



More than just results

Dr Richard Plenty and Terri Morrissey reflect on key skills and competencies required by today's airport leaders.

Good leadership is easier to write about than to do. Not only do leaders of organisations have to manage day to day operations, but they also have to ensure that their organisations are going in the right strategic direction – at the same time, keeping their staff on board and dealing with the impact of unexpected crises and events.

Leaders are generally judged not only by the results they achieve but also by the perceptions of others, which may or may not be fair.

Airport leadership is becoming as complex as leadership in any other sector. Traditionally, the aviation industry attracted operators and 'techies' looking for safe and secure employment.

As airports have grown in scale, with multiple functions and complex operations – no longer strips of concrete but engines of economic growth – the need for professional leadership and management at all levels has grown.

The development of airports into fully fledged businesses, more competition and challenging economic circumstances, has also increased the need for a more commercial approach.

There is no doubt leadership is a 'hot topic' in the sector. Our interviews for *Airport World* with airport CEOs have consistently identified leadership succession planning as one of their key challenges.

At the ACI World Assembly, Conference and Exhibition in Calgary last September, one of the main sessions was on 'Leadership and the Next Generation of Airport Professionals'. Some top CEOs and HR directors took part, and the session attracted a very large and engaged audience.

And, the ACI World Governing Body reviewed the general issue of airport leadership and succession at the same meeting.

All the available evidence (for example, Exambela's bi-annual CEO survey of European airports) suggests, not surprisingly, that there is a strong connection between the quality of leadership in an airport and the results that are achieved.

So what are the skills and competencies required of the modern airport leader? And, are these common across the sector or do they vary from airport to airport?

Key components of airport leadership

Excellent airport leadership is about taking the organisation in the direction that it needs to go, keeping key stakeholders on board and delivering results consistently, year after year.

It adds value to the infrastructure and the asset for airport investors, and does so in a way that is sustainable, ethical and seen as responsible by the wider community.

The ability to achieve 'sustainable growth' is fast becoming a critical measure of success. There is only so much that can be done to cut costs and make processes leaner and more efficient, beyond that, new sources of revenue and income must be developed.

Sustained good performance is an essential starting point for effective leadership. Excellent leaders have a results and delivery orientation and mindset. They will generally find a way of getting the job done and delivering results even when they lack some of the desirable characteristics of the ideal leader.



This may be because they have the confidence to surround themselves with others on their leadership team with the skills they lack, or (more often) because they possess the determination and will to succeed whatever the obstacles.

'Big Picture' competencies

The ability to put things in a broad perspective whilst still being able to pay attention to detail – what Shell calls 'helicopter' and McKinsey the 'dolphin' quality – is an extremely valuable asset in leadership.

It requires intellectual ability, the capacity to spot patterns and linkages, and systems thinking. We see three main components in the airport setting:

- Thinking strategically – the vision to take the organisation in the right strategic direction, see the wood for the trees and able to chart a clear way forward even in uncertain environments
- Maximising business opportunities – the capability to identify and develop opportunities for growing revenue from existing and new businesses; demonstrating an entrepreneurial spirit, a commercially focused mindset and a capacity for innovation
- Building a high performance culture – the capacity to translate strategy into action by converting a vision into clear business plans, setting strategic objectives and ensuring individuals have challenging targets for which they are accountable

These skills are important to ensure that their organisations are properly connected to business strategy, particularly when their circumstances are changing.

As Declan Collier, CEO of London City Airport and president of ACI Europe, says: "It's the requirements of the business that should always drive organisation and leadership development".

Relationship competencies

Leaders do not operate in isolation but have to get on with a wide variety of people. Indeed, the ability to get things done through others is a defining characteristic of nearly all leadership roles.

