

## Lillian Borrone: Weaving a Web to Revitalize Port Commerce in New York and New Jersey

### Administrative Profile



In the mid-1980s, the Port of New York and New Jersey was steadily losing ground to competitors in cargo trade (Lueck 1986). A decade later, the organization crowed that it was the busiest port on the East Coast, by a wide margin (Port Commerce 1998). What caused the comeback? Robert Gleason (2000), secretary-treasurer of the International Longshoremen's Association, attributed the shift to Lillian Borrone's becoming director of the Port Commerce Department in 1988. Her vision and management style propelled newfound cooperation as a route to a successful future.

Among transportation executives, Lillian Borrone stands out as a pioneer who turned around a faltering entity through new ideas, creative marketing, and coalition building. She was able to spearhead the port's recovery while working in a field that even today remains a male-dominated bastion (Bowling et al. 2006). Her story is worth telling as an example of successful public sector leadership by an executive who argued that "the social complexity of our transportation problems requires a more open and social process to produce robust solutions" (Borrone 2005, 16). Her career path also serves as a key information source for learning the strategies women have used to advance in the transportation field (Schachter 2005).

Some feminist scholars have argued that because of female experiences as nurturers, many—although not all—women have a relational rather than an individualistic approach to organizational leadership (e.g., Burnier 2003; Hendricks 1992). Such an approach, which also is practiced by some men, gives organizational participants a sense that decisions should be made through a rich web of relationships rather than by a single executive standing in splendid isolation at the hierarchy's apex. Mary Parker Follett (1924,

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*In 1988, when Lillian Borrone became the director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's Port Commerce Department, she was the first woman in the world to head a major port. During her 12-year tenure, she revitalized the port's cargo trade. She spearheaded the recovery of a faltering entity through vision, astute marketing, and an inclusive, participatory management style. Her achievements contain valuable lessons for all managers who want to revitalize agency operations. Her career path also serves as a key information source for how women can advance in the male-dominated transportation field.*

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1927) articulated an early version of this approach when she posited that change in organizations comes through a genuine interweaving or interpenetrating of understanding among people in groups rather than through a single person's fiat. She noted that this conception makes everyone's work important because the insights of anyone—high or low in society's pecking order—can help weave the guiding will that runs the organization.

Lillian Borrone's approach to management exemplified relationally anchored behavior. In interviews, people who worked with her often commented on her ability to build networks and care about the opinions of multiple stakeholders. This case study suggests some ways that this approach helped her revitalize the port.

### Early Life and Career

Lillian was born the first child of Santo and Lillian Cerza on August 13, 1945. She spent her childhood in several New Jersey towns, first in Paterson, and then in Totowa and Pompton Plains.

At her birth, her father was a member of the merchant marine; later he came ashore and worked in heating and ventilating. Her mother was a teacher. Both parents were active in community affairs and the local Democratic Party. As a child, Lillian began her public life distributing campaign literature in her neighborhood. Like many women who entered transportation agencies, she did not originally envision such a career. She majored in political science at American University. During her last term in 1968, she took a job with the Council of Governments in Washington, D.C., where she had the good fortune to work under Trudy Muranyi, the only female manager on the organization's technical side. Trudy demanded excellence while serving as a model of how a woman could advance in transportation. Working as a transportation technician, Lillian helped plan roadways for the new metro and instantly fell in love with the field.

When Lillian realized she could not advance in the organization without a natural science degree, she moved to the U.S. Department of Transportation's urban mass transportation unit. Her job in the technical assistance group was to help local governments make decisions about bankrupt transit systems.

Traveling around the country, Lillian got to know key people in urban transit. One of her strengths throughout her career was that she was able to piece together a network of contacts that her subsequent colleagues considered unparalleled.

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Later, when she became a high-level manager, she was able to call on these contacts to help solve problems.

In 1970, Lillian married Michael Liburdi, an operating engineer, and moved back to New Jersey. From 1970 to 1978, she worked for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, a bistate organization that provided opportunities to administer multiple transportation modes: aviation, rail and water. She began to stake out what management theorists call a protean career (e.g., Hall 1996), moving in and out of different jobs to acquire specific abilities. Although an early supervisor told her that facilities management was no place for a woman, she had the courage to disregard his advice. She left a position as rail programs coordinator to take rotating assignments managing the George Washington Bridge and Journal Square bus stations, and thus she became the first woman to administer Port Authority facilities. This experience gave her line credentials, an important prerequisite for moving into the executive ranks. She partici-

parted in professional associations, chairing committees for the American Public Transit Association and increasing her network of colleagues. She got technical credentials by earning a civil engineering master's degree from Manhattan College. This degree increased her credibility with transportation administrators.

