

Mobilizing High-Performing Partnerships for a World Class Transportation Project

The Client: City of Denver Public Works Department – Eagle Project Team

Denver’s Eagle Project - A Transportation Project Like No Other! The Eagle P3 Project is a major part of the \$4.7B Regional Transportation Districts (RTD) transit expansion approved by Denver area voters in 2004.



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The “Eagle” is two commuter rail corridors which include a 22 mile segment from Denver’s downtown Union Station to the Denver International Airport, and another 11 mile segment extending from downtown to the City’s western suburbs. In addition to the technical and neighborhood issues associated with integrating the \$1.8B rail corridors into the City’s established urban core, the “Eagle” is the first major transit project in the US to include a private party who builds, finances, and operates the system.

The Need for Collaborative Excellence: In late 2010, the City of Denver Public Works Department created a team of veteran professionals to be responsible for bringing Commuter Rail – FasTracks – in and out of the city of Denver, Colorado. The team’s role was to ensure the success of what was dubbed the Eagle P3 Project and to work in liaison and partnership with the Regional Transportation District and the construction company, DTP.



Lesley Thomas, City Engineer, Deputy Manager of Denver Public Works who engaged the team for this project, shared, “This team is the best-of-the-best in each of their respective fields. The size and scope of this project is monumental – never before has something this large been undertaken.”

Recognizing the importance of the Eagle P3 project, Thomas retained the team of Syzygy and the Corporation for Positive Change (CPC) to work with the City and County of Denver (CCD) team leads Brian Pinkerton and Jennifer Hillhouse to design a multi-phase project focused on creating an environment of positive communications, innovation, collaboration and leadership excellence. Barbara Lewis of the Rocky Mountain Center for Positive Change and Kami Guildner of Syzygy designed and facilitated the process.

The Guildner/Lewis team developed a multi-phase program focused on delivering a strategic blend of training and coaching to hone their communication skills, decision-making processes, and task and time management. The process drew on and modified the Appreciative Inquiry methodology to meet the specific needs of this complicated and ambitious project. It included a series of 5 custom workshops, integrated with a series of individual coaching sessions. This comprehensive program focused on the following goals:

1. Team Development
2. Individual Skills Building
3. External Stakeholder Collaboration

Program Length: May 2011 – March 2012

Who Participated?

- Core team of 12 City of Denver (CCD) Public Works Employees, all veterans in their field of expertise.
- Approximately 25 RTD and DTP FasTracks employees to participate in appreciative inquiry interviews in Phase II, and come together in Phase IV in 2 joint workshops on Collaborative Excellence. Included executive team participation.

Phase I – What does Collaborative Excellence look like anyway?

The very first series of workshops engaged the Core CCD Team in fully understanding the keys to successful collaboration. The two-day appreciative inquiry workshop developed by the Guildner/Lewis team was designed to help the CCD team operate like a *refueling station* where team members come for information and insights, new energy and support.



Hillhouse shared, “The first workshop helped our Core Team really connect to the bigger picture of how sustainable transportation and multi-mobility would change the face of the City of Denver – how it would impact the lives of residents and commuters every day.” She continued, “In the midst of day-to-day issues and challenges, it was easy for our team to lose track of that big picture outcome. It really helped us to step back and look and why this project was so important to the City of Denver.”

The Core Team also explored their own stories of where they had experienced collaboration at its best throughout their impressive careers. Their stories exhibited example-after-example of real-world behaviors that created positive partnering and collaborative excellence. They started recognizing life experiences where teams had worked through really difficult scenarios by treating each other with respect, engaging in positive conversations, problem solving collaboratively and negotiating in good faith.

In order to engage their RTD and DTP counterparts in this process, each member of the core team interviewed several RTD and DTP team members to hear their stories on positive partnering and collaboration as well as their insights on how to bring out the best in partnering on the Eagle P3 project.

In reflecting on these interviews, Baertlein recalled one particular interview with a counterpart, “His stories of past successes highlighted his pride in his work and his collaborative ability to solve problems. I saw a different side of him by listening to these stories. And as we moved into talking about FasTracks, I heard his passion and appreciation for what FasTracks was going to do for the City of Denver.” Baertlein continued, “This was a different conversation than we’d had in the past, as we were always focused on fixing some problem. These new conversations helped me realize that we really had similar visions on the big picture – we just didn’t see that in the day-to-day stuff.”

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“This has been really helpful in the ongoing relationship. Now when things get tense around an issue – which will come up in a project of this size and scope – it’s easier to step back and lower the intensity level – ‘hey this is just one of the million things we’re going to have to work through.’ I think this new level of interaction and understanding has been really helpful.”

With dozens of interviews completed, the Core CCD Team compiled a list of “Principles of Collaboration” that were derived from the stories and insights. The team committed to working within these Principles. They kept a poster of the Principles on their desks and distributed the Principles at meetings to set the right focus for project communications. Pinkerton shared “These Principles included everything from respect to being honest and forthright, to trying to see the other side. When we started meetings by sharing these Principles, our conversations began to shift, as everyone began to realize our commitment to creating collaboration.”

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FASTRACKS
RFD

City of Denver Eagle Team
Our Commitment to Collaborative Excellence

Trust:

- I will start with a position of trust, rather than building it up slowly.
- Denver needs to understand DTPs schedule and scope.
- I will be honest, respectful and follow-through.

