



MBTA Strategic Planning Report

Fall 2019–Spring 2020

Overview and Purpose

Throughout late 2019 to Spring 2020, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) engaged in an employee-led internal planning process. The goal of the exercise was to improve agency operations by addressing key organizational issues. During this process, participants generated a shared sense of purpose and critically examined pressure point for the workforce. Over the course of four months, more than 100 members of mid- and senior-level leadership engaged in honest, challenging and structured conversations, to align around a vision, mission, and values, so that the MBTA can better meet our public mandate.

Building a Structure for Change

Reform at the MBTA was and continues to be an urgent need. In 2019, desires for change were driven by a few key factors including the MBTA's prior crisis-to-crisis management style, a new General Manager coming into the organization in January 2019, and exacerbated by a series of high-profile derailments in the summer of 2019. The Strategic Planning facilitated sessions, using the Kotter model for *Leading Change*,¹ worked to build a coalition of reform within the organization. The group collectively rebuilt the MBTA's strategic Vision, Mission and Values. Now, in 2021, the agency is expanding the participant base of this planning process to sustain the change required to modernize operations to provide safe, reliable and accessible transportation.

Culture Change



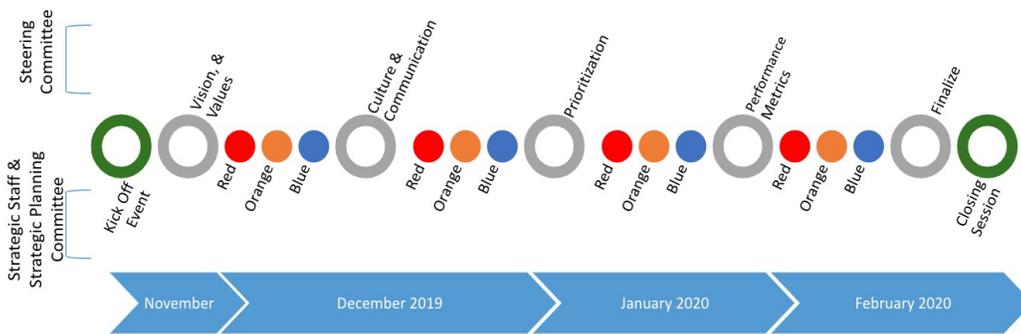
The MBTA's struggles and challenges are deeply rooted in the agency's culture-- defined as the unique social and psychological environment in the workplace. Culture is made up of the collective experiences, beliefs and values held by the employees of that organization. [The Safety Review Panel](#) report, released in December 2019, found that the MBTA "must address [our] safety culture – it is critical to every aspect of the agency." The Panel also noted that "the agency has not identified or adopted a comprehensive vision, mission, values or set of strategies and goals to guide the organization's actions." Specifically, the Safety Review Panel pointed to culture. It noted that the MBTA praises silence, reinforces retaliation, and lacks of transparency. The MBTA has historically struggled to live out a core value of Safety based on these deep cultural issues. To move the dial, this Strategic Planning process engaged with the MBTA's cultural issues head on.

Leaders from across the agency have committed to putting resources and effort into improving the organization's culture. This change will not happen overnight, and will require an openness to new ways of doing business. The core mission of the MBTA will always be to provide transit to the region, but, *how* the agency functions internally has room to improve.

¹ John Kotter, *Leading Change*, Harvard Business Review, 2012

The Process

Strategic Planning was both process-driven and employee-led—two factors which were critical to its success. Just over 100 MBTA mid- and senior-level leaders spent four months in eighteen separate facilitated planning sessions. Nearly 6,000 employee hours were committed to this endeavor in order to generate broad support and buy-in for the reforms needed. Over the course of many meetings, employees developed a shared statement of vision and mission, drafted a new set of MBTA core values, and created organizational priorities for needed changes. The Executive Team, in conjunction with an inter-departmental planning committee, refined the organizational strategies and is now aligning these strategies with external MBTA priorities. The MBTA began a process of building a new culture through these thoughtful, reflective, and structured sessions.