From 1978 to 1981, she returned to the Department of Transportation, where she worked as an associate and then deputy administrator of the Urban Mass Transportation Administration. In 1982, she returned to the Port Authority when Peter Goldmark, the executive director, asked her to analyze the role of aviation in a newly deregulated environment. After working for two years as the aviation department's assistant director, she became director of the Port Authority's management and budget department.

### Port Commerce

On June 20, 1988, Lillian became director of Port Commerce, which owns and operates maritime properties, including Port Newark and the Elizabeth-Port Authority Marine Terminal in New Jersey, as well as the Howland Hook Marine and the Brooklyn Piers/Red Hook Container Terminals in New York. Her new

position gave her direct line authority over one of the Northeast's most extensive trade and transportation networks. She became the first woman to head a Port Authority line division and the first woman to head any of the world's major ports.

Lillian was now responsible for the harbor-wide channel, terminal, and transportation infrastructure master planning needed to support all the Port Authority's maritime facilities. The responsibility thrust her into a politically dynamic environment. As part of a bistate agency, Port Commerce must be sensitive to many stakeholders, including the governors of New York and New Jersey, each of whom appoints half of the Port Authority's board of commissioners; federal agencies such as the U.S. Coast Guard, Army Corps of Engineers, and Environmental Protection Agency; New York and New Jersey state agencies; terminal host cities; maritime unions, shippers and environmental groups with their conflicting agendas; and the private companies that lease terminal space and to which the authority subcontracts operations, such as Express Rail.

By 1988, global trade had created a flow of goods from country to country that required aquatic transport. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was a gateway in the supply chain of international trade, but a number of problems hindered its ability to play a dominant role. Ship size was growing, and increasingly larger megaships needed deeper channels than the port could supply without constant dredging of its berths. There was concern about the port's ability to use the most efficient intermodal transportation; at transfer points, merchandise shifted to land transport by truck rather than rail, even though rail transport had higher container-handling capacity and was environmentally preferable. The port centered on European and Latin American cargo and had no viable plan for capturing the increasingly important Asian traffic.

Lillian Borrone (2005) once said that she never ran away from a problem of any sort. During her tenure, she faced these problems and successfully addressed each dilemma. The port dredged relevant channels from 35 feet to 45 feet to allow passage of megaships, pioneered an intermodal rail facility at its Elizabeth, New Jersey, marine terminal, and increased the number of imports from Asia. Cargo volume increased by more than 50 percent, sustaining New York and New Jersey's position as the premier East Coast port.

Lillian's ability to turn things around stemmed from her skill in weaving a web of relationships to deal with people both inside and outside her agency. She was able to motivate the people who worked for her to develop excellent ideas, and she was able to get major external stakeholders to put aside their differences and cooperate for the good of the port. She was fluent both at conceiving and implementing innovation. Keohane (2005) argues that it is rare to find a leader who has a rhetorical gift and the ability to be a good listener; Lillian possessed this rare combination. The following three subsections show how she used her skills to handle a trio of contentious issues.

## Dredging

The dredging issue represented a complex problem. As the harbor's natural depth at Port Newark/Elizabeth was approximately 19 feet—too shallow for large cargo vessels—maintenance dredging of berths was an operational necessity even in the 1970s and 1980s. With a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit, the port continually dredged selected berths and disposed of the material at the Mud Dump, a federally regulated ocean site off the coast of Sandy Hook, New Jersey. As ships became ever larger, they needed deeper water for their hulls.

Concerns developed when tests done as part of the 1990 permit renewal process discovered trace amounts of dioxin and other contaminants in dredged sediments. At the time, no federal standard existed to assess their food chain impacts, but concern grew that toxic substances could accumulate in fish if the port placed the material in the ocean. Some environmental groups opposed any further activity until more was known about the consequences.

No conceivable solution to this issue maximized all positive values. At one level, the issue pitted the port's ocean commerce and its impact on the region's economic vitality against the possible environmental problems caused by dredging. The International Longshoreman's Association, shippers, and many local political leaders supported the port's need to dredge as an economic necessity. They saw the movement of goods and thousands of jobs at stake.

