Transforming Talent at NYC Transit's Rail Control Center: A Journey to Elevated Performance

Organization Overview:

New York City Transit (NYCT) is one of the agencies within America's busiest and largest public transportation authority, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). On a typical day, its Subway Department runs more than 550 trains, making 8,000 trips and moving 6 million riders. At the center of this logistical marvel is the Rail Control Center (RCC). It is the equivalent of a flight control center, except that it controls the actions of trains in the subway system.

A transformation project was initiated in response to concerns raised by senior management at New York City Transit (NYCT) regarding performance lapses at the Rail Control Center (RCC). The project found that talent, training, and culture needed improvement, Talent being the most pressing issue due to recruitment challenges and high turnover.

The Challenge

The organization's structure underwent significant changes with the centralization of all train control responsibilities to the RCC. This meant they needed to rethink how they managed talent. While previous efforts focused on training and cultural improvements, resolving talent issues needed a different approach.

Why I was able to step in

Given my transformation expertise and understanding of the complexities of the RCC from leading a previous project, I was asked to lead the talent transformation.

Project Approach

Utilizing the Reframing Matrix and Kotter's Organizational Change Model, we identified root causes and put into place solutions for long-term change. I led the project design and managed workstreams to improve talent acquisition and retention. This included refining recruitment processes and supporting hiring managers.

Results and Impact

A new competency-based hiring process reduced differences in the quality of hires and improved retention. The revamped program increased stakeholder confidence, leading to lower churn and improved performance within six months.

We learned that it's important to address informal learning structures and create a good work environment to develop skills and keep employees. To maintain these improvements, ongoing support and adaptability will be crucial.

In conclusion, the initiative's success highlights the importance of addressing informal learning and creating conducive working environments for talent retention.

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The Situation

This was a much-needed transformation project mandated by New York City Transit's senior management. Lapses during a series of high-profile incidents in recent years raised concerns about the Rail Control Center's (RCC) performance level.
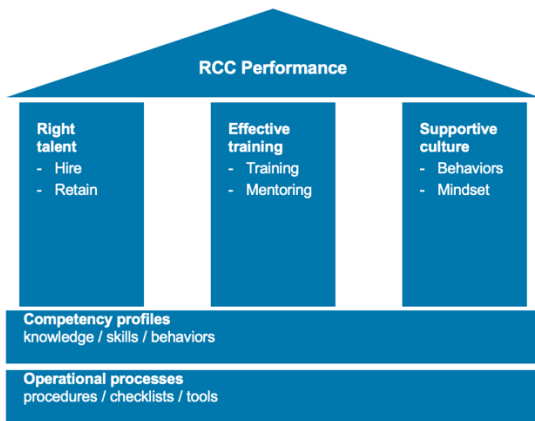
Driven by this concern, I was assigned to lead an initial investigative project that showed that the RCC's performance is driven by three elements: talent, training, and culture.

Of the three, the talent pillar was deemed as the most retractable issue due to:
- Not enough eligible candidates applying
- A policy-driven shallow candidate pool
- Not encouraging the right people to stay

Based on this, senior leadership requested that follow-up work be initiated to enhance the probability of selecting candidates with technical and behavioral attributes most aligned with what is needed to succeed at the RCC. Essentially, determine how to best identify, hire, and retain the right people.

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Traditionally, the RCC handled incident management, communicating with field personnel via radio to resolve the emergency. However, a few years before this project, a massive technology transformation introduced a responsibility realignment. Many of the 80-year-old manual track switching towers were closed as the train switching and monitoring system was digitized. As a result, the responsibility for the minute-to-minute movement of trains was centralized within the RCC, radically changing the Center's responsibilities.

This resulted in a new organizational structure and work environment being introduced. To ensure timely communication, everyone responsible for controlling movement within the system was moved to one centralized control floor. Not only does the floor house the Console Train Dispatchers (CTD), who are responsible for the minute-by-minute movement, but their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd level managers also sit on the floor. At any one time, 140 seats need to be covered. Needless to say, this is a pressure-filled environment, especially during an incident.

A year before this project, a new head of the RCC was brought in to improve performance.

