



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE PERRONE



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I'm Steve Kraske and this is the Overland Resource Group podcast series, Profiles and Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement. These are stories about the surprising results that organizations achieve by experimenting with alternative approaches to working collaboratively, empowering employees and leading more creatively. These stories are told by leaders of corporations, government agencies and the unions which represent their workforces, as well as leading experts in the field of organizational change.

This series is underwritten by Overland Resource Group, a change leadership consultancy bringing transformative results to organizations for over 30 years. Today we hear from Mike Perrone, National President of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialist, the union that represents approximately 11,000 federal aviation and Department of Defense workers, who ensure the reliability and safety of the national air system every day.

Perrone started his career with the FAA in 1981 in air traffic control and during his tenure he has worked in a variety of union roles focusing on training, engineering and system design. He was one of the founding members of a joint leadership team made up of union leaders and their management counterparts, and together they built a collaborative labor management process that has effectively addressed critical issues and shaped a culture of collaboration in the agency since 2010. Perrone spoke with Cathy Wright.

CATHY WRIGHT

I want to really focus on your experience over the past several years when, first as Vice President of PASS and now as its President, you've been involved in establishing a structured collaborative process with the FAA. So let's start at the beginning and if you could describe for me what it was like when we brought together the PASS leaders and your management counterparts for that first joint meeting.

MIKE PERRONE

So we were in Charlotte, North Carolina in January and it was cold outside, but it was even colder inside the building. Management was on one side of the room, PASS was on the other side; that was the first time that we met face to

face and we had a terrible relationship early on. A lot of things had happened, labor relations was involved so there was that feeling of let's try this but I think both sides, and I know for me, okay, we'll try it but this isn't going to go anywhere. This is going to be another one of these things, but let's just give it a try.

We knew going in, PASS and myself, that we didn't want to continue the way it was, the battles, the fights, just the whole negative way of doing business so let's try something new. And when you guys from Overland approached us we said, "Why not try it? Let's see where we can go with it." But yeah, in the room it was hostile. We were open and honest. We let it fly. That's how we started off that meeting.

CATHY WRIGHT

Yeah; you were definitely open and honest, Mike. I'll give you guys credit. But then over the next four months, as you said, you guys agreed to give it a shot and you all had a lot of joint meetings to discuss possibilities, to think about whether this was the direction you wanted to go, and you all looked at how other organizations had put together collaborative processes. What was really going through your mind in that period of time, in those first few months, and what was behind the skepticism because I know there was a lot of skepticism on both sides of the table?

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah; like you said we committed. That was one thing that we talked about. We committed to doing this to see where it was going to go. So those few months it was waiting for the shoe to drop, waiting for the axe to the back of the head kind of thing, because we'd been down this path before. Over the years that I've worked in the agency we've had different programs and it starts out big bang, we're going to change the world kind of concept, hey, let's give it a shot, and then somewhere along the line somebody, somewhere comes out and says, "Hey, sorry, we're not going to do this." So for those few months we were still having open dialogue and we were still kind of saying, "Well, when is the rug going to get pulled out from under us?" That's how we kept showing up for meetings—like I said we committed to it—but it was just waiting for somebody to say, "Hey, we're kidding, sorry."

CATHY WRIGHT

So it was skepticism based on past practice? You had data you were operating off of; certainly it's understandable why you would be skeptical. But then in May of 2010 I guess you all had had four or five meetings at that point, PASS and the management leadership agreed, you know what, we're going to move forward, we're going to form what came to be called a joint leadership team and really began to put a structured approach in place. What do you think was the turning point? What happened in those exploratory meetings that enabled PASS to be ready to take a deliberate step and to sort of come out of the closet a little bit, to let people know this was the direction that you were ready to go?



