LEADERSHIP UPSIDE DOWN

A framework to build the equitable, accessible, and verdant future we all want.

JOSH COHEN

transloc.comcom/the-movement

JOSH COHEN

Josh Cohen is TransLoc's National Director of Policy. Beyond the multi-syllable words in his title, this means he touches pretty much everything that goes on at TransLoc, a remnant from Josh's experience as one of TransLoc's earliest employees. For seven years, Josh helped TransLoc grow from 5 customers to 120 customers as TransLoc's Director of Business Development. Prior to TransLoc, Josh was CEO of DomoLife, a real-estate services business, and VP of Turnkey Sports, a sports business consultancy. When not chasing his three kids around the Bull City, Josh enjoys roasting his own coffee and smoking his own barbeque.

transloc.com/the-movement

OPENING

In my conversations with hundreds of leaders over the last year, I've realized that if we want to truly bring about change, we'll have to turn the traditional view of leadership *upside down*.

When many people think of leadership, especially in the context of mobility and our cities, they think of the swashbuckling (and historically, male) leader doing traditional leadership activities: making executive decisions to improve the community, giving interviews on TV, or cutting the ribbons at a public unveiling. There are a number of problems with this way of thinking, but a fundamental one is that what you're seeing isn't actual change.

Prototypical leader actions like opening a new transit depot or talking about a mobility plan in the newspaper that appear to be change aren't change. Instead, they are the result of change. They are the result of previous action taken—often long ago and hidden from plain sight—like a seed that has been carefully tended that finally sprouts. If we want to bring about change, we need to turn the conventional way we look at leadership upside down.

IF WE WANT TO TRULY BRING ABOUT CHANGE, WE'LL HAVE TO TURN THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF LEADERSHIP UPSIDE DOWN.

Instead of focusing on the executive decisions that are written up in the newspaper, we need to invest in the necessary reflection that led to the origins of these policy changes.

Instead of focusing on the elected or appointed official that represents the people, we need to look at the communities that are the people.

And instead of focusing on the political showmanship, we need to focus on the internal humility.

My goal for this document is to provide a simple three-part framework that everyone can use to help bring about true change in their communities.

PART ONE

REFLECTION

REFLECTION

Applying this framework of leadership upside down requires a significant period of reflection, both at the community level and by leaders in the community. Like an individual making the space for meditation, the community needs to make space to reflect on what's important to it. This requires a strong effort of community engagement to identify what the community values and what the collective vision of the community is for itself. This critical thinking, reflection, and learning act as a foundation for bringing about change.

AND WHILE SOME MAY THINK THAT THIS WORK MAY BE EASY, IT'S NOT. IT'S HARD AND IT'S MESSY, ESPECIALLY TO DO IT WELL.

And while some may think that this work may be easy, it's not. It's hard and it's messy, especially to do it well. It requires a community to confront what its values are, what its end goals are, and what it's willing to give up in order to achieve the community vision that supports its values. This isn't done by some glorious leader sitting in a conference room by his or herself, dreaming up a community vision. It requires engaging with the

REFLECTION

community, intentionally and mindfully, over a significant period of time. It requires starting with some ideas and then getting feedback on them, early and often.

Too often, we get mired in the existing processes that we already have for, say, building roads or allocating funding. But how often do we step back and say, "Why are we doing this? What do we want our community to look like? Who are we doing this for and are their voices in the room?" That's the point of this community reflection process.

And while that process can be long, challenging, and occasionally messy, it is the right thing to do. And it will pay off. Not completely because life isn't quite like that. There will still be people that you haven't talked to. There will still be people that will disagree with your proposal. But if you do the process right, those people will — more often than not — give you the benefit of the doubt. Why? Because this process — this messy, long, challenging process — builds trust. It helps people see that you are not simply trying to undermine them. You are working towards a common good where reasonable people can disagree, but can also respect when the approach is coming from a decent place and going towards a community-driven vision.

One way to determine how the process is going is to evaluate the community choices made on the short-term vs. long-term continuum. When leaders are prioritizing the short-term over the long-term, they can be doing so for ego or other selfish reasons, like retaining a prestigious

REFLECTION

selected or appointed position. And while there may be an occasional situation where short-term thinking should trump long-term thinking, long-term investment even over short-term benefit is a handy heuristic to use.