The Challenges and Opportunities

Historically, the persistent CTD shortage has been seen as the driver of the decline in skill level at the RCC. As noted above, leadership felt comfortable independently interpreting and implementing enhancements to the training and culture elements. Still, it was at a loss on how to break through and reduce the persistently high churn rate. This was because it wasn't straightforward. Historically viewed as the cause, the CTD shortage was really the symptom of a much more complex issue.

Two vicious cycles drove the lower CTD talent levels: a low recruitment success rate and high churn.
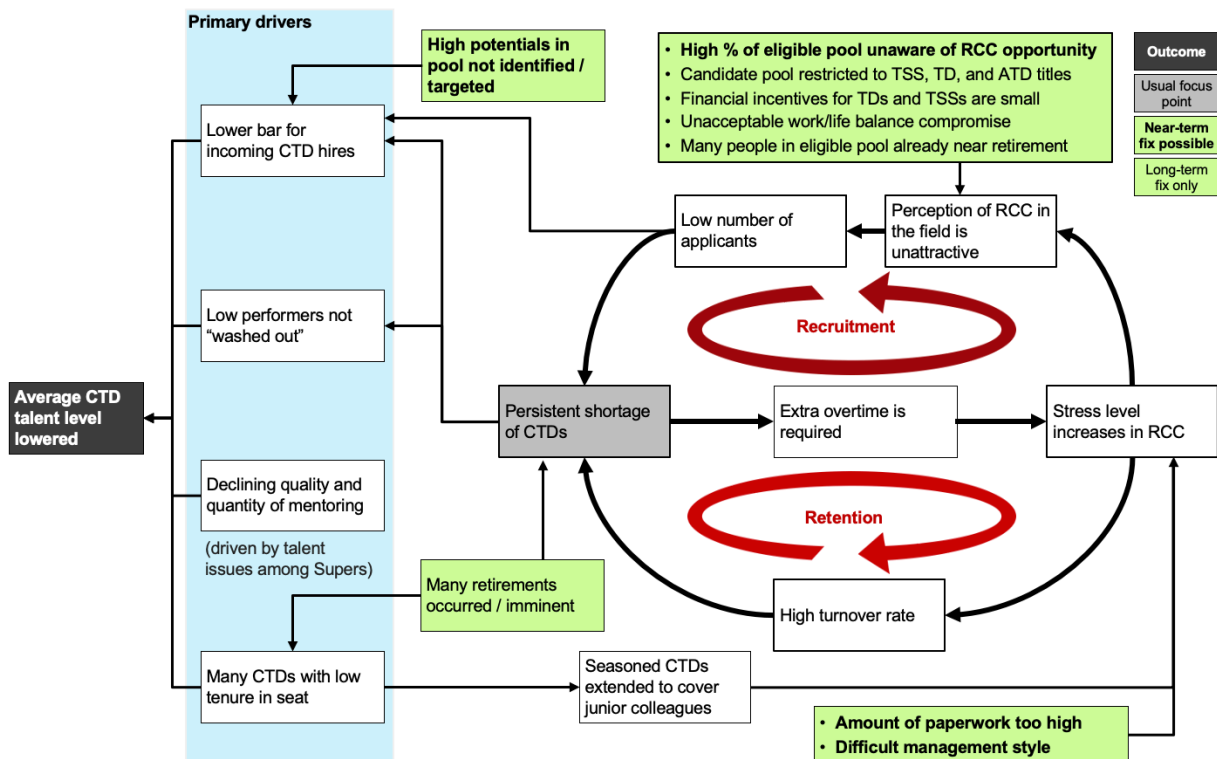
These loops were being fed by:
- Unclear job expectations resulting in variability in perceived proficiency attributes
- An unstructured interview process that was not repeatable or scalable
- Inconsistent retention of resumes and evaluation sheets impeding hiring performance analysis

While management's lack of transformation capabilities and resistance to change were two major challenges, senior leadership's sponsorship was a significant positive.

Why I was able to step in

The initial project, which I led in the prior year, had identified three performance pillars that needed to be strengthened: talent, training, and culture. NYCT's senior leadership recognized that the RCC management

team had many operational management capabilities and could handle the training and culture pillars. However, none had the experience in transforming the talent pillar.

