



## WHISTLE STOP TOUR

DUNCAN BONFIELD, DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AT NETWORK RAIL, TALKS TO CORE

### **You have joined Network Rail relatively recently, taking into account your 'new boy' status, what kind of organisation do you see?**

First of all, Network Rail is very modern and outward looking, really what you'd expect from any progressive large, modern corporation. On the other hand, there is also the feeling of a traditional heavy industry – we have maintenance crews who venture out on a winter's night to brush snow off points! So for me, Network Rail is a contrasting organisation, a mixture of old and new. We have people who've been in the railway industry for a long time, in all its various corporate guises, and a large cadre of people who are new to the business.

### **So is it fair to say it's an organisation in transition?**

Yes, that's exactly where it is. And like any organisation we don't want to lose the heritage, or to lose the experience, we want to bring the best of the past, and to ally it to contemporary thinking and the most modern management techniques. Also there is a sense that the company has got to change, we are like most organisations facing some really tough financial challenges going forward.

We are also in a challenging industry in terms of balancing the interests of stakeholders, passengers and indeed the British public. So there's a delicate balancing act in delivering a railway that performs in terms of running trains on time, but is efficient and safe at the same time.

### **How do you see your role within Network Rail?**

My job is to create a political, media and regulatory environment which allows us to have the right conversations about long term infrastructure planning and the operation of the railway. Most people will know that the UK has got a very chequered record on this! So my job is to create the right environment and make sure we have the right conversations.

We have to have a strategic approach – if we're not careful we'd end up servicing everybody and achieving nothing. Just in the last couple of months the

Conservatives came out with a rail review – reasonable in terms of what it said about Network Rail, but it clearly did not think that Network Rail put passengers' interests and those of the freight users at the heart of the business. We have a challenge not only to convince the external world about putting passengers first, but perhaps some of our own people as well.

### **What do you think are the building blocks of your reputation?**

We have to act with the best interests of passengers in mind. This company only exists to get people and goods from A to B. Unless we have that absolutely central to our thinking, then we're almost certainly not going to achieve what we can and should be achieving.

But if you asked most of the public what is Network Rail, they wouldn't know – and indeed, why should they know? We've made consciously little effort on going out and raising awareness of the company. This is because for the last seven years we have focused, quite rightly, on getting the performance right, starting from the demise of Railtrack, and on delivering performance and safety – getting the trains to run on time. The company has been pretty successful in doing that. If we can keep people satisfied with their train service, then we will earn the right to have other discussions around what can we do to introduce new capacity and grow the railway.

### **And what do you think is the basis of your reputation, in the eyes of stakeholders?**

A key part of it is people's attachment to the railway. The railway is very much part of the British landscape geographically, historically and culturally. If you think of Brunel, the Carlisle to Settle Line, St Pancras station, the Harry Potter films – King's Cross and Platform 9¾ and that fantastic scene where they show the Glenfinnan viaduct – what you see is there's a massive amount of latent goodwill towards the railway in this country.

I think this depicts an emotional attachment and resonance with the railway. Contrast this with the feeling generated by finding yourself underneath somebody's armpit on the 8.17 from Harpenden! We have to get more of the former emotion and less of the latter.

**So how does the Board come to a view as to whether you're making progress?**

I think the Board has got a real vision of where it wants to take the company and the communications department is absolutely central to this, it's not peripheral it's essential to what the company does. And really it's about progressing the strategy, and then translating it or putting it into a narrative form, a story that we can tell, and tell consistently and well.

The lines of communication at Network Rail between the Board and my team are very short, so we get a lot of feedback. As a department, we have a lot of conversations at many levels with different stakeholders, and clearly regular meetings with politicians, Department of Transport, that kind of thing, so there's a constant level of feedback, not just from the Board, but from many of our key stakeholders.

Another key element is our research. Notably at our managed stations (where 50% of journeys start or end), we run big pieces of research aimed at understanding our passengers. We also run stakeholder research, we run research with our customers (the train operators and freight operators), so we have a range of objective data to both drive our planning but also measure our progress.

**We're finding a shift in opinion in favour of regulation of industries, and in parallel, a low level of trust in CEOs. Within Network Rail, what's the linkage between transparency and trust, and what's the role of communications in bridging those?**

Network Rail is in a different position to most, we get a public grant. And this company is also tightly regulated - from the Office of Rail Regulation through to the Rail Standards Safety Board. So it's even more important to us that we have the right approach in terms of the way we operate. We have higher standards, perhaps, than in regular commercial life that we adhere to – and transparency is important, as is simply being straightforward and easy to deal with. To be honest this is a challenge – as with a number of big corporations, the public can have difficulty dealing with a big, complex organisation within a confusing industry.

In my opinion, it all comes down to brand and reputation. You can be as transparent as the best, but you also have to very actively build reputation as well. We all know that some of the brands that are most trusted aren't necessarily the most transparent. Really, the way to earn trust is to act in the right manner, embed this culturally within the organisation and build brand reputation.

**Finally, your elevator pitch – if someone were to ask you what does Network Rail stand for, what would you say?**

Quite simply, it is about making the trains run safely and on time.

If it's a longer lift ride, then I'd say it's also about planning Britain's railway infrastructure for the future. Making sure that we have the right train system for future generations, and delivering it in a way that is efficient for taxpayers and train operators, but is also focused on the passenger. At the end of the day this is about delivering a service for passengers – because without them, what on earth is the point of the railway?