

“Our values should guide our behaviours and actions in the bad times as well as the good”: Elaine Clark RFM

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For over 25 years the Rail Forum Midlands has been supporting the railway industry to grow and thrive. It now represents over 200 rail supply businesses from across the UK, collectively employing tens of thousands of people and contributing billions to the UK economy.

Elaine Clark is the Chief Executive and responsible for the day-to-day running of the Rail Forum, including working with the Board to set strategic priorities. She has responsibility for maintaining strong relationships across the government and for delivery of sector deal activities.

She has kindly taken time to write a piece for railbusinessdaily.com in which she talks about how our values should guide our behaviours through the bad times, and how now is the time to support some innovative thinking for a better future:

“A few weeks ago I had a call from the guys at RBD asking if I would write a guest piece for them. Of course I said yes and got to thinking about the usual rail related

opportunities and issues that I might write about. But in the course of the last month I think it's fair to say that all of us have had our world turned upside down and are getting to grips with the new reality of a global pandemic and Britain in lockdown. So what to focus on in these challenging times?

The vast majority of companies I have worked for, and currently work with, have some form of company values; usually taking pride of place hanging on an office wall somewhere. I have long believed that the true test of such statements only occurs when companies face real challenges and crises. Let's be honest anyone can stick to their values when times are good – but what about when the chips are down? Do we really mean those nice words? Mainstream and social media comments about some companies (not in the rail sector) in the last few days would suggest that for some organisations at least they are perhaps just empty words.

Our values should guide our behaviours and actions in the bad times as well as the good and they are a true test of leaders at times like these. So now, more than ever, we should hang on to them and be true to them.

In the coming days and weeks some companies will be faced with difficult decisions about furloughing people or even worse letting them go. How organisations handle these difficult conversations and decisions is likely to test their values – communicating with your staff, listening to their concerns and ideas will set the tone for your future relationships as things start to return to normal. Some people will have good ideas that will help you and your businesses, so maybe now is the time to support some innovative thinking for a better future. Even without the possibility of losing your job or reduced earnings we should also recognise the stress that everyone is under and support each other from a mental health perspective; what we are all facing is an alien world but at least we are all facing it together so let's keep the emphasis on that word: together.

Collaboration is a word that often features in organisation's values and is something we at Rail Forum Midlands (RFM) have been trying to encourage in a variety of ways not least through the work we are leading on the Midlands Pilots of the Rail Sector Deal. But it's not always easy, especially when people and organisations are busy. In the current climate we are already seeing companies who are normally competitors talking to each other about sharing resources to ensure we can keep trains moving as more and more staff have to take time off work – this is a real demonstration of the railway family coming together.

How we treat our customers and suppliers is also vitally important. If companies really do value their suppliers they won't hold up payments and indeed should be looking to make earlier payments to help smaller companies out. Huge credit to Network Rail for taking a lead on this and for working hard to pay its suppliers even quicker than normal – let's ensure this cash flows (not trickles) down the supply chain. And can we see other large clients doing the same please? Our SME supply

chain is really going to struggle in the coming weeks and months; myself and colleagues at RFM have spent hours talking to members and government over the last week identifying the key issues and seeking government support and intervention where it can make a difference. And I know other trade associations across not just rail but in many other sectors are doing the same.

So what happens when the current crisis is over and we emerge on the 'other side'? Personally I am passionate about the UK supply chain and much of RFM's work is about championing our SMEs in particular. Looking forward to what might change as we come out of the existing situation I have a plea to all those companies out there to really focus on supporting local UK suppliers; they deserve a chance to replace current overseas suppliers and they will need your business to survive, stabilise and grow stronger. RFM supports ReshoringUK and now, like never before, we need you to support our local UK businesses. We will be here to help them – it's one of our core values – I hope it's one of yours too."

Elaine Clark, Chief Executive of Rail Forum Midlands