Based on this, the Head of the RCC asked me to steer the talent element of this transformation. I was selected based on my understanding of the issues, my change management experience, and my ability to leverage proven, well-documented transformation approaches.

The Stakeholders

The agency's president gave the mandate to transform, which was the best executive sponsorship we could hope for. This was backed up by the Senior Vice President of Subways and the Head of the RCC, who had been specifically brought in to improve operational performance.

Some of the RCC Superintendents (hiring managers) had mixed moods. A handful wanted the process and culture to remain very militaristic, while others recognized the stress their employees experienced from having to cover unfilled slots. The findings from the prior evaluation indicated that the CTDs, those responsible for the hands-on activity, unanimously validated the need to revamp.

The Actions

My Roles and Responsibilities

As both an external advisor and project lead, my role was to design (project design, scope definition, and KPIs) and manage all the necessary workstreams so that the project delivered the desired results on time. Since the project was to be staffed with one – myself - it was imperative that I lead by influence to obtain the assistance of others.

This required leading by influence, whether I was doing hands-on work with the subject matter experts (SMEs) or ensuring that the initiative was moving in a timely fashion. Specific key project deliverables included:

1. A stakeholder analysis and engagement overview
2. Structuring the behavioral change plan
3. Forming and driving the behavioral change plan
4. Managing personal transitions (resistance)
5. Developing success metrics

The Scope

Based on the initial analysis, senior leadership requested that follow-up work (Phase 2) be initiated to take a closer look at enhancing the talent pillar (individual performance, turnover, and recruitment). Essentially, help figure out; How do we best identify, hire, and retain the right people?
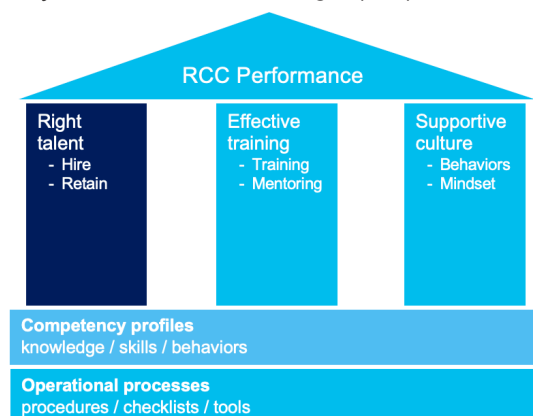
This translated into the following three mandates:

1. Enhance the probability of selecting the right candidates
2. Develop a repeatable and scalable interview process
3. Put a support system in place for hiring managers

The engagement's specific objectives were defined during the transformation process.

Transformation Methodology
Because in Phase 1, we were able to identify the drivers that could be influenced, we could now delve into identifying and fixing the root causes. Given that we were dealing with qualitative perceptions and many unknowns and wanted to incorporate gained insight into actionable steps, I advised the sponsors that we would employ two techniques. I structured the engagement to leverage two complementary frameworks: the Reframing Matrix and Kotter's Organizational Change Model. Both are proven and well-documented approaches, making it easy to obtain executive buy-in.

Reframing Matrix
This technique was used to gain the perspectives of RCC employees, supervisors, and field personnel about the RCC—the information gathered during the exercise expanded upon the findings that surfaced in the initial expository project.

Position Perspective	Planning Perspective
Is the position attractive?	Can we increase the candidate pool?
Are we looking for the right attributes?	Do we have the right strategy?
What do other systems do?	Does the recruitment process make sense?

CDT recruiting effort not meeting needs

Potential Perspective	People Perspective
Is it scalable?	What do current CTDs think?
Is it repeatable?	What do former CTDs think?
Is the interview process correct?	Are candidates aware of the opportunity?
	What is the perception of the RCC in the field?

