



NEWS

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CONTACT: GARY WOSK/JIM SMART
MTA MEDIA RELATIONS
(213) 922-2712/922-2700
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THEY JUST CALL ME ELLEN - AS IN LEVINE; WHEN IT COMES TO RUNNING OPERATIONS SHE'S NO PLAIN JANE

Ellen Levine, the first woman to serve as Executive Officer for Transit Operations, has a good handle on what makes 1.2 million Metro System passengers and 6,300 MTA employees tick. Credit it all on those years in public health.

The "health" of passengers and employees have greatly benefited since Levine, the holder of a Master's degree in public health, was promoted last October, after serving as the MTA's Regional General Manager, Western Regions Operations.

So impressed was the former president of the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Alan Kiepper, that he recently nominated her for a spot on a prestigious international transportation study group.

"I like the relationships she has formed with the working force and union officers," wrote Kiepper. "She has a positive focus where there's been a rocky history."

Speak with Levine over an extended period of time and the same words creep into the conversation: nurture, grow, empowerment, ownership, and doing the right thing. They also happen to symbolize the core of a philosophy that has served her well throughout a 17-year career in transportation. A word of caution though, if you happen to interview Levine, make sure to bring extra writing pads or microcassettes along - she makes

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Tommy Lasorda sound laconic, and there's so much spring in her step that Carl Lewis seems stationary.

Levine, who sees herself as a "change agent" by encouraging her staff to "step out of the box and embrace change," has brought about just that. Most of the 28 priorities she identified have been accomplished in her first 100 days on the job. Among them:

- On time service has improved markedly.
- Complaints have dropped 25 percent.
- 53 buses have been added into service.
- On-board customer complaint cards have been introduced.
- The first of 18,000 bus stops have been cleaned.
- Adopted 100 suggestions from employees to improve service.

At first the 50-year-old Levine mulled over whether putting in minimum 70-hour work weeks, becoming a workaholic and throwing away her social life was for her. Ultimately, with the support of her husband, Ed, Levine gave a thumbs up to being given a chance to improve the way the the MTA operates its buses and trains.

"It presented an opportunity and a challenge that I could embrace and run with," the North Hollywood resident said.

Though her initial comfort level has not wavered, the enormity of her responsibilities: 6,300 employees and their families, 2,000 buses, 100 rail cars, and of course, 1.2 million daily boarding passengers, is never lost on Levine.

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"When people ask me how are things going, my response is always 'It's big,' she said. "First of all it's a huge scope of responsibilities. It takes everything to bring about 6,300 employees together with our riders. And that's the way I see the job. I see it in a holistic approach. It's not the riders out there and the employees are here. If we don't get a symbiosis between the two, we're not going to make it. And that's big."

Even though the job is frustrating at times, throwing in the towel is the furthest thing from her mind.

"If it didn't seem overwhelming occasionally it would be boring. If any of us becomes that complacent on the job, where it's not overwhelming, then maybe we need to grow. I'm not someone who could retire on the job."

The dye was cast from Day One, when Levine wrote to her new extended family: *Dear Fellow Transit Employees, from the front line down, all Transit Operations employees and our partners throughout the MTA will put the customer first and be guided by our credo: We exist to serve the customer; we either serve the customer directly or support someone on our team who does.*

Changing careers was not something the New York City native planned to do when she moved to California in 1979. Since public health jobs at the time were far and few between she answered a blind RTD classified ad for a researcher.

"I can do that," Levine recalled herself as thinking. Any doubts she entertained were limited to whether she could adopt to a "para-military," regimented environment after years in a free-thinking, academic one.

"In such a free-think atmosphere, the thinking is that as long as the product finally gets done it doesn't matter when you did it. With the

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exception of that, I brought aspects of this philosophy with me into transportation and I think encouraging free thought and academic growth stimulates participation and buy-in from the entire staff."

One regret Levine has is not being able to spend more time out in the field with her employees, where she engages them in "Let's Talk."

"If they should say why don't we do X, Y, and Z, then my answer is 'You know, that's really good. Why don't you, you and you work on coming up with a solution to X, Y and Z? And we'll talk about it later.'"

Levine admits to one Achilles' heel.

"I'm someone who likes to see instant fulfillment. I thrive on challenge but I want to see results quickly. I don't do well when the results take forever to see. If we make a decision to do something I don't want to plan it forever."

By empowering down, Levine hopes to help others realize their full potential, which she believes will pay big dividends for the MTA and the community it serves.

And though she also sees herself as a consensus builder, helper and giver ("I rarely say this is mine, instead it's ours or yours"), Levine is more than willing to go against the grain. "It has nothing to do with how much you trust people but at times you sometimes have to take ownership. When all is said and done you have to own it."

With 100 days under her belt, Levine looks forward to the next 100 days and beyond.

"I love my job, actually my last three at the MTA. They have been exciting, empowering and given me an opportunity to empower down, jobs that allow me to take my whole portfolio and put it altogether. That's pretty exciting."

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Count MTA Interim CEO Linda Bohlinger among Levine's biggest fans.

"The changes Ellen has helped bring about at the MTA and the community in only 100 days are remarkable," Bohlinger said. "If this is any indication of what we can expect in the future, employees and passengers are going to be much better off."

Levine has two married daughters, Shari and Marci, and three grandchildren . She enjoys collecting antiques, exotic travel and gourmet cooking.

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