examples illustrate, there are a variety of considerations for your hiring and training practices. Your ridership and customer satisfaction surveys will tell you if your practices are making the grade. Looking for operators that want to serve the public and that appreciate the differences and similarities in their customers will give you the best start. And, as these programs illustrate, developing an interactive training program that gives operators effective skills they can use will create the positive, proactive workforce you are looking for.

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