In the airport setting, this requires not only emotional intelligence but also a degree of political nous and social savvy. Developing the following competencies can be very helpful:

- Building networks and alliances – the development of relationships, alliances and partnerships – both external and internal – to support business objectives
- Leading others – the skills to lead, manage and inspire change. To engage, motivate, develop and support individuals and teams potentially from diverse backgrounds, to achieve their objectives and goals even when these are challenging and difficult
- Communicating effectively – the ability to engage and influence stakeholders, shape opinion and to create an environment where constructive dialogue and feedback is encouraged

James Cherry, past chair ACI World and president and CEO, Aéroports de Montréal, believes that the ability to engage people is the cornerstone of leadership.

"Without engagement you have no hope of ever achieving the objectives of the organisation," he says.

Self competencies

Leadership is challenging and can make high demands on those who aspire to do it well. The personal example set by the leader makes a huge difference to the respect that people feel for them and the responsibility others are prepared to take on.

Not surprisingly, the best leaders tend to be those who are comfortable with themselves, resilient and mentally tough.

In times of change, people increasingly look for leaders who are role models of personal leadership. In the airport setting we see the following characteristics as key:

- Leading by example – demonstrating the will to lead, a proactive approach, courage, clarity, resolve, and personal accountability for delivering on commitments



- Managing work – the personal skills and discipline to set clear priorities, focus, develop clear and realistic work plans, make timely decisions and delegate work appropriately as well as remaining flexible when circumstances change
- Authenticity – individuals who are true to themselves, aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, demonstrating integrity, fairness and an openness to learning

Tan Sri Bashir Ahmad Abdul Majid, president of ACI Asia-Pacific and managing director of Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad, speaks of the need to take enough time to assess a situation before taking action, and to create a climate of openness where people are encouraged to speak out and leaders are prepared to listen.

A sector approach to leadership?

The leadership competencies we describe were developed on the basis of research, interviews, literature review and practical experience, not just in airports but across a range of industries.

We have defined the competencies in much more detail at four levels ranging from ‘new recruit’ to ‘airport director’. An initial version was piloted with considerable success at Dublin Airport Authority, which subsequently adapted the template to their own circumstances and continue to use it.

The overall framework has also been introduced in London City Airport. And, in recognition of its CEO’s Irish origins, we have used the shamrock (above) as a motif for summarising it!

As it stands, there is, as yet, no common agreed framework for leadership that runs across the sector. Not surprisingly, airports have tended to develop their own models of leadership and own competencies that they believe are unique to them.

After all, airport leaders operate under different business models and don’t all have the same degree of freedom. They have different owners, operate under different models, in different circumstances and with very different sizes and complexity.

Despite these differences, all airports carry out the same principal functions. As the tutors on ACI World’s strategic HR programme, we find that despite coming from many different backgrounds, our participants have more in common than they have differences.

And, industry leaders such as Dr Yiannis Paraschis, chairman ACI World, point out that while circumstances are very different in mature markets to the developing world, airports everywhere have increasingly become fully fledged businesses where it is important for leaders to have a business and entrepreneurial mindset when striving for performance in a regulated market.

There would be potential to develop this framework in a way that could be used more widely. The model is generic enough to encompass most situations. The emphasis put on different competencies would vary from airport to airport, and other specific competencies could be added as required.

There would be great benefits for the sector if a broad cross sector framework could be developed as has been done in some of the most successful global multi-nationals. A common language would make it easier to identify and develop potentially talented people, transfer learning between airports, and facilitate staff exchanges and development.

Standards would be lifted as airports, particularly the smaller ones, begin to understand the leadership agenda more clearly.

Realistically, developing a shared understanding and agreement on a topic as difficult as leadership within the airport sector is always up for debate. And where best to do it than at our Leadership and Change Management Forum in Bologna in October this year where you can hear from experts in the field!

In the meantime, it is important for airports to recognise that leadership really matters, and take stock in the best way they can of the leadership talent they have at their disposal as well as what they will need in the future.

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About the author

Richard Plenty and Terri Morrissey are co-organisers of ACI Europe’s Leadership and Change Management Forum, which this year takes place in Bologna, Italy, on October 23-25 and features a special Master Class on Leadership presented by three experienced CEOs who will debate the topics raised in this article.

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