



# Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

## ATU Local 689 Briefing on Safety Culture

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Before  
The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority Committee on Safety  
April 23, 2015

Good Morning,

Last month, Local 689 and Interim General Manager Jack Requa participated in a Public Hearing on Safety at WMATA. We heard testimony from a variety of people that included WMATA employees, local labor leaders, public transportation experts and the public. Several ideas that are central to the creation of a safety culture came out of the hearing and I would like to share my thoughts about them with you today. But first, let me introduce you to the concept of a safety culture as I understand it.

At our public hearing last month, Jeff Rosenberg, the Director of Government Affairs at the ATU International, described Safety Culture as, "...a way of life. Maintaining a safety culture requires vigilance, an ongoing commitment, and realization that your work will never be done." Simply put, he hit the nail on the head.

A healthy safety culture cannot exist without commitment from the head of an Agency, the Board of Directors and the employees themselves. It requires dedication, investment and constant work. A safety culture does not just happen overnight. When I first experienced the term safety culture it was during the NTSB's investigation into the Fort Totten accident. During the investigation we heard from an SSO working at a nuclear power plant who explained the need for a safety culture. That testimony has stood out as a clearest understanding of why a safety culture is imperative and necessary for the dangers that we face when we don't have one. I've thought often about that nuclear plant and all of the inhabitants in the surrounding communities, states and continents! It is the reason that we must work day and night to protect the Carol Glovers, Jeanice McMillians, the John Moores, the Cherrys or the Nashs! The knowledge that we cannot make mistakes of any kind cannot be ignored now that I know, and I need you to understand that burden also.



I warn you now, the reality of our safety culture is non-existent! Those who have implemented safety procedures and regulations will disagree of course but my reasons are simply this: a single mistake should not cause death. Simple mistakes should not happen if we are actually following our safety culture as if our lives depend on it.

And although everyone in the transit community sang praises about how WMATA turned around safety issues on paper, in reality it was that same community who doubted that our workforce was enabled with the ability to positively change that quickly. To follow through with the vast number of rules that have been implemented since 2009 required skilled ability; the procedures and processes in the big purple rule book are evident but assuring that all those procedures and processes are carried out day by day with the simplest of acts is non-existent without the same safe practices carried out each time. That is what has to be called to action.

Believe me those who are comfortable with the knowledge and ability to perform their crafts on the rail know the mistakes that took place on January 12<sup>th</sup>, even without the NTSB giving their report of the investigation. Just as we know that what took place at Fort Totten could not have happened if the train to wayside communications were transmitting as they should. But a warning had been given and it was not fully investigated.

In pockets of our organization, our current culture will not change quickly. It is encrusted with distrust, anger, and fear. If we can sincerely dedicate ourselves to the creation of a joint safety culture, we will begin to make changes, slowly and surely. But we all must change our way of handling safety, and our customers, the employees. A healthy safety culture is founded on mutual trust, it is established thru joint ownership with the Union and the Authority, and perfected by assuring that our number one priority of this system is safety.

Many experts agree that safety culture requires the following components:

### **1) Continuous Education and Training**

Creating a healthy safety culture requires as Jeff Rosenberg said, "vigilance [and] ongoing commitment." It is a constant investment in our workforce. Employees cannot get emergency preparedness training the year they enter the workforce and then never receive that training again. The training that was given last weekend was great because of the recognition that there is a need but how many employees received the same level of training and how scripted was the training? I ask this question because after the January 12<sup>th</sup> incident I spoke to a group of bus operators who discussed their interaction with Rail because they travel by rail constantly to get to pick up relief time points. If they were on board that train, on that day, but lacked the skills to assist passengers, there would have been a deafening public outcry as well as a more significant decrease in ridership. They must be involved in this training at some level.

While safety must be the core value of the company, it is equally important that the commitment to that value is shown time and time again. Creating and implementing a regular training program, with input from the employees themselves, shows an everyday investment in the employees. When training becomes a regular part of going to work, it will no longer be looked at as discipline. WMATA customarily has only been able to utilize training for new hires and skeleton re-training programs that accommodate the employees who have broken a rule or violation. We don't see a great deal of proactive training that is mandated in order to accommodate this needed culture change effort. A rule change is only a small part of the process and no one believes that a culture is changed because you make a rule.

There are a number of processes that WMATA can enact to change the way training is implemented, with the most obvious being the introduction of a regular schedule for training and retraining. Training should not only be scheduled when there is a need for recertification or punitive requirements. With the speed of changing technology these days, it is important to constantly refresh and build on the knowledge employees use to do their jobs every day. As human beings, we do not get better by staying stagnant. Just as in every other facet of our lives learning, change, and being challenged causes growth. Why not use this same logic to create a regular training and retraining program? By empowering your employees with more knowledge to perform their crafts, you are helping to create a company that is equally focused on its employees as it is on its passengers and profits. In the end, everyone wins.

