



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF  
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Interviewee: Abraham Simmons

Interviewer: Jonathan (Yoni) Friedman

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FRIEDMAN: It is Tuesday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, the interviewer is Yoni Friedman and I am here with Mr. Abraham Simmons. Thank you so much. Could you please introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about your background.

SIMMONS: *I am Abraham Simmons, engineer, graduate Business School at Claremont University, Executive MBA, former employee of Air Liberia, VOLPAR Incorporated, McDonald Douglas, UPS Air Group.*

FRIEDMAN: When did you come to Roberts Airport?

SIMMONS: *In 2007, I had retired two years earlier when a business associate was traveling had a very terrible experience at the airport. I called the Minister of State and told him I would be glad to take a look at that operation and see what I could do to improve things over there. That's how I got to Roberts International Airport (RIA). I had a conversation with Minister Edward McClain, Minister of State for Presidential Affairs.*

FRIEDMAN: What was the situation at Roberts Airport when you first arrived?

SIMMONS: *Facilities were inadequate, service was atrocious, throughput was very low. The physical accommodations at the airport were in a dire need of renovation, to be rebuilt. There was not enough room to handle the flow of passengers coming through the airport. These were all problems that had been identified in 2003 by a study that was done for the United Nations through the World Bank and it had not been implemented. There was an opportunity there to get those things going.*

FRIEDMAN: The World Bank made recommendations as to how to—?

SIMMONS: *There was a study done that recommended increasing the size of the facility. It pointed out the inadequacies in human resources. There was a need for training that had not occurred for decades. The skill sets had to be improved and a program had to be put in place to ensure that the resources generated at the airport would pay for these items.*

FRIEDMAN: To your knowledge why weren't the World Bank recommendations implemented between '03 and '07?

SIMMONS: *I don't know, I wasn't here. I can't speak for the others, I would think you would need to talk to those who were involved in the airport over those years but I can't tell you why they didn't undertake them. But the need still existed when I got there in 2007.*

FRIEDMAN: What resources did you have at your disposal?

SIMMONS: *The airport was broke. They were in debt. They had some airlines coming through. The problem was assuring that the fees generated at the airport were properly accounted for, that we have some means of getting money to get things done. In addition to that you have to have the right people doing the right thing at the airport.*

*There was a process started, because of the financial condition of the airport, to reduce the staff at the airport. Over the years people had just been sent over there for jobs whether they were qualified or not. It was a very bloated payroll. You had to go and find out what these people were doing, find out what was*

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*required for the level of service you were providing, and start doing things to bring the number of persons available in synch with the service delivery.*

FRIEDMAN: Did you conduct—basically you're talking about a functional review.

SIMMONS: *There was a functional review for each department. We utilized people within the department to do the first level reviewing. Those results were brought up to a group that was a multi-disciplined group of people at the airport to conduct the reviews because what is happening in one area affects another area; you had to be aware of the handoffs, be it first or secondary type handoffs. But you get those people who come in and say, yes, I think your conclusions are right or no I think there are other things needed to be included or to be done. That process went ahead.*

*At the end of that we were able to come up with what we thought was the number of persons that should be working at the airport. Those who did not make the cut we had to make sure that they were removed from the payroll following all the laws that the Ministry of Labor has established.*

FRIEDMAN: Did you encounter any resistance?

SIMMONS: *Of course, people are never ever happy to leave their job, especially if they are not qualified. They claim political linkages, they claim tenure. We've been around since the second war that happened fifteen years ago but that's not a reason for continuing in a position. It has to be based on a skill set, what you bring to the organization that enables it to meet its goals and objectives.*

FRIEDMAN: Was this in effect an attempt to change the culture?

SIMMONS: *That had to happen. People need to understand that any organization starts with values and these should be shared values. People have to understand why they exist and how exceeding those bounds that are established defeats the purpose of what you're trying to achieve. When they buy into it and see that it is a top-down commitment people follow suit and attitudes change. Not only do you have to establish clear rules of engagement, people should know that there are clearly defined penalties for violation. When they do violate the rules it isn't a matter of saying, "Okay, you get another shot, you get another one the next week down the road. If you violate the rules there are clear-cut repercussions and you will bear them." "Once they know that people perform appropriately.*

FRIEDMAN: Did you seek political supporters essentially to implement these reforms, to deal with some of the resistance?

SIMMONS: *Those who tried to do that found that it didn't amount to anything. People run to different ministers, to people in government, to champion their causes, but when they know that that is not going to change the decision they gave up. I had a mandate to straighten up the airport, an appointment from the President and that's it. I did what I was mandated to do.*

FRIEDMAN: What was the first thing you did when you took the position?

SIMMONS: *The first thing I did was to ensure that we had a clear chain of custody for our revenues and then to ensure that people knew what their areas of responsibilities were. You had people in one segment of the organization trying to do things that were the responsibilities of another area. You can't do that because it leads to*

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*chaos. We clearly defined responsibilities; we had a series of workshops to clearly define responsibilities.*

*At the same time, through the auspices of the US (United States) government, we had consultants come in to start putting together a policy manual. We ended up with a five-volume airport operations manual. But as that was being developed we started training the staff to the new processes and procedures that they have to follow. We were implementing it even before the work was completed. It gave us a chance to validate some of the approaches we were taking. If things were not working well, maybe we needed to modify what we were doing or find out why they weren't working and make other changes to make it happen.*

FRIEDMAN: Who led the workshops for the staff?

SIMMONS: *Some of them by me, some by the GEMAP (Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program) comptroller, Alex Cuffy, some by others we brought in as consultants.*

FRIEDMAN: What sorts of topics were covered in the workshops?