Shared Vision:

- I will always consider the walk from my Partner's point of view.
- I will always bear in mind how this project will ultimately benefit the city.
- Let's build a project that we are all proud of.
- I will make my expectations part of every conversation, and listen and hear those of others.
- We will represent the silent majority.

Respectful Relationships:

- At the end of the day, we only have each other.
- No "I" in TEAM.
- I have something to learn from everyone.
- I will start from a position of respect, rather than building up to it.
- Leave your baggage at home! "Let it go!"
- Embrace 5:1 positive communications ratio.

Negotiate in Good Faith:

- Here is where I need to end up.
- Communicate open and honest with the end result/goal in mind.
- If it is worth doing, it is worth doing right.

Positive Communications:

- Don't be afraid to complement the other team.
- Always take the high road.
- Be transparent in our communications.
- Listen.

Illustration: A person with a backpack labeled 'Strategic Thinking' and 'Communication' stands next to a train labeled 'Commitment, Technical, Communication, Trust & Collaboration'. The train is moving through a cityscape.

Phase II – Discovering Individual Strengths as Collaborators

Phase II of the project engaged the Core CCD Team in one-on-one coaching focused on their individual collaboration strengths – honoring that every team member brought their own style of collaboration.

Over the course of StrengthsFinders assessments, 360 Collaborative Strengths Profile and a Values Assessment – each team member defined their own “Collaborative Leader Essence,” which reflected who they were at their best. Finally, they set an action plan to set a course practicing these strengths every day.

While some standard tools were incorporated into the coaching program, Hillhouse reinforced, “Kami is an amazing listener and through her unique way of framing questions, pulls out thought-provoking and insightful information about myself that I had never considered. For example, I discovered I have a unique ability to understand the full breadth and depth of a project. This full view perspective often will let me see ways to step forward in a positive way. This personalized coaching

approach enabled each of us to fully discover our gifts – for example some people on our team excelled at the strategy, some excelled at driving action, others excelled in creating strong relationships. Together, our team balanced one another – and ultimately created a strong team as a whole.”

Hillhouse recalled her coaching sessions, “I had never really taken time to dig into my strengths in this manner. It certainly gave me an appreciation for the gifts that I bring in my role as a planner and a team member.

Baertlein shared his coaching experience, “Coaching really helped me connect the dots to why I do what I do. I rediscovered the passion in my work. Something I hadn’t taken the time to do on my own for quite a while. It was a fantastic outcome for me.”

Pinkerton shared, “The coaching reinforced how I am able to build healthy relationships that thrive with effective communication – and how important that it is to strategically lead and hold a team together – something that is certainly important, in my role as RTD Liaison.”

At the end of the coaching series, the CCD Core Team came together for a ½ day workshop to integrate their learnings and better understand the strengths and gifts of their fellow team mates. This workshop helped solidify the team’s commitment to being a Refueling Station for each other.

Phase III – Putting Collaborative Excellence to Work

Phase III brought RTD and DTP team members into the collaborative process in two consecutive workshops. The first workshop focused on helping the three parties understand each other’s perspectives and develop a common vision of the importance of working together in moving forward as efficiently and smoothly as possible. The second workshop focused on developing specific plans for addressing challenging issues in a productive way. The goal was to have the teams embrace the principles of collaborative excellence and then bring those principles to life on real-world project issues.



In the first workshop, the teams conducted three-way interviews involving individuals from DTP, RTD and Denver. Baertlein reports discovering how one senior official was truly more open to resolving things and creating win-wins than he had ever suspected. He reported, “I saw a whole new side of that individual that day. He was much more open than I ever dreamed

he would be.” Baertlein reported that the experience helped him in dealing with others from the same organization in a way that helped break down some of the “stubbornness barriers.”

In the second workshop, the right people from the different organizations worked on improvements to specific projects. They filled in templates where they first documented how the work would typically proceed, and then brainstormed ideas to resolve sticky issues, called “sticky wickets”. They then applied their collective insights on how to be more productive in working together to developing a new, more efficient collaborative approach.

Several groups focused on how to streamline the review and approval process for segments of the commuter rail line. Executive leaders associated with the organizations met to refine the oversight and comment resolution process, which had been a significant “sticky wicket” in the past. They agreed on a refined approach that is still working well. Following this workshop, Pinkerton noted that at the first meeting of the oversight committee, everyone reported that the relationships were going much better between RTD, DTP and the City.

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Was it worth it?

Yes. As Hillhouse expressed, “We’ve heard from a lot of people, including upper management, that they were so thankful that we did this process and they wish other jurisdictions would do the same. We’re on a great path forward. “

Several of the team members reported specific benefits for the project and the individuals involved. Specific benefits noted included:

- Realizing that we are all working toward the same end goal
- Creating better relationships. People have let go of preconceived notions about each other.
- Resulted in a personal commitment to see the project through and to be more eager to dive into everything
- Internally, the Denver team became more flexible and learned to appreciate each other’s roles
- Reaffirmed the team’s belief in the power of keeping things positive and being fully committed to finding a way to find new approaches and solutions
- Resulted in refined review and approval and a better oversight structure, demonstrating how the right collaborative process can create efficiencies and streamlined processes and restore the partners’ commitment to getting the job done right.

At the end of the process. Lesley Thomas commented that the Syzygy/CPC team “provided a framework to bring three already skilled groups together and make them even better.” She noted that “the Eagle P3 team has come together with a better understanding of their strengths and defined roles which will be invaluable as the project moves forward.”

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