IF A LEADER WANTS TO BE ALIGNED WITH THE COMMUNITY, THEY WILL NECESSARILY THINK IN THE LONG-TERM

The reason for that is the community vision and values are almost always long- term in nature. They are rarely solely for the benefit of the short-term. And so, if a leader wants to be aligned with the community, they will necessarily think in the long-term.

Only once this reflection has been done at a community level and done equitably can a community move forward. Successful communities invest in this process. Unsuccessful communities shortcut this process and wonder why they can't make progress on what they perceive as critical community initiatives.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

▶ COMMUNITY VALUES

- What does our community stand for?

- What is our history and how do our values reflect that history?

- Have we been inclusive in our outreach to the community for their contributions?

▶ COMMUNITY VISION

- What compelling vision does our community have for some defined point in the future?

- Is that vision based in our community-held values?

- Have we shared the vision widely so that others can be inspired and challenged by it?

▶ TIME FRAME

- Do our choices mindfully prioritize the long-term over the short-term? Why or why not?

- How do we discuss trade-offs on how we accomplish our vision?

CASE STUDY

Minneapolis has been insulated from many of the economic downturns that have impacted the rest of the United States over the past several decades. This insulation, as well as the robust growth it has experienced, led to what Heather Worthington, director of Long Range Planning for the City of Minneapolis, described as their community's "narrative of exceptionalism." In addition, Minneapolis is home to the somewhat famous "Minnesota Nice" brand of hospitality.

But this narrative had some cracks. Indeed, while Minneapolis has a long history of embracing immigrants, it hadn't confronted the direct and indirect impacts that generations of racialized policies had on the economics of the region and its residents. The creation of Minneapolis' new comprehensive plan Minneapolis 2040 was meant to combat these policies.

WHILE MINNEAPOLIS HAS A LONG HISTORY OF EMBRACING IMMIGRANTS, IT HADN'T CONFRONTED THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS THAT GENERATIONS OF RACIALIZED POLICIES HAD ON THE ECONOMICS OF THE REGION AND ITS RESIDENTS.

CASE STUDY

But more than what they did, it was also important to look at how they built this new comprehensive plan. They accepted that they needed to include everyone in the public engagement progress so that everyone knew they had agency and the power to contribute to what the future of Minneapolis would look like. That meant Heather and her team had to identify different ways to engage with the community beyond just the standard evening public meeting. They visited festivals, sought out underrepresented groups, and even held meetings on public transit vehicles.

What this intentional process allowed was for relationships and trust to be built and a community vision of a future Minneapolis that encompassed all of Minneapolis and her values and serves as a beacon to others who want to live in an ambitious, equitable, and just community.

PART TWO

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

We often lionize those elected officials who nominally have the title and power, but leadership upside down focuses on the community. The community includes not only those individuals who pay attention to all of the issues of the day and come to all the planning meetings but also those who just pay their bills and don't come to any planning meetings. The community even includes those who can't pay their bills. The community is diverse and this diversity serves as the bedrock that allows for representative democracy to work.

And the way that community is represented is advocacy. What is advocacy? My loose definition is the application of power by those not explicitly in power, especially by those who are disenfranchised or who are users of a product or system. Examples of advocates include the Riders Alliance in New York City, People Protected in San Francisco, or Los Angeles Walks.

Regardless of the cause, these advocates focus the energy of the community to ensure that individual leaders know they have support to make challenging decisions or hold them accountable when they don't. The very nature of many good public sector decisions in urban environments is that they will cause those who are negatively impacted by any changes to show up. As former Houston Metro board member Christof Spieler notes in his book "Trains, Buses, People," if no one will be impacted by the new transit infrastructure your city is installing, there's a good chance it doesn't actually go anywhere that people want to go! So in that case, it's actually a good thing when there are citizens against some public transit investment. The key then, as suggested by Spieler on

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

an episode of the [Movement Podcast](#), is to ensure that advocates — even just one — turn out to provide cover for the elected official to make the right choice.