Kotter's Organizational Change Model
This model was employed because it creates a sense of urgency and empowers the RCC staff to drive the change, increasing the likelihood that the results will be sustainable. The main steps in Kotter's Organizational Change Model are:

De-freeze culture
- 01 Create a sense of urgency
- Create guiding coalition 02
- 03 Set a vision and strategy

Creating the environment for change

- Enlist a volunteer army 04
- 05 Enable broad-based action

Initiate & enable change
- Create short-term wins 06

Empower the organization

- 07 Sustain acceleration

Re-freeze new culture
- Anchor new approaches 08

Incorporate & sustaining change

Execution

PHASE 1 — Root Cause Analysis & Roadmap dev'l
PHASE 2 — Transform RCC talent management
PHASE 3 — Scale impact

DISCOVERY
- Define problem
- Gather insights
- Identify causal factors
- Identify root cause
- Develop recommendations

DOMAINS

TALENT
- Establish sense of urgency
- Create guiding coalition
- Establish vision & startegy
- Communicate change in vision
- Remove obstacles
- Create short-term wins
- Consolidate gains

TRAINING
- Revamp training
- Create mentorig program

CULTURE
- Communiction & engagement
- Imbed new talent culture

KPIs
- Retention rate improvement

Legend:
- Discovery
- Proof of concept / MVP
- Production

As shown in the above diagram, the aim was to execute a transformation that would reassure leadership that RCC personnel would have the capabilities to exceed performance expectations during both normal operations and emergency situations. This involved fundamental changes in how the RCC defines required capabilities, markets available positions, and evaluates candidates, all of which would impact staff. While it all fits together seamlessly on paper, the sustainability of the new processes and the realization of tangible benefits would be a challenge.

Diagnosis Phase
Step 1: Reframing Matrix – Position Perspective
To better understand the environmental pressure of the RCC, I spent over 70 hours on the floor sitting with the CTDs durin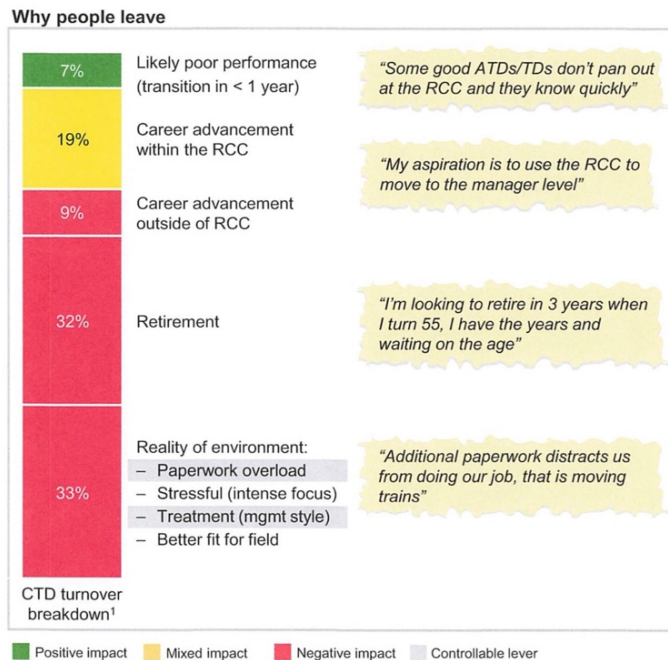g different shifts and just taking in the interactions. During this time, I had general conversations about the role, how they came to be, and their career decisions. This allowed me to clarify the root causes of the negative performance and churn. Three things stood out:
- Several join the RCC within five years of their expected retirement because of the significant overtime to pad the base salary used to compute their retirement payout
- Frequent mandatory overtime to fill staff shortfall creates significant stressors both within and outside of work, leading to churn
- Identified an unstructured interview process that prevented the comparison of candidates from different hiring cycles to identify common positive traits

Why people leave

7%	Likely poor performance (transition in < 1 year)	*"Some good ATDs/TDs don't pan out at the RCC and they know quickly"*
19%	Career advancement within the RCC	*"My aspiration is to use the RCC to move to the manager level"*
9%	Career advancement outside of RCC	
32%	Retirement	*"I'm looking to retire in 3 years when I turn 55, I have the years and waiting on the age"*
33%	Reality of environment: – Paperwork overload – Stressful (intense focus) – Treatment (mgmt style) – Better fit for field	*"Additional paperwork distracts us from doing our job, that is moving trains"*

CTD turnover breakdown[1]

■ Positive impact ■ Mixed impact ■ Negative impact ▢ Controllable lever

Step 2: Reframing Matrix – Planning Perspective

Understanding that a prerequisite skill set was needed to apply for the CTD role, I analyzed the underlying title composition of the current CTD pool. This information served as a surrogate for a detailed study of each individual's career path within NYCT. In addition, I explored the different ways that opportunities were internally promoted. To provide perspective on the findings, I conducted a benchmarking survey utilizing our relationships with systems in places like Washington, Philadelphia, Montreal, and Paris.

