



A Heart-Healthy Approach to Toll Collection

By Beth Ruffing



As most anyone trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle knows, the American Heart Association promotes healthful habits to reduce the risk of heart attack, heart disease, and stroke. The group advocates sound eating habits (you are what you eat), exercise and fitness, and lifestyle and cholesterol management to improve heart health.

What does all this have to do with toll collection? Having been a biology major in college and a human resources professional in my career, I view toll collection as the heart of cash revenue collection. And just as good eating habits and healthful activities safeguard the body's heart, so too do healthy lifestyle habits within the toll-collection department keep it pumping efficiently. Additionally, changing your behavior to improve your lifestyle can be likened to changing an organization's behaviors and actions to transform a culture.

At the North Texas Tollway Authority (NTTA), we've enjoyed the tremendous support and commitment of our board of directors and executive management, along with an overwhelming level of employee participation, in shifting the culture of NTTA's toll-collection department to achieve world-class customer service without

compromising traffic flow, safety and security, or operational integrity.

Anatomy of a Toll-Collection Department

Toll collection tends to be a very operational, process-centric function, and understandably so. After all, it is the cash revenue-gener-



ating department of any toll agency and the first “face” of the agency cash-paying customers encounter. To keep traffic moving, the toll attendant’s interaction with the customer tends to be extremely short, perhaps as brief as two seconds. In such a streamlined transaction, a systematic, process-oriented form of toll collection is generally the most efficient for driver and attendant alike.

If you’re a toll attendant, management expects you to push traffic through as quickly and efficiently as possible, collect the appropriate toll, and minimize variance in attended lanes 8 to 10 hours a day, 365 days a year, including holidays, when other people are at home enjoying the festivities. Alone in a booth, you’re isolated from managers, supervisors, and other coworkers and scattered over many miles of roadway. Oh, and, by the way, we need you to smile and have fun doing it. Never mind if you’ve just dealt with the 2,000th customer of your shift, who happens to be running late, has

just been fired, or is having a bad-hair day and has decided to take it out on you.

On top of that, our industry is moving toward express lanes and open-road tolling to improve traffic flow, reducing the public’s face-to-face contact with the toll attendant, placing more emphasis on call centers, and providing as much automation as possible, again to improve efficiency for the motoring public. Thus, management and the public are becoming further removed from the employees of a toll-collection department. Yet, despite all the technological innovation and automation, as long as there is a cash-paying customer using our facilities, there will always be a need for the toll-collection department, in some form, to provide customer service, and the health and morale of its employees must be considered.

Taking the Pulse

In 1998, NTTA began reading the pulse of its toll-collection department. We found that operationally the department was functioning adequately—tolls were being collected and traffic was kept moving. But the department tended to be process-centric and NTTA-centric instead of customer-centric. In other words, customer service wasn’t the primary focus of employees’ work. Individual toll plazas lacked a strategy to work together for a common goal beyond revenue collection. Groups were aloof with one another, and communication from management was frequently minimal, reactive, and disciplinary in nature rather than motivational. Supervisors had little responsibility and accountability, and career momentum was limited.

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I recall one supervisor telling me after being denied a promotion to a manager position that he would never again consider applying to join the toll-collection management team, chiefly because he was so disenchanted with

conditions in the department. At the time, absenteeism and “presenteeism” (in which employees are present in body but not engaged in mind and spirit) were high, turnover was running at better than 15 percent, and some employees were counting down the days until they could retire—hoping they’d reach that milestone voluntarily.

Although nothing was “broken” and few issues existed with “what” was being done—after all, revenues were flowing—there were concerns about “how” things were being done and the type of internal and external customer service that was being provided. In March 2003 management determined that the heart of the toll-collection department wasn’t pumping as efficiently as it could and that further diagnostics were required to pinpoint the cause. Balance needed to be established between the unit’s service-centric and process-centric focuses, coaching and discipline, and fun and work.

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With the help of Tamer Partners Corp., a Southlake, Tex., consulting firm specializing in corporate culture and motivational tools, NTTA in 2003 began conducting “health checks” of the toll collection department, performing stress tests, diagnosing problems, and promoting management behaviors that contribute to a healthy work environment. Today, Tamer still visits us two to three times a week as we continue with the health checks to monitor our performance and adjust our direction as necessary.

Stress Tests and Diagnosis

The magnitude of changing one’s lifestyle can be monumental. Often, unhealthy behaviors practiced over a long period of time become normalized, and the thought of making a dramatic change, even a positive one, can be overwhelming.

The same is true in transforming the culture of a functional area within an already existing company, particularly in the most populous department in the organization, such as was the case at NTTA. A poor history of successful change, unhealthy management behaviors, and the absence of employee trust in management can foster the belief that cultural change in an organization is impossible. Ensuring commitment and support at all levels of the company, engaging the right resources to accurately diagnose corporate strengths and weaknesses, and adopting new habits to improve overall organizational health and prevent further “dis-ease” are vital to the long-term success of a revamped corporate culture. Being sensitive to the initial discomfort that dramatic changes may provoke while implementing and integrating those changes is also essential for success.

