

# **FDOT Step Up: *Moving Forward as One***

**by**

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## **How it Started**

It didn't take the Secretary long to realize his appointment as leader of the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) was going to be one of the bigger challenges he had faced in his professional career. State employees in Florida had not seen a pay raise in six years; the state legislature had decided to place a larger responsibility on employee contribution to their health care; the retirement system was being revamped and job reductions in the workforce were ongoing. These actions and others had reduced morale to an all-time low. In essence, the morale of state employees had bottomed out. The FDOT was also struggling in an attempt to gain increased funding for infrastructure construction. Realizing the critical circumstances and the negative impact of low morale, the Secretary reviewed the infrastructure of the agency, human resource policies and sought the input of others. The conclusion he reached was that inconsistencies permeated the agency and there was little effort to maximize input from human capital. FDOT needed to turn the corner with a significant change in the culture and consistency in policies. In short, Secretary moved forward with a plan for the agency to be a ... *bold, innovative roadmap for the future which will provide the most advanced and effective transportation in the country.* In October 2011, the Secretary announced the plan for stepping up:

- The approach would be centralized control policy by the executive team with decentralized execution in the Districts,
- Consistent, predictable and repeatable (CPR) change and work actions would be used by the agency,
- Interactions within the agency should demonstrate consideration of others, professionalism and respectfulness with each other (CPR<sup>2</sup>). (CPR<sup>2</sup> was introduced during the second annual Step Up meeting)
- The workplace culture of Step Up with bold actions, innovative ideas and inspirational communication - would be embedded in the agency.

The communication was powerful if somewhat overwhelming. Responses ranged from full acceptance to the plan to resistance from scattered comments. However, the consensus of employees welcomed inclusion in the functions of the agency. What was found most

interesting, FDOT inadvertently backed into a full blown employee engagement practice. The following story will provide you with an overview of the *three phases* used, how Step Up is the realization and practice of employee engagement and the success stories that emerged.

### **Phase I: Communication from the Start – Creating Awareness & Understanding**

In successful change initiatives communication is what brings the change to light. The Secretary initially moved forward with his plan using *sense of urgency discussions* with his immediate leadership team. Onboarding the team was critical to gain support and commitment to Step Up and the beginning of a communication plan. The Secretary then called a Step Up Workshop meeting with his top one hundred seventy executives and cost-center managers. The one day meeting was entitled *Step Up I - Raising FDOT's Batting Average*. Throughout the workshop, the Secretary repeatedly articulated the change focus and actions necessary to move forward as one FDOT. His communication of thinking boldly with innovative ideas and inspirational communication was the plan of action. Secondly, actions should be consistent, predictable and repeatable, followed by behavioral expectations. Interestingly enough, during the meeting the Secretary asked all employees to submit innovative ideas to him. His challenge was met with over 1200 ideas! A statewide "Innovators! Team" was then created to review the ideas, select the doable ideas and then push the ideation forward for approval. The Innovators! Team later organized a process for submission of ideas, follow through and feedback.

Capturing the enthusiasm from the workshop meeting, the Secretary traveled to each of the eight Districts, as well as Headquarters, delivering sense of urgency communication in Town Hall meetings. Each meeting always concluded with Q&A. The Secretary also utilized webinars as a change of pace and a means to further disseminate Step Up information and practices. Transparency was delivered as well as impactful listening skills applied.

The first year of Step Up moved slowly as the new language and practice of Step Up began to penetrate the upper level of the agency. It was important that FDOT leadership understand the focus and direction of the agency. Getting buy-in, identifying influencers and potential champions of Step Up dominated the communication. Even though the overwhelmed remained vocal in the workplace, quietly resisting the culture shift of Step Up, the Secretary persisted in challenging the *as is* with a *to be* persuasion.

Twelve months later, the Secretary scheduled another one day workshop meeting, with the same participants, entitled, *Step Up II – Every Step Begins with Me!* The intent of this meeting was to further drill down to the individual level. The Secretary indicated that progress was being made after one year, but there was still a long way to go. Getting the message out consistently, helping others understand the message and getting everyone to do something

with ideas remained the issue. He continued to emphasize that every level of leadership communicating Step Up should be the same everywhere within the agency; Step Up is not a choice but the way we do business and the message should be delivered with conviction and enthusiasm. The challenge in the workshop meeting was placed in a question format: How have you made Step Up a reality in your area? What are the benefits of Step Up? How are you being accountable to Step Up? A real plus to the meeting was the introduction of the Step Up Resource Bank. During the second meeting, a presentation was made on the resources created and available in the Step Up Resource Bank. Although limited in volume, the resources represented a start for leaders to use for team meeting starters and short presentations with larger groups of managers and supervisors.

## **Phase II: Gaining Traction**

Two years of Step Up at FDOT passed quickly. Ongoing Step Up dialogues and practices continued to grow with sustainable workplace actions. Step Up Town Hall meetings flourished in the Districts and Central Office. Daily communications included Step Up results and forward thinking actions. The Innovators! Team tackled some big ticketed innovation ideas and turned them into workplace applications.

In the beginning of Phase II, Step Up drill down meetings was conducted in each District and Headquarters. The intent of the interactive meetings was to further communicate Step Up and recognize the efforts of those employees who had stepped up. The communication of Step Up was broader in reach and comprehensive in content. Along with managers in the earlier FDOT meeting, additional managers and supervisors were also in attendance. The impact of Step Up growth and commitment was clearly communicated in the meetings.