Step 3: Reframing Matrix – Potential Perspective

With the benchmarking information in hand, I mapped the RCC's recruiting process from demand forecasting to the interview process—this uncovered process inconsistencies and gaps that likely drove hiring quality issues.

- Unclear minimum proficiency levels
- Reliance on individual interviewer methodology
- Process primarily resides outside of Human Resources and, thus, doesn't leverage their skills

Step 4: Reframing Matrix – People Perspective

Now that the internal look was completed, I turned my attention to the potential candidate population. I polled 168 individuals in the candidate pool to quantify their awareness level and perceptions of opportunities at the RCC. This work uncovered that:

- Not every eligible candidate was aware of the opportunity to apply for an RCC role, although they deal with the RCC daily
- Many who are aware of the opportunity do not apply because they heard bad things about the environment from those who returned to the field because they did not like the RCC environment

With an understanding of the perceptions and process shortcomings solidified, it was time to implement a solution. RCC leadership was very concerned that many of the uncovered causes were cultural and that most would placate their demand for change but eventually revert to their old ways. This was also my concern at the start of the engagement, which is why I pushed to use the Kotter Change Management model. This framework was selected because its success lies in a holistic approach, which emphasizes the technical aspects of change and the human and cultural factors critical for successful implementation.

Solution Development
Step 5: Kotter – Establish a sense of urgency
To highlight the consequences of not engaging in affirmative action to address the vacancy rate, I conducted a quantitative forecast of CTD availability versus RCC's projected need, considering population statistics. The forecast clearly showed that the shortage would only decrease if the status quo were changed. More importantly, based on strategic forecasts intent to place more responsibility at the RCC, the projected vacancy rate could not be covered by overtime.
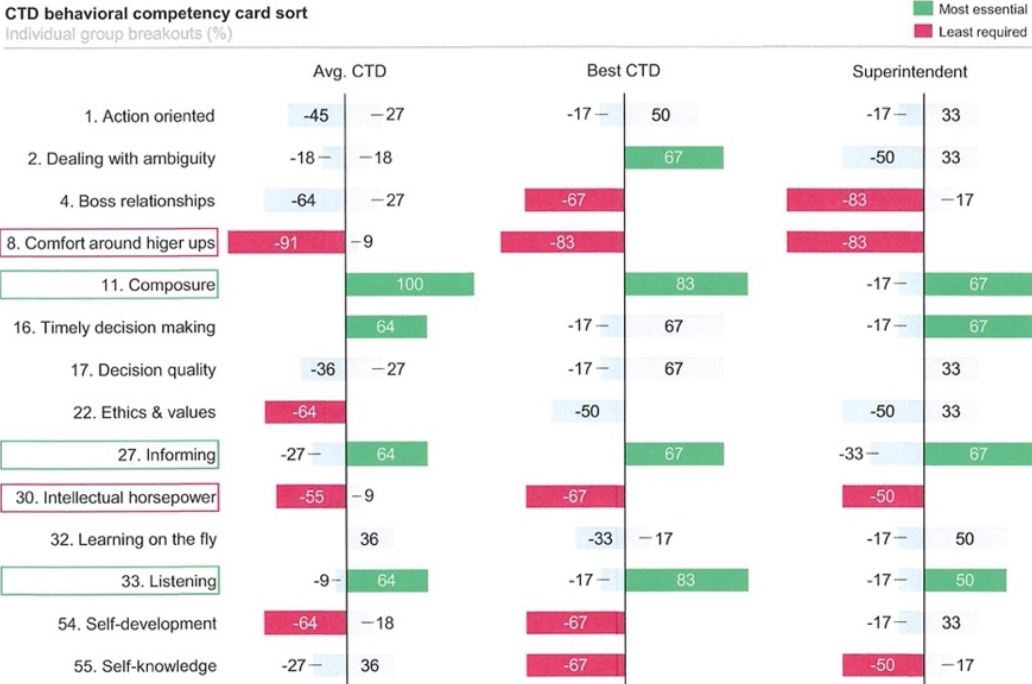
Step 6: Kotter – Establish a vision & strategy
Fortunately, RCC Leadership and the other key stakeholders responded with a sense of urgency to the above report. We convened a half-day workshop, including SMEs, to determine what was needed to reverse the negative trend at the RCC. Over the next week, I took the workshop's output and assembled the strategies and required actions into a Transformation Roadmap (pathway) that bridged the gap between the current state and that of a highly performing RCC. One of the big takeaways was that we would introduce a competency-based interview process.

