

Drive for Excellence: How To Increase Transit Ridership

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Drive for Excellence (DFE), a new concept in employee-based marketing for public transportation, applies to public transportation many of the management principles discussed by Tom Peters in his book *Thriving on Chaos*. The DFE program uses teams of front-line employees, who are given the responsibility and authority (including budget authority) to implement projects aimed at increasing ridership. Implemented at two large agencies to date, the program has proven successful in increasing ridership. It has also been successful in improving employee morale, fostering interdepartmental cooperation, improving customer relations, and enhancing public relations. The structure and implementation of the DFE program, as well as the evaluation methods used to monitor ridership and program performance, are described.

Most transit agencies in the United States would admit to facing a ridership crisis. Decreasing gasoline prices and suburbanization have resulted in increased use of the single-occupancy vehicle and decreased use of public transportation.

As public transportation has lost market share, communities have also lost out through increased traffic congestion and an increased burden on the infrastructure of aging roads. Ironically, the response that many policy-making bodies have taken is to decrease resources for developing and marketing public transportation because of decreasing ridership.

The pressure to increase ridership on public transportation, therefore, has never been greater. Throughout the nation, transit agencies are attempting innovative approaches to increase ridership. The transit industry is being transformed as agencies begin to restructure service, penetrate new market niches, and respond in myriad ways to the changing market demand.

At the same time, businesses in America have been going through a major management revolution, spurred by the teachings of authors such as Peters and Drucker. These authors cite businesses that have succeeded because of their commitment to customer service and the empowerment of their workforces.

The Drive for Excellence (DFE) concept was developed as a program for increased ridership, inspired by the successes achieved in other sectors of the economy through programs that give workers a stake in their companies and some management responsibility for the products they deliver. The program moves beyond the rhetoric of participatory management by giving grass roots teams of employees financial resources, decision-making power, and a strategic framework for increasing transit ridership. The basic concept and history of the DFE

program and its potential application to other transit agencies are described in the following sections.

HISTORY

The DFE concept was created at Seattle Metro in 1988 to respond to concerns about decreasing ridership and employee morale. Since that time, the program has been renewed at Seattle Metro and adopted by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA).

DFE was structured as a first step in building a new approach to transit management, where everybody in the organization has a responsibility for satisfied customers and increased market share of all public transportation products. There are people within the industry who might argue that the program concept does not take into account the day-to-day realities of transit operations. In both Cleveland and Seattle, the DFE program was developed as a total agency initiative, with strong participation from all quarters of transit operations, including union representatives.

Because of this participation, the DFE program has endured and overcome initial skepticism. The program structure is a simple, decentralized campaign. Teams of employees from each transit operating base are allocated money (\$5,000 initially in Seattle and \$8,000 in Cleveland) to increase transit ridership. Team members are asked to make their own decisions about activities to increase transit ridership.

Each team is organized by two coaches, who cannot be above a first-line supervisory level. In Seattle, one coach is from an operations division and the other is from a planning or marketing division. Teams can recruit members in any way they choose. The role of midlevel and upper managers is to facilitate and counsel. Overall campaign coordination is provided by a campaign manager, who has day-to-day budget authority for the program.

As noted in the organization chart (Figure 1), teams are supported by planners, who help identify routes with market potential, and by researchers and revenue staff, who monitor ridership (systemwide and on targeted routes) to give teams necessary feedback.

A steering committee made up of senior members of the management team plays a particularly notable role in implementing the management transition that DFE represented. In addition to encouraging communication throughout the organization, the steering committee cuts red tape and encourages flexibility, particularly among midlevel personnel who have much vested in a more structured, hierarchical management system.

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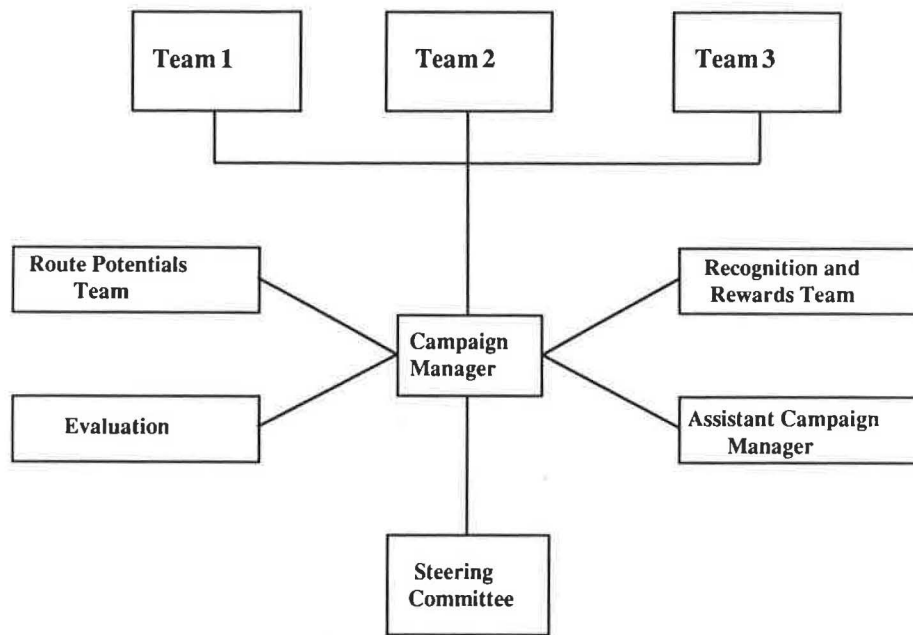


FIGURE 1 DFE organization chart.

The DFE program was a risk, but it was a managed risk. The return on investment has been extremely gratifying to date. In the first few months of operation, DFE teams in both Seattle and Cleveland generated a wealth of ideas to increase ridership and improve public relations. They engaged in projects that ranged from a holiday food drive in Cleveland, which raised over eight tons of canned food, to the creation of a floating bus made of milk cartons, which appeared in a SeaFair festival in Seattle. As the evaluation findings in the next section indicate, the campaigns have helped to attract new riders, improve employee morale, and stimulate positive media coverage.

Both programs are now maturing. Seattle is entering its third year and Cleveland its second. One of the questions that remains is how the DFE concept will evolve over time in a specific location.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

At Seattle Metro, the DFE program went through extensive evaluation in 1988. At the Greater Cleveland RTA, the program has not been in operation long enough for a meaningful evaluation. Therefore, this section includes only the results of the Seattle project.

For management at Seattle Metro, DFE merited scrutiny because it represented a new management approach and a major commitment of staff resources. For the employee work teams, accurate information about the results of their efforts was crucial to sustain motivation and permit the teams to refine and improve their projects.

Therefore, in Seattle, an interdivisional evaluation team was created to assess DFE. Working with management personnel, the team established three main evaluation objectives:

- Test the effectiveness of the campaign in increasing transit ridership and other indicators of campaign progress,

- Identify potential improvements to DFE activities and highlight particularly effective techniques, and

- Record qualitative assessments of the campaign, staff relations, outside interests, media coverage, and other pertinent data.

Special data collection and reporting activities were established. Baseline data on system ridership, as well as ridership on specific routes targeted for improvement by the teams, were established prior to the implementation of campaign activities. Ridership monitors and automatic passenger counters were then deployed in order to collect weekly ridership data on targeted routes. Summary ridership reports were produced periodically and distributed throughout the agency.

The response to promotions was measured by the number of returned free ride tickets from each event. Questionnaires were also included in the information packets distributed to households during three of the major route promotions. This information was used to estimate the number of nonriders attracted to the service on a trial basis.

Each team was also asked to fill out a monthly report that described the specific activities carried out by the team, the amount and type of materials distributed, the number of staff participating, and the total volunteer hours contributed.

Results

The five DFE teams in Seattle began activities in the field in June 1988 and continued their work through the end of the year. During this period, the teams designed and implemented over 45 promotions and activities that would not otherwise have occurred at Seattle Metro. The types of activities undertaken by the teams fell into four general categories:

- Route modifications,
- Targeted information distributions,

- Fairs and festivals, and
- Physical modifications to transit vehicles or facilities.

A complete team activities report for June to December 1988 is available from the authors on request.

Route Modifications

In three instances, teams analyzed a particular route and made changes in routing or scheduling to improve convenience and coverage. For example, one team added a bus stop at a regional park to a route that had previously passed by the recreation site. In another case, a team made a minor adjustment to the schedule of a route that allowed it to meet an earlier ferry and save commuters 15 min.

Targeted Information Distributions

These activities were generally aimed at increasing ridership on selected routes. The teams designed special brochures and usually distributed these with free ride tickets to residences in the vicinity of the route. More than 18,000 residents were targeted in this manner. Distributions also took place at park-and-ride lots, on board ferries, on board designated transit routes, and even in the jury room of King County Superior Court.

Fairs and Festivals

Teams participated in 11 events by entering a float in a parade, setting up a display booth, or distributing balloons, general Metro promotional literature, and free ride tickets. In two instances, the teams arranged for special shuttle buses to provide access to the event. The shuttles ran from nearby park-and-ride lots and, in one case, from a ferry terminal.

Physical Modifications to Transit Vehicles or Facilities

Three teams chose to get a promotional message across by making special changes to Metro vehicles and facilities. The most visible of these was the custom painting (by staff and local art students) of a Zoo Bus for a winding route that terminated at the Woodland Park Zoo. The project resulted in considerable media coverage and higher awareness of transit as a transportation option to the zoo. Another team used recycled materials to construct and post signs at transit freeway stations, giving travel time information from that location to major destinations: "Let Metro Do the Driving. Only 8 minutes to Downtown Seattle."

Response to the many promotions, as measured by free ride ticket returns, varied according to the type of promotion and where the complimentary coupon was distributed. Of the over 50,000 free ride tickets distributed by the Seattle teams, approximately 35 percent were returned. Distributions at park-and-ride lots, on board coaches, and among jurors, however, averaged a 60-percent return rate. About 30 percent of the tickets given out at parades and festivals were used. The low-

est return rate of 20 percent resulted from door-to-door distribution.

Survey returns from packets distributed in residential areas indicated that, of the respondents who intended to use the free ride tickets, approximately 40 percent of them did not usually ride the bus. By applying this ratio to the actual number of free ride tickets returned from all home end distributions, the evaluation team estimated that 900 nonriders tried the bus because of these DFE activities. This amounted to about 5 percent of the targeted residences and represented a respectable return rate for mass-mailing-type promotions.

The turnaround year in ridership for Seattle Metro was 1988. After four years of slowly declining patronage, ridership increased by 3 percent in 1988. The goal of 500,000 additional rides by the end of the year was achieved. Many DFE activities resulted in directly identifiable ridership increases. During the summer of 1988, for example, DFE-sponsored special-event shuttle buses carried 7,600 passengers who would not otherwise have ridden.

The teams also targeted 13 existing routes with promotional activities to increase ridership. These routes represented approximately 5 percent of the trips taken on Seattle Metro's transit system. Table 1 shows the annual change in passengers per trip registered on these routes as compared to the rest of the system.

The 12-month analysis indicated that DFE succeeded in raising ridership on the targeted routes at a faster pace than was occurring in the rest of the system. This preliminary conclusion is tempered, however, when the comparison is carried further back. In 10 out of 13 annual signup pairs, beginning with the fall 1983 to fall 1984 period, DFE routes outperformed the rest of the system.

Evaluation Conclusions

The conclusions of the ridership evaluation were

- DFE produced ridership increases that would not otherwise have occurred. This was most clearly demonstrated by those activities that resulted in serviced additions or extensions (for example, special-event shuttles);
- The DFE promotions succeeded in attracting a substantial number of nonriders to try transit; and
- Although ridership increases recorded on DFE routes were higher than for the rest of the system, Metro's system-wide increase in 1988 was the result of other factors as well.

TABLE 1 DRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE RIDERSHIP COMPARISON

Ridership Summary Period by Signup	Percent Change (passengers/ trip)	
	DFE Routes	All Other Routes
Spring 1987 to spring 1988 (<i>Drive for Excellence Begins</i>)	+1.58	+2.98
Summer 1987 to summer 1988	+4.21	+0.36
Fall 1987 to fall 1988	+4.07	+2.97

In more qualitative terms, DFE involved a broad cross-section of staff in a burst of energy to increase ridership. During the campaign, employees, family members, and friends gave more than 3,000 volunteer hours to the effort. The teams also demonstrated a level of cross-divisional teamwork never before experienced in the agency. Employees began to redefine their organizational roles more broadly, demonstrating a better understanding of the interrelated nature of the agency's functions. With a fresh perspective, the teams designed and implemented activities that would not otherwise have happened.

Cynicism, though present, was not pervasive and did not interfere with the spirit or functioning of the teams. As was expected, some friction occurred between teams and regular staff when the teams sought to carry out an activity that affected the responsibility or authority of the regular staff person (for example, minor schedule or route changes). Some activities also proved unproductive and were discontinued. For example, one team bought advertising space in a classified advertising publication and got no response back. Free ride ticket distributions were discontinued at park-and-ride lots when it became clear that the high return rates represented lost revenue more than increased ridership. In all cases, the decisions to initiate or discontinue activities were the responsibility of the team.

THE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Transit agencies considering implementing a DFE program need to incorporate five basic elements into the program's design. They are grass roots participation, leadership and commitment, structure, communication, and feedback and evaluation. Specific issues which Seattle and Cleveland have found problematic in the process of program implementation include middle management commitment, program communication, rewards/recognition, and program continuity.

Grass Roots Participation and Empowerment

The DFE concept cannot succeed without participation throughout the transit organization, especially by front-line employees. Participation in this case means much more than convincing bus drivers to do marketing and promotional work. Rather, it means involvement by front-line employees in every phase of decision making about the campaign, from the planning of activities to allocation of budgetary resources.

In every sense of the word, DFE is owned by the employees who participate in the program. It is very important that all DFE activities be generated through the teams. Teams can consider proposals from outside groups or from transit managers, but it must be their decision to implement the project, even if those activities have never been tried before, or have been tried and failed. Teams need to be allowed to make mistakes. Projects mandated by agency managers are counter to the fundamental principles of the program.

Managers have found their roles somewhat changed in the DFE program. Instead of playing a quality control or disciplinary role, they have been more effective as advocates and facilitators. In fact, the steering committees have been spe-

cifically charged to facilitate projects, cut red tape, and address logistical issues in a problem-solving mode.

For both transit agencies, the greatest resistance to participation has come from middle managers, who in some ways have the most vested interest in the bureaucratic status quo. Special guidance must be given to this group, reinforcing the commitment of top management to the program and its goals. In addition, every opportunity must be given to encouraging and rewarding participation by middle managers in this program.

Leadership and Commitment

Some managers have questioned whether front-line staff are ready for the empowerment granted through the DFE program. But perhaps a better question is: Is management ready for the adjustments it must make to allow the program to work? The DFE concept cannot succeed without the commitment and involvement of top agency management. The commitment comes in several forms.

First, a financial commitment needs to be made. Each team needs to have financial resources with which to implement their activities—the amount could be as low as \$500 or as high as \$10,000, depending on the kind of system. The key is that the teams have some money to work with and that accounting systems are set up to allow them to make decisions about how to spend that money in a timely way.

Second, upper management needs to be prepared to sell the program enthusiastically to middle management, who may resent the potential disruption of the program. The DFE program means taking staff away from some of their day-to-day responsibilities at times. It sometimes means bending the rules to allow more timeliness and flexibility for the program. Agencies unwilling to make that commitment should not attempt to undertake a DFE program.

Third, upper management needs to be involved. They need to be willing to be part of the team process. The DFE structure mandates that senior management meet regularly as part of the campaign steering committee to facilitate elements of the program. The program is enhanced even more when senior management participates in team activities.

Structure

A DFE campaign is structured to allow a free flow of ideas and energy among employees at all levels of the transit department. Seattle Metro and the Greater Cleveland RTA, like many transit agencies across the county, had become internally fragmented. This fragmentation was due in part to geographical separation (bus bases and their personnel located in outlying areas and administrative personnel located in the downtown core). The DFE concept recognizes that teamwork toward a common goal requires that people from different perspectives come together and share those perspectives in developing a strategy for success.

This is often easier said than done, because this philosophy requires that people take a personal risk and join forces with an "unknown quantity." To help break the ice at Seattle Metro, the DFE structure mandates cross-divisional inter-

action. Team coaches with a planning or marketing orientation are required to choose an advisor from operations divisions. Conversely, team coaches who had their feet firmly planted in the operations side of the house must choose an advisor with a planning or marketing background. Coaches are paired into teams, one from operations and one from planning and marketing. At the Greater Cleveland RTA, the existing organizational structure did not allow the same mix between the planning and marketing and operations staff. Instead, administrative support staff became involved in the program. This structure created opportunities for teamwork that had not before existed at the RTA.

These teams are the heart of the DFE campaign. Each has the basic responsibility of meeting the ridership goal through the activities conceived and implemented by their team members. Team coaches have the responsibility to recruit members, manage the team budget, and monitor team activities. They also have significant responsibility for motivating and rewarding team members for their contributions to the ridership effort. Team advisors are the mentors for team coaches. Their responsibilities include advising coaches on team activity proposals, assisting teams in carrying out their activities, and coordinating with market strategy committee members to advocate for team interest. Team members comprise anyone the team coaches can recruit. It is not unusual for team members to include bus drivers, mechanics, facility maintenance workers, planners, accountants, and analysts.

Much of the success of DFE can be attributed to this unorthodox organizational structure. In addition to DFE's exceeding its ridership goal in Seattle, an interesting phenomenon began to take place. Personnel in all divisions and at all levels of the organization began talking to one another. This talk was not just meeting talk. Instead, it took place in hallways, over the phone, and at lunch. And the talk was not all centered around increasing ridership. Bus drivers wanted to learn about the intricacies of the planning process for a bus route. Marketing people discovered just what it takes for the operations department to respond to a request for a shiny, clean bus to be on display at local events. Supervisors saw that the bright, articulate people who worked for and around them had an untapped well of ideas about running a bus company.

Communication and Feedback

The overall success of the DFE campaign depends upon the many small successes of the individual activities. Over the course of the first year of Seattle Metro's DFE, over 70 activities were undertaken by employee teams, providing many opportunities to talk about individual, team, and campaign successes.

Communication breakdowns usually occur because there is no forum in which communication can take place. Seattle Metro's DFE program guards against this downfall by developing specific communication forums through which to channel DFE news. These forums include newsletters, suggestion boxes, and bulletin boards.

Newsletters

Drive Times, the *Drive for Excellence Review and Preview Newsletter* was one of the most important communication tools

of the campaign. Written by the campaign manager, *Drive Times* was posted at over 100 locations throughout the agency. In keeping with the underlying theme that DFE was a fun activity in which to be involved, *Drive Times* was a chatty, one-page update about team activities, successes measured by the evaluation team, upcoming events employees might want to become involved in, and progress in achieving the ridership goal.

Ideas with Drive

"Ideas with Drive" suggestion boxes were scattered throughout Seattle Metro bus bases and administrative offices. Suggestions were passed along to team coaches, who shared them with team members for their consideration. Employees who submitted ideas were notified as to the status of their ideas and were encouraged to join a team and work to implement the idea.

DFE Bulletin Boards

DFE bulletin boards were installed at all transit department facilities. These bulletin boards were maintained by the team coaches and dedicated to DFE information. Weekly ridership numbers, pictures of team members and team activities, and messages of praise were posted on a continual basis. The DFE campaign manager was responsible for providing coaches with reprints of magazine articles, written information about ridership activities occurring at other transit agencies, and information from the private sector pertaining to marketing or customer service.

Evaluation

A thorough evaluation of a program such as DFE is essential for both management and the staff directly responsible for projects. In Seattle, an interdivisional evaluation team composed of staff with research and analytical capabilities was created to assess DFE. This team first produced an evaluation plan that clearly spelled out objectives, a methodology to gather data, and a schedule of evaluation activities corresponding to the progress of the campaign itself. In addition, each team developed quantifiable nonridership objectives in order to measure the general level of effort and to make sure a team would be credited for completing specific tasks.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the DFE program represents a substantial departure from the standard operations of most transit agencies, it provides a compelling framework for increasing ridership, building interdepartmental cooperation, enhancing employee morale, and improving agency public relations. Agencies considering implementing DFE programs, however, must be prepared to make some major commitments to a very different management philosophy. In addition, consideration must be given to the question, "What next?"

The program at Seattle Metro, just completing its second year, is attracting higher numbers of volunteers. Unless some-

thing is done to accommodate the additional workload demands on staff participants, however, the program can be excessively demanding, sometimes leading to burnout. The question remains (at both Greater Cleveland RTA and Seattle Metro) whether DFE will become part of the daily ethic, continue in a campaign mode, or simply be an effective short-term tool for increasing ridership.

These are all legitimate outcomes, but a conscious choice must be made by management to assure their own credibility and the credibility of other employee involvement efforts.

The DFE programs undertaken at Seattle Metro and the Greater Cleveland RTA continue to demonstrate positive results as employees from all levels of the organization are

involved in building transit ridership. At both agencies, the consensus is that the benefits have far outweighed the anticipated risks.

The program has proven popular with employees, the community, the media, and elected officials. In addition, management has seen considerable payoffs with greater internal coordination and improved morale. The program and its activities are documented to have increased transit ridership, sometimes fairly dramatically.

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