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## A New Approach

# Wanted: Dynamic Leader To Drive Change At The MBTA

## Lack Of Leadership Leads To Poor Performance

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By William F. Lyons

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The month of February has not been a good month for transportation in Boston. The chink in our city's armor has been exposed in a most brutal fashion. If there was any doubt that the city of Boston is dependent on a reliable, efficient MBTA system, those doubts must be dispelled by now. Without the MBTA operating, the city was in a constant state of congestion, further exacerbated by streets choked with snow piles. With our weakness exposed, we have to examine the problems that led to citywide gridlock quickly and objectively.

The calamity that overtook the MBTA in February was embarrassing for a northeast city known for crippling winter storms. Of course, there is no doubting that this was a month of storms of historic proportions. However, the fact that the MBTA shut down on several occasions because the system was simply unable to operate, and not for general public safety concerns, is telling. Something has gone horribly awry. And with an Olympic bid hanging in the balance, we had best figure out the problem at the MBTA pronto.

It is easy to blame the problem on inadequate investment in an old transit system, as outgoing general manager Beverly Scott has done. There is no doubt that underinvestment is part of the problem, particularly in the area of train control systems. But blaming the problem on old trains is simply a scapegoat, as much of the fleet has in fact been overhauled in the last 20 years. The bottom line is that decades of rough storms have never produced a result as stark in their outcome as the storms of January and February 2015. The only logical conclusion is that the MBTA suffers from inadequate management and leadership.



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Let's not pretend. The MBTA is suffering from crushing debt and inadequate resources. The sooner we all acknowledge that fact, the better the city of Boston and the commonwealth of Massachusetts will be. No transit system can support \$5 billion in debt, much of which it did not incur voluntarily, without experiencing significant trauma to its operating budgets. Make no mistake – debt is a serious and debilitating problem for the MBTA. But debt alone does not explain the dismal performance of the MBTA in February.

Let's start with the problem of deferred maintenance. Yes, the very existence of deferred maintenance is a symptom of inadequate fiscal resources. But the fact that deferred maintenance logs have not been maintained at the MBTA for years tells a significant story about how the MBTA has been managed. If we don't know where our maintenance needs are, it is nearly impossible to budget resources appropriately. Without reasonably accurate deferred maintenance logs, how can one know what systems are most in need of attention? This is a serious problem with the way the MBTA has conducted business for the last five years or more. Management needs to get a grip on this problem, and fast.

### Lackluster Leadership

Perhaps more importantly, the MBTA has suffered from a lack of entrepreneurial and innovative leadership. Anyone with successful business or military experience knows that we can inspire our teammates to overachievement when there is good leadership in place. In the alternative, poor leadership can result in underachievement and lackluster performance. This is the state of the MBTA today. Simply put, inattentive leadership at the top of the agency created conditions which led to poor morale, nonexistent esprit de corps and an absence of pride in performance. The result – a transit system that could not rise to the occasion when its performance mattered most.

As an army officer of more than 25 years with recent combat experience, I have had the privilege to serve with and lead some of the most exceptional young people America has ever produced – bar none. I have also had the unfortunate experience of witnessing some of the worst leadership our soldiers have ever endured. One lesson I have learned in my decades of military service is that good leadership inspires exceptional performance in the most unbearable conditions, and inadequate leadership causes an otherwise functioning organization to fail miserably when it is tested by adversity. The MBTA of February 2015 fits in the latter category.

The MBTA is at a crossroads. With general manager Beverly Scott leaving, the MBTA could conduct a nationwide search for a transit professional with impeccable credentials. I would argue that this would be a mistake. The MBTA needs disciplined leadership. Awe-inspiring, tough leadership. An acumen for transit matters would be very helpful, but an ability to cut through and across management and labor issues while inspiring the exceptional performance needed to manage a transit system crippled by financial woes is essential. Without this first-class leadership, we are resigning ourselves to decades of mediocrity or worse.

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