Step 7: Kotter – Communicating the change in vision
The above realization – competency-based performance – would handle many of the previously identified weaknesses. However, there were two concerns. First, no one had a comprehensive list of the competencies and behaviors of successful CTDs. Secondly, how could we communicate such a significant shift in a way that would honestly handle concerns?

The CTDs and Superintendents were the best sources to extract insights that would help develop a suitable competency-based process. For this reason, I moderated a series of workshops to introduce competency-based performance by having the participants identify which competencies they deemed most vital to their success in the role. Because I included a substantial portion of the RCC Floor population in the workshop, everyone on the floor knew about the pending change, but more importantly, several CTDs became advocates for the change.

CTD behavioral competency card sort
Individual group breakouts (%)

Legend: Most essential (green) / Least required (red)

	Avg. CTD		Best CTD		Superintendent	
1. Action oriented	-45	−27	-17	50	-17	33
2. Dealing with ambiguity	-18	−18		67	-50	33
4. Boss relationships	-64	−27	-67		-83	−17
8. Comfort around higer ups	-91	−9	-83		-83	
11. Composure		100		83	-17	67
16. Timely decision making		64	-17	67	-17	67
17. Decision quality	-36	−27	-17	67		33
22. Ethics & values	-64		-50		-50	33
27. Informing	-27	64		67	-33	67
30. Intellectual horsepower	-55	−9	-67		-50	
32. Learning on the fly		36	-33	−17	-17	50
33. Listening	-9	64	-17	83	-17	50
54. Self-development	-64	−18	-67		-17	33
55. Self-knowledge	-27	36	-67		-50	−17

Based on the workshop findings, the two top Superintendents and I worked together to create an interview guide, question bank, and agreed-upon proficiency rating scale.

Step 8: Kotter – Remove obstacles
To make sure that the new competency set was firmly established in the hiring process, I worked with Human Resources to:
- Develop job competency profiles; also used in position posting descriptions
- Craft a structured interview process
- Designed the technical and behavioural rating scale

Ideal CTD behavioral profile

Skill	Expected proficiency level
Composure	*Emotional control* - can handle stress and keep a clear head; doesn't become defensive or irritated when times are tough or actions challenged
Timely decision making	*Goal-directed thinking* - makes timely decisions that are derived from the quality and sufficiency of the information at hand
Informing	*Attention to communication* - can effectively convey accurate information under stress; ensures that communication is heard and understood; is timely with information
Listening	*Accurate listening* - practices attentive and active listening; grasps when someone is speaking to them; able to accurately repeat instructions or information

