



# ROAD TO Reinvention

The work that VicRoads carries out touches the lives of all Victorians multiple times per day.

Images courtesy of VicRoads

**F**or more than 100 years, VicRoads has been planning, developing, and managing the Victorian arterial road network, delivering safety initiatives, and providing customers with registration and licensing services. The state government organisation knows that its job is to enhance people's lives, and therefore it makes it a priority to listen to their feedback for the betterment of the communities it serves.

John Merritt has been leading VicRoads as CEO for just over 12 months. This is his third government role, a sector he feels extremely passionate about. "I think these public organisations are such a privilege to run," he says. "You are able to make a big impact on the town in which you live, and you get to actually have a say in your local community through this work. Furthermore, you get to be surrounded by people who share that same desire.

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- John Merritt

In many ways, the task is simply to ask, 'How do you get all of that ability and all of that care and throw it at the enormous challenges that we face to make our communities thrive?'

"It has staggered me how big a role we play in the lives of Victorians. We provide a service to every adult, every day, multiple times. I am confident that I am like the majority of public servants in this state who come to work in order to make a difference. If you ever wanted to make an impact, this is the place to be because you have so much opportunity."

John is currently taking VicRoads through a transformation journey. Through extensive conversation externally and internally, he has been able to determine a strategy to reposition VicRoads from its historical role as a roads agency to a more contemporary one as an organisation that makes people's lives better.

"We are 102 years old as an organisation," John says. "We have been doing things and working in the same way for a long time. The world has changed and the needs and demands being placed on us have changed. However, we haven't changed anywhere near as fast as we perhaps should have. We are at the tail end of the nation-building phase for road organisations, and that is why there needs to be a transformation. It's all about enhancing people's lives and doing whatever it takes to improve their daily experience. To do this, it requires a big change in focus, a shift in accountability, and most importantly a lot of change in the way we lead."

There are three key strategy areas that John has outlined for VicRoads. The first is to have a really sharp focus on what's important so that everybody's efforts are deployed towards the same goal. The second is to have a clear sense of accountability. "This is particularly interesting and >



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challenging in public organisations where people care deeply and try hard,” John notes. “Those things are important, but it is in fact the result that counts the most. I find consistently that while we value our care, the community is really only interested in the result. That’s what matters, and it’s very important in public organisations to be very clear about what that is.”

The third focus is on leadership. John believes that to get the best out of people on behalf of a community, there is a need for leaders who first and foremost see their role as enabling staff to successfully carry out the job they are employed to do. “That leadership space is a real interest of mine,” John says.

“I love leading public organisations because one of the keys to a good life is meaning, and these types of jobs serve that up on a plate. You have always got people searching for meaning, engagement, and achievement, so it’s been a priority

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of mine for some time now to try and find a way to lead my staff into achieving that. That’s really number one for me. Everything else is sort of secondary to that in my world.

“The goal is to get the best out of people. I think leaders play a critical role in the capacity of people doing their best work; and, in particular, they have a critical role to play in building self-belief and trust. The nature of contemporary public service is that the vast majority of issues that we have to deal with—there are thousands of issues—have no easy answer.”

John notes that the community he serves values time limits and responsiveness. He believes that VicRoads needs to lead in a way that is pushing decisions down as close as possible to the customer. One initiative he has implemented is to give feedback on how staff perceive the work of leaders within the organisation, through LSI (Life

Styles Inventory™) and OCI (Organisational Culture Inventory®) tools. With almost 200 people in leadership positions, the survey material has been useful in ensuring the right degree of support is given so everyone can make the most of their talents.

“That’s a huge undertaking because it is critical work and it can only begin with the feedback,” John explains. “It then leads to this coaching and support of our leaders. For some, the results have been a pleasant surprise, but of course for most of us it has been very challenging.

“For many leaders, it’s the first time they have had feedback of this nature. My experience in using these tools in other organisations is that it is a very powerful way to improve leadership and results in an enormous increase in performance from people.”

One of VicRoad’s responsibilities is to promote road safety within

Victoria. Each year, 250 people lose their lives and more than 5,000 are seriously injured. After years of a consistent reduction in road fatalities, VicRoads has reached a plateau. John says he is determined to step up in this space to continue to reduce the suffering the community experiences as a result of road trauma. Staff have recently been on the road engaging with people living in metropolitan and country areas to tackle this problem. “There is a broad consensus about reducing trauma, but there is certainly no consensus about how that should be done,” John notes.

He adds that there are varying views between the different interest groups, as well as around speed and personal accountability. By hosting forums and discussion groups and opening up the conversation with the community, VicRoads has been able to listen to people’s issues and ideas before trying to come up with solutions. The organisation has also ramped up its online presence with a new website to encourage community interaction, and social media is being used as a medium to target a wider range of people.

VicRoads manages, on average, around \$1.4 billion worth of road construction work per year and therefore has a strong working relationship with local councils, contractors, suppliers, and other partners. It has more than 1,000 staff located in regional Victoria and operates 41 customer service centres across the state. Every day, more than 10,000 people walk into one of those centres to transact with the organisation, and another 10,000 people call through on the phone.

“It’s a very high touch business,” John says. “We touch everyone’s lives every day. I think an average Victorian makes 3.2 journeys a day, so if you want to make a difference, this is a great place to be. We are a capable organisation. We know how to plan, build, and maintain a road, and we know how to manage the access to the road system very well. We also care deeply about what we do.”



John has a strong vision for the future of VicRoads. He wants the organisation to be a highly valued contributor to the lives of Victorians and to be highly responsive to their needs. Furthermore, he wants a significant

majority of his employees to feel as if they are growing personally through their work with VicRoads. “If I can get all of those things right, then I will be happy,” John concludes. •

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