There are other ways communities can engage in action, but advocacy is the most salient and most needed. Advocacy — similar to being a whistleblower for a crime — may be the most important, yet thankless, job there is.

ADVOCACY — SIMILAR TO BEING A WHISTLEBLOWER FOR A CRIME — MAY BE THE MOST IMPORTANT, YET THANKLESS, JOB THERE IS.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

▶ REINFORCES COMMUNITY

- Does your advocacy uncover and reinforce the community values?

- Is your advocacy representative of the diversity of your community? Whose voices aren't we hearing?

▶ PROVIDES COVER FOR OFFICIALS

- Have you engaged with your elected and appointed officials? Have your elected officials engaged with your advocacy?

- How explicit and public have you made your support for similar positions by elected officials?

▶ HOLDS OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE

- How have you used your status in the community to hold public officials accountable by reconciling their stated positions with the community values?

CASE STUDY

It's easy to look at the recent transit success in Seattle and think it's always been that way. Led by the growth of technology firms like Amazon and Microsoft, Seattle has more cranes than any other US city and has bucked the trend of falling transit ridership. Perhaps one might even think Seattle has always had an enlightened view on public transportation.

SEATTLE HAS MORE CRANES THAN ANY OTHER US CITY AND HAS BUCKED THE TREND OF FALLING TRANSIT RIDERSHIP.

But that isn't the case. While Seattle region voters have made significant investments in public transit over the years, they've also rejected a number of referendums that regional leaders put forth to the public, including two votes for a potential subway through downtown Seattle. But Seattle leaders didn't accept these rejections and kept putting public transit referendums in front of the voters. This resilience culminated in a 2016 proposal by Seattle leaders for Sound Transit 3, a $15 billion transportation plan.

CASE STUDY

IN RESPONSE TO THIS UNPRECEDENTED REQUEST FOR PUBLIC DOLLARS, SEATTLE SUBWAY ACTUALLY COUNTERED WITH A $30 BILLION PLAN CALLED ST COMPLETE

Before the public had a chance to vote on this referendum, enter the Seattle Subway advocacy group, "a community of grassroots transit supporters to channel public enthusiasm for fast, reliable high capacity transit into actionable goals." In response to this unprecedented request for public dollars, Seattle Subway actually countered with a $30 billion plan called ST Complete. This larger plan was not only better for riders by truly connecting the region with public transit, but the audacious ask also served to make $15 billion look downright reasonable. The result? Voters approved the measure and work is now underway to build the larger network.

PART THREE

INTERNAL HUMILITY

INTERNAL HUMILITY

Traditional leadership in cities focuses externally on things like the big speeches or the ribbon cutting. Leadership upside down is the opposite. It focuses internally, in a humble way, on three key areas that are necessary to build this world we want to live in:

• Creating a point of view

• Making a decision

• Reducing silos

By operationalizing these inwardly-focused values, we can create an environment that allows for leadership to flourish.

CREATING A POINT OF VIEW

The traditional view of leadership is the big ego and big speeches, often delivered by elected officials. But to be successful, you actually need the opposite. What does this look like? It requires humility to listen, to think, and to create a point of view. Roger Enrico, the former CEO of Pepsi, is cited by former Steelcase CEO (and current Ford Motor Company CEO) Jim Hackett in this Harvard Business Review article that "leadership is having a point of view." I couldn't agree more.

Until a leader actually commits to a perspective and begins to align both her own mind and team around it, it's ephemeral. It doesn't mean anything. It's not leadership.

INTERNAL HUMILITY

To form a point of view requires critical thinking, building on the previous two areas of leadership upside down: reflection and community. Often leaders neglect to do this and the result is ego-driven or serving the best interest of the few at the expense of the many. To achieve the equitable, accessible, and verdant mobility future we all want, this cannot be the case.

DECISION MAKING

As noted earlier, critical thinking and reflection are important, but insufficient. While action without thought is reckless, thought without action is ineffective. So it is important to match the thinking process

WHILE ACTION WITHOUT THOUGHT IS RECKLESS, THOUGHT WITHOUT ACTION IS INEFFECTIVE.

with an action process that results in a decision being made. This decision-making process must be done in a way that is influenced by the leader's role as part of the community.

