

Transportation Leaders Define Success

How do transportation agencies cultivate innovation? At the Every Day Counts (EDC) summits, agency leaders took part in panel discussions on empowering their staff, leveraging expertise, and sharing innovation successes.

How do you define success?

“When we talk about innovation deployment, I define success as creating an environment where everybody who works at the department feels empowered to bring forward ideas and suggestions on how to do business differently,” said Victoria Sheehan, New Hampshire Department of Transportation commissioner.

“Success means developing a team who understands that our core mission is customer service, whether that means project delivery or the delivery of services such as highway maintenance and public transportation,” said Anna Barry, Connecticut Department of Transportation deputy commissioner. “We also want a team who understands the need for continuous improvement.”

How do you empower your staff to succeed?

“We believe we can be most successful by pushing decision making down to the lowest possible level,” said Monique Evans, director of the Federal Highway Administration’s Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division. “If we empower our employees to make decisions, to be innovative on the spot, we come up with very good solutions in the end.”

“Our project teams are self-directed work teams,” said Richard Crawford, director of the Maine Department of Transportation Bureau of Project Development. “They have a budget, they have a mission, they have a project to deliver, and they make the decisions they need to make to bring that project forward and get it delivered.”

“We pushed for Local Innovation Teams in our regional offices,” said David Esse, Wisconsin Department of Transportation Innovation, Research, and Technology Program chief. “We give folks who bring ideas forward the option to see it through. They can sit down with senior management, present their idea, and develop an implementation plan.”

How do you leverage expertise in the transportation community?

To get the most from EDC summits, the Oregon Department of Transportation brings staff experts to

attend innovation breakout sessions. “We make sure we make contact with the experts who are presenting, and often we set up future peer exchanges with other DOTs that have experts in a particular area,” said Chief Engineer Steve Cooley. “You might also be that expert for another State, so be available to them. It goes two ways.”

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation collaborates with the private sector on deploying innovations such as e-Construction. Patty Leavenworth, chief engineer and deputy administrator, described an example in which a consulting community member suggested a workflow collaboration tool to the agency. “It benefits industry, but it benefits us as well, so willingness to step outside of our roles and form those partnerships goes a long way,” she said.

How do you share innovation successes?

The Michigan Department of Transportation communicates with the public about innovation use. “If we can provide better value for tax dollars we publicize that,” said Tony Kratofil, chief engineer and chief operations officer. “When we were beginning to adopt e-Construction we were challenged with a major interstate reconstruction project. The only way to deliver it as quickly as we could was by e-Construction. We talked about the speed at which people were seeing the project as enabled by technology.”

The Vermont Agency of Transportation holds an annual Innovation Day at which teams share their work on research topics and innovative projects with colleagues. “It’s really interesting to see bridge designers talking to somebody who’s leading research on winter maintenance. It reminds everybody that innovation is happening all over the organization,” said Chief Engineer Wayne Symonds.

The New York State Department of Transportation participates in TRANSCOM, a coalition of 16 agencies in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region that collaborate on transportation management. Todd Westhuis, the department’s chief of staff, cited “the innovation that comes with that and the collective advancement of technology, techniques, and approaches to problem solving,” as benefits of coalition membership.