The Strategic Planning work was driven by cross-departmental working groups. The Executive Team, made up of the General Manager’s direct reports, served as an anchor for all the work. These 15 individuals spent a collective 75 hours over 5 facilitated sessions. In addition,

a cross-sectional team, -- known as the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) -- consisted of executives, management and operations staff who helped to shape the discussion and structure of the working sessions. The SPC met separately for an additional 6 sessions. Central to the work was bringing together the Executives, the SPC members and senior leadership into three cohorts, delineated by Red, Orange and Blue, to have critical and honest conversations about reforming the MBTA. These 100+ staff gave significant time, energy and emotion, resulting in individual buy-in and commitment to change and their passion for the mission of the MBTA was evident in their dedication to the process.

The devotion of this group was an essential component of its success. In fact, when surveyed this leadership group felt strongly aligned to the mission and purpose of the MBTA, knowing that our work is important and critical to the region. To keep them engaged, executives have pledged to reconvene the 100+ staff on a regular basis to build relationships, share work to date, and get feedback on our progress.



Building the Foundation

The goal of Strategic Planning is to enable all staff, to be aligned to the same vision and allow everyone to move in the same direction. This will enable the agency to evolve from a managing-by-crisis mentality to an organization with a shared sense of purpose. The work to date has resulted in new vision, mission, values, and organizational priorities deeply supported by the agency leadership which are listed below.

What We Do

Vision: We envision a thriving region enabled by a best in class transit system.

Mission: We serve the public by providing safe, reliable, and accessible transportation.

How We Do It

Values:

Safety. We put safety at the forefront of our work.

Service. We aim to deliver superior service, connecting people and communities.

Equity. We strive to treat all customers and employees fairly and consult diverse voices and perspectives in decision-making.

Sustainability. We invest resources wisely in solutions for our team, our communities, and our environment.

Priorities & Strategies for the Future

In addition to refining our vision, mission and values, the Strategic Planning process enabled critical conversations regarding needed reforms within the organization. These changes fell into three broad and often-overlapping buckets, all supporting changes in how we function as an organization.

Culture,
Collaboration and
Communication

Workforce
Investments

Diversity, Equity
and Inclusion

Improve Internal Communication & Coordination

As an organization with over 6,000 staff and thousands of contractors, dozens of departments and over sixty physical worksites, it is not surprising that the MBTA staff identified the need to improve collaboration and communication up, down and across the workforce. Developing structures and processes for enhance communication and collaboration will ultimately help improve the culture of the organization.

Recognize and Develop the Diverse Talent We Have

Thinking holistically, staff identified how we could improve investments in our workforce from the moment of onboarding, training and development, promotional opportunities, through to succession planning at the end of the one's career. Supporting our workforce will ultimately lead to more satisfied employees who provide a higher-quality of service to the communities we serve.

Invest in Becoming a More Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Organization

MBTA leaders identified that improving diversity, equity and inclusivity needed to be central to all of our reforms. The MBTA has a complicated history in terms of how we have treated all of our workforce. In addition, today, we know that our leadership team does not reflect the diversity of the workforce as a whole or our ridership. Improving equity at the MBTA will require sustained attention and commitment to bring about meaningful change.

Moving Forward

The MBTA has made many public-facing commitments to our riders and the communities we serve to make improvements in service and reliability, and to expand access to transit. This Strategic Planning process was a needed pause to reflect inwardly on the organization itself. Having made commitments to the staff involved and our governing Fiscal and Management Control Board, moving forward we will have to deliver on advancing our priorities and making sustainable change. In the next stages of our process, we will identify targeted strategies under our priority areas, develop our indicators of success, and align our work within the context of the operating and capital budget processes. To ensure implementation success, we have created a governance structure to ensure we complete our objectives.