MIKE PERRONE

Our Executive Board, we talked about it and we really said do we want to continue to fight the way we have been? Grievances are still our bread and butter and ULPs, unfair labor practices, and we always had that; we still have that today, but I think we really said, “Let’s give this a shot.” One of the key things for me was I worked with Teri Bristol years ago and she was an open and honest person. She typically kept to her word and her running the management side of the house gave me the confidence—and I told my folks—that Teri wants this to work. She’s willing to try. She’s keeping her managers in line. Those four or five months we started seeing some things that, by her saying we’re going to do this on the management side, we’re going to work with PASS, I think convinced us, “Hey, let’s go forward. We’ll take this time and do it.” I think that was one of the keys for me. She said, “Look, we need to do this. I’m going to give my whole commitment on the agency part,” and we decided on the PASS side, “Okay, let’s give it a shot.”

CATHY WRIGHT

Right; and Mike, at that point Teri was the Vice President of Tech Ops and then she has since moved on and is now the Deputy COO for the whole air traffic organization. We like to believe that her great experience as a collaborator contributed to her ascent to that leadership role, but she was absolutely a strong advocate and a determined leader as this process was getting off the ground.

So once the joint leadership team really got going you all started focusing on making improvements in some pretty critical areas. I remember you all had really honest conversations about personnel safety and wanting to make that more of a priority. You worked on modernization of the air space through working with program officers and working with NextGen committees, and you also developed a framework for operational metrics to assure that the metrics were driving the behaviors that you all wanted to drive as a leadership team. I’m curious what your sense of it is in terms of accomplishments that the JLT has been able to make thus far. Are you satisfied or what are you thinking? Is there more to do?

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah; there’s always more to do. One of things that was key for us early on is we learned a valuable lesson in taking some of this on. We found that unless we had control in our organizations mistakes were going to be made, people would do whatever they needed to do, so safety was an easy one because that applies to everybody. The AT wants a safer environment. We want a safe environment. We started with that. We built on that, some of the other programs, but one of the real keys also was that the WE program, WE, we took that on but yet we didn’t have total control so we lost control of it. That I think really helped saying, well, if we’re going to move forward on projects we need to have control of it or be able to make the changes.

So based on that the metrics program and some of the modernization we’ve

talked and kept together on, and it's showing a slow progress, but it's showing progress and I think everybody still desires to work on it.

CATHY WRIGHT

It's a great point, Mike, and I know that the program that you reference, the workforce engagement, was really agency wide. I think it's difficult for any one group to exert the control that they wanted to, as you mentioned. But you all also did nice work in standing up work groups on your own and pulling in employees who had really valuable input to share.

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah; that was also a key. We knew—I shouldn't say we—the group knew, the JLT knew we didn't have all the expertise so we went out and relied on people that did, and then took that input and then we made a decision. Who to put on the workgroups and give them some structure on what we needed for them to do, so that was important because typically groups get together and we say, "We know everything and we can do it," and then we find out we're missing pieces. That's been something that's been worked on also.

CATHY WRIGHT

Great; and then in that way too you were also expanding out practicing collaboration at various levels in the organization. Another important step you all took as a JLT early 2011 was, for the first time in the history of the agency, as a joint leadership team, you brought in all of your district level managers and all of your district level PASS reps, so the counterpart pairs. I think in that first session they weren't quite sure what was in store but you gave them an introduction to the process, you did some training with them on collaborative leadership skills and the JLT really stressed their expectations, which were for this manager and this PASS rep to start working together proactively, to start dialoguing regularly, not just over grievances or disputes. So a couple of questions there—I'm curious how you would characterize that first meeting when you brought the mid levels in. It was 100 plus people, and was the thinking the JLT had in doing that?

MIKE PERRONE

Well I think the, again, from the JLT perspective, we had just gone through that whole, "What's going on? We're apprehensive. We're not sure this is going to go anywhere" and those hundred folks had the same kind of feeling. Some of them were, "Yeah. I got a vacation in Atlanta, Georgia, for a week". Some were, "Hey. Let's give it a shot". Some had already been doing it and were far ahead of us in collaboration and talking and working together. So, we had a good mixture and then we had some that it didn't matter what we said or did, they were not going to be players. They just obviously refused. So, the whole feeling was we were trying to educate them. This was different. This was something that both sides, PASS and management, want to work and we needed them for their support and help to reach out, to collaborate, and again the two key things we said is, "We retain our union rights and management retains their management rights. This is the stuff in the middle box that you can work on together" and the big thing was just talk instead of dropping a paper