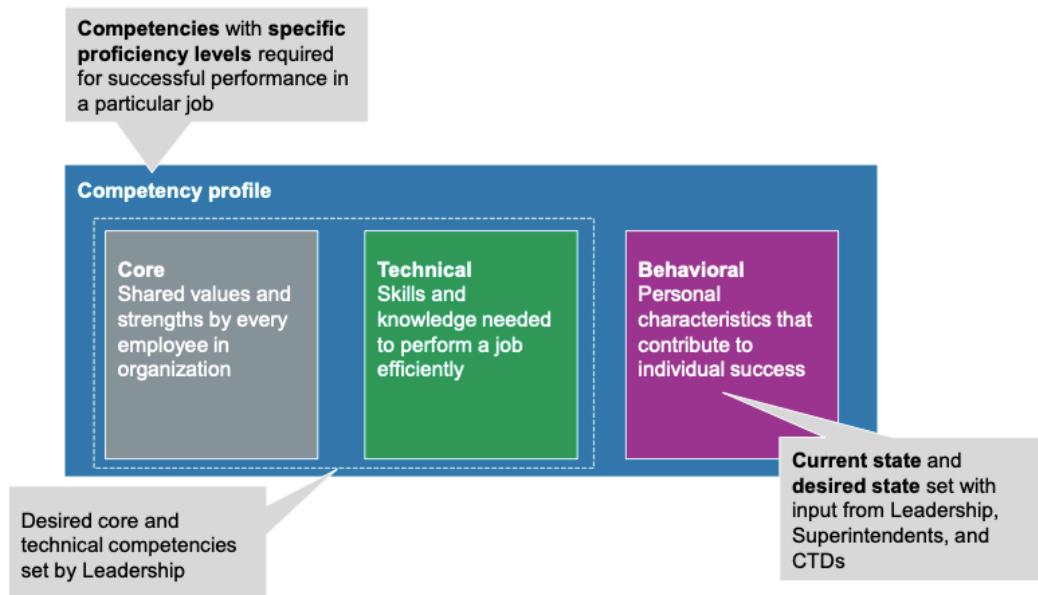Step 9: Kotter – Create short-term wins & sustain acceleration
Because this process was new to the Superintendents, the HR SME and I participated in the interview panels held right after the process changes. Doing so not only accelerated the interview process—more candidates were interviewed over the same period—but also solidified the new regimen because we were there to respond to any questions from the other interviewers about the process.
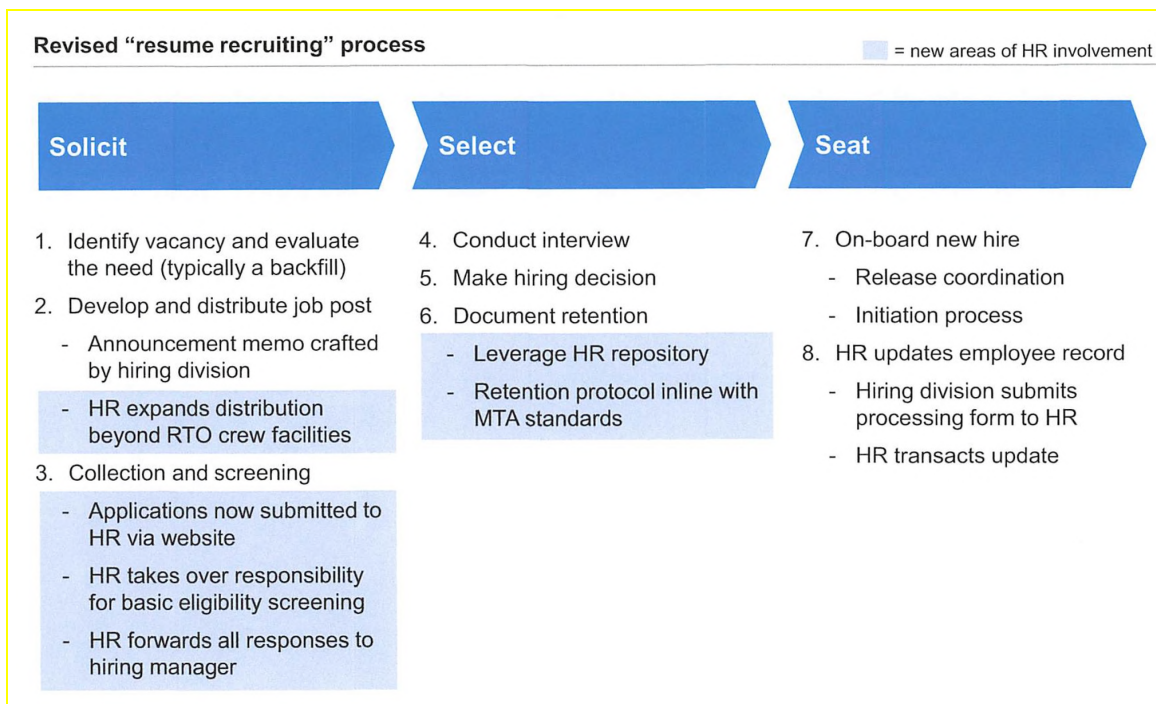
Step 10: Kotter – Anchor new approaches
After the first two or three rounds of interviews, the confidence level in the process change was obvious; it started to convert some who were neutral on the idea at the beginning into advocates. NY Transit is a show-me environment, and Senior Leadership was sold after the initial runs of the competency-based system. The competencies were embedded into the revised training and development programs.