MBTA's Organizational Performance Goal Areas

Stemming from the work done in the Strategic Planning Process, the organization is aligning behind 7 key performance areas driven by our four Core Values and our three Strategic Priority areas. Each will be described below.

What we do:

Safety. *We put safety at the forefront of our work.*

Safety, both for our employees and the riding public, is critical to functioning of the MBTA. The MBTA will develop and support a safety culture that is organization-wide in which safety is everyone's priority. This includes investing both in the Safety Department

but also in critical quality assurance and oversight functions and in promoting safety amongst leadership. The Authority must also establish and monitor safety performance targets and indicators down, as appropriate, to the department level. Most importantly the MBTA must continue to implement the Safety Management System (SMS) and finalize our Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it is also critical that protocols are in place to keep employees safe, including providing personal protective equipment and testing, developing mitigation strategies in how we deliver service, and enhancing cleaning.

Service *We aim to deliver superior service, connecting people and communities.*

As an organization we strive to provide a high-quality and reliable service for our riders, and a goal for the organization is to increase our level of schedule adherence for the public. Given the COVID-19 crisis, the MBTA must ensure transparency when adjusting service to meet changing ridership patterns. It is incumbent that we communicate with our customers and stakeholders clearly and consistently on projects, service levels and issues which may arise. As an organization we must continually monitor and improve customer satisfaction. We must also ensure that all of our contractors are meeting or exceeding service performance levels. Finally, we must ensure progress on our many capital program goals which will ultimately result in increased service reliability, decreased headways and enhanced experiences for the customers we serve.

Equity *We strive to treat all customers and employees fairly and consult diverse voices and perspectives in decision-making.*

With a mission to “serve the public” through providing “safe, reliable, and accessible transportation,” it is essential that we ensure equitable service for our riders. In particular, we must ensure that any proposed changes to our service minimize any negative impacts for our transit-dependent riders. We have a robust plan to remove barriers to accessibility throughout the MBTA system, and we must advance our accessibility-focused capital projects and our [PATI priorities](#) to make good on those plans. Affordability for transit-dependent riders is an ongoing issue for transit organizations. The MBTA will continue to investigate, undertake and evaluate fare and service pilots with measurable benefits to low-income and environmental justice communities as resources allow.

Sustainability *We invest resources wisely in solutions for our team, our communities, and our environment.*

This year has delivered a huge fiscal challenge for the organization. It is critical that we deliver on revenue and expense targets for the current fiscal year, and that we manage expenses, particularly headcount, to control operational growth. We also know that FY22 will be challenging due to a major budget shortfall so it is important that we proactively reduce expenses and grow revenue as much as possible to limit the harm in the next fiscal year. On the capital side we need to establish a sustainable delivery model for \$2 billion in future investment goals. Moreover, to protect our commitment to the environment, we must ensure that we improve our resilience to both

climate change and extreme weather, while also improving our energy efficiency and increasing the use of electric vehicles.

How we do it:

Culture, Communication and Collaboration- *Improve internal engagement and collaborative decision-making processes.*

As an organization we must commit to clearly communicating and actively informing all stakeholders, both internal and external, of major challenges and initiatives. We seek to develop a culture where all employees are actively encouraged to report safety concerns, either to their supervisor or to the Safety Hotline. We must improve staff engagement to seek and receive feedback directly from the workforce. We want to ensure strong partnerships across departments in order to achieve our common goals, building upon collaborations and enhancing mutual respect for all colleagues. The MBTA must strive to develop more inclusive decision making, where feasible, seeking alternative points of view and making space for different voices in decision-making. Lastly, as an organization we must support a workplace culture working group to focus on engagement and communication.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion- *Invest in a more diverse, equitable and inclusive organization*

