

Tim Ranalli Profile by Henry Allikas

Henry: I'm here with Tim Ranalli. This is Henry Allikas in the Carpenter Shop. Please tell us how you came to Caltech, and about some of the different work you've done here.

Tim: I had the opportunity to come to Caltech through a friend I knew who was working in Design and Construction at the time. He was a project manager and let me know there was an opening for a service mechanic, which is the after-hours mechanic. At that time, they were reporting to the central plant, and he knew I was looking for a new job. I had recently graduated from UTI where I took HVAC and refrigeration. I applied and got that job with the central plant as being kind of the fill-in night mechanic and worked in several positions over several years, eventually ending up the supervisor of the H&V department. So that's how I came here and kind of the beginning of where I started. And I've been here for going on 37 years holding several different job titles.

Henry: You and the Infrastructure & Maintenance director recently got new job titles and there were some changes made in how you divvy up the work of managing the shops. Could you describe what the previous arrangement was like? What were his responsibilities and yours prior to this?

Tim: In the previous arrangement, the infrastructure and maintenance director had mechanical, electrical, plumbing and controls and the central plant under him. I had the trade shops, so the carpenter, paint, and lock shops, along with the service center, asset management, and business intelligence work we do. That's the way it was before.

The new arrangement is meant to enhance the planning and the execution of work. The infrastructure and

maintenance director has all the shops for the actual execution of the work. And my group is more of the logistics and coordination part of operations. In my group, I also have transportation, purchasing, the stockroom, and the mail room. Those groups report to me and will help streamline getting the parts and the materials into the hands of the people who need them in the quickest way we can.

And then we have some folks who were not previously allocated for planning but are now. That's the electrical engineer and some of the folks who were with the sustainability group in the beginning. The real goal is to have a team focused on planning our maintenance and identifying the priority and criticality of each asset to invest in, versus the folks who need to execute the work, to relieve some of the planning burden from them.

Henry: Today, are you doing both planning and execution?

Tim: Because we're temporarily short one director, the Assistant VP and I are splitting the work from the MEPC group and the central plant. I'm helping with the technical piece, the X's and O's, blocking and tackling, if you will, and John is helping with the personnel and the budgeting pieces of those shops until we backfill that position.

Henry: Now that you've spent a little time with this new job, how is your experience different every day?

Tim: I've taken on some new groups that I'm not familiar with — you know, I came from an MEPC background. I had the plumbing and mechanical and control shops prior to taking on the architectural trades, so I had the folks who were doing the execution of the job. Now it's more of the planning feature. There's a lot of new stuff that we're doing here. It's a big communication/customer service focused group now, to help plan so folks can execute the work. In that piece, there's a lot of new stuff for me. Logistics is new for me. Getting the parts in the technicians' hands

is new for me. I used to be on the other side of that. Now I can focus on how we might make a difference. There are some new challenges for me and it's been exciting. It's been different.

Henry: Do you think that technicians doing the work are going to experience a big change from this? Or is it more the customers who are going to see an immediate change in how services are delivered?

Tim: I think it's both. But my goal is to have an immediate impact on the technicians doing the work, getting the right tools, parts, and equipment into their hands when they need it. This is materials and supplies, not only the physical tools they use. We have a lot of processes drawn out from when we started implementing AiM in 2015. It's time to review those to make sure we're pressing the right buttons or asking for the right information. Are we trying to get too much data? That was the original goal, to get the data so we can improve, and now that we have it, are we using it? Constant improvement, right? In reviewing those processes and helping technicians, they're going to feel the impact first.

Henry: Is there anything else you'd care to share?

Tim: Another thing that we've embarked on is a real customer service focused department within my department that's headed by a new manager of service and process, Kari Myers. She's going to elevate our customer service level, both outward facing and inward facing. In the service center, everybody's our customer, from a technician doing the work to the people who are receiving the work. Taking a holistic look at how we do business and how we make the environment more conducive to doing your job, that department is going to have a big impact. That's a new piece here.

Henry: Will we see changes like that right away? Or is this something that's slowly being developed?

