

# People-First Leadership: Insights from a 50-Year Career in Transportation

## Will Kempton

MTI Trustee; Retired Transportation Executive

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*It is a privilege to be asked to share some personal stories about my pursuit of a career in transportation and what that career has meant to me over the 50 years I have been working in this field. The leadership qualities I have developed over that half century have helped me achieve success and allowed me to collaborate effectively with my employers, my peers and especially those who worked for me. Looking back on my career, I have come to recognize the value of people in the conduct of one's life work, and I hope you can benefit from my experience.*



*Will Kempton received a commendation for his 50years of service in the transportation industry from Santa Clara County Supervisors Cindy Chavez and Otto Lee at the 2023 MTI Annual Awards Banquet & Convocation Celebration.*

## The Beginning

Like so many going off to college, I had only a vague idea of what I wanted to do for a career. I opted to major in Political Science at the University of San Francisco, and it was in graduate school at California State University, Sacramento, that I had my first exposure to the potential of working in the transportation industry. Several students who worked for the California Department of Transportation advised me of some openings at the newly named Caltrans and I was hired as an entry level analyst in October, 1973.



In 1980, I was appointed as the Department's Assistant Director for Legislative and Congressional Affairs, which gave me a bird's eye view of California state politics focused on transportation. That position allowed me to learn about the broad transportation responsibilities of the Department and to grow an appetite for wanting to participate directly in the management of actual projects and programs. This was the moment that inspired me to help "connect the world" through my career.

### **Learning to be a Leader**

In 1985, largely due to the exposure I gained working with local governments and other transportation agencies in the conduct of Caltrans' legislative business, I was asked to interview for the Executive Director position at the Santa Clara County Traffic Authority, a new agency charged with administering a \$1 billion roadway construction program financed through a voter-approved half-cent sales tax in the county. As the first program of its kind in California, it presented enormous challenges. Nonetheless, I eagerly accepted the position, and, over the next seven years, through an innovative management collaboration involving the Authority, Caltrans, and the private sector, all of the projects were delivered to construction in an accelerated time frame. It was this success and the desire to work with and lead people toward a common objective that continued to influence the direction of my career over the next several years. In 1974, I was approached by the newly elected Schwarzenegger Administration to apply for the position of Caltrans Director and was appointed by the Governor later that year.

### **Recognizing the Importance of People**

Serving the Governor and the people of California in this position was a wonderful experience for me, and I relished the chance to hone my leadership skills and to manage a talented group of people in improving mobility across California. Caltrans faced some tough challenges at that time, including the replacement of the Bay Bridge, a poor public image, labor and funding issues, and project delivery and efficiency problems. The importance of people was a critical feature of this position. I had served in a management capacity over hundreds of individuals in previous assignments, but it was a far more significant task to align some 23,000 employees in a positive direction, to inspire and motivate them, and to gain their support and assistance in carrying out the huge tasks associated with the operation of the nation's largest state transportation agency.

I began this management challenge by committing to be a very visible Director and trying to meet and communicate with everyone in the Department. While I was never able to meet all of my employees, I did personally talk to a large percentage of them and also communicated with the entire Department through monthly video emails and other methods.

As this relationship continued to blossom and expand, I initiated an effort to convince my employees of the importance of their jobs, reinforcing the significance of their work and the positive benefits to the public. Together, we were able to substantially improve the public image of Caltrans, and this leadership approach began to pay big dividends in terms of performance and efficiency. As an



example, the Department had been frequently criticized over the failure to deliver projects in a timely manner. I challenged the regional District Directors to enter into Contracts for Delivery, where these senior managers committed themselves and their staff to meet stated delivery goals. The response was incredible and further enhanced the Department's image with stakeholders. When an employee accomplished an important task or performed a noteworthy action, they heard from me directly; this ongoing relationship between the Director and employees created a work environment that encouraged innovation, commitment and pride. Caltrans went on to deliver a record number of projects associated with the Governor's 2006 Transportation Bond and the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Program.

### **Sealing the Deal: People Really Matter**

The next steps in my career only strengthened my commitment to developing strong relationships with staff. In 2009, I reluctantly left Caltrans for a new challenge: CEO of the Orange County Transportation Authority. I employed the same approach to managing that agency, even though one of my first official tasks was to sign layoff notices for coach operators due to a downturn in the economy. I also promised to ultimately rehire every operator who wanted to come back when the recession ended. That promise was kept, and efforts to focus on a direct relationship with employees paid off again.

In 2013, as a lack of transportation funding was again facing California's transportation program, I was asked to take over a leadership position with Transportation California, a labor and construction organization committed to raising funds in support of the State's program. During my term in this position, including a stint as the Interim Executive Director of the California Transportation Commission during that same period, I once again used a positive attitude to motivate and encourage employee performance and to develop the effective relationships needed with the Legislature, regional and local agencies, labor organizations, the construction industry and other interested parties to ensure the passage of Senate Bill 1, approved in 2017, which raised funding in excess of \$5.4 billion annually for transportation.

None of this work could have been accomplished without the engagement of all the people involved, and that is my ultimate takeaway. Only by building personal relationships with the employees in your organization, aligning staff with program objectives through encouragement and motivation and using the same skills to build bonds with peers, interest groups and decision-makers, was I able to connect my world through transportation. Leadership is a personal trait, but it must be embodied with a solid concern for the people with whom you work. People really do matter, and a recognition of this fact will help ensure a successful career in any endeavor.



## About the Author



Transportation innovator and manager [Will Kempton](#) has almost 50 years of experience in transportation, government affairs, and public service, retiring in 2017. Almost three years later, Mr. Kempton came out of retirement to serve as the Executive Director of the Sacramento Transportation Authority, where he was focused on the development and management of a countywide transportation sales tax program.

Preceding his brief retirement, Mr. Kempton recently served as Executive Director of Transportation California; an industry-based transportation advocacy group dedicated to the advancement of California's transportation program. Prior to his latest stint with Transportation California, Mr. Kempton served as Executive Director of the California Transportation Commission. In 2004, he was appointed by Governor Schwarzenegger as the Director of Caltrans. He served in this capacity for five years before taking over as the Chief Executive Officer of the Orange County Transportation Authority.

Mr. Kempton has been a member of the Mineta Transportation Institute Board of Trustees since 2004 and served as Chair during the 2021-2023 term.