



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL RINALDI



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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 Paul Rinaldi, President of a National Air Traffic Controllers Union. Prior to becoming President Rinaldi served three terms as the association's Executive Vice President after 16 years as an air traffic controller at the Washington, Dulles tower. Paul is an outspoken advocate for air traffic controllers and aviation safety professionals on the national stage.

Since taking office in 2009 Rinaldi and Executive Vice President, Trish Gilbert, and their National Executive Board have elevated the NATCA to new levels of success in what many will consider a best practice and collaboration in the federal sector. Paul currently holds the position of the NextGen advisory committee and serves as a union representative on the FAA's National Labor Management Forum. Rinaldi spoke with Cathy Wright.

CATHY WRIGHT

Paul, thank you so much for making time to share your perspectives on collaboration with us today and really to talk a bit about how you've approached the challenge of collaboration as a leader. During your tenure as the National President of NATCA you have consistently and very deliberately advocated for establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship with FAA; and you've really put those words into action.

Unfortunately, we find this is more the exception than the norm with a lot of labor leaders, and management leaders for that part, I'm curious what led you



to have this belief system and how your various roles, both as an air traffic controller and as a union leader have shaped your views on the need for collaboration?

PAUL RINALDI

Thank you, Cathy, and thank you for including me in this interview. We're so dedicated to the flying public that collaboration is the best way to continue to maintain the safest, most efficient system in the world. We have seen in the years past where the pendulum has swung from one side to the other, where our labor seemed to have the upper hand or management had the upper hand, and really not a lot was getting done to modernize the system, to continue to enhance the safety of the system. It's a no brainer to me and to the Executive Board here at NATCA that collaboration is the best way to go.

CATHY WRIGHT

Absolutely, and to your point, Paul, it's I think so much tied to the core mission of the agency about protecting and maintaining the safety and efficiency of air space, and to your point what better way to do that than through working collaboratively.

Today Paul, NATCA and the FAA have what many people would describe as a best practice of labor management collaboration within the federal sector and perhaps in the country as a whole, but I remember when you stepped into office as National President in October 2009, there was a great deal of distrust and animosity and really just outright dislike between the controllers, the union as an institution and the agency. How did you step into this role and turn the tide relatively quickly?

PAUL RINALDI

That's a great question, Cathy, and I think depending on who you talk to they would say you turned the tide relatively quickly, and depending on the other side you're talking it's not quick enough.

CATHY WRIGHT

Good point.

PAUL RINALDI

We still have some areas where they're struggling with their positional corners and their turf and they don't want to open up the door and reach common ground and common interest. We thought it was very important early on and Randy Babbitt, the administrator, and myself had a conversation early on that we could like each other, we could have lunch together, we could collaborate at the national level, but if we didn't really push that philosophy down to the field level we would fall short and we wouldn't be able to really change the culture of the FAA, and in order to change the culture you had to change the behavior. We knew that that was not going to be an easy thing to do.

Trish Gilbert and John [Pipes] did an outstanding job of really setting up some collaboration conferences and then some training and we really constantly pushed towards finding the common ground and working together. There

were a lot of people on both sides within the FAA and within NATCA that really wanted this as the way to do business, and really knew that this was the best way to continue to be the world leader in aviation, but there were a lot of institutional roadblocks and hurdles that we had to jump over.

I would like to say we're 100 percent there but unfortunately we're not, and I would like to say that we would never go back to a positional relationship, but we might. But I'm hoping, if Michael Huerta gets confirmed as the FAA administrator - I have three more years right now as the NATCA President - we could have three more years of working towards changing the culture and the behavior of this organization and shifting the paradigm to this is the way, and the only way to do business to be successful.

CATHY WRIGHT

It's a great point, Paul, and I think you're spot on too. So much of this is about fundamentally shifting behaviors and helping people learn how to do business differently. Now, you all had a lot of history of adversary relations and I'd say NATCA was very good at it, so this in a large sense is both NATCA and management learning a different approach and having a different set of tools in the toolbox.

One follow up question I would ask that's related to that Paul - especially for labor leaders, when they decide to take a collaborative approach they have to do it in a way that brings their members along. They can't get so far afield that they look back and realize the people they're leading aren't there. And you, in your case, were re elected to your second term by acclamation; I think it's a clear demonstration that your members were with you. How did you do that and what counsel would you give to other labor leaders who were choosing this collaborative path?