But failure to dredge also promised to bring its own negative environmental consequences. Aquatic shipment is the most environmentally benign transportation mode. If the Port of New York and New Jersey could not accommodate goods for Mid-Atlantic consumers and industries, these goods would enter at another port, perhaps Baltimore or Halifax, Nova Scotia. Trucks would then take the goods to the Mid-Atlantic region, thus generating air pollution and highway congestion in an area that already suffered from clogged roads (Wakeman and Costanzo 2004).

Tom Wakeman (2005), a dredging expert at Port Commerce, says that Lillian's framework for engaging the problem hinged on trying to do what was right for the environment and the port. She worked with scientists from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New Jersey's Environmental Protection Agency, New York's Environmental Conservation Agency, and a number of academic centers—such as Rutgers University's Institute of Marine and Coastal Science—to learn how to stop pollutants from getting into the estuary, model the consequences of the dioxin already in place, and develop a range of acceptable dredged material disposal options. She initiated an assessment study that found that capping disposed material with

clean sand reduced ocean disposal risks. She spoke with community groups and local political leaders about the issue, with an emphasis on coming together and “Weaving Environmental and Economic Needs into a Responsible Solution” (Liburdi 1994, 13). Her mantra was that all concerned parties had to come to the table to find answers that worked.

In 1993, the Corps of Engineers issued a permit to allow dredging and ocean disposal with capping of contaminated material. The port completed a round of dredging in September 1993, but the need for additional work was constant throughout the decade as the size of cargo ships continued to grow. Throughout the period, Lillian interacted with Corps of Engineers administrators and federal legislators. She tended to have good rapport with both these stakeholders because she based her ideas on voluminous study and showed energy and enthusiasm in presenting those ideas.

Unlike proponents of reinventing government, she did not see legislators as inhibiting managers from getting the job done or standing in the way of administration by experts. Instead, she saw the legislators as a gateway to public support, saying at one point, “We need a new unity between our transportation experts and our political and social leaders, who are skilled at reaching out for general public support and understanding” (Borrone 2005, 15). In addition, she noted that agencies need clarification through legislation of their roles and responsibilities (Liburdi 1994).

An important point that she tried to make in her presentations was that the port needed to know the rules of the game—to have some idea what amount of dredging would and would not be allowed in the coming years. Her efforts paid off when the port received a blueprint in 1996, the Corps of Engineers Dredged Material Management Plan, that identified permitted volumes of dredged materials until 2040.

The key issue now became where to place the dredged sediments. The port benefited from the simultaneous growth of a movement to slow suburban sprawl by reclaiming urban brownfields, vacant real property whose redevelopment is complicated by the presence of contaminants. Capped dredged material bound with dry concrete provided an environmentally sound, economically supportable way of reclaiming

land for urban communities. When OENJ, a developer, approached Port Commerce with a proposal to use dredged material as structural fill, Lillian worked with local officials to craft win-win agreements that allowed the port to dispose of the sediments while furthering the economic revitalization of waterfront jurisdictions. Probably the most successful of the ensuing agreements was the use of dredged material to construct the 1.3 million-square-foot Jersey Garden Mall in Elizabeth, New Jersey—transforming a city dump into a revenue-producing property. Elizabeth’s mayor, Christian Bollwage (2006), noted that in discussions of the project, Lillian always saw both sides of any issue and worked to find agreement and get the job done.

### Intermodal Transportation

A port is a temporary platform for moving goods from ships to landside transport. Growth in intermodal cargo handling was essential for Port Commerce to have global gateway connectivity. Lillian took the position that improved rail transport was vital to moving international cargo once it left the harbor. The land transport system had to maintain pace with aquatic improvements, even though the area’s policies to encourage global trade had outpaced policies regarding freight transportation supply (Borrone 2005).

When the 8-acre Express Rail terminal opened at Maher Terminals in 1991, the port acquired an in-house facility for moving containers from ship to train. Lillian quickly made the innovation popular by giving rebates to shippers who used rail rather than trucks to transport goods at least 260 miles within the United States or Canada. This Container Incentive Program worked. Express Rail progressed from handling 20,000 to 30,000 containers a year in the early 1990s to handling more than 200,000 containers a year today—about 15 percent of traffic (Maher 2005). In 1995, Port Commerce completed an expanded Express Rail site, four times as large as the original offering (Menon 1997).

