DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
RURAL TRANSIT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

RTAP Peer Roundtable Notes:
Emotional Intelligence and Effective Communication

12/13/23, 10-11:30 am CT

Participation:

1. Kayla Sullivan, Transit Alternatives
2. Bill Spitzer, Rolling Hills Transit
3. Shelly Rockman, Cedar Valley Services/SMART
4. Joanne Brackey, Cedar Valley Services/SMART
5. Jeremy Monahan, Prairie Lakes Transit
6. Gary Ludwig, Trailblazer Transit
7. Chris Thompson, Cedar Valley Services/SMART
8. Rhonda Torgersen, Tri-CAP
9. Jennifer Olson, Rainbow Rider Transit
10. Lynnell Simonson Popowski, NWRDC
11. Kirk Kuchera, Cedar Valley Services/SMART
12. Pat LaCourse, Brown County
13. Mariah Kathan, RTAP
14. Berta Hartig, RTAP

Challenges

- Being too direct and people taking offense
- How to manage if you have a sarcastic and smart-aleck approach that not everyone understands
- Communicating with different communication styles and ways of working
- Knowing what type of communication others need what they will respond to the best
- Oversharing without thinking through answers
- Knowing the right words to address a problem
- Emotional intelligence can take a long time to build up a foundation of skills
- Learning how to effectively communicate with regional coworkers with limited eye contact (cultural differences)
- How to not ramble when talking
- Making sure your intent is understood when emailing and texting staff
- Worrying about how interactions went afterwards
- Making sure that there is equal communication with all employees
- Dealing with an aging workforce that doesn't check emails and needs communications printed or written on whiteboards.

Meeting Roles

- Process Observer: Lynnell
- Timekeeper: Pat
- Parking Lot Attendant: Kayla

What does effective communication and emotional intelligence mean to you?
- Emotional intelligence is the ability to remain calm, process data, and generate a response based on facts instead of feelings. Book referenced: *Emotional Intelligence Habits* by Travis Bradberry
- Having thoughtful and mindful responses
- Having maturity when speaking. Without maturity you can throw out inappropriate jokes or inopportune comments that show you may not be paying attention or showing that lack of maturity.
- Knowing your audience and adapting to the context you are in.
- Effective communication involves how to say something so that it can be heard. There can be messages that someone isn't happy to receive, but you can deliver it in a way that won't destroy their ego. Be sensitive to the emotional needs of the recipient.

How can you be direct and still communicate without hurting others' feelings?
- Emails can be hard to determine someone's tone.
- Kirk recommended the EQI (Emotional Quotient Inventory) assessment that he took during the LTP. It breaks down emotional intelligence into 4 key dimensions. The report was 30 pages and included action steps that you can take. He highly recommended that everyone considers taking this assessment.
- Directness can also be tied to taking the time to respond and gathering your thoughts before responding.
- Pat shared about parenting. Kids would go to the "weaker" parent, so he and his wife decided they would discuss the issue or idea and then respond together. That can be used as a management technique as well. It would be helpful to bounce ideas off an assistant manager/operations manager or peer mentor.
- Things may feel urgent, but it is okay to take the time to respond. You can write up a response when you are emotional but NOT send it. It is also okay to answer with "I don't have the answer, but I will figure it out and get back to you."
- Smart-aleck tone and sarcasm can be a challenge because not everyone gets it. It can be hard when you can't have fun when you want to make your work week more enjoyable. Thoughts and ideas from Jeremy: Using levity and sarcasm isn't always a bad thing, but you should keep it light. It is better to have levity but be careful not to be immature. Know your audience and who you can joke around with or not.

How can you handle challenges with employees who don't work in the same office/location?

- It can be hard to make sure that you're remembering to communicate to all locations especially when people aren't checking their company email. Emailing helps to show an information chain. Email and meetings are the primary methods of communication. It is a big struggle when people don't check emails. One way to support employees can be by forwarding company emails to personal emails when that's appropriate.
- One agency uses a group text for drivers and sends emails. If there is more information than you can text, he directs them to the email.
- If you're making a change, you may have to say it 7 times for it to sink in.
- Jen has everyone's cell phone number. If she needs to hear back from people, she will call them. She faxes to the garages, and she has things posted on the bulletin boards.
- One solution offered was to use memo boards in addition to emails
- Saving your emails and using email flags or labels to remind yourself to follow up to make sure that employees are getting the communication can also be effective.
- Someone shared an example of when a communication issue had been addressed directly about being mutually respectful – The manager said: I am responsive to you; I expect the same level of respect from you. That conversation was tough but helped the relationship and the communication since.