Another way to train employees is through mentoring. Mentorship is a large part of learning the ropes of a company. Any new employee, no matter how experienced, will make mistakes because they are still learning how to operate within the system according to WMATA's rules. Who better to teach the newest employees than someone who has been with the company for many years and likely made those same mistakes themselves? In addition, mentorship helps to create a community. It encourages mutual trust, respect and creates bonds that can last for decades. I always find employee morale is at its highest when people work on a consistent basis with people they trust and respect. Instead of just giving our Million Milers a steak dinner and a pen, let them put their skills to work and commit to a meaningful contribution.

The same thought can be applied to the hiring of individuals for jobs at WMATA. An aspect of training that relates to trust and respect is also the work experience of the people who are overseeing our members on a daily basis. Many of my members view management as the bad guy, and if we had a conversation with them we would find that they have good reason! Throughout my tenure I have fortunately witnessed supervisors who have nurtured and inspired the personal growth of the workforce. We witnessed their behavior as our supervisors, and teachers. Many times, supervisors are hired off the street, with little experience in the transit industry. Fresh eyes are great but this industry cannot afford inexperienced workers at any level whether they are sitting

behind the steering wheel, master controller, buttons, switches, keyboards, levers or a desk! The lives of our customers, my members, are at risk every day. I know my members would feel better if they knew their supervisor had the same amount, if not more knowledge, about the jobs that their employees perform daily. Supervisors hired off the street must also have a safety mindset and want to make sure safety is the number one priority at WMATA. We all are required to lead by example. An employee can't see supervisors breaking the very rules that lead to their termination. You cannot permeate that type of cultural practice if those who are in place to lead only practice safety through intimidation or privilege because they lack the knowledge of actual job experience. A large part of any occupation is perception and management has to give the perception that they are as focused on the type, level and kind of supervision given to its customers, my members. Please keep in mind that upward mobility is paramount to morale and dedicated employees.

Another way to lead by example is through actions. We have watched the practice of sprucing up locations over the years when important people visit but routine ticket orders are left open for weeks when regular employees call them in for repair. The same level of attention should be given no matter who is reporting or asking for cleaner facilities. At our public hearing on safety last month, UFCW 1994 MCGEO President Gino Renne spoke about deferred maintenance and the deadly costs associated with it. He said,

"What worries me is that technically speaking deferred maintenance and other safety concerns are a direct result of...managers who seem to not care about the unintended consequences of cutting corners and not adequately investing in the transit systems they operate."

If WMATA wants safety to be woven into the very fabric of our lives, they need to hire leaders who embody those characteristics, invest in the workers and maintain the systems that they lead. It can't just be a question on a survey.

## **2) Open and Honest Communication**

In addition to training, communication between management and employees is key to the creation of a safety culture. Communication at WMATA is a huge problem! At our public hearing last month, we also heard from several employees who felt their opinions were not valued. One employee, a rail operator, spoke about the amount of time it takes for a safety concerns to be addressed. If that isn't bad enough, she also spoke about the lack of communication from management as it pertains to how critical the safety hazard is to her safety and the safety of her passengers. My members are more than willing to protect the riders of Metro, but management must give them all of the information, not just what they feel is relative. We are thinking human beings!

In addition to the major communication problems between management and my members, there are also major technological communication problems. Radios don't work in certain Metro stations, putting the safety of my station managers at risk. Radios also drop out in numerous locations throughout the system putting the lives of my maintenance workers at risk and many train operators cannot get speed commands throughout the system. When that happens they lose the ability to communicate with Central? What happens if there is an emergency? How can you ask an employee to willingly put their life in danger without equipping them with the tools to at least protect themselves? Communication is so important on multiple levels!

Recently, an employee opinion survey of all WMATA employees was conducted. Several items pertaining to communication were alarming to me. First, when employees were asked if they receive clear and regular feedback on their job performance, 46% of them responded favorably. When this question was asked to employees around the country, 62% of them responded favorably. That means WMATA is 16% behind the rest of the country when it comes to communicating clearly and regularly with their employees. Second, when employees were asked to rate WMATA on being open and honest in communications to employees 45% responded favorably. Again, the rest of the US responded 59% favorably. WMATA is behind the rest of the country by 14%. Those are significant numbers!

How can we change this? Well for one, we can start including employees in the decisions that go on at WMATA. When I was asked to provide the employee perspective on the general manager it occurred to me that while WMATA reached out via e-mail to riders who have purchased a SmarTrip, they didn't reach out to their own employees, who they insisted ALL have WMATA e-mail addresses in the last few years. Little things like that are what I am talking about. Employees must buy into the company and the only way you are going to win their trust again is if you include them in some of the decisions made by the company. It is an opportunity to start fresh with implementing inclusion because it doesn't do us any good to have a GM they have never spoken to or laid eyes on!

