

# Finding Common Ground: Removing Barriers Between Management and Labor

**BY KRISTIN WARSINSKI**

Chief Executive Officer  
Riverside Transit Agency  
Riverside, CA

**RIVERSIDE TRANSIT AGENCY (RTA),**

like so many organizations across the globe, faces big challenges in a post-pandemic world. The pandemic changed us as individuals and as an agency. We saw that a gap had widened between union labor and administration as we entered a new normal.

Coach operators and maintenance workers had been on the front lines of the pandemic, while administrative staff worked mostly from home. There was a feeling of, “We had to be here—you didn’t.”

We needed to get back to our roots and reimagine our agency culture. And we needed to find common ground and do it in collaboration with our union workers, members of Amalgamated



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Transit Union (ATU), Local 1277.

Just like everyone else, we had issues with hiring and retention due to the disruption in the labor market. In September 2023, we actually had to remove select weekend service due to our operator shortages. Something had to be done.

**The Importance of Workplace Mentorship**

Our agency made a big hiring push, but we knew we needed to do more to attract talented workers and keep them. So, under the guidance and support of our 22 board members, we

partnered with the union to create a mentorship program, which we named the RTA and ATU Mentorship Program 2022, or RAMP 22. Funded through state grants, RAMP 22 is a true labor/management partnership founded with help from California Transit Works! (CTW), a California consortium of transit agencies, transit unions, and colleges

focused on workforce development. CTW is one of the High Road Training Partnerships (HRTPs) of the California Workforce Development Board (CWDB).

RAMP 22 aims to make new coach operators and mechanics feel welcome, supported, and part of the family. Being in a new professional environment can be stressful. New employees need to know that others felt the same way at first, and experienced the same things they are going through. Operators and mechanics need real-life tips

to help them with their day-to-day challenges.

One of the unintended, but positive consequences of working together in creating this program is it helped us communicate more effectively with each other. We had to set our individual differences aside for the greater good.

Another aspect of the RAMP 22 program we are currently exploring is retraining and reskilling our workforce as we anticipate new technologies. Like other transit agencies, RTA is investing in zero-emission technologies, such as hydrogen fuel cell electric buses. Our board of directors

recently authorized our agency to issue a contract for the design and construction of a hydrogen fueling station and the design of a second station. This fall, we expect to order our first hydrogen fuel cell buses.

As RTA moves toward new technologies, we want to make sure our employees are trained and ready. It’s important that staff don’t feel left behind. To help us achieve this, we carved out five percent of the last few competitive federal



Riverside Transit Agency coach operator Fred Allen displays his certificate after completing the RAMP 22 mentorship training curriculum. Celebrating with Allen is Josie Garcia, RAMP 22 Coordinator.

grants we’ve received to pay for training and equipment.

As technology continues to be part of transit’s future, the better your relationship is with the union and your employees, the more trust that you have and the more likely you can implement those new technologies with employee support.

A second tier of our mentorship program is an apprenticeship program that we are working to create with one of the local colleges to educate our staff on new technologies. We hope it will also get the younger generation excited about a career in transit.

**Employee Engagement**

We are also focusing on our workforce engagement efforts. As part of these culture changes, we are rolling out a new set of core values. We introduced a list of potential core values and let our employees vote on them, something RTA has not done before. The next step is to get everyone’s buy-in and train them on the meaning of these values.

Leadership and the union are never going to get along 100 percent of the time. There are going to be things that we don’t agree on, but with mutual respect, you can build a good partnership. I am thankful for the partnership we have with ATU Local 1277, and the great strides we have made toward building a better future for all employees at RTA.

You can get a lot done when you find common ground.



Riverside Transit Agency CEO Kristin Warsinski is pictured along with staff and members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), Local 1277.

**DART SETS THE STAGE** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

- Empowered Agency: Build a nimble organization that can act quickly and effectively by streamlining processes and empowering employees.
- Culture of Contribution: Create a culture that aligns roles and responsibilities with the vision, deepens organizational trust, and encourages growth.
- Quality Service: Deliver a quality customer experience defined by strong rider advocacy and built on professional pride and continuous improvement.
- Seamless Mobility: Integrate mobility options to create a seamless travel experience defined by frequency and reliability to position DART as first in mind.
- Fantastic Spaces: Create fantastic spaces that add value to our communities, enhance the rider experience, and foster a sustainable and thriving region.
- Strategic Relationships: Position DART as a collaborative leader and recognized regional economic and mobility asset.

As DART works to meet the needs of the next 40 years it will deliver on the goals of Point B, looking to build trust and partnerships with the public, elected officials, and other key stakeholders, working to move DART from being a service that people sometimes use, to being a valued regional economic and mobility asset.

**SMALL STEPS, BIG REWARDS** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

ordinary. They want to reach their job, medical appointment, or the grocery store in an efficient manner and be as comfortable as possible while doing so. Taking the small steps like the ones our employees have taken can make all the difference in the world.

I could not agree more with Lance

and others who have taken these important steps, and I would encourage every public transit agency to do the same. Find out how to get started at [ibcces.org](http://ibcces.org) and facilitate internal conversations on how your system could better meet the needs of all passengers.