### A New Route

After World War II, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was North America’s dominant port. It lost this status in the 1980s as commerce soared with Asia, principally Japan. Asian shippers sent merchandise to West Coast ports; trains then took the goods to East Coast locations.

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In the mid-1980s, Frank Caggiano, a Port Commerce staff member, concluded that the center of Asian manufacturing would soon shift from Japan to China, India, and Southeast Asia's less expensive labor markets. He saw that it might be less costly for businesses in these areas to ship East Coast–destined merchandise through the Suez Canal in an all-water service going directly to the Middle Atlantic states.

In 1988, when Lillian became head of Port Commerce, she seized on the idea's potential even though it would require a major swing in logistical practice. She hired the consulting firms of Paul F. Richardson and Fredrick R. Harris to study whether production was shifting to Southeast Asia and asked the firms to compare cost factors between the traditional West Coast and Suez routes.

Two years later, the consultants reported that enough production existed in Southeast Asia to support an all-water service; cost advantages could exist for shippers at certain points. The problem then became how to convince the first shipping line to break with precedent and try the novel route. Lillian took on marketing the innovation, a task at which she excelled. She traveled to Asia and met with shippers and tried to get at least one to take ownership of the idea. A year after she began her campaign, Singapore's Neptune Orient Line inaugurated the first Suez service. By the late 1990s, seven lines were using it. The port entered into an unprecedented marketing alliance with the Egyptian Suez Canal Authority to publicize the route. Change came, at least in part, because Lillian was able to adapt her thinking to new realities on the ground and convince other players to accept a similar shift in thinking. A port public relations manager said that Lillian "was the best public relations person the port ever had" (Rosciszewski 2005).

### Staff Participation

Follett's (1924, 1927) web metaphor suggests that good ideas percolate from many points in an organization, not merely from the top of the hierarchy; departments that encourage staff participation are often likely to spawn a greater number of innovative ideas than units in which the manager makes all decisions unilaterally. People who worked for Lillian at Port Commerce cite her respect for staff as a spur to their creativity. Victoria Kelly (2005), a junior employee in the 1980s, remembers Lillian conducting meetings in an egalitarian fashion, not as if she alone had the correct answers. In that atmosphere, Kelly always felt that

there was no limit on what she could accomplish. Tom Wakeman (2005) joked that she gave people enough rope to hang themselves—or succeed. Her executive secretary, Jacqueline Grossgold (2005), said that she treated people at all levels of the hierarchy with the same respect, that "She took time to make you feel important." Dorothy Rosciszewski (2005) explained that Lillian listened to people; she was open to suggestions from her staff, which made her crew more creative. She let staff members participate in outside committees, whereas many other executives at her level always represented the port on those committees themselves. (At the same time, Lillian maintained a visible presence in professional organizations. She served as chair of the American Association of Port Authorities and of the Transportation Research Board's executive committee—the first woman to hold those posts.)

People remember Lillian as hard driving and perfectionist, setting high standards for herself and other people. This dual approach—respect and high expectations—led staff to develop many good ideas and share them with her, as in the Suez Canal route.

### Gender and Work Life

As one of the first female transportation executives, Lillian had a remarkable opportunity to mentor women—an opportunity she fervently embraced. Victoria Kelly (2005) remembers Lillian pushing her to try her hand in a host of new areas, such as lease negotiation and facility management. Lillian then structured the experiences so that Kelly had support while learning. Having thoroughly mastered the field, Kelly became a Port Authority executive in her own right; she is now director of the tunnels, bridges, and terminals department.

Kate Ascher (2005), another Port Commerce employee, says that Lillian attracted capable women and supported them. She gave them informal coaching, helped them understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and offered them contacts for career discussions. The U.S. Department of Transportation's Christina Casgar (2005) says that Lillian "plowed back generously." Of course, Lillian also mentored male employees. Frank Caggiano (2006) recalls Lillian's steering him to broaden his résumé and include operations experience.

In her first stint at the Port Authority in 1978, Lillian helped create Women's Equity, an internal group to help prepare women for senior management positions. Initially, the creation of the group produced shock at

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the agency. In time, Women's Equity acquired enough legitimacy that senior male managers joined and gave their support.