At NTTA, the diagnostic tests Tamer performed for our toll-collection department involved observing current department operations, with Tamer consultants working side by side with employees in all toll-collection positions across all shifts, days, and plazas. Tamer also conducted numerous on-site interviews at all employee levels, from executive managers and directors to frontline employees. Letting employees talk with someone neutral, outside of NTTA management, enabled us to receive truly honest feedback.

As a result of these tests, we determined that we needed to implement a lifestyle, or cultural, change to improve the most basic function of a toll entity: the two-second interaction between toll attendant and customer. But how do you do that?

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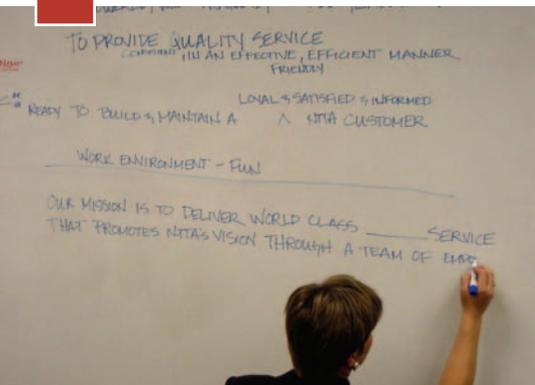
lection employees feel that they work in a healthy environment, have the opportunity to succeed, and are viewed as valuable to the organization at large. That goodwill, our thinking went, would then be passed on to the customer in those two seconds of interacting with the toll attendant. Management would become the “healthy” role model.

We knew we had a huge challenge on our hands and that only long-term behavioral modification would result in success. Our employees would believe in our commitment to change when they saw it working, heard and felt positive reinforcement from management, and observed change in management’s own behaviors. The effect would be a veritable tidal wave of momentum. Additionally, we knew that producing results would start with simple things such as smiling more often, interacting more frequently with each other, and bringing increased energy to the job.

Developing a Road Map

In shifting the culture of our toll-collection department to provide world-class service, NTTA adopted a customer-service mission statement created in 2001 specifically for use across all of our departments. The statement, which we developed with Tamer’s

help in the culture transformation of NTTA’s Customer Service Center, remains the guiding principle for all we do. That act, in and of itself, demonstrated NTTA management’s vision and commitment to the health of the entire organization. Additionally, there is a strong desire among the board of directors, executive staff, and the toll-collection department to build a culture in Toll Collection that supports this customer-service vision.



We believe we provide world-class service when our employees are passionate about serving the customer and take complete ownership of the customer’s needs. In providing such service, we’re embracing customer centricity, and by making positive changes in our organization, we reflect a focus on the customer and a commitment to attracting and retaining top employees.

Part of our customer-service vision entailed developing a comprehensive road map to guide us in achieving cultural change within our toll-collection department. In your personal life, creating and committing to a strategy that integrates sound nutrition and exercise plans, using the right set of resources to attain those goals, finding ways to stay focused on the plan, and celebrating one’s successes are key to achieving a healthy lifestyle. Similarly, in business, the same holds true for achieving cultural transformation: Management must obtain consent and commitment from the organization to adopt a strategy, devise ways for employees to remain focused on the goals, and celebrate successes that align with the new vision and the diversity of the staff. True to that approach, our road map promotes a service-centric approach to business while employing best practices and processes to ensure operational integrity.

The map, a 15-page, spiral-bound, ledger-sized document, includes our customer-service mission statement; business objectives and supporting strategies; current working conditions by location, shift, and position; and notes on the future state of our business. It also divides the current 12-month period into three phases of point-by-point objectives to be achieved within each phase to prepare us for the future. All the information in the map came from our employees and was welcomed as is—we didn’t edit it to make it appear we had no morale problems. Each toll-collection team manager, service

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manager, workforce manager, director, and administrative assistant has a copy of the map and continues to refer to it.



After evaluating whether the toll-collection department's organizational structure supported these new initiatives, management determined that the staffing structure required an overhaul as well. Existing titles and positions were reviewed, including that of toll attendant; new positions were created; and roles and responsibilities were redefined. In reviewing the toll-attendant title and position, we understood we needed to present to NCTA's executive director a solid strategy that would support the organization's vision of customer service. Additionally, we determined that our customers want to talk to an empowered NCTA employee, one who is permitted to make decisions. Who better to do that than "the boss"? The toll-attendant position was thus retitled "booth owner and service specialist," or "BOSS" for short. In turn, management activities defined by our new strategy are all designed to support the BOSS. After more than a

hundred comprehensive interviews with employees at all levels of the organization, and 39 internal moves, a new management team was in place.

Staying Fit

In addition to the road map, we created a "Management Activities Matrix" with the express intent of defining daily management and supervisory activities to ensure that all elements of our comprehensive strategy would be implemented. All managers and supervisors are accountable for various functions, including coaching, employee recognition, meetings, communication, productivity, and quality monitoring.