of grievance, or doing something. Talk. Have a conversation and I think they were really, on the management side, they were looking at their managers, their upper managers and, “What do we say? What do we do?” On the PASS side, as typical unions, they were a little bit more open because even though at the time I was vice president and am now the president, they don’t report to me so they weren’t looking at me being open and honest and I think that had an uneasy feeling in the room. So, you got one side willing to talk, the other side not. For the second part, the JLTs thinking, we wanted and we saw that we could not do all of this work. The National JLT wasn’t going to be able to reach out to everybody, because eventually we wanted to go down right to the field level, to the first level of pairs and we needed a second level to be part of that, to reach out, and to help us with that. So, that was one of the keys. It was manageable, a hundred people was manageable in a way, so that’s why we decided to do that.

CATHY WRIGHT

Well, I think it was really a smart move on your part, Mike, because all too often in change efforts you get the leaders at the top engaged and feeling good about the direction, and you get some involvement from frontline people and that big group in the middle gets left out, and that really is the group that you need pulling with you and helping really execute the vision and the strategy the JLT had put in motion. I think that was a really wise direction that the JLT pursued.

Referencing your members, Mike—I’ve got to imagine that as you’ve gone through this process you’ve gotten a fair amount of pushback. Sometimes we hear people talk about drinking the Cool Aid and getting in bed with management; I’m curious how much of that sort of thing you heard and how did you respond, or how do you respond if you still hear that sort of thing?

MIKE PERRONE

Since we represent everybody across the United States you have the different cultures, different age groups, people have been around. We heard from folks like myself that have been around, “We’ve done this before, employee involvement, EI, or workgroups and so what’s different about this?” We’ve heard from some people that were actually pleased and happy because they had come through the environment when it was fight and battles and they were looking for that, “Hey, let’s try this and let’s work.” Some had already been doing it, despite what the national level was doing, and then others were just brand new to the agency going, “All right; let’s give it a try. What have we got to lose?”

So our biggest thing from the union was this wasn’t going to impact our contract or our grievance process, so they really had to understand the differences of the old EI program where we did, unfortunately, give up both sides, our rights, and at the end LR, labor relations got involved and said, “Hey, you can’t agree to this. This is illegal. This is a management right.” This was

different. We kept and told them we're staying in a neutral middle box where we can work on issues together, and those kinds of things helped. We also worked on, with your help, on meetings; the elevator response is the quick little responses when somebody said something. You can give them a 30 second answer because a lot of times you could talk for hours but they don't hear you, so just a quick message, "Hey, this is what we're saying. This is what we're doing." If they wanted to follow up we had that, but we keyed on a lot of quick, short messages and we did it together, so I think that was a helpful point.

CATHY WRIGHT

And it helped people here, the same message, whether they were talking to a PASS leader or a management leader; they were getting the same story because we know people will check both ways, right? Mike, you gave me a great segway because one of the things that the JLT was really deliberate about was keeping that, the traditional LR work, separate and apart from the collaborative work. When you brought the mid level leaders back together again for a second meeting later that same year in 2011 you all, as a joint leadership team, decided to invite in members of the contract negotiating team. You were just getting underway, working on a new collective bargaining agreement; what was the thinking behind bringing the negotiating team in to see and observe that collaborative session with all the mid level leaders?

MIKE PERRONE

What happened is at the JLT, again Teri had approached us from her side of the house, the management side of the house, they were getting a lot of pushback and a lot of pressure that the LR needed to be in the meetings, LR needed to hear and see what we were doing. Then on our side, from the PASS perspective, our LR folks were looking at, "Well, the agency is not moving, they're not collaborating, not working together with us so what the heck are you guys doing?" So we decided jointly, "Hey, let's bring the team in, have them sit in the back of the room, listen mode only, and hear what we were talking about and how we were doing what we were doing."