PAUL RINALDI

It's a great question and it is a leap of faith you take out there. You say we need to go down this road and it's uncomfortable and it's a lot of work to collaborate, and especially for union leaders for collaboration. Union leaders know how to file grievances, arbitrate cases, fight every issue and sometimes even the ridiculous issues just to [cause] the paperwork. We are probably, I think, one of the best unions [at it].

During the time between 2006 and 2009 there were hundreds of thousands of grievances files against mostly issues in which we really wouldn't have filed grievances if we were getting the due respect and actually working together. So we had to come from really one side of the pendulum and get into the middle and not take anything more, and be very conscious of not to move that pendulum too heavily to our side when we had the opportunity because all you're going to do is create animosity on the other side with management.

To get the labor leaders to move that way the first thing was the National

Executive Board - and Trish Gilbert our Executive Vice President, played a key role in that - in getting all 12 of the National Executive Board members, Trish, myself and the ten RVPs, to understand where we needed to go. After some serious discussion there then we had to get the next layer of activists and leaders within the organization, and once you trained them and got them to buy in - they were skeptical. They said, "Are you sure this is the way we're going to go?" I go, "This is the only way to go." This is what's going to make us different than anybody else because we're going to find common interests; we're going to take the high road. Even when we have setbacks we're still going to take the high road because we need to be that union that has the answers and they don't point fingers to say, "They're the problem." We have to be the ones to resolve those issues.

Today, I think there aren't many out there to say, "That's not the right path to go." In our ranks they all understand this is the best way to do business and we're starting to see a lot of success with modernizing equipment and technology and procedures. ERAM, which is the en route modernization program that was an abysmal failure without us involved; from 2003 to 2009 a \$2 billion project that quite frankly wasn't working.

We are now, since we've been involved in early 2010 to now we're up and running in about six facilities and testing vigorously in another ten and things are looking very good. When you see the dollar value in that, that we saved this program, because it was about to be shelved because it just wasn't working, that's living proof that collaboration is the only way to be successful.

CATHY WRIGHT

I think you're so right, Paul, and especially for people on the frontline. It seems to me you all, the senior leadership level at NATCA, you have the words, you have the actions that match the words and then you created opportunities where they could see real results, and they could see themselves and their counterparts and their coworkers really having the opportunity to get involved, hands on, in issues that matter like the modernization of the air space. I think that goes a long way towards - it's not the words, it's also the actions, and you all have done an amazing job of staying the course and holding to that line.

I suspect though, Paul, outside of your organization, external to NATCA, there are probably still critics who would say you could get more for your members if you chose a traditional, more confrontational approach, or you may still have members inside the organization that say that. How do you respond to those critics that think, "Oh, this is not going to get you what you need in terms of representing your members."

PAUL RINALDI

You're spot on with that question. There are still those traditional type of individuals within membership and then actually even within the House of Labor that say, you can't collaborate with management, you can't trust them,

they're going to screw you every chance they get, and that you will be able to be more successful as a union leader if you use the established tools in which we have for years such as the grievance process, the press and congress, and if you use those tools more as opposed to collaboration.

My response is clear; listen, when we fight all we are doing is spending our time and energy fighting and not improving the lives of the membership or the safety or the efficiency of the national air space system. When we collaborate it's a lot harder to collaborate, but what we're doing is actually improving the work environment for our members, both at work and also while they're away from work they don't have to worry about a lot of things. At the same time we have much better product of enhancing the safety of the system and the proof is in the pudding, so to speak. If you just look at everything we have accomplished in the last three years to what we did three to six years prior to that - and I'm not pointing fingers of blaming anybody - but I think this process needs to be cemented down so that we continue down this road.

CATHY WRIGHT

Paul, as I was preparing for an interview I was reflecting on your membership and I think of this as a group of people - they're controllers by the very nature of the work that they do. They're not pushover type people. They're strong willed. They're opinionated, even directive, and on the management side of the house most of those management leaders came up through the controller ranks, so you've got it on both sides of the house.

I imagine there were plenty of times when you were challenged mightily by these strong willed controllers and management counterparts; I wonder if you could describe a particular situation when your role and your actions as a collaborative leader were particularly tested, and yet proved successful.

PAUL RINALDI

It's a good question and I think that we're dealing with mega Type A individuals.

CATHY WRIGHT

Yeah.

PAUL RINALDI

To be successful in the controller ranks you have to be a Type A type person and you're right, most of the management officials, if not all of them, climb through the controller ranks and rise to the top. My relationship with Rick Ducharme is probably one that people were looking at to see exactly how that would develop as he played a very important role in imposing work rules and pay rules in our organization.