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Tim: It is actively being worked on. I just came from a meeting where Kari is involving everybody, all the managers and supervisors, to get their feedback. She's meeting with the Division Operations Officers to get their feedback, to find out what the pain points are. She's hit the ground running and we can look forward to some good things. Communication is going to be key.

Henry: Are there any particularly tough challenges you see facing you, or Facilities as a whole, right now, today?

Tim: Right now, our challenges are not like anybody else's. The skilled trades are lacking people. We had a huge number of retirements and will continue to have those for the next couple of years. The ability to bring folks in who are skilled or bring folks in who have lighter skills, but we can train up, that is a huge focus and has been for the last three or four years. We've known this was coming for quite a while. It took a long time to put a plan into action. And I think we still have a long way to go on that. But I would say the personnel and the morale is the biggest thing that we need to focus on. Everybody can say anything they want about budgets, you know, we're here to do a job and there are constraints, but we can work and excel within those constraints. Focusing on the people is the number one thing.

Henry: Is there something more you'd like to talk about, dreams that you have, or things that you'd like to do?

Tim: I came from the late '80s and early '90s when I think it was a little easier to operate amongst groups. There was more of a camaraderie between the groups, and I think as time has gone on, there's been more stress involved in everybody's daily life and jobs. And it's not just us, right? Getting back where people are truly happy to be here every day and can feel comfortable working with their peers, that would make me happy.

There must have been something going on in the past, to see people in Facilities that I've worked with stay here and continue to move up, even from a non-technical position then advance to a lead level and then a supervisor level in a skilled trade. You know, our days are challenging every day. Bringing an air handler online or replacing one that's broken, or piping leaking in the street, you dig it up, you replace it, those things are going to happen throughout Facilities. But I think for our group in Facilities, keeping that relationship with your peers and your colleagues is really important. And I've seen that happen here. So even though we've lost a lot of people, we've also kept a lot of people.

Henry: A lot of this stuff has been professionalized, running these different building departments. It used to be that a professor would take a year off and be the manager of chemistry, the guy we deal with who says, Hey, come fix this person's office. And that's changed across academia. But I think it happened kind of late here, in the late '00s, maybe, and then we brought in AiM. We used to talk directly to everybody that we did a job for, and now we don't. Is that part of what we're trying to improve here?

Tim: When we launched AiM, we wanted to better communicate, not replace the communication. Customer service training for the technicians has never happened. How to talk to a customer and not alarm them unnecessarily, that's different for every single person. It could be a person who's turning a wrench looks up and says, Hey, this thing is 70 years old. What do you expect to happen? A comment like that could cause panic. Another thing Kari's looking at is how we get customer service training among our own group so we can better communicate, not replace communication.

As long as I've been here — my boss that I replaced at HVAC had been here for over 40 years, and he had the same experience —

communication was not the greatest. We've tried business cards, we've tried door tags. We tried everything. Of course, this was before texting and everything else, but oftentimes the person that is calling in the issue is not there when you show up. Who do you talk to? A lot of times you don't know where the person you're talking to fits in the organization, right? They could be the professor or whoever it is there. We never want to replace communication with what we've got. But learning how to communicate helps us all.

Henry: When I first started with FED, we worked on performance reviews and in there was the word "customer." And it was a big question, Who is my customer when I go on a job? Is it my direct supervisor? Is it his boss? Is it the grad student whose lab — I mean, is it the lab manager, is it the professor who owns a laboratory, the building manager? Is the new service and process manager going to help people get some guidelines for how to address that?

Tim: Our customer is the Caltech community and yes it can be confusing. That is why the service center is here to be your point of contact and the campus point of contact, to help communicate and provide customer care. We can help identify who is being impacted and communicated with if there are any questions.

Henry: If there's an active leak going on ...

Tim: We need to be calm and reassuring in the situation and show empathy to the occupants who might be losing research, and then we continue to work. These are attributes to customer care that we recognize, we've already documented, we have a plan for. Now it just comes to execute that plan and I think we will be far ahead as a facilities organization. In Facilities, unfortunately, nobody picks up the phone and says, Hey, the lights came on today. Thank you very much. Many things that happen are things we have seen numerous times and we react to automatically.

