

# JFK Leadership

Crystal Coleman  
Director of Office of  
Programs

## RRB

Years of Service: 29



## Summary:

Civil servants are each individually unique with one common goal, helping Americans. As leaders of civil servants, a good manager not only focuses on helping Americans (meeting the agency's mission) but also focuses helping federal workers themselves. Ms. Crystal Coleman embodies the definition of a great civil service leader. As a Senior Executive, she has illustrated leadership through a lifetime of helping others. Ms. Coleman has influenced the careers of many through mentorship, collaboration, and innovation, all the while effectively upholding the mission at each agency she has worked.

Leadership is an act not just a title. True leaders recognize the talents, skills, and areas of growth within teams. Ms. Coleman has recognized, developed, and allowed others to grow under her direction by engaging in active participation in the work. By getting to know individuals, their work and purpose, she has assisted in finding growth opportunities for staff. As they have successfully continued in their careers, she humbly accepts their gratitude while requiring they continue their growth. As Theodore Roosevelt stated, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care". Ms. Coleman has shared her skills and talents throughout her federal career by illustrating care and concern for others. This is what makes her more than a leader, but a great leader and a force to reckon with.

**Description:** Ms. Coleman began her career in federal service in September 1991, the same year that Nelson Mandela became president of African National Congress. Nelson Mandela was an example of transformational leadership. Inspired by Mr. Mandela, Ms. Coleman bought a similar style of transformational leadership to each agency and team that she has been a part of during her career.

Nelson Mandela said it was better to lead from behind especially during victories. Ms. Crystal Coleman led her team at the Department of Labor Employee Benefits Security Administration (DOL-EBSA) as the second in command of the regional office. During her tenure, she identified opportunities for growth within policy and procedures, but more importantly, her people. Her guidance and development of job analysis and crediting plans ensured the best candidates to achieve Regional and Agency priorities. Throughout her career, Ms. Coleman has actively recruited talent by attending job fairs and promoting skills focused on solutions rather than a can't do attitude.

Her teams in Los Angeles and Chicago Regional office closed more than 800 civil cases restoring retirement, healthcare, and other workplace-related benefits of workers and their families. Benefits restored included pension plan assets total \$9.7 million, prohibited transactions reversed in excess of \$1.6 billion; plan assets protected totaling \$1.5 million and directly disturbing more than \$10 million to plan participants. Again, leading from behind, during these victories, Ms. Coleman humbly accepted the accolades by recognizing the efforts and dedication of her team. She rewarded and promoted exceptional performance. These accomplishments were the result of the collaborative efforts of the employees based on the relationships she helped them to foster, centered on meeting the agency's missions and each respecting the contributions of the each team member.

Ms. Coleman illustrates a see one, do one, teach one attitude in her work at the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB). As the Director of the Office of Programs, she demonstrates creative thinking and solution-driven decisions. When we, her team, need representation and ideas for work place problems, she provides clear end-goals and directives. This clarity promotes creativity. Following her example, we guide our own teams through similar coaching and mentoring exercises. Prior to the pandemic, Ms. Coleman guided her staff by helping us to balance competing priorities with limited resources (both staff and information technology). She always demonstrates a commitment to automating work processes and organizational change as evidenced by her recommendations to expand our use of technology, which positively impacts our customer service. Ms. Coleman utilizes her management skills to identify problems and develop insights into situations and applies innovative solutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, only exacerbated the challenges we faced with limited resources when we were physically in the office. At the start of the pandemic, our organization was forced to make swift decisions about staffing and work that could be done remotely. Ms. Coleman, however, led the Office of Programs by turning this adversity into an opportunity. She worked with each of her direct reports individually and their staffs to identify key critical workloads and projects impacted by the pandemic and through her innovative thinking Ms. Coleman was able to provide strategic guidance that allowed the workloads to process without interruption and the projects to continue implementation. Unexpectedly forced to work offsite for an extended period, required us to rethink how to conduct business yet still meet our agency's mission. Under her leadership, work processes that had been largely dependent on us being in the building were while were either reprioritized or reimaged using existing technologies so that the work could be not only be completed remotely, but done so in a safe and secure manner. Keeping the safety of staff in mind, the Office of Programs team largely transitioned to a virtual environment by developing new and innovative ideas that maintain the agency's mission of paying benefits to the railroad workers and their families while protecting the health and ensuring the safety of RRB staff.

This would have not been possible if Ms. Coleman was not an early supporter of telework initiatives long before the pandemic. That foresight helped make the transition to a virtual environment less arduous under the pressure of today's environment. The mandatory telework environment has challenges recognized by many including Nicole Ogrysko (2021, March 24)<sup>1</sup>. Ogrysko noted many agencies have allowed federal employees to work non-traditional hours to accommodate family care responsibilities during the pandemic. Ms. Coleman was a leader in identifying the needs of her workers and immediately notified to the entire Office of Programs of adjustments in the hours of operation. She also shared the importance of one's own safety (a clear directive from the current administration) and health even in the unprecedentedly telework environment.

Similarly, Ogrysko (2021, March 24)<sup>1</sup> reports that the new environment presents a potential need for training and guidance. Ms. Coleman has always demonstrated support through informal and formal guidance and training of management. When the Office of Programs increased telework in 2016, Ms. Coleman strongly encouraged and directed her management team to participate in trainings related to managing remote teams. The Office of Programs was the predominate participant and routinely has a high participation rate in contractor soft skills training at the RRB. This is because of Ms. Coleman's leadership and innovative thinking to not only see talents and skills within her teams, but to recognize areas of growth and future leader and environments.

Despite the increased workloads caused by the pandemic to the unemployment and sickness benefit program for benefits payable under the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act, because of her leadership and guidance, workloads decreased in other mission essential areas of the Office of Programs. For example, the Disability Benefits Division (DBD) began paperless processes in March 2016. However, in March 2020, contracting process for DBD was paper (printing and scanning). Through Ms. Coleman's leadership, the team developed a fully paperless process that increased efficiency as a whole, such that workloads reduced to levels lowest under the current leadership. This accomplishment equated to a 15-29% production increase when comparing prior months. She echoed the need for paperless processes throughout Programs.

The multiple COVID relief acts greatly impacted benefits payable under the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act (RUIA). Beginning with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act CARES Act) through the American Rescue Plan (ARP), these acts promised to provide fast and direct economic assistance for American workers and families, including railroad workers impacted by the pandemic. However, the actual implementation of these acts were extremely complicated given the multiple Treasury appropriations that funded the additional benefits. Ms. Coleman encouraged her team to collaborate, exercise creativity, honesty, and to tell her the truth whether it was "good, bad, or ugly". As a result, the team overcame programming glitches and urgent customer service demands for payment by ultimately provide a positive impact including adjudicating more than \$194 million in benefits to railroad workers, American citizens impacted by the pandemic.

While RRB enjoys Ms. Coleman's leadership, her influence is still widely respected at her former agency. She has used that influence to encourage former co-workers to volunteer for development programs at RRB and apply for permanent positions at RRB. Great leaders motivate because of vision. Ms. Coleman's influence inspires all who have the privilege to work with her.