CATHY WRIGHT

Paul, at that point in time Rick was the Vice President of air traffic and then he moved on into the Deputy COO role, is that correct?

PAUL RINALDI

That is correct, but as we were pushing down the collaboration route there

were some really tough feelings about Rick Ducharme within my organization and the actions and leadership which he was on the direction to go this way and he did it the best way he can. That's what he does; he does his job very well and he was given specific direction to go and impose work rules and pay rules and they went down that road.

When it came down to collaborating everyone said, "Well, how can you possibly collaborate with him; he's the enemy?" I just said, "He's not the enemy. He's a man that has a job to do and he was doing his job. If his job now is to collaborate I bet he's going to be just as good of a collaborator as he was when he imposed work rules on us." But getting challenged by a lot of my membership, a lot of those Type As of how could we do this? How could you now do this? I would just say them, "What is our option?" Our option is when we were fighting we said we wanted to be involved and we wanted to collaborate and we wanted to have a say in the work environment, have a say in modernizing the system and changing procedures. And now we're giving the opportunity and you're going to tell me I shouldn't do that because it's that person who did something while he was under the direction of a different administrator, and I just don't buy that.

That's how I confronted a lot of those issues early on, and as we started to see results - and I have known Rick a long time and we've had a friendship aside from work going back to 1992 - was I happy with the way he handled things from 2006 to 2009? No, absolutely not, and I was able to express that properly. Beyond those Type As it really comes down to this is the way we have to do business. We saw what happened from 2006 to 2009. We saw what happened when we had the upper hand from '98 to 2002, and now the pendulum keeps swinging and it's not working for anybody. You need to [gate] it down and [safety] system can never be at jeopardy because of a labor dispute.

CATHY WRIGHT

I remember you saying, Paul, that the overall objective here was to minimize the pendulum swing. It's too disruptive. It's exhausting for people to go from one extreme to the other all the time, and I think you really have brought a steady hand to help minimize that swing that we heard so much about coming into the agency.

I think too, Paul, you reference in your relationships with key management leaders, you really had to leave some history behind. Not that you forget the history but you have to, and you did, have the capacity to believe that people can change and I think you modeled that so well with your membership. And you were willing to take that first step, which people are watching and they need to see that. I wonder if you could expand, Paul, on what you believe are the qualities that are most critical for collaborative leaders to master as they're trying to get their organizations to follow suit down a collaborative path? What are those qualities?



PAUL RINALDI

Well, it's interesting, Cathy. I had a very tough election in 2009 to get elected as President. I ran against the sitting President and a former Executive Vice President, [unintelligible 00:18:52]. One of the criticisms against me was I was too much of a fighter and I would never be able to collaborate. I thought well, now that's interesting because my whole message during the campaign was we have to do things differently. I think the people that have known me for years, if I would fight, that they think that would be the only way that I would be able to do business.

I think the most important thing for someone who is going to enter into a collaborative relationship is, one, to understand that you have to find common interests for sure, and two, you have to be able to listen, and not just listen but hear and understand. And if you don't understand ask them the questions - why is this so important to you? I was finding that out with myself as the FAA administrator or the acting COO, David Grizzel would say, "Why is this so important to you?" and I would explain why.

Being able to find the communication skills and the understanding to see each other's point of view and then to be able to say, "Well, how can we get to a resolution here where we could all be satisfied?" We're not all going to be happy; that's not realistic, but we could all satisfy our position and fulfill our needs in what we need this issue for, and I think that's real important. I think it's important to be able to listen; not just listen but hear and understand on both sides, and understand the common interest.

CATHY WRIGHT

I know initially when we came in and started working with the agency and NATCA there had been such a long period of time when there wasn't proactive conversation; everything was reactive and it was battle, battle, battle. And in that context you don't really have the opportunity to practice listening and seeking first to understand, and you all certainly made a major shift there.

Paul, what do you think the great challenge is in bringing labor and management together to work collaboratively, and maybe you just addressed that, but what do you think are the most difficult pitfalls that really get in the way and that leaders have to help overcome in order to create that successful collaborative environment?

PAUL RINALDI

We work with it every day and the pitfall is if somebody makes a mistake - I see it on my side all the time - if management makes a mistake and doesn't include us in a decision or leaders often will forget to invite us to a meeting, that all of a sudden, "There they go again, they're screwing with us." What I try to say is, "Well, I'm not sure they're screwing with you, as opposed to they just forgot and they make mistakes. Human beings do make mistakes," and I communicate with them and let them know, "Hey, this is a meeting I should have been in," or "This is information I need to know so that we can work collaboratively together."