INTERNAL HUMILITY

In this step, HOW a leader acts is almost as important as WHAT the decision is. This is such a critical part of the process and it is where most people focus, but it will only be as successful as the foundational elements before it.

WILLINGNESS TO KEEP TRYING IS THE CRITICAL ASPECT OF LEADERSHIP

Sometimes, decisions aren't made and that lack of decision-making is the barrier to progress. And sometimes decisions are made and they fail and the willingness to keep trying is the critical aspect of leadership that is needed.

Making decisions is hard. Trying, failing, and trying again is hard. Disappointing those who disagree with you is hard. And yet, any successful change requires making decisions and reconciling these realities.

INTERNAL HUMILITY

BREAKING DOWN SILOS

To achieve the world we want to live in, we will have to embrace systems thinking and break down the naturally occurring silos in our problem-solving. The challenges we face aren't just transportation problems, they are land use problems. They are housing problems. And they are economic development problems.

Over and over in the public sector, we've tried to solve problems in a vacuum. Funding is handed out for specific problems which leads to them only being solved from a particular point of view. Or simply creating another problem in its wake. Until there is a recognition that the problems that we face are holistic and will thus require holistic solutions, we will face silos. A good leader cannot accept silos and instead must set out the expectations accordingly.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

▶ CREATING A POINT OF VIEW

- Have you been humble enough to listen to others who may be closer to the problem or the situation?

- Have you given yourself the space to not just listen, but synthesize what you've learned into a coherent point of view on what's needed?

▶ MAKING DECISIONS

- What has been your balance between thinking and doing?

- What is your and your community's tolerance for taking risks? For responding to failure?

- Are we making decisions that are in advancement of community even over self?

▶ BREAKING DOWN SILOS

- What can you do to take a more systems approach on problem solving in your community?

CASE STUDY

The larger shift of the transportation industry towards mobility as a service is a tacit admission that silos don't work. Public transit alone is not enough. Neither are microtransit or micromobility or TNCs. We can see it in action in Dayton where the Dayton RTA is one of the few transit agencies that manage public bike share. Why? Because they recognize that keeping these modes separate doesn't help the people they are trying to serve, a key theme in my conversation with Dayton RTA CEO Mark Donaghy.
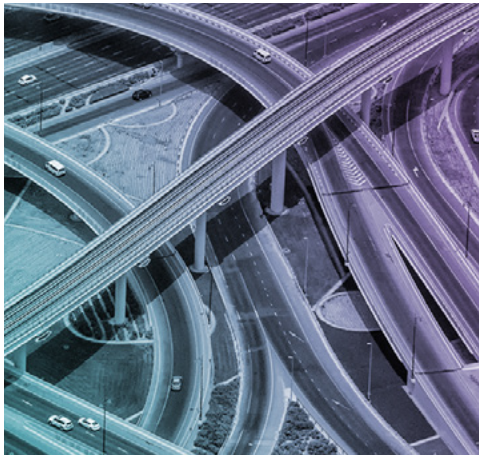
THE LARGER SHIFT OF THE TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY TOWARDS MOBILITY AS A SERVICE IS A TACIT ADMISSION THAT SILOS DON'T WORK

My conversation with Ian Griffiths of Seamless Bay Area identifies how the Bay Area could make a huge step forward in usability to riders not by adding additional service (though that would be helpful) but instead by helping the 8 million people using dozens of transit systems jammed into 9 counties to have a seamless experience with simplified pricing, signage, and operations. Right now, ego and fiefdoms are trumping the needs of millions of people for better transit access.

CONCLUSION

In order to achieve the future we all want, we are going to have to do something differently. The way to start is by turning everything — including our fundamental view of leadership — upside down.

Instead of jumping into problem solving, we instead need to invest in reflection.

Instead of relying on those who we believe have the power, we instead need to recognize that the people have the power.

And instead of falling in love with the big speech, we instead need to look humbly in the mirror in order to make better decisions and bust the silos that prevent our success.

A fundamental acceptance of this new reality as well as the application of this framework of leadership upside down is the way forward to make the green, equitable, and accessible mobility future we all want.

JOSH COHEN

LEADERSHIP UPSIDE DOWN

transloc.com/the-movement