The Results
As a result of introducing a competency-based hiring process, the variability in hire quality was reduced, which increased the probability of obtaining the "right talent." The competency profiles were incorporated into a structured talent marketing/interview process. These same competency profiles were also used as the base of the revamped training and culture programs, thus binding everything into one cohesive unit.

Competencies with **specific proficiency levels** required for successful performance in a particular job

Competency profile

Core
Shared values and strengths by every employee in organization

Technical
Skills and knowledge needed to perform a job efficiently

Behavioral
Personal characteristics that contribute to individual success

Desired core and technical competencies set by Leadership

Current state and **desired state** set with input from Leadership, Superintendents, and CTDs

In conjunction with the rollout of a new talent acquisition and retention program, every RCC manager was educated on the concept and its value and benefits. Additional Human Resource skills and resources were injected into the process, elevating them from passive participant to active member of the sourcing program.

Revised "resume recruiting" process

☐ = new areas of HR involvement

Solicit

Select

Seat

1. Identify vacancy and evaluate the need (typically a backfill)
2. Develop and distribute job post
   - Announcement memo crafted by hiring division
   - HR expands distribution beyond RTO crew facilities
3. Collection and screening
   - Applications now submitted to HR via website
   - HR takes over responsibility for basic eligibility screening
   - HR forwards all responses to hiring manager

4. Conduct interview
5. Make hiring decision
6. Document retention
   - Leverage HR repository
   - Retention protocol inline with MTA standards

7. On-board new hire
   - Release coordination
   - Initiation process
8. HR updates employee record
   - Hiring division submits processing form to HR
   - HR transacts update

Within six months, the revamped program created confidence amongst the key stakeholders when they began to see the fruits of the effort in lower churn and improving performance.

Conclusion
As a result of this initiative, the RCC reduced the time it takes to fill a seat by 18% and improved retention by 50%.

Lessons learned

One of the most critical lessons learned during this engagement was that concerns that might be out of scope for the engagement but factor into its overall success need to be identified, called out to the stakeholders, and actions for consideration be presented in the final report.

In this case, the finding was that significant informal and implicit forms of learning occurred with existing CTDs who were deemed high performers. For example:

- The development of competencies resulting from work itself when CDTs helped the less seasoned navigate more frequently occurring situation
- Implicit forms in a more immediate work context, such as seeing how others handle the stress and pressure of having three layers of management look over your shoulder during serious emergencies.

It was important to communicate that "working" conditions that promote learning must be created to build confidence, reduce stress, and increase retention. This could take the form of a digital twin (simulation) where CTDs respond to simulated situations but can then work through both positive and negative actions right afterward.

Appendix: Kotter Organizational Change Model

This model is successful for several reasons:

- Clear Process: It provides a structured, step-by-step process for managing organizational change, which helps leaders and employees understand what needs to be done at each stage.
- Focus on Urgency: Kotter emphasizes creating a sense of urgency, ensuring stakeholders understand the need for change and are motivated to act swiftly.
- Leadership Engagement: The model highlights the crucial role of leadership throughout the change process, emphasizing the importance of visible and active support from top management.
- Communication: Effective communication is central to the Kotter model. It stresses the need for transparent and frequent communication to keep employees informed, address concerns, and maintain momentum.
- Empowerment and Involvement: Kotter encourages empowering and involving employees in the change process, fostering ownership, commitment, and innovation.
- Short-Term Wins: Celebrating short-term wins is essential for maintaining momentum and building confidence in the change effort. Kotter advises breaking the change process into manageable steps to achieve early success.
- Continuous Improvement: The model promotes continuous improvement by encouraging leaders to reassess and adjust strategies based on feedback and evolving circumstances.