Clearly, the original intent of Step Up was to encourage all FDOT employees to be bold in thinking, generate innovative ideas and share inspirational communication. Entering into the third year FDOT leadership team realized that Step Up was an approach to engage employees. FDOT had produced an employee engagement practice that was using innovation as the key driver. A positive turbulence surfaced that was beginning to impact the agency. The language of Step Up had broadened to include the need to refine the culture and clearly explain how Step Up is the vehicle for employee engagement and innovation.

## **Phase III: Taking Ownership of Your Work**

FDOT was quickly learning that giving employees ownership of their work accelerated

communication and the practice of engaging employees. Prior to the third annual Step Up meeting, the Secretary released information that the agency had reached a milestone in goals achievement and there was a 10% upswing in the recent employee satisfaction survey. Recognition was delivered throughout FDOT with a cross-section of communication tools. Each message consistently acknowledged employees for their commitment and performance in the agency.

The annual Step Up meeting, attended by the same participants, provided the opportunity to summarize the Step Up progress and recognize engaging actions by employees. The meeting was entitled, *Step Up III - Making a Difference & Owning Your Work*. The meeting began when the Secretary gave his State of the Step Up Union address. He was enthusiastic in his remarks and gave extensive recognition to the achievements of the agency followed by a comment that struck a positive tone: It's all about you! The Secretary's sincerity brought smiles upon faces and a feeling of work satisfaction.

A pilot employee engagement survey was conducted prior to the meeting with the results reported to participants. Interestingly enough, participant feedback was mixed to the data reported. The data identified served two purposes: the realization that there is a difference between employee satisfaction and employee engagement, and secondly, the need to gather feedback to generate an eventual FDOT employee engagement survey. At the same time Step Up resource development was in full production. One of the resources presented, *Mapping a Course to Success*, was introduced. The resource takes participants through an employee engagement gap and disconnection gap. It explains how to engage employees, essential leadership behavior and then crossing the performance bridge to success.

Continued Step Up communication followed the annual meeting along with identifying specific resources to support Step Up meetings. The resources were categorized under the following areas:

- Readings: Books and Articles
- Stepping Up Ideas and Tools
- Power Sessions (See *Fig 1* for list of the 12 Power Session topics)
- Videos
- Step Up Posters, Pictures and Meeting Starters
- Materials from the Annual Statewide Step Up Meetings

The next step in Phase III was to generate communication to fully align all FDOT employees to the Step Up principles of being bold, generating innovative ideas and inspirational communication. Up to this point, the three statewide meetings were dedicated to the management level to create the awareness and understanding that would lead to engaging employees in Step Up practices. The fourth Step Up meeting represented the culmination of the Step Up learning curve. The intent of the meeting was to formally take Step Up to the front line. It would be the opportunity to engage the head, heart and hands of all employees and embed employee engagement as the work culture practice.

The planning for the fourth annual Step Up meeting required an intensive effort to develop twelve Power Sessions, (see Fig 1) each having a one hour duration, for team and department meetings and the selection of five employee engagement drivers that would be used in the development of the employee engagement survey questions. The survey would be sent to all employees prior to the meeting; and equally important was the need to develop a presentation that would rejuvenate the Innovators! Team effort. Even before the scheduled meeting, meeting, content teasers were sent to the same participants. The purpose was to generate enthusiasm, build curiosity and assure participants that the Step Up meeting would be interactive. The title and focus of the meeting was *Step Up IV - Putting Step Up into Power Drive*.

## **Power Sessions**



Fig. 1

The meeting started with a bang! The Secretary recognized a year of goal achievement and remarked on the total efforts of all employees. Participants were then engaged in two interactive Power Sessions. A guest speaker, from the private sector, spoke on getting

employees on the same page. Then short videos clips on employee engagement were shown and a simulation was used closely related to the game show Jeopardy. Next, feedback from the engagement survey reported areas in need of strengthening. Finally a presentation was given entitled, *Innovating How FDOT Innovates*. The presenter challenged participants to *Free the Idea Monkeys* – identify employees who have bold and innovative ideas, implement idea campaigns, establish innovation incubators in each District and Headquarters; and finally, redefine the statewide Innovators! Team by broadening their role and responsibility. The presentation had a tremendous impact on the participants. The room was full of excitement and laughter with participants ready to increasingly Step Up to the challenge of engaging the front line.

Currently FDOT, continues to find ways to manage the energy of engaging employees who are bold, offer innovative ideas and inspirational communication. The innovation incubators are being developed and implemented. The incubators present the opportunity maintain the innovation focus and the greater possibility that FDOT will eventually become an innovation community. A new social media feature is in the offing that would invite leaders to share ideas and successes in engaging employees.

### **You Can Hold On or Let Go and *Move On***

Organizations that have successfully made innovation part of their strategy did so by capturing the creative energies and the powerful insights of their employees. The Secretary's intent to replace low morale with engaging action(s) was the springboard for engaging employees in innovative thinking. The Step Up culture re-channeled the energy of employees into a work culture that helped them be part of something big, the chance to make a difference, do meaningful work and belong to an engaging workplace. The Secretary's challenge to fulfill the capacity of the agency remains ongoing- *an idea only gets you to a better idea*. To be sure, the leadership provided by the Secretary is *...more than just task accomplishment, it's about helping employees realize their potential*.