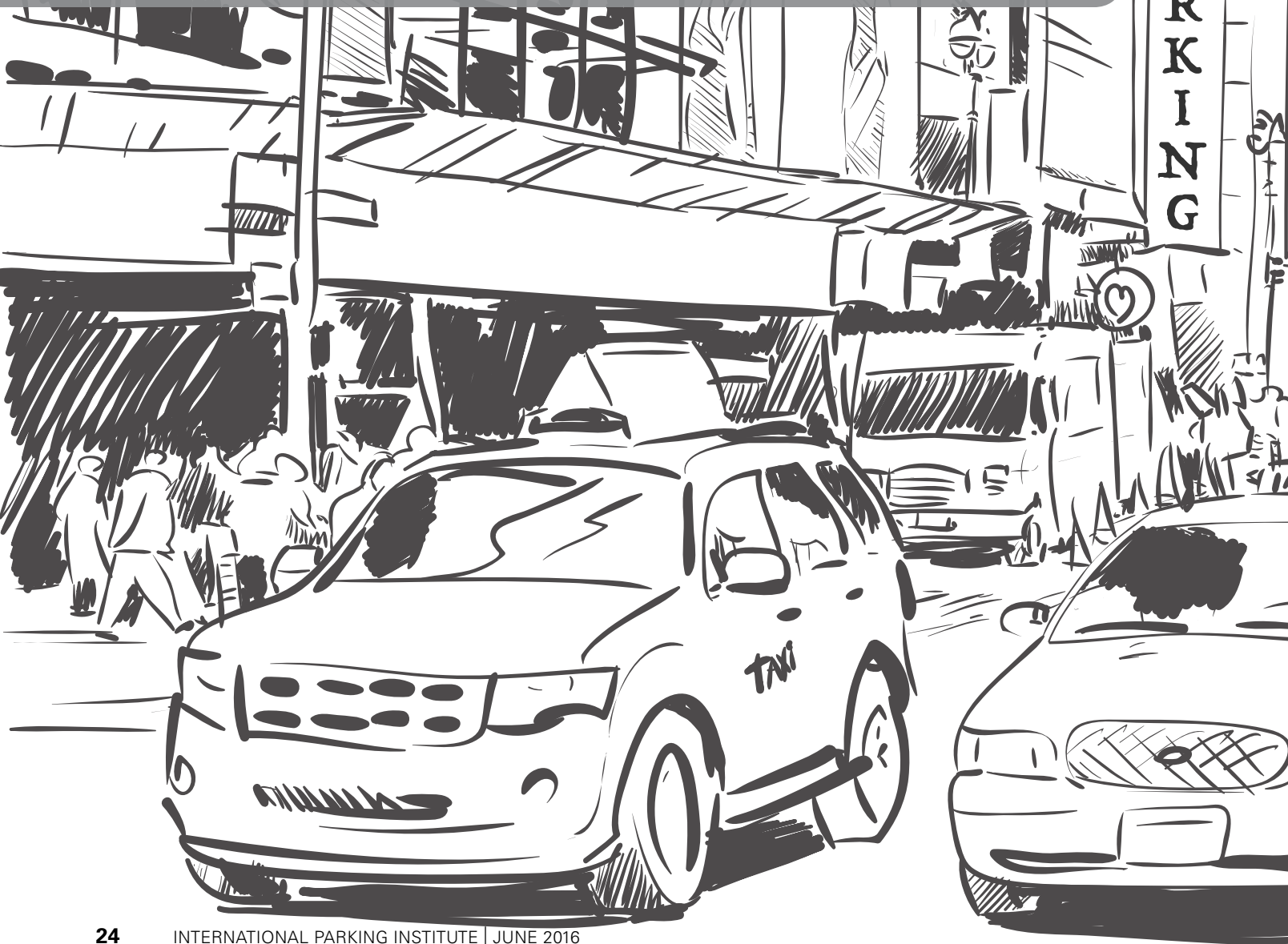


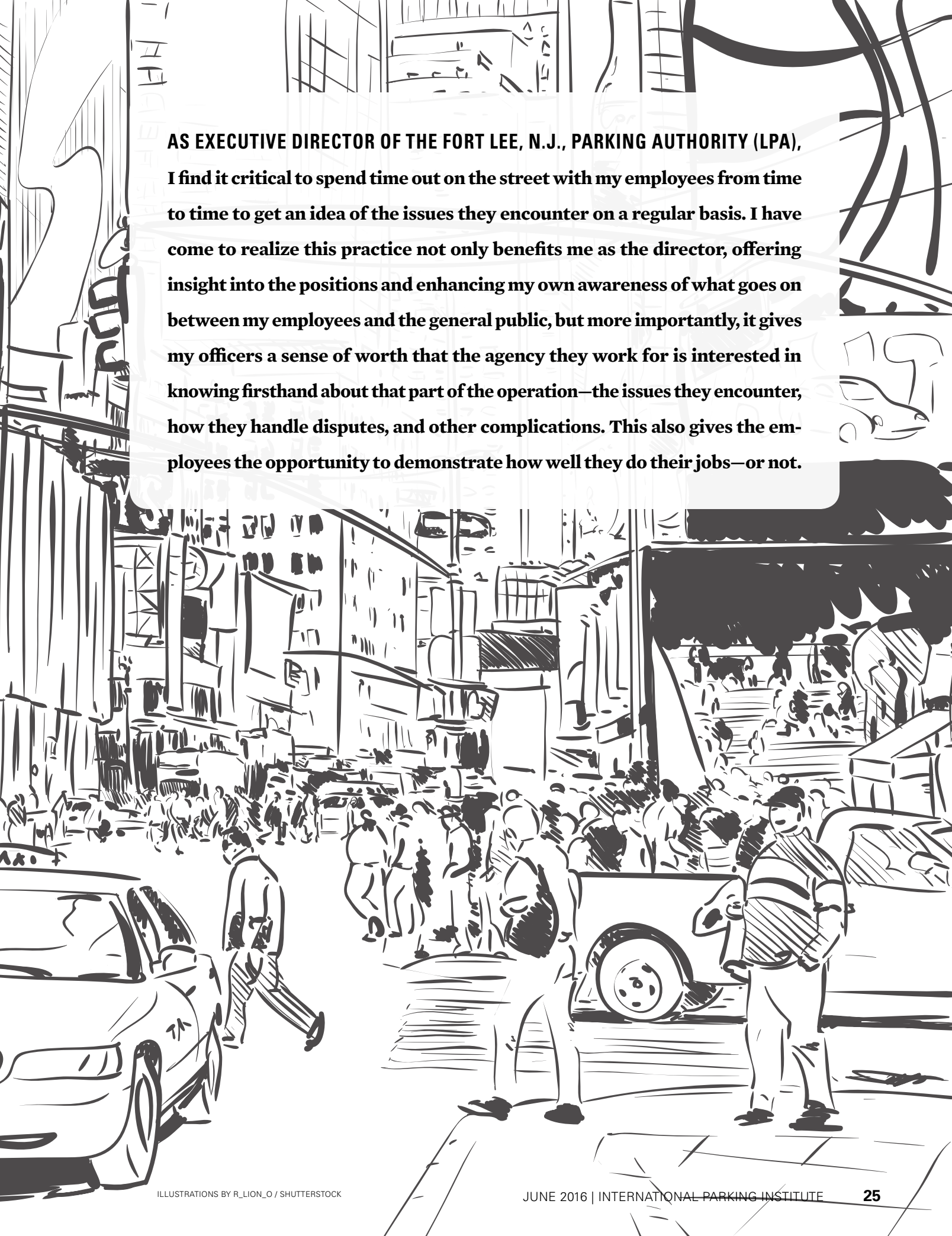
Leaving the Desk

By Gloria Gallo, CAPP

Looking for insight into your parking operation? Spend a day with a frontline professional.



AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE FORT LEE, N.J., PARKING AUTHORITY (LPA), I find it critical to spend time out on the street with my employees from time to time to get an idea of the issues they encounter on a regular basis. I have come to realize this practice not only benefits me as the director, offering insight into the positions and enhancing my own awareness of what goes on between my employees and the general public, but more importantly, it gives my officers a sense of worth that the agency they work for is interested in knowing firsthand about that part of the operation—the issues they encounter, how they handle disputes, and other complications. This also gives the employees the opportunity to demonstrate how well they do their jobs—or not.





In most cases, I have found officers are eager to share all they know and are more than open to suggestions to resolve their dilemmas. They are happy to show me how much I am missing sitting in my office on the phone or at meetings. I have found going out on the road with my officers here and there to check on equipment performance, defuse a specific situation, or to determine why summonses are down/up, etc., is not really enough. It has become apparent that there is still much more going on and much to be learned by being out there in that day-to-day environment in the capacity of the officer. This experience has given me an incredible amount of valuable knowledge.

Because most people do not recognize all the services some parking authorities provide to their communities, these agencies are only looked upon as the ticket-giving departments of municipalities. As we all know, parking enforcement officers (PEOs) meet all kinds of controversy out on the streets, and how they act and react has a tremendous effect on the public's perspective of the authority, both structurally and politically.

Parking enforcement officers are the face of your agency; that realization becomes clear when people come into your office and complain about a citation they received and are upset about the officer's behavior, whether founded or unfounded. The public groups together the director and the entire staff in their unique perspective of an unsettling experience. Directors find themselves needing to be diplomatic and understanding of the public's side of the story while needing to support

the officer's decision on how the situation was handled, even though the director was not there, has no idea what was said back and forth, and may not even be familiar with such incidents. However, directors can get a better feel for the overall picture and what staff approaches should be during controversy when they have had firsthand experience on the road dealing with the public.