Exercise is vital to maintaining personal fitness and creating a high energy level. So, too, in the realm of business fitness. To keep the department fit, we created a structured "Momentum Calendar" and implemented it in conjunction with the Management Activities Matrix to balance fun and work. The calendar lists quarterly activities by week and includes events that involve managers and executives to ensure organizationwide participation. Our toll plazas have created teams and representative mascots as part of the effort, and the increased "face time" between individuals at different levels in NCTA has broken down the walls between frontline employees and executives and managers. New toll-collection uniforms present an updated image to the public. And events such as ice-cream socials, cultural appreciation days, manager car washes for employees, and the "World Class Cup"—a two-hour event of friendly competition and games combined with training in the new strategies for all toll-collection staff—have brought a high level of energy to the organization.

A smart eating plan means choosing the right foods, preparing them in a healthy way, and balancing one's diet. In business, how are we balancing our employees' "diets"? Are we providing the daily requirements of communication, motivation, acknowledgment, and recognition?

Rewards and recognition coupled with coaching and disciplinary action have brought a new balance to the interaction between our employees and their managers. While they continue to address performance and behavioral issues, managers and supervisors now actively make a point of noting people doing something right, whereas before, recognition was far less frequent. On-the-spot recognition and unexpected rewards for outstanding service and

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work reinforce the behaviors we seek while celebrating employees' success in attaining them.

Addressing performance and behavioral issues has acquired a new complexion as well. Our new "exact change" coaching sessions, generally given as managers walk the facilities, are informal feedback meetings, while "change made" coaching sessions are scheduled, formal feedback affairs that offer the opportunity for two-way communication between managers and employees.



Just as reducing cholesterol helps maintain a healthy blood flow in the body, so does removing impediments to communication improve the flow of information in an organization. We have implemented processes to do just that, including starting our monthly "Toll Talk" newsletter for staff, instituting "mobile motivator" committees at each plaza that plan events and provide another means of communication between employees,

and training team managers and team leaders in two-way communication to alleviate employees' feeling that they were never heard.

Results, Simply Stated

NTTA's strategy to revamp the culture of its toll-collection department has reaped significant results. Turnover has declined from more than 15 percent to 9 percent, and documented disciplinary action has decreased 50 percent to 75 percent.

The new, two-way communication between management and staff and the role of manager as coach have made our BOSSes feel valued and able. A common vision, consistent managerial behaviors

across all plaza facilities, the elimination of "silos" (plaza facilities that would operate on their own, without collaborating with anyone), and the provision of technical and soft-skills training and



development coupled with rewards and recognition have similarly empowered NTTA's BOSSes. Not only are our employees happier, but our cash-paying customers are conveying their delight with the changes at NTTA as well, with customer "escalations" in response to poor service declining by more than 50 percent.

Committing to the changes necessary to achieve and maintain a healthy heart requires ongoing effort. Typically, people in the process of changing to a healthier lifestyle first notice that they feel better, then confirm that feeling through medical testing and diagnostics. Protecting the heart of a business requires similar testing and diagnostics, and NTTA is devising new ways to measure success. For example, we're developing a management review program for the department that will contain measurements for service, operational integrity, safety, and security based on established goals for each plaza facility and its associated ramp plazas. This, coupled with ongoing communication, will help us determine our success and pinpoint where changes to our strategic direction may be needed.

I once read in the *Harvard Business Review* that “you can’t govern without the consent of the governed.” We agree and have obtained that commitment and consent from our employees to maintain our

cultural shift. The result is that the heart of our cash business is pumping more efficiently than ever.

Scott Thomas, of Tamer Partners Corp., conducted interviews among the frontline toll collectors during our transition period and remembers one particular conversation quite well. The individual had been

with NTTA for quite some time and was only a few months shy of retirement. The employee had been very loyal to the organization and wanted to offer his full support during the interview. He spoke candidly about NTTA’s work environment, the challenges and strengths of the toll-collection team, and the desire for improvement in morale and fun. After answering Thomas’s final interview question, the man expressed some concern. He thought the concept of transforming the department’s culture was noble but possibly unrealistic. He feared that this was just the latest “flavor of the week” and that much more than ideas was required to bring about significant change. Thomas told him he couldn’t agree more and assured the employee that the commitment to change was solid at the top of the organization and would require action at every level.

Thomas planned to check back with his interviewee six months later to see whether he thought the company had succeeded with its plan. At an NTTA “Toll Train” event acknowledging employees for their achievements in transforming the department’s culture,

Thomas saw the man and made a point of catching up with him afterward. As the two shook hands, Thomas asked whether he remembered their last conversation. The man said he did and with great passion and teary eyes went on to describe the amazing transformation he had seen in his department. He loves the new culture now, he said, so much so that his retirement date had come and gone. He said the change was real, not just talk, and that the entire department had embraced the evolution. He added that his wife now thinks he’s crazy because he enjoys going to work. Thomas said he knew this was a great indicator of the success NTTA’s toll-collection department is experiencing in transforming its culture.

I couldn’t agree more.

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