



Interview with Marc Noaro April 2010

Snowdon Tate

Marc Noaro, Service and People Director for Eurostar, talks to us about his Christmas nightmare, the development of a modern transport phenomenon and how the recession is affecting the travel and leisure industry.

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Profile summary

Education	Ardingly College, West Sussex
Recent career	Eurostar 1994-present
	2010 Service and People Director
	2007 Customer Service Director
	2005 HR Director
	2003 Head of Customer Service, on board
	2000 Terminal Manager, Waterloo

Snowdon Tate: Why did you get involved in the travel industry?

Marc Noaro: When I was studying, I was determined that I wouldn't end up commuting into London amongst the sea of suits and briefcases, although now that's exactly what I seem to be doing! I ran a business with my father which taught me the values of time and money management. I ask my team when we're discussing investment proposals "if it was your money, would you spend it?" Today there is a very clear focus on ensuring return on investment – the onus is on ensuring that you deliver results.

ST: You joined Eurostar in its very early days. It must have been an exciting place to be.

MN: Yes, it was. I joined Eurostar two weeks before the Channel Tunnel opened for passenger services. Coming from the very hard-nosed and commercially focussed airline industry to effectively what was a public sector culture was a real shock to me. But the business was growing fast, with loads of opportunities for people with potential who were also ambitious. I started in the Terminal's control room and then moved into a couple of customer facing roles before beginning my management career as Waterloo Terminal Manager.

ST: As Customer Services Director, what did you think when you heard trains were stuck in the tunnel during the snow?

MN: That was not a good moment! I was woken up at 5.45am on the 19th December, a Saturday, by my second-in-command. He needed help and was just starting to realize what was about to unfold. My first thoughts were "I can't believe this is happening"; it became clear that the same team had been up all night and needed to be relieved. I travelled into London, mobilized a new team and walked into the most challenging operational situation I have witnessed in my career. The whole episode taught me a lot about people – who can cope with a crisis – and how to deal with an extremely difficult and very public situation.

ST: What had happened to cause such chaos?

MN: One of our trains got stuck just inside the tunnel because of the weather and snow was falling incredibly fast, building up on trains waiting either side of the tunnel. The temperature inside the tunnel is a fairly constant 25

degrees and outside it was minus 5, so a huge temperature difference of 30 degrees. When the trains entered the tunnel the snow melted, penetrating the electrical systems and causing another four breakdowns.

ST: As a member of Eurostar's leadership team, how did you deal with the crisis?

MN: We've had a lot of really good press over the years, particularly when compared with the airlines, and for the first time we found ourselves the subject of intense hostile media scrutiny. We felt it was important to be humble and not begin to make excuses, start navel gazing or apportioning blame, so we rolled up our sleeves and started to help our customers. Afterwards it would have been easy to beat ourselves up; we've chosen to learn from what happened, put it right and make sure that if disruption happens again – and it will, due to the nature of the industry - we can deal with the situation and look after people much better. We are determined to spend the rest of 2010 building on where we are. We've had some huge successes over the last few years and we need to make sure our customers and our staff continue to have faith in us.

ST: How has your staff been affected?

MN: Everyone wants to work for a business that they are proud to be associated with. The media did not pull any punches and I think people were feeling quite bruised and embarrassed, which in turn affects their behaviour as they're less confident in delivering a good experience for our travellers. It is a huge job to rebuild internal confidence and it is the responsibility of the management team to turn around the hearts and minds of the people who work for Eurostar, especially crew members who bore the brunt of the problems, and re-engage our teams to be proud of who they work for again.

ST: As the front line of Eurostar you have all sorts of customer problems to deal with. How do you cope with irrational behaviour?

MN: I learned a long time ago to treat people equally and fairly. I reflect on what I would like somebody to do for me in the same circumstance. By asking what can be done to help we can gently undo the knot of frustration; it's about listening to an unfortunate experience and finding a way of making it clear that we understand and empathise, and can respond to reasonable requests. I recently had an experience where my flight was overbooked. The airline's solution was to offer £110 in compensation and a flight 5 hours later at 8pm. Instead, I asked for a business class upgrade to give me access to the business class lounge where I could spend the time working. It was a win-win situation. People can be unreasonable and nothing will calm them down, in which case being formal and icily polite does the trick! Good customer service isn't about giving in. It's about finding the right solution for the customer and the business and treating people as valued individuals. Sometimes saying 'no' is the right thing to do; it's how you do it that's important.