The MBTA wishes to model the diversity of our ridership and ensure inclusivity of different perspectives, voices and experiences across our organization. Specifically, we hope to recognize and support the diverse talent across the organization and to provide equitable opportunities for career development and advancement. The organization must support and encourage the new DEI Working Group and the DEI Executive Council to foster dialogue about what changes need to be made and to hold ourselves accountable to making those changes where possible. We also want to ensure we have fair hiring process and that all hiring managers have completed required training to prevent bias in our hiring process. In addition, the Authority should continue to develop new training content, whether delivered in person or virtually, for staff on the topics of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Workforce Development- *Recognize diverse talent that we have and provide opportunities for meaningful professional development and career pathways.*

Supporting and developing our workforce will lead to a stronger team and a more positive culture for all our staff. This is work to be done for all levels of staff. The MBTA needs to build and maintain a strong executive leadership team. For all staff, the organization must assess internal skill gaps and build out leading and development, and succession planning, strategies to mitigate and address the gaps. Aligned with our DEI work, workforce development opportunities must be assessed through the lens of equity, both in terms of participation but also in terms of content and skill development, to ensure robust professional growth. This work must all be done with our partners in the leadership within the labor unions, and the MBTA must ensure that we are achieving our objectives within our collective bargaining strategies.

Strategic Planning in Action

Aligning to Safety Matrix

During the Strategic Planning process the MBTA also received specific feedback and recommendations from the Safety Review Panel. Many of the comments and recommendations underscored the need for our internal look at how we function, including noted issues with communication, negative culture and lack of transparency. Responding to the challenges that were presented was an opportunity to show how we “live out” safety as a core value. In the past year we have built a solid process for ensuring progress on our safety goals, as we work on the backbone issues identified both in Strategic Planning and in the Panel’s review. We are unifying those processes under four collaborative and cross-functional Core Teams to ensure priorities are established and goals are met. The Core Teams were designed based on the themes in the Safety Panel Report but also mirror some of the issues raised through the Strategic Planning sessions. The four Core Teams are Safety Culture; Workforce Development; Asset Management; and Safety Oversight and Management System (SMS) Implementation. These Core Teams, each with an executive convener, roll up to an Executive Safety Committee, which meets monthly to address issues and remove roadblocks.

Countering COVID

In the second week of March 2020, everything changed in Massachusetts with the shutting down of many services and guidance to stay home in the face of COVID-19. The MBTA, however, did not stop. Our frontline workers were seen by the public for what they really are: essential. While COVID pushed 900+ staff to work remotely, the frontline staff showed up every day. During this crisis, the work of Strategic Planning continued; we modeled the agency that we wanted to be, even in times of crisis. Moreover there was significant progress made in some meaningful avenues. Communication streams improved, from regular General Manager video messages, to the use of new technological platforms to push announcements to staff members’ personal or work devices and the development of a new staff-focused intranet platform. As an organization we also were forced to be more intentional as to how we collaborate across departments during a time rapid decision-making, such as procuring and distributing necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) for our frontline workforce. While COVID wreaked havoc on our ridership, the agency’s response was designed to rally around our core values of safety, service and equity. The process of planning for painful and unwanted service reductions was centered on the riders most dependent upon our system. Now the organization is again pivoting to the next wave of action: obtaining and distributing vaccinations to keep our workforce and our customers safe so the MBTA can provide safe, reliable and accessible transportation.

Responding to the Call to Dismantle Racism

While the organization stood up a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Workgroup in late March, the murder of George Floyd and other unarmed people of color and the awaking of the many Americans, allowing for a greater understanding of the painful and deep realities of racism in our daily lives, provided urgency to this priority area. The organization has assessed and developed a structure for our DEI work so that it is sustainable

and impactful. A staff-lead DEI Advisory Council is advocating for changes within, while a new DEI Executive Council is providing the support and leverage to make meaningful changes for our staff. Central to this work was the creation of a new executive leadership position to ensure that equity is considered in all that we do. The organization is also launching affinity groups for staff to provide more peer-to-peer connections and opportunities for professional growth. As an organization, the MBTA is committed to that change.