In the late 1970s, Lillian helped create Women's Transportation Seminar, an international organization to advance female transportation careers through networking and skill acquisition. Over the next 30 years, she gave many presentations to the organization. In 2005, she facilitated a seminar for the New York chapter on the value of volunteering and networking, two areas she has always seen as crucial to career development.

Hale (1999) argues that it is important to understand how gender affects perception in concrete work situations. Because transportation is still male dominated, women leaders are often evaluated through gender stereotypes. Several people noted to me that Port Commerce stakeholders sometimes underestimated Lillian before they met her. When Lillian became port executive, one union leader asked a port employee, "Who is this girl and what can she know?" After he dealt with Lillian, he came to respect her understanding. Several people told me that Lillian was known as the "Queen of the Port"—a phrase that acknowledges her status and power but also focuses on her gender. (It is doubtful that earlier incumbents of her position were known as Port Kings.)

In the early phase of her career, Lillian suffered from discrimination, which was then prevalent in the field. Traveling in the Midwest for the Department of Transportation, she often faced mayors or council members who were shocked that a woman represented a federal agency on transit matters. Once she was excluded from an informal get-together held at a venue that did not admit women. Later, her organization apologized and she worked with the civil rights office to publicize that federal administrators should not do business in male-only clubs.

In her first stint at the Port Authority, she received a salary lower than that paid to male administrators at her level. When she returned to the Port Authority in 1982, she insisted on receiving equal pay. She took a playing field that was far from level and helped to straighten it out.

Gender-based perceptions also influenced the intersection of her career and personal life. Throughout most of the 20th century, virtually the only women able to make successful careers were women who did not marry. By the time Lillian entered the workforce, societal sanction against careers for married women had atrophied, but issues concerning how wives allocated their time still resonated for some people. Indeed, even today, women tend to work fewer hours at

paid employment and more hours at home than men do (Buelens and Van den Broeck 2007).

Lillian's husband was supportive of her career in its early phases. Difficulties arose in the early 1980s, when she was in Washington, D.C., during her second stint at the Department of Transportation, and he wanted to return to New Jersey. She accepted his request and they returned to the Mid-Atlantic area, but later he saw her Port Commerce promotion as taking too much of her time, a complaint that a wife would be much less likely to make to her husband given society's different social expectations. The couple separated in 1988; Lillian married Edward Borrone in 1995.

Some port employees suggested that Lillian's gender facilitated behavior that was beneficial to the organization. These administrators saw her humane leadership style and interest in promoting positive feminine behavior traits that contrasted with the "lone wolf" management style more common among transportation men. Thus, these practitioners agreed with feminist scholars, who argue that the reality of women's lives leads many women to have a relational orientation to management.

### **An Active Retirement**

Lillian Borrone's retirement from the Port Authority in December 2000 did not end her public service career. In July 2001, President George W. Bush appointed her to the Commission on Ocean Policy, a body giving Congress recommendations on ocean use and sustainability. After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Donald DiFrancesco, acting New Jersey governor, asked her to coordinate the Office of Recovery and Victim Assistance, a task she undertook from September 17 to December 31, 2001. In 2004, she became an inaugural member of the federal Homeland Security Science and Technology Advisory Committee. She currently chairs the Eno Transportation Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

While Lillian has provided excellent service in all these positions, her major legacy is fostering the transformation of New York and New Jersey's port into an exemplary international commerce platform. Her relational skills are widely credited as part of the ability set that helped her get this job done. A study of her accomplishments, therefore, adds some evidence to debates about how a manager's relations to affiliation and achievement interact in the workplace.

Some organizational behavior literature posits an either/or relationship between a manager's need to achieve and to relate well with other stakeholders. One textbook even says that organizations should be leery of hiring too many people with a high need for affiliation because such people are more

concerned with getting along with others than performing tasks (George and Jones 2008). The advice seems to suggest that executives should hire men and women who do not particularly care about other people.

Lillian's career, on the other hand, suggests that weaving strong relational networks is a prerequisite to superior task performance in at least some situations. In interview after interview, respondents reported that she was very goal oriented and also very concerned with integrating the views of many people. She understood the importance of creating and building a team. Her success may embolden other administrators—male and female—to question whether the relationship between a concern for affiliation and performance is “either/or,” or rather, as Lillian Borrone's career seems to imply, “both or neither.”

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## Note

1. Established in 1921, the Eno Transportation Foundation, named for William Phelps Eno, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving ground, air, and water transportation.

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