The Battle

Everyone deserves to feel appreciated and respected for the job he or she does. One thing I have learned from witnessing the backlash an enforcement officer gets from some members of the public is we have to be thick-skinned. People can be cruel when they feel they have been wronged, and that's when the battle begins. There are so many excuses used, and some are legitimate, but most are not. The public is also under the impression they can dispute and correct any misunderstanding or errors right there on the street. Some get so angry they spit, tear up their tickets and throw them in our faces, and then scream out a number of commonly used expletives. Parking officers must really step back and remove themselves from these types of situations, both physically and emotionally.

Many people are simply uncomfortable with the presence of a parking officer, even when they are not in any violation. Just seeing an officer walking down the street checking meters annoys some enough to call out or to go running to the officers to make sure their vehicles are safe from ticketing. As a firsthand observer, the director gains a whole new respect for the job these employees do.

Getting Heated

A lesson from my days shadowing staff on the street: Officers generally welcome guidance in dealing with heated disputes. We might take for granted that our people would deal with the public accordingly, but it can be quite difficult to maintain composure in the midst of some intense situations. The ability to defuse a situation that becomes chaotic is an essential tool necessary for the officers' effectiveness, as well as their safety. As a group, which includes members of the administrative staff, I find it invaluable to discuss these matters and share experiences and methods that work and don't work. Both types of methods are equally important to examine. It would be advantageous to any agency to enroll its officers in professional training seminars that focus on the dos and don'ts of enforcement confrontations.

On most days, extreme confrontation is not the norm. However, another issue that becomes a challenge is "to summons or not to summons." Setting written policy is always best, but there are those exceptions that may not be covered in the overall guidelines. The practice I find most effective is to let my employees know that if they are in doubt, don't sweat it out. It is OK to let a ticket go rather than issue a summons that was written in error. I find it is more beneficial to instruct my employees on methods of improving their good judgment than to suffer the wrath that may follow erroneously written tickets. Everyone makes mistakes, but we can all learn how to implement effective practices when we take the time to stop and think, put ourselves in the place of motorists, and then make educated decisions, for example. This is a very effective method when dealing with the issue of insufficient signage.

In Court

Meeting with the general public in court is where officers say they get the chance to present themselves in a different light, so to speak. This is the place where they are in a structured environment, and they have documentation and photographs to support their summonses. Not only does court allow them to prove their case, but also on a more positive note, they feel it gives them the opportunity to talk to the individual in a more reserved environment. Here, they can actually sit down with the person and discuss the options. The officer also has the court's legal representation available for additional support and/or guidance. Another important factor is the good working relationship the officers have with the prosecutor. Observing proceedings lets me see there is a mutual respect between both parties that allows the process to work through quickly, efficiently, and favorably for all involved.

Our authority uses PATS, a real-time, automated ticketing system tied directly to the administrative office of the courts in Trenton. Officers' training in the care and maintenance of their equipment is critical; they cannot work without it. Learning what their needs are for the proper upkeep during a day on the street was highly beneficial, and I learned about challenges such as batteries not recharging, data not downloading properly, printers skipping and not printing the summonses properly, and other miscellaneous malfunctions.

Normally, the officer would report these types of issues to the help desk. Stepping in and reaching out to the state from the director's desk makes a difference in the response time in comparison to the help desk calls that are made by the PEOs. This is one approach to taking action in keeping our equipment up and running with less downtime.

Fort Lee's northern location during the winter months only adds to the already challenging job of working out in the elements, not only with equipment freezing up at times, but because parking enforcement officers are also burdened with having to walk in the ice and snow and determining whether a person can get to the meter to pay or not because of the weather. I was pleased to find out my officers were not taking advantage of the situation by lessening their efforts but, on the contrary, were frustrated they could not do their jobs effectively.

In the past, they offered to work with our maintenance department to clear the snow from high-occupancy metered areas. Of course, bad-weather winter months result in fewer tickets, loss of revenue, and many unproductive workdays. Believe it or not, the officers are as concerned about the stability of the authority as I am and expressed their desire to do their part in the continuation of keeping our agency a vital part of the community.

Being out in the field learning about my agency's operation from a parking enforcement officer's perspective was an invaluable, enjoyable, and eye-opening experience. There is so much more to these employees than the public believes. They are sharp, eager to do a good job, work independently, and so appreciated the time I spent with them as they were happy to "train" me in the practices and manner in which they conduct themselves in their day-to-day work ethics. They educated me in many ways, not just in how they are able to follow policy set before them but also in the personal way they journey through their days and how they make decisions based on their integrity. We are fortunate to have such a dedicated and enthusiastic parking enforcement team. Kudos to the FLPA crew!



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