That really I think opened their eyes up as to what was going on and they actually started, in the back of the room, having conversations amongst themselves, and at the end of the week they resolved their ground rules that we needed to move on for the contract talks. I think it went over to, yes, it's traditional LR, it's traditional labor management, and the unions have these ground rules but they just listened to each other. They talked to each other, and because of that they said, "Hey, we're now at a point where we can sign these ground rules." And with that also they backed off on having to be involved in our meetings and getting their fingers in there because we weren't talking any management, labor issues. We were talking generalities of safety and middle box kind of questions. It was a twofold reason and it worked out perfect for both sides.

CATHY WRIGHT

And I think it was a really smart move on the part of the JLT because they got



to see the behaviors that as leaders you were modeling and the direction that you were trying to steer the organization. Mike, that also, I think, was kind of a beginning for what ended up being a really successful negotiation process. Would you agree?

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah; we ended up doing, instead of traditional bargaining, we did interest based bargaining, first time, and that basically is we would talk about what our needs were in a particular article, and then the FAA would talk about their needs, and a lot of times just in that conversation we'd agree and we'd sign off the article. Some were a little bit more discussion, a little bit back and forth, and then some obviously were the typical we're on one side, they're on the other, but it really helped move that process along. Now I have a second contract that's under negotiation; because of that first one we are well ahead in negotiating and doing the same principles so I think that the benefits were definitely well used.

CATHY WRIGHT

Fantastic; and I think Mike too, on the PASS side of the house as you all were going through that process, you were really doing a lot of communication out to the members, I think it ratified with an unprecedented margin, didn't it?

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah; it was one of the most overwhelming numbers that we had in a long time; well over 85 percent.

CATHY WRIGHT

That's great.

MIKE PERRONE

One other thing talking about going to the field, when the JLT, when we were traveling around the country for our meetings once a month, we also made a decision to meet at a location, a field facility, joint management and PASS bargaining unit folks, and had the managers on the JLT and the labor side, and have open and honest discussions. What the JLT was, who we were, what we were doing and what we were working on. And then also we had them ask us questions, and I remember the first meeting we had in Salt Lake a manager stood up and asked a question and I turned to Teri and I said, "Let me answer this." So here is labor answering a question to a manager, and the manager looked at Teri like, "Well, aren't you going to answer?" and she said, "Yeah, Mike's right on point."

CATHY WRIGHT

Awesome.

MIKE PERRONE

I think it started the beginnings of the dynamic of we're speaking in front of each other together and we're saying why don't we agree—we didn't always agree—but when we agree it didn't matter who was speaking. I think that was a real benefit to the field.

CATHY WRIGHT

Absolutely; and so often in any organization one of the things you always hear

is our leadership is not visible enough, and here was a way that you all took on that challenge and did it jointly, which I think is really impactful. So let's shift now to more current status—you all as a JLT have really been focusing on strengthening and sustaining the process, you're standing up joint leadership teams in service areas and flight inspection, and they'll pretty much act like a JLT but within a geographic area. What was the rationale behind doing that?

MIKE PERRONE

Again, we cover the whole United States so our group is all over the country. We needed people at certain locations to work the process that we were doing nationally here, on the national team, but we needed more boots on the ground. By doing the service areas it's basically a third of the country split up, flight inspections are their own entity. We wanted them to run with this, and again, continue in keeping the momentum going.

A key that we talked about early on was somewhere down the line we would get budget cuts. Everybody is busy, everybody has got other jobs to do but we figured if we had all those groups in place the more chances we'd have for this to continue and that's what we've been doing.

CATHY WRIGHT

Great; and you also have recently brought in internal resources and trained coaches to help you in that regard. Is that part of keeping this process sustainable?

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah; absolutely. When we found out that, again, the FAAs budget was cut, your organization was contractually going to go away, we needed some replacement—and I use that term loosely because you guys did a fantastic job for us, and you also did a fantastic job getting our coaches up to speed, which I thank you for—

CATHY WRIGHT

Thank you, Mike.