SIMMONS: *It varied. If it was in the accounting area you talk about document flow or procurement, what is required. What are the documents that we are going to use from requisition through issuing of purchase orders and reviewing on a periodic basis the needs of the airport, setting up a committee to do that, selecting vendors, qualifications of vendors. Things of that nature. We had different people come in and do courses of seven hours, one-day sessions, two-hour sessions. Some of them we broke up into mini-topics because we thought that was the best way to get people to absorb what was being taught rather than trying to put them through a four-week course on whatever the subject matter might be. We tried to keep it focused to the day-to-day activities. Then as they learned those you started giving them a broader picture of the world they were in.*

FRIEDMAN: Did you find that the staff was receptive to the training courses?

SIMMONS: *People always want to learn. People want to learn especially if they see things are being better organized. Once you take uncertainty out of the process and things are regular and predictable, people are receptive.*

FRIEDMAN: What was unpredictable about the processes before you arrived?

SIMMONS: *For example, a man who was in charge of maintenance wouldn't know if he would have the materials he needs on time to get a certain thing done because the airport didn't know if it had the money to pay the vendor who is holding up supply of these items to the airport. Or we didn't have transfer station available because we didn't get the repairs done to certain type of vehicle on time. It a myriad of issues that affect day-to-day operations. You have to see where those bottlenecks are and clean them up.*

FRIEDMAN: You mentioned the first thing you did was secure the revenue flow.

SIMMONS: *Absolutely.*

FRIEDMAN: Why was that your first priority?

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**SIMMONS:** *You can't do anything without money. People cannot be coming to the airport and paying bills and the money isn't accounted for. That was one of the problems they had.*

**FRIEDMAN:** What were the weaknesses in accounting for revenues?

**SIMMONS:** *A system that ensured that we tied in movements at the airport to revenues, basically that was it. Once you do that and there is an audit trail you're good, it stopped the leakages.*

**FRIEDMAN:** What was in place when you came? What systems were in place to account for revenues?

**SIMMONS:** *[Chuckling] Not much, not much. There was a department responsible for it but usually the leakages occurred before they were even informed that the revenue was available. We had to do things to cure that problem.*

**FRIEDMAN:** How would leakages occur?

**SIMMONS:** *How did they occur?*

**FRIEDMAN:** Yes, at that early stage.

**SIMMONS:** *Because people circumvented the system and instead of pointing the clients in the right direction to ensure that things were done in an orderly manner, revenues got diverted.*

**FRIEDMAN:** Was it a matter of corruption or was it a matter of just bypassing—?

**SIMMONS:** *Theft, pure and simple. Once you ensure that every movement is recognized and all of the supporting departments are aware of that movement, then everybody can be mobilized to accomplish what he has to do in that process to make sure that the customer has a successful visit to RIA.*

**FRIEDMAN:** How did you account or make the revenue flow more transparent. How did you prevent the old habits from persisting?

**SIMMONS:** *Because we established a process that has to be followed and anybody who tries to circumvent it was fired.*

**FRIEDMAN:** Did you have to fire people?

**SIMMONS:** *Absolutely. I had no compunction about doing that. If you don't obey the rules you suffer the penalties. Once people know that the name of the new game in town, everybody fell in line.*

**FRIEDMAN:** Did you have to closely monitor the revenue process to make sure that it was being followed?

**SIMMONS:** *On a daily basis. I ensured that the accounting department gave me a daily cash position. We knew what accounts they were in. We did some validations with the banks. Once the entire flow is validated from the customer landing through money in the bank account we were good. Anybody who tried to interject himself into that process was removed from the system.*

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FRIEDMAN: I understand that before your arrival there were issues of fees being processed after hours.

SIMMONS: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: How did you deal with those issues?

SIMMONS: *We established a procedure for after-hours collection of revenue and put that in place and that's it. Nobody wanted to violate those guidelines because if you were the person who did that, you're out of the airport.*

FRIEDMAN: What effect did you see on this?

SIMMONS: *The airport when I got there had a quarter of a million dollars cash shortfall. When I left we had a million cash in the bank and our revenues were such that our costs were maintained below what was required.*

FRIEDMAN: How much of that was because of cracking down on leakages? How much of that was just increased revenue flow?

SIMMONS: *It was a matter of both. We didn't go back to do a retrospective of what would have happened if the current conditions existed that weren't there prior to 2007. But we did note the increase in revenues and we noted our efforts to streamline our costs to bring them in line for the services that we're providing. We did benchmarking to see if our services were competitive in the region. We then went ahead and operated based on those new targets. As a result we ran a profitable operation.*

FRIEDMAN: Can I ask you about procurement practices?

SIMMONS: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: What was the state of—how transparent were procurement practices when you first—?

SIMMONS: *Not well organized. I noted that there were too many suppliers. Secondly supplies were not brought in on a regular basis. People were not projecting what they wanted, were not going back and looking at our usages to establish min/max for different areas of the operation. It was just not controlled. What we had to do first of all was look at all the suppliers. We decide who we're going to deal with for different category of products. We'll deal with the top two people in each area or the top three.*

FRIEDMAN: How did you identify those people?

SIMMONS: *You get information from places like the Ministry of Commerce. What is the volume of items? Are they a major importer or not? What are the major products they import? Then we look at their ability to meet your needs as they develop, see if they'll work with you based on an increase in volume because once you consolidate your purchases you now have negotiating power. That's what we did. We reduced the number of suppliers we had and went from there.*