And usually when you communicate those issues back and forth it's like there was no ill will, but the biggest pitfall is the memory of the ill will when we were fighting, and that when somebody does make a mistake it's premeditated. I'm trying to make sure they know that that's not premeditated, and if it is then we address it in a different avenue but 99 percent of the time it's just a mistake. It's hard to collaborate and that's one thing I have learned, for sure. It's a lot easier to fight and it's a lot harder to collaborate, but at the end of the day collaboration is where you're going to get the results.

CATHY WRIGHT

So true; so true. One of the things I want you about, Paul - you all have had so much success getting a collaborative environment in place, but a lot of originations really struggle with how to quantify the impact of their collaborative efforts. How have you all found to really measure success and how do you know it's working?

PAUL RINALDI

Well, we are able to quantify it by just looking at our labor relations. Within our collective bargaining agreement we have what we call pre arbitration review and each region has one of those once a quarter. When I was leading labor relations for the eastern region, and even under the most collaborative relationship under [Jane Garbi] as the administrator and under the best contract - everybody says the Green Book was the best contract this union has ever had - we probably had anywhere from 100 to 200 grievances a quarter that we would do pre arbitration reviews on.

CATHY WRIGHT

In each of the regions?

PAUL RINALDI

Each region.

CATHY WRIGHT

Wow!

PAUL RINALDI

Yeah; and it would be a full week of going through this.

CATHY WRIGHT

Wow!

PAUL RINALDI

This year, 2012, I am proud to say that most regions have cancelled at least one, if not two of their quarterly reviews, and when they do meet they meet for less than a day and they're dealing with issues, less than ten issues. At this time at the national level we have less than five grievances that are right for arbitration, and we have never, ever had that in an organization, in this organization; ever. It would always be 500 keyed up ready to go for arbitration, and we have five to six issues that are ripe right now for arbitration. Not only is that saving a lot of time, which then equates to money, but it's certainly saving a lot of money. Arbitrations are very, very expensive and time consuming.

And the fact that we're not arbitrating that amount of cases and we're not tying

up arbitrators for pre arbitration review and we're not tying up labor relation specialists in each region for a week and we're doing it maybe one or two days a year now instead of 20 days a year, that to me - and that's just one aspect of collaboration; that's not the other tangible results we're seeing in the tech world - but that to me is a huge success.

CATHY WRIGHT

CATHY WRIGHT: And Paul, would you attribute that to the fact that the parties are able to resolve things proactively outside before they have to go the traditional route, if that's what's going on?

PAUL RINALDI

Absolutely. Disputes are certainly happening but they're being resolved at the lowest level possible; at the local level they're resolving them. If not then the regional level, and before they even - if they bubble into a national issue we also have the steering committee at the national level that are resolving these issues also, and it's really working towards a harmonious work environment.

CATHY WRIGHT

That's great. When things get resolved at the local level they're more apt to stay resolved because it's not somebody else's solution that's getting pushed on them, so that makes tremendous sense.

PAUL RINALDI

That's absolutely right, and you're getting the best resolution. If I'm resolving something at the national level for a local facility I don't know the intimate details of that issue and what the impact is, but certainly at the local level, local manager and facility rep, know the best resolution to their problem.

CATHY WRIGHT

Yeah. Paul, one of the things that we see organizations struggle with, quite honestly, when they've put in place a process, they've moved down the collaborative path, in some ways it's easier to make the change than to maintain the change and really keeping it sustainable. How would you respond to that? Have you found that to be the case and is it a concern to you about whether and how to sustain this process?

PAUL RINALDI

My biggest concern is sustaining this process. I think the success of the process speaks for itself but working for a federal government agency that is basically political appointees that run a cabinet position in the Department of Transportation, and a political appointee who is going to be the FAA administrator for five years, you could get a different tone and direction. So our biggest concern now is focusing on sustainability, cementing the path to success and showing not only the users, but certainly congress, the White House, the Secretary of Transportation and the whole DOT, along with industry, that the way to success is collaboration. We saw how destructive fighting could be and we see the value of collaboration.

Now, how do you do that? It's a mind boggling question that I toy with all the time, and so does Trish Gilbert, that we have to continue growing in

our relationship and it's much like - not to be too corny - but it's much like a marriage. You have the wedding and the honeymoon and then the first two years are great, everyone is getting along, and then we hit some tough spots, and when you hit those tough spots what do you do? Do you stop communicating or do you fight?