MIKE PERRONE

—but we wanted to have coaches to continue—again, as I said, we're all busy, we're all doing a lot of things and we still needed coaches to keep the meetings going, set up the meetings, doing what it took from when the OIG was there, to continue this. It's a cost factor obviously. It's internal but I think it now becomes—it's a FAA, PASS—I call it a thing but it's a bad term; it's ours.

CATHY WRIGHT

As it should be.

MIKE PERRONE

Yeah.

CATHY WRIGHT

Exactly as it should be, Mike. You also referenced anticipating tough times and I think in recent months you've seen them as a JLT, just encountering a ton of change. You've got a new collective bargaining, which we talked about, bargaining agreement, and there are always new contracts that are always

open to different interpretations, so that gets “ouchy.” You’ve had almost wholesale turnover on the management side of the JLT. New leaders at PASS, yourself and your Vice President, new in those roles. You had a realignment that shifted a lot of people with Tech/Ops into new roles and new players. And on top of all that we’ve got sequestration underway and unprecedented budget ramifications. I think there are probably more factors I didn’t recount, but how has all that impacted the JLT and the collaborative process, Mike, and what have you all done to try to overcome these challenges?

MIKE PERRONE

Well, early on in our meetings we established some ground rules and we established some working norms. Taking into account we knew, as again any time you’re dealing with the federal government there would be budget issues, there would be different things that would pull us. We knew going further down that the election for the President of the United States was going to come, depending who was in that office, so we had planned and we had ground rules.

What we didn’t plan on was the perfect storm. All these things hit at the same time. A wholesale management change out, just about and on the PASS side, me moving from Vice President to President kept the continuity but my new Vice President came from the field so there was a little bit of a learning curve. But the management side really had a lot of actors. We had a ground rule not to have actors but we needed them to at least participate; if we didn’t there would have been—I think this JLT and this whole collaborative event would have died. But unfortunately, the actors didn’t have the buy in that we did because they weren’t permanent.

So all these things we planned on and we had actions for but we, as a JLT, I think were overwhelmed, one, and two, didn’t follow our own processes, so again it’s a good learning curve. We planned for it, we looked good on paper; we just didn’t exercise it or execute it. Since then we’ve had a meeting in—we now have permanent managers, our team is back to being as permanent as can be and we have started to readdress some of the issues and maybe modify. But they key is the meeting just a few weeks ago, I think we had a real open and honest, do we want to continue to do this? And the answer was overwhelmingly, yes; the benefit is to continue doing it even with the new players, and we’ve just got to readjust to the process.

CATHY WRIGHT

Yeah; and I would commend all of you, Mike, because I know there were some very difficult conversations along the way and some gut checks, and I think you all having that honest, open dialogue, which has been one of your mainstays as a leadership team, helped to get you through it and I commend all of you all for stepping up to tough conversations and sorting it out and adjusting, as you say, which is always necessary along the way. Kudos to you all as a team.



MIKE PERRONE

I appreciate that.

CATHY WRIGHT

Mike, I want to ask too, this has been an amazing journey as you kind of recount the steps and the development the JLT has gone through, I'm curious in hindsight, is there anything you would do differently?

MIKE PERRONE

Yes. Again, as I said earlier on, we would have not taken on something that we didn't have total control of. We kind of lost some time and momentum, and a little bit of discouragement, maybe a little bit of raising the bar, but sometimes that's a good thing. You make a mistake and you reevaluate it and you move forward.

But for the most part I think with, again your help in taking us to a couple of locations that folks had been doing collaboration—we saw someone, we heard some of their issues and their concerns and how we worked it. Probably the only other thing I would have done even more I would have communicated to our folks. Communication is always a tough thing, right? People will always say, "We don't hear enough," and I think we could have maybe done a little bit more. Overall, the key was going in with the philosophy of we want this to work and I think we continue to do that. So yeah, I don't know; just don't have so many big expectations that you can't handle it, but overall I'm pretty pleased.

CATHY WRIGHT

Great. Mike, what has been the benefit to PASS as an institution?