Local 689 is ready to roll up our sleeves and work with WMATA but there must be an equal desire to work with the employees. We not only work on and in the system, but many of our family and friends use public transportation regularly. You must give us the respect we have earned by bringing the employees working every day in the field to the table and asking for their input!

### **3) Abolish the Culture of Retaliation**

According to the Federal Transit Administration, an important aspect of a healthy safety culture is the ability to gather data and predict unsafe conditions. Transit is safe, but when something goes wrong, it is disastrous. There are deaths, mass confusion, and it

is usually the result of something that could have been prevented had the right follow up taken place. After the catastrophe, it takes months to investigate, figure out what went wrong and in most cases, a new Standard Operating Procedure is created. Most of the time, the blame is placed on the backs of the employees operating and maintaining the failed system. Instead of being proactive about safety at WMATA, we are reactive in the worst way and that is dangerous. Blame should not be the first thing we look to do in the event of a tragedy but this is our perception. If we can create a safety culture where hazards are reported and followed through on, we can start to analyze data and predict when these catastrophes are going to happen. If we can predict them, we can prevent them.

The Transit Cooperative Research Program's Report 174 on Improving Safety Culture in Public Transportation analyzed the safety culture at nine companies outside of the public transportation industry and they found several recurring themes in the interviews they conducted. Instead of disciplining employees,

"This group of companies empowers employees to communicate freely and to champion safety values...In all of these organizations, employees are the core of the culture; they are recruited, trained, retrained and empowered to play an essential role in safety."

The TCRP Report 174 also surveyed transit stakeholders (identified on page 23 of the report) and asked them to identify important components of safety culture. All of the stakeholders recognized the importance of reviewing accidents "from the perspective of future prevention rather than focusing exclusively on finding someone to blame." They also agreed that "Employees are encouraged to report...safety events without fear of blame or retribution." When Employees at WMATA were asked if they receive recognition or awards when they do a good job, they responded 40% favorably. This percentage is behind the rest of the US again by a whopping 23%! It is even 6% lower than it was in 2012 when this question was asked. Why are you failing to recognize when your employees do well, but as soon as they make a mistake there is no mercy?

My members feel retaliated against, they feel threatened and they fear how management might react if they make a report on a safety concern. In one instance, I know of a track employee that reported safety concerns and filed a grievance but because it was revealed in arbitration that he used a cell phone to document the safety concerns, he was suspended for five days! That is unacceptable and dangerous! Management feels the need to discipline rather than instruct, guide and support. Wasn't it more important to have him report the hazard than keep it hidden and undisclosed? That is not conducive to the establishment of a safety culture. Necessary safety changes should be encouraged every chance we get, especially if it makes the employees feel safer. I've said it before, and I'll say it again and again. You cannot discipline your way to a safety culture!

To remedy this situation, management can create incentive programs for reporting safety violations and hazards. By doing this, the perception of retaliation that many workers believe they will encounter when making a safety report can be reformed. Recognizing and respecting employees who contribute to the overall safety culture at WMATA will change the general school of thought that management is looking to blame employees when something goes wrong. I often wonder how many safety initiatives occur that aren't recommendations of the NTSB?

#### **4) Effective Reporting System**

Last month, we also heard from a train operator that once she or her co-workers make a safety report there is no way of knowing when and if the report is being addressed. This is troublesome. What prevents a supervisor from deciding that it's not important and putting it in File 13? Where is the accountability and how do employees follow through on their complaints? My members cannot have confidence in a system where they do not even know if their issue is being taken seriously. If they feel that their opinion is not valued how are they expected to have faith in management? Transparency is another root in a safety culture foundation and must be applied even when we are in error.

With programs like Close Call, a non-punitive system in which Metro Rail employees can make anonymous tips on safety violations and hazards in their workplace, we have already seen that we can make positive safety changes by working together as a union with management. We know collaboration can work, but employees must feel like they are a part of this process.

Those who are taking part in the program know the benefit first hand and are doing their part to bring about change. If we are serious, every department should begin to partake in this way of reporting and resolving safety issues.

I would like to leave you with this thought: My members work every day to protect the riders of this system, who many times include you, me, and many of the people we hold near and dear. If they have that awesome responsibility they should be included in the process and not treated with indifference and neglect? My members are your neighbors, your friends, and even your family. Do we not deserve safety and respect too?

I thank you for the opportunity to speak today and let me close by saying that I'm sure that several departments are attempting to resolve some of the problems that we face as an agency. It is not our attempt to shake a finger to blame. But I believe if you keep having the same results but continue doing things the same way it is a type of insanity. We have to evaluate the best practices, discard the negative, and create a better safety culture for the future.