So with us we're really resolving a lot of issues but how do we keep it going? How do we keep it growing, and we think education is key and we're developing new classes on how to continue to collaborate and to continue to maintain common interest and interest based discussions and continue to move forward in those directions so that we're constantly talking about it and sustaining the process at the same time, and growing in the process. And if we do that and if we have the right administrator confirmed for the next five years, and the right union president for at least the next three, we can continue this process and cementing it down that maybe, just maybe, nobody will look back to the other way and do business because we see how this works. That's the goal. The goal is to make this process so successful for industry or the flying public, for congress and for FAA and the White House, that the other way of doing business is so archaic that we're not even going to consider it. That's the goal.

CATHY WRIGHT

That's a great success measure. Paul, I want to just for minute recount some of the successes that I've observed, that you all have achieved. It's amazing. Over the past three years you've made amazing strides; unprecedented. You jointly trained every facility manager and every NATCA rep on interest based communication. First time in the history of the agency that's been done, and they went through the training together. You've partnered at the national level on issues that were once absolutely taboo. Things like fatigue, professional standards, facility realignments, safety self disclosure program, and the list goes on and on.

And at the facility level you now have labor management teams who are working together on wide ranging issues from technological to procedural to air space related improvements. It's a phenomenal record of success. Given all of that I just have to ask you, is there anything you wished that you had done differently or done more of or less of?

PAUL RINALDI

I always wish we could do more. Trish and our National Executive Board are stretched really thin and we've had our interest based leadership classes that have been going on throughout the country and we have tried to make every single one of them, and spend at least a half a day in each one of those classes, to show the value of this class and to make sure that we have national leadership showing up. And our schedules have just been so demanding and we were able to do that, and Trish did the majority of them. She was able to fly to Kansas City and then fly to Dallas and get both classes in one day -



CATHY WRIGHT

Wow!

PAUL RINALDI

—to the point that we're all exhausted as we come to the end of the year. You always want to do more. You put a lot of things in place but now might be the time to make sure that we get the right administrator in place for the next five years. I'm working real hard and supporting Michael Huerta for his nomination, and hopefully they've got one more week to get this done or else we're going to have to start over in a new congress.

So as long as the pieces are still in place we'll still find common ground; we have a lot of hurdles and a lot of challenges in front of us. Obviously Fiscal Cliff is less than two weeks away - it's about ten days away right now - and that's our next challenge. About three to four years ago we would not be mature enough to be dealing with this issue with the agency, and I think as an organization we now are mature enough to look at how do we help you do this correctly, because the first and foremost thing we are all concerned about is the safety of the flying public.

So as we move forward we think about the challenges ahead and I'm thankful we did all of the heavy lifting in 2009/2010/2011. We did a lot of maintaining in 2012, and now we're going to have some real challenges ahead where I think we're not going to test the relationship but we're going to see how stable collaboration is, if that's a good way to put it. If we fall short then we're going to have more work to do ahead of us to make sure that we can stabilize the process. In my heart I think we have done such good work in developing this process that I believe that we can handle any issue that comes in front of us.

CATHY WRIGHT

That's phenomenal, Paul, and to see that transition that you reference, the maturity of the relationship is now to a point that NATCA is an ally for the agency and really helping push for shared interest that benefit both NATCA, your members and the agency as a whole, and that's a great shift to have been able to make that happen.

Paul, I want to thank you so much for taking your time and talking with us today and sharing your perspectives on the collaborative process, the challenges, the progress, and especially for touching on your leadership approach. You all have made tremendous strides and I thank you for sharing your story, and thank you for the example that you're setting in the federal sector.

PAUL RINALDI

It's my pleasure and it's the pleasure of this organization and your company has played a very, very important role in getting us in the right frame of mind and in the right place to do a lot of this work, and I thank you and your company for everything they've done. I've said it before, collaboration is not easy. Fighting is certainly a lot easier than collaboration but at the end of the



day, if we're talking about enhancing the national air space system, making the system safer, modernizing the system and making the work environment the best, safest place it could be for our members, collaboration is the only way to do it.

CATHY WRIGHT

Thank you so much, Paul.

PAUL RINALDI

Thank you, Cathy.

STEVE KRASKE

That's Paul Rinaldi, President of the National Air Traffic Controllers Union. He spoke with Cathy Wright. This Profile in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement Interview was brought to you by Overland Resource Group. For a transcript or more information, visit their website at www.orginc.com or email them at WorkingTogether@orginc.com.