MIKE PERRONE

A lot of our folks and members are seeing that by having the conversations with management, the reps are talking to the managers, they're resolving a lot of the local issues and the second level issues without having to file a grievance, without having to go to arbitration, which for us is a cost saving. Just having that dialogue ends up, "Oh, okay, I hear what you're saying. No, I didn't mean it this way; I meant this way," and it kind of moves things along. Again, a benefit was at the contract table, having that open dialogue and the interest based bargaining got us through a year and a half to get our contract completed versus the last one took almost four years.

CATHY WRIGHT

Wow!

MIKE PERRONE

Traditional bargaining; a bit different.

CATHY WRIGHT

Yeah.

MIKE PERRONE

And this new one that we're doing is, we believe—I don't want to jinx myself—but barring any major—less than a year because we were able to go in with a lot of articles that we've already discussed and a lot of conversations that we both agree with. So the benefit is we're getting some contracts; even though

we're not discussing them in the JLT I think it flows over.

A couple of quick examples—there was an issue with a rental car in Oklahoma City where most of our people are training, and just having that open dialogue and discussion with Teri at the time, she was able to resolve that, where we would have had to file a grievance, go through that whole process. And in a matter of I think a couple of weeks she resolved it and then we moved on; everybody was happy. It was a win win for our folks. In Oklahoma there is no real transportation so our folks have to rely on rental cars or their own private vehicles, so that was an impact that we were able to resolve, so those kinds of things, even on a local basis, our folks are seeing day to day.

In this case, today's environment, there are some places that have actually talked with management and showed them and helped them save some money, so that maybe we can reduce the number of furlough days just by having the boots on the ground. Folks out there know where to save money and cut costs and that's getting filtered up to the national level.

CATHY WRIGHT

That's great. I remember when we first came in and started talking to people in the agency, frontline employees were saying, "We've got great ideas. We have ideas about how to do things better, smarter, more efficiently," and I think part of what the JLT has freed up and created are mechanisms for people to get involved and share those kinds of ideas, which in this environment every bit helps.

MIKE PERRONE

The one thing that's a joke, "We're from the government; we're here to help." They're mired down in their programs and processes, so you have people out in the field, "Hey, I've got this solution," and years later, if at all, it goes up through the chain, so we've changed some of that dynamic.

CATHY WRIGHT

That's great. Mike, a last question before I just open it up to you for anything you want to add—there are a lot of organizations out there, labor and management, that struggle to get a collaborative process underway. They're not accustomed to working like this. They don't even know how to get started in some cases. What advice would you give to others who may be struggling to get going in this direction?

MIKE PERRONE

I think the biggest thing would be let the membership from the union side, let them know what you're doing, what you're planning, get some of their input. They have history. Management is going to do something on their side. But ultimately, the key for us was really taking on what we could control within house, what we could do to show a quick success. What we could do together talking the same, and showing the same front.

I'm not saying we're going to just go out there and be talking heads and



pretend, because people can see through that in a heartbeat. We were truly, really talking the same language. We were working issues that had touched people and I think that's key. They saw it. They heard it. One other example we had—we were inviting management to our union meetings for the first hour—again, that had not been done in my career—and so they saw management was willing to come out and have open and honest discussion.

And then they would leave and I remember one instance a member said after the management left, "Are they for real?" Absolutely; and so I think the key is making sure that the field knows what's going on, taking on small chunks, and then the momentum will take over itself.

CATHY WRIGHT

Mike, fantastic perspectives. I really appreciate you sharing. Is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

MIKE PERRONE

The only thing, again, I want to give kudos to you guys; you really were instrumental in helping us. The key for folks going into this is you really want to make a change; you want to make a difference. It's easy to battle, and sometimes you have to, but just talking. That's all it is. Just having a conversation and then that usually starts good things to happen, or it doesn't and then at least you know you've got to do whatever you've got to do. I really believe we came in with this very skeptical; like I said a cold day in Charlotte but three plus years later we're saying, "It's still working and we still have great things to come." Thank you for your time and effort.

STEVE KRASKE

That's Mike Perrone, National President of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialist Union. He spoke with Cathy Wright. This Profile in Collaborative Leadership Interview was brought to you by Overland Resource Group. For more success stories from collaborative leaders, please visit our website at www.orginc.com