Accountability to Change KPIs; SPCI; Staff Survey

The changes needed in the organization are significant and will require a sustained effort. The MBTA leadership is putting three structures in place to drive accountability.

Strategic Planning Committee for Implementation

To hold us accountable and to sustain the pace of change needed, the Strategic Planning Committee which had been essential in the design of our process, has now taken on new responsibilities. Renamed the *Strategic Planning Committee for Implementation (SPCI)*, this group comprises both members of the Executive Team and participants from the Strategic Planning process. As we develop activities in each of the three priority strategy areas discussed above, the SPCI will function as the connective tissue for all the reforms with a future-focused view. In addition, the SPCI will meet quarterly with the Executive Team to ensure alignment on goals and activities. Lastly, the SPCI will continue to support the reconvening of the staff involved in the planning process on a regular basis.

Performance Management

Stemming from the organization's performance goal areas, the Authority is changing the way performance is assessed for all leaders and for all departments. This exciting work will help to operationalize the 7 organizational goal areas which will ultimately cascade down to the day-to-day work of the MBTA an individual employees. Prioritization and alignment across all levels of the organization are the key to ensuring that short term issues and crises do not divert attention from long-term priorities. A leadership team, is developing an agency-wide performance management process built on our values and priorities while assuring that resources are properly aligned.

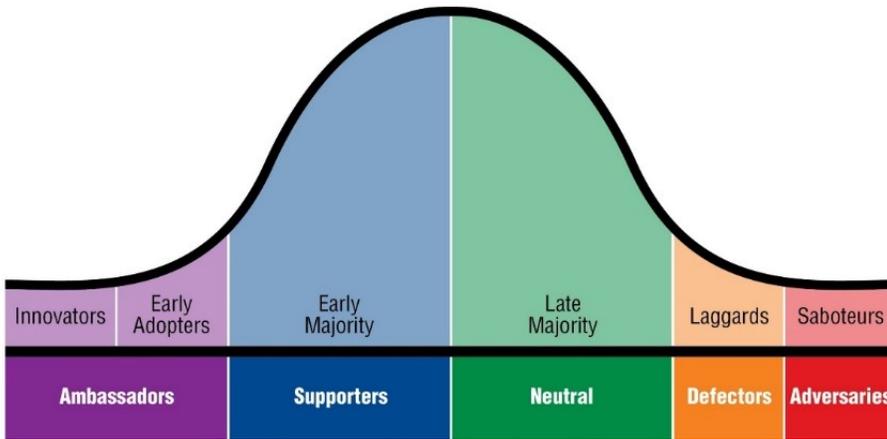
Staff Survey Efforts

Creating robust feedback loops with the workforce to leadership and back down are part of a strategy to improve communication and culture. One tool to modernize, and anonymize, this feedback is through new all-staff surveys. The first survey was released in November of 2020, and each quarter another survey will be pushed out to employees so that everyone has a way to provide their observations and opinions. Each survey will have a deep-dive module on topics connected the workforce: Safety; Communication; Managers/Supervisors; and Workplace Culture. The Survey results will be shared on the new intranet platform, T-Stop, and will allow leadership to track direct staff feedback over time.

Building Buy-In for Change with Workforce ²

One of our next steps in the Strategic Planning Process is to bring our message of change and improvement to the work force. We know that each of the identified priority areas will need constant refinement and iteration, and these are conversations we must have with staff who are in the field to make necessary course corrections along the way. As we continue to want to “Be the Change” we are seeking, we will

need to be open and listen to more voices and perspectives and to refine and improve upon our efforts. This process created Ambassadors for the change we seek. However, this is a large and complex organization, and we have to be intentional about bringing more staff into these dialogues. This is how we will ultimately change our organizational culture.



² Image taken from Linda Tan-Spicer, Gaining Buy-In for Your Culture Change, accessed July 23, 2020 at <https://www.upliftingservice.com/blog/gaining-buy-culture-change>