



Gateway Cities General Manager Rich Rogers

By **FRANKLIN A. HOLMAN**

(Sept. 17, 2003) One year ago General Manager Rich Rogers had a vision for the Gateway Cities Service Sector. Today, he looks back at the foundation that has been laid and envisions a growing and continually improving sector.

"You see cleaner buses on the street and operators with positive attitudes," Rogers says. "But as standards are raised in the agency, patrons also raise their standards."

"Our challenge is to get ahead of the customers to continually meet and exceed their expectations," he says.

With the bar raised, and a new vision in mind, Rogers took a look at how the sector's first year has paved the way for the Gateway Cities sector to make a difference in the communities they serve.

Q. What was your vision for this sector a year ago?

A. The vision was to develop a strong team with common goals and objectives, and to strive towards continued improvement.

I looked at the start of the sector as the introduction of a new business unit. Each of the individuals selected for the team is an expert in a particular field and was chosen to help lead us to continual improvement.

From the beginning, we worked at providing training tools for our managers to achieve the ambitious goals we set. If you are going to raise expectations, everybody has to have the same vision and the training to be the best leaders they can be. Then, they can share the vision with all of the employees.

The sector was built to support the operating divisions, to get out to the communities we serve, and to improve relations with the public. It was important for the divisions and managers to move in a positive direction to improve the services we provide.

Q. What has been accomplished this year to make that vision a reality?

A. We raised the bar on our performance standards. We looked at **everything** we do operationally to serve the customer and critiqued what we did and what we could improve on. The focus was to exceed customer expectations and to promote MTA. I quickly found that this is a huge challenge.

The good news is, we are doing a better job promoting MTA, but with that heightened publicity comes increased expectations from our customers. Even though we are raising the bar on our performance standards, the customers are raising their expectations of us as an agency, so we have to get ahead of the customers to continually meet and exceed their expectations.

Specifically, we have improved on safety. We have a heightened awareness of safety. Employees are working safer and smarter, which has reduced our Worker's Compensation claims by almost 40 percent.

Q. How have the changes made this year affected employees?

A. It's been a very challenging year for employees. You have to take into consideration that change is not generally accepted with open arms. Employees are skeptical about change, but we are progressing away from that skepticism. We have to ultimately change the culture of the agency. If you look at Roger Snoble's strategic plan, it sets the foundation for us to define our priorities. For now, we have established a foundation and aligned our vision, mission, goals and objectives. We are going to be moving together in the same direction.

Q. What are patrons saying to you during the public meetings you've attended?

A. Now that MTA is reaching out to the public with focus groups and town hall meetings, people are responding positively to the fact that we are out there and available.

When we have public hearings dealing with service changes, the community does not view it very positively. It's hard for riders to understand the rationale behind reducing or eliminating a line.

Overall, the community wants to see clean buses, professional operators who are courteous, and buses that run on time. These are simple ingredients, but the dynamics of getting there is a little challenging. For us to meet and exceed their expectations, we are going to have to deliver what patrons want, so we have to continue to improve upon our service.

Q. One year ago you had planned to improve communications, with an emphasis on upgrading the image of Metro Operations. How has the image of Metro Operations changed over the past year?

A. We have a very aggressive community relations plan that has worked hard at opening up the lines of communication between our sector and the 26 cities we serve. They have set up meetings with a number of elected officials' representatives to explain the sector concept and communicate our plans and programs. We have also held a number of Town Hall meetings, participated in various community events, become active in some of our local Chamber activities, and effectively communicated information about sector activities such as public hearings, town hall meetings and agency programs.

We have also been much more pro-actively involved with our operating divisions, ensuring that we prioritize ongoing communication at all levels.

The end result has been that you see cleaner buses on the street and operators with a positive attitude. One of the key components of that is that employees have a heightened awareness of accountability. Everyone understands the expectations and everyone knows that there is accountability associated with striving toward meeting those

expectations.

Q. What issues are currently being addressed or will be addressed in the future by your governance council?

A. Our governance council was just recently formed — we had our first meeting in August. We had to immediately put our council members into the fire because our second meeting included a public hearing on potential reduction or cancellation of service or some of our contract lines.

My role is to educate the council members about the sector from an operational and community perspective, including what our needs are and how we go about meeting our objectives. The governance council's role is to evaluate and decide if they should endorse staff recommendations on operational decisions that impact our region.

Q. What do you enjoy most about being general manager of this division?

A. Watching our team exceed their goals. I enjoy helping them achieve success. My role is to develop our managers to be as effective as they can be.

Q. Looking ahead, what do you plan to accomplish next year?

A. We want to continue to foster a safety conscious environment. We also want to make sure employees are recognized for achieving a heightened safety level.

The other thing we are focused on is continually improving communication. Managers not only need to be out there and visible, but also to be available to communicate with our employees about what is going on.

I am going to continue conducting all hands meetings, facilitating quarterly management meetings and conducting employee feedback surveys. With the results, we can talk to employees about what we can do to improve, and we can establish goals together as a team.

We will continue to foster and build new relationships with the communities we serve in the Gateway Cities region. We're also looking forward to working with our Division Advisory Committee (DAC) members to work with us in our community outreach efforts and our anti-graffiti and safety school program.

Q. What would you like to say to the employees and coworkers who have worked alongside with you this year?

A. My team has made my job a lot easier. Each and every one of them is an expert. They are the ones who make it happen. I am extremely proud of the improvements shown throughout our first year together. As everyone continues to share the common vision of the agency, that momentum will continue to accelerate. We will see improvements happening faster and faster. I envision our team successfully making the strides necessary to exceed our customer's expectations.

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