How can you be more mindful about oversharing information?
- If someone is out sick, and someone asks about it, make sure to get permission and ask: what information are you comfortable being shared publicly? Don't share information without permission. You can guide other staff to talk to the individual directly.

How can you communicate consistently with other Transit Systems?
- Sometimes overcommunicating can be effective to find definitions that you didn't share understanding on before. Using the same language for terms between agencies is important. For example, using the term "route" sounds like a fixed route, but sometimes that route is actually an on-demand, flexible route, or deviated route.
- Who decides what the definition is? The definition needs to fit what each transportation system does. It doesn't make one definition right or wrong, but it's helpful to be consistent.
- Regarding short-hand communication: Words mean different things to different people and can lead to communication issues or confusion. Acronym use is a barrier. Make sure to explain acronyms when you use them. Have a guide for your staff, a cheat sheet.

How do you handle rambling conversation?

- Make sure that your message gets to the point when it needs to.
- When you are quiet for a long time it can allow flood gates to open.
- Some struggle with being uncomfortable with silence and making sure there is balance when there are two groups in dialogue.
- It can help to write down what you're going to say in advance. Think about what you are going to say and choose the right words. This can be more effective and removes emotion. It helps keep your goals in mind.
- With important email communication, set it aside and then read again later before sending.
- Ask someone to review your email or notes. Then ask them about the impression it gives off to be sure it aligns with your intention.

Ask a Peer:

Lynnell is part of an RTCC. She is to get a transit system to add a trip (45 miles) between two small towns to increase access to a health care facility. The current transportation between these cities has a route that drops off at 8am and picks up at 3:30pm, so the passenger is stuck at the medical facility all day, which is a long time to wait especially if you are sick. She asked if anyone had ideas for obtaining funding to get this extra trip added to a rural transit system, such as a Carbon Reduction grant or other grant to increase access to medical service.

- FTA section 5311-funded transit systems designate routes based on the budgets they submit to MnDOT yearly, so the 5311-transit system would have to request additional funding in their next budget.
- Jeremy shared that his understanding is that new service is not a priority for the next year or two as funding is needed in other areas of a transit agency's budget. He recommended that they may need to redesign an existing route to accommodate the new stops Lynnell is talking about (rather than creating a new route).
- For federal grants, MnDOT typically applies for the 5311 systems, because the 5311s are subrecipients.
- Small grants are sometimes from the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) and National RTAP.
- Another solution could be asking the hospital or clinic to help pay for the route
- Mariah shared a resource from HIRTA Public Transit in Iowa. They got federal funding to design a Health Connector app that will make medical transportation more seamless for transit providers and passengers. [More information on the program here](). Since it's federally funded, the code for the app will be open source for other transit systems to use, so it could be a long-term solution for situations like this.

- The group added this to the parking lot for Lynnell to bring this question to the approproiate staff at MnDOT for further assistance.

Kayla wanted to know about other agencies' policies about personal shopping during work time. The scenario she's thinking of, it was for ~40 minutes, not during break or a lunch, and the rides were not delayed as a result:

- Rhonda said that they have a part of their handbook that says that the vehicles are only to be used for the purposes designated by Tri-CAP. Use of the vehicle for other purposes is prohibited unless the use is clearly incidental. An employee can only deviate from their route by 1 mile, and if they do stop somewhere, they must stop during their break or lunch. Rhonda shared this wording with Kayla over email.

Other resources shared during the discussion:
- EQI (Emotional Quotient Inventory) Assessment from Leadership Training Program
- Book: *Emotional Intelligence Habits* by Travis Bradberry
- Some interest in RTAP hosting an Emotional Intelligence Workshop or training in the future.

Process Observer Report: Meeting went well

Parking Lot Attendant Report: Bring up funding issues to MnDOT for medical rides

Next Peer Roundtable Jan 10, 2024