ST: With such a volume of passengers you must have witnessed some ridiculous things!

MN: A woman once mistakenly drove a car into the railway arches under Waterloo Station whilst a door was left open and unattended for a few minutes. The arches were all closed off and used as store rooms; she managed to

drive her car all the way to an electrical plant room at the end of a three hundred yard labyrinth, and then couldn't get turn around. I had to reverse her Nissan Micra all the way back out again!

ST: How has the economy affected the leisure industry?

MN: Conspicuous consumption is out, irrespective of whether people are actually any worse off, and the media coverage on the current economic conditions means that people are being more cautious before spending. Leisure travel is a discretionary spend which we can target with good marketing. Business travel is pretty difficult to stimulate as it's governed by travel policies and most businesses are cutting spending wherever possible.

ST: How is the recession affecting Eurostar?

MN: During a recession people shop around for bargains. These days people have much better access to the most competitive deals and there are more products competing for less disposable income. It's about value for money as well as basic cost. We're concentrating on looking after our customers, driving loyalty and encouraging people to travel. Recessions can be a catalyst for change and some of the initiatives we're taking now are becoming embedded in our long-term plans which will give us wins year on year.

ST: You experienced the last recession; how are you helping the younger managers deal with these really difficult circumstances?

MN: We have a relatively young management team, many of whom weren't around during the recession of the early nineties. They saw a blip when the dotcom bubble burst and again after 9/11 but nothing on this scale. Some of my contemporaries in their late thirties and forties all remember the early nineties as being pretty grim with high unemployment, a housing market in crisis and high interest rates. We see different reactions from our younger managers. Some are worried, but many are actually quite motivated by the challenge. Strong leadership during difficult times is vital. We're telling our managers how it is – a very serious time, the business market is shrinking, our cost base needs to reduce. We're being careful not to frighten people. A message of Armageddon doesn't help, either!

ST: How does 2010 look?

MN: We're doing well in the first quarter and we can see some stability in the market now so we are very busy putting plans in place to continue to grow and looking forward to 2011 and the great opportunity that the London Olympics in 2012 throws up.

ST: Fifteen years is a long time to spend with an employer. How has this time affected your relationship with Eurostar?

I have friends who have a policy of changing employers every two to three years so that they can learn new skills in different types of businesses. I've changed jobs every two years or so at Eurostar. It has changed so much over the course of its very short history that it's been an exciting place to be. It's a young business, still learning

and developing. I've earned my spurs in a range of posts and it's good to be able to give back some loyalty to an organisation that has invested in me and my career. I'm not the longest standing employee by any means; there are fifty others who've been with the business longer than me!

ST: What do you enjoy most about your work?

MN: The variety. I have such a wide portfolio – the customer experience alone covers so many different aspects of service, from arriving at the station through to check-in and then on board the train. I get involved in the NGO part of our business, dealing with the Department for Transport, the Home Office, Border Controls and the EU Commission. Eurostar is a very complex business with a unique multicultural mix taking in England, France and Belgium. There are complex ways of getting things done but I love being able to influence so many different aspects of the business.

ST: What's next for you?

There are lots of changes still ahead for Eurostar. Significant structural changes that are taking place right now will give us complete management control of all areas of the business, particularly on the continent where we have relied on relationships with our partner railways in the past. I'll soon take responsibility for several countries which will be a big challenge and one I'm really looking forward to.

ST: Your children are young at the moment; how will you encourage them to go about preparing themselves for the world of work?

MN: Recessions come and go, so they will have to endure one sooner or later in their working life! I went to some great schools and my parents viewed independent schooling as an important head start. They never pushed me in a particular direction but left me to do what I thought was right. I don't want to push my children to follow a career – I want them to work hard at school to give themselves the best opportunities to pursue whatever they want to do. More than anything else I want them to be healthy and happy.

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