

Getting Things on Track

From his decades of experience working for the London Tube, Howard Collins is revitalising the tired rail system of Sydney and creating more engagement between commuters and Sydney Trains.

Images by Scott Ehler

Entering his thirty-seventh year in transportation, Howard Collins has brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to his role as Chief Executive of Sydney Trains. He has worked on a variety of different projects and has seen the London Tube system go through two of its most challenging periods: the 2005 bombings and the 2012 Olympics, which Howard believes to be an instrumental chapter in his career.

“With 35 years in London transport and doing a lot of great things, I think that it culminated for me with the Olympics, which is the biggest transport event you’re ever going to manage. It’s a big event: transporting 500,000 people between the Olympic park and Westfield at Stratford. You really feel that you are delivering into the world a public transport system that worked really well. We pinched a lot of great ideas from Sydney in terms of staff engagement, visibility,

and contact with our customers, which worked really well in 2000, and we certainly felt that we wanted to do the same.”

Howard joined Sydney Trains in June 2013, setting up a five- to ten-year program for the future of Sydney’s railway system. “I’d heard about the Fixing the Trains program launched by the new government that had decided to focus on customers and getting the basics right. That just rang true to me. That is what I did in London: we basically changed it around from an operational and engineering-led organisation to a customer-led organisation, focusing on the staff, their visibility, the cleanliness, announcements, and the ticketing system. It was almost like a dream come true that I could be part of another initiative like that again, having the great hindsight of learning a lot the first time, and realising that if I had my time again, I could do some things

differently. I certainly felt there was opportunity here.”

Since the early days of his appointment, Howard found he was in close agreement with Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian about the direction of the company. “It’s about visible staffing and staff that are proactive and want to get out there and be involved—changing their attitudes and behaviours from being focused on keeping the trains moving and being slouched on seats, not interested in making eye contact, to getting them out there and being involved. It was also about refreshing the management team at senior level and allowing those people who had done their time and wanted to go to leave RailCorp, and bringing in a fresh mix of people from the private and public sectors.

“And then the basics: cleaning the stations, cleaning the trains, removing the graffiti, making sure >

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the guards made intelligible announcements. So we sent them to radio school with our friends from Smooth FM or 2GB and said that they didn't have to list the stations at 100 kilometres an hour; they could actually take their time and make sure it was useful for people to hear.

"The result has so far been very positive, as shown by customer satisfaction levels. Before I got here, it was around 79 per cent. Then when I started, it was around 81 per cent, and now it's up to 83 per cent. And that means that the place is cleaner, people are hearing more information, and the service is more reliable."

Another basic element that has been a major focus for Howard has been the reliability of the train service. "We had a really good look at the timetable. We put a lot more trains in, but we untangled some of the mess of trains crossing over each other and delaying each other. It was a real risk, and people were worried.

"I was very keen to introduce almost a London Underground culture into the business, which is a turn-up-and-go philosophy: trains every 10 minutes from Hurstville, not every eight minutes, then 12 minutes, which it was. We wanted to get some of the clock-face timetabling sorted and rationalise the service patterns so you didn't need a slide rule or a calculator to work out when, or indeed if, the train was going to stop at a particular station."

The three-pronged approach of fixing the trains, focusing on the customer, and improving the reliability has meant Sydney Trains has had to be tough on itself and very self-critical. "We've tightened up the targets for trains running on time, because in the old days, if they all turned up within five minutes within a very narrow band, we got 100 per cent. Now we've widened the measurement of the peak and we measure punctuality as opposed to trains getting cancelled and not counting as a cancellation. I've made the rules of measuring our

performance tougher, and one day we'll be comparable in terms of London. When trains are two minutes late, we'll record the delay, whereas at the moment it's a five-minute window of opportunity for the trains to be on time."

In aspiring to make Sydney's railways a world-class system, Howard has recognised the importance of investment, which has been exemplified through the success of the Waratah trains. "Now customers are saying that the trains look brighter and cleaner, and a big reason for that is because probably 50 per cent of them are riding our new Waratah trains, which work very well. We involved the staff in the early stages of the cab design, getting their input; and also ensuring they understood how they contributed to the program, along with proper training in cab simulators—which was the first time that we've had those here of any magnitude—so people were familiar with the equipment and controls before they had even left the classroom.

"The trains were delivered through a PPP arrangement between us and Reliance Rail and Downer EDI group. That was new for Sydney. Normally, they bought the trains, maintained them, cost a fortune, and it developed into a real, ongoing problem. This time around, it's about building our relationship with a long-term supplier and partner through Reliance Rail and Downer EDI. We are bringing in the best talent from around the world who can actually make these trains very reliable, offer us a good service, and then there's the power of the contract behind us. If something doesn't happen, the partnership continues to work and there's motivation on both sides to make sure the trains do run, because it costs either party a lot of money if they don't"

Sydney Trains has been increasing its efficiency, particularly around maintenance and ticketing. "I've had quite a lot of experience in ticketing with the Oyster product in London, which I believe was produced by the same



manufacturer as Opal here in Sydney. I believe the Opal card will revolutionise the way people travel in Sydney. They'll no longer have to scramble for the change and sort out what ticket to buy; you just turn up and go, like the e-toll is now for your average car driver. That's going to have a big impact on the way we operate stations. We'll be able to get people out of ticket offices and onto stations where they can be visible and of more use and assistance to our customers.

"Another long-term strategy is about how we carry out our maintenance. We had 127 different locations, normally little sheds and demountable buildings, where individual crafts- and tradespeople all worked separately. We're drawing that into 12 centres called 'network bases', centres of excellence for maintenance. In the >



longer term, this will allow us to carry out and respond to maintenance issues much more easily and efficiently.”

Howard is hopeful for Sydney Trains’ future as he continues to implement new strategies for the business and keeps a very close eye on the network he’s responsible for. “I go out a lot; I travel on the network as a customer every day. You cannot be a chief executive and not be in touch with what your product is all about. And not just turning up for half an hour, visiting a site, and then disappearing in a chauffeur-driven limousine. You have to be there, to understand it, and you have to have your ear to the ground for what customers tell you. It also gives me an opportunity to engage with the staff, which is probably my biggest crusade. I’m expecting a lot more contact between my senior management team and the guys and girls that are out there on the front line every day

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making a real difference to the customer experience.

“I try to spend at least half a day a week out there talking to the staff and visiting the network. And you get a lot of feedback. I’ve introduced my own blog, so every week I write a blog. And it’s me who writes it; no PR agent gets anywhere near it. It is a bit disjointed and may need some polishing at the end, but, as far as I’m concerned, it gives me a chance to keep up direct contact with the whole team. I pushed hard on things like Twitter, which was almost a given in London. There were a lot of reservations around that, but you’ll find now that almost every line has a Twitter feed. We’ve got to keep in touch with the reality of what goes on out there.

“Things are certainly better, and increasingly the public are aware of that—which ironically almost makes it tougher. After years of finding other ways to get around,

customers are now coming back, interested in what we’ve got to offer. But with that revived interest and curiosity comes a greater expectation. That’s the higher bar we have set ourselves and now have to clear.”

Viewed from that perspective, improving the trains is a program that never really stops. The trains are now expected to run at a peak punctuality and on-time running rate of at least 92 per cent, and in time that expectation will rise. An 18-month major refreshment program for the busiest stations across the network is delivering cleaner, safer, more efficient, and more easily navigated stations to handle the greater customer numbers.

“There’s plenty more things ahead of us, though I prefer to think of them not so much as challenges, but as opportunities. While planning is important, and we’ve done that, delivery is the thing—2014 is the year of doing.” ◉

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