

Creating a Collaborative Environment Between Airport Operations and Maintenance

Why does there seem to be less collaboration between operations and maintenance when compared to collaboration between other departments and divisions within airport organizations? That fundamental question led to the development of *ACRP Report 92: A Guidebook to Creating a Collaborative Environment Between Airport Operations and Maintenance*.

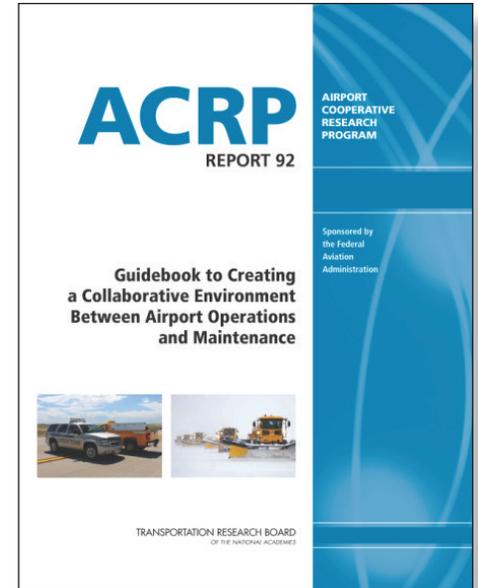
The question also compelled Ryan Johnson to take action.

Johnson is an airport operations specialist at the Harrisburg Airport (MDT), part of the Susquehanna Area Regional Airport Authority in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Johnson is also an ACRP Champion and takes his responsibility to promote ACRP products “very seriously.” So, while the operations and maintenance teams at Harrisburg get along “pretty well,” Johnson noted, he wanted to make the situation better and was

confident the tools in *ACRP Report 92* would be of assistance.

Johnson gathered members of both teams at MDT for a lunch-and-learn event where he presented the primary findings of the guidebook. “I was not sure how staff would respond,” said Johnson. “I didn’t want employees to think I was convening the gathering because there were problems. To the contrary, our operations and maintenance department personnel get along quite well. But I believe we can always improve, so I did my best to emphasize the positive outcomes associated with greater collaboration in the workplace,” he said.

In advance of the lunch-and-learn session, Johnson developed a survey instrument based on guidance found in the Collaboration Toolbox section of *ACRP Report 92* and administered the survey to his operations and maintenance employees to assess how



well the group collaborated. He compiled and compared the results to national averages contained in the guidebook and reviewed the results during the session.

The survey responses revealed several areas of strength:

- MDT has less conflict than the national average.
- Communication at MDT is better than the national average.
- MDT staff set their own work assignments more than the national average.

The survey results also identified several opportunities for improvement:

- MDT employees understand the work order system less than the national average.
- MDT employees use checklists less than the national average.
- MDT employees have less work flexibility than the national average.



Above: Operations and maintenance staff at Harrisburg Airport (MDT) meet to discuss how generational differences among the teams can affect their styles of work and communication. MDT supervisors followed the guidance in *ACRP Report 92* to help evaluate their operations and maintenance work environment and to improve collaboration between employees.

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- There is no mentoring program at MDT.
- Employees at MDT have less latitude to prioritize their work.

While the survey findings overall were good news, Johnson and his colleagues wanted to take action that would help them capitalize on their identified strengths. They decided to “drill down” into the questions associated with why MDT employees have less latitude to prioritize their work.

After reviewing their survey results in light of the warning signs, possible root causes, and action strategies identified in *ACRP Report 92*, Johnson and staff concluded that the warning sign “Lack of confidence in others to complete tasks” was relevant to MDT. According to the guidebook, this warning sign can be attributed to “personal aversions, past disappointments, or lack of confidence in others’ skills.” Subsequently, employees will exhibit distrust in other’s abilities to perform as expected.

“But why?” asked Johnson. He and his operations and maintenance team members referred to the possible root causes section of the guidebook and selected “Employee work style differences” as a possible cause for the lack of confidence exhibited by the group. They then drilled down even further and selected “Generational differences” as the strategy to focus on to help them address the warning sign.

“I informed the group that generational differences can be an underlying cause of dysfunction and lack of collaboration between employees,” noted Johnson.



Above: Graphic illustrating the assessment process followed by Harrisburg Airport (MDT) to identify ‘Generational differences’ as a key reason why their operations and maintenance staff have less latitude in prioritizing their work. *ACRP Report 92* provided MDT with useful tools and guidance to help recognize and manage generational differences among their employees to improve collaboration between the operations and maintenance teams.

According to *ACRP Report 92*, in today’s workplace there can be up to five different generations working together, and each have different ideas of how to complete the work and what collaboration actually means.

At MDT, Johnson and his colleagues determined that their operations and maintenance team was comprised of three generations:

- 36% were Baby Boomers.
- 46% were Generation Xers.
- 18% were Generation Yers.

With this information in hand, Johnson and his colleagues invested time to meet and discuss various communication styles among the different generations and how the different generations think about work, life, and the work/life balance.

“The exercises Ryan led were eye-opening to me,” said Crystal Tennis, airfield grounds supervisor at MDT. “As soon as he talked about differences in generations, it made sense to me. Sometimes it’s hard to work with other generations,” she observed.

As a result of the process and the new information she obtained, Tennis has worked hard to change her behaviors. She now looks more closely at how she presents information to others, and no longer expects people to do something just because she said so.

“Some employees would always ask me ‘why’ we were doing something I directed them to do and that question infuriated me,” Tennis said. “I now try very hard to think about the other person. As Ryan and our group discussed, each generation

Generational Characteristics

- **Baby Boomers are loyal, have the experience, and will provide historical knowledge.**
- **Generation Xers will be loyal to the company if the company meets their needs. They will add value to the company such as challenge, variety, and independence.**
- **Generation Yers will bring new approaches and fun to the workplace.**

—*ACRP Report 92: A Guidebook to Creating a Collaborative Environment Between Airport Operations and Maintenance*

brings value to the organization and each generation does things differently. Our challenge is to better understand the differences and change our behaviors accordingly,” she concluded.

“In my role as an ACRP Champion I attempt to utilize as many ACRP reports and implement as many ACRP research findings as possible here at MDT,” said Johnson. “Without question, the tools contained in *ACRP Report 92* are among the best I’ve seen. I am confident that by better understanding the unique qualities and work styles of employees from different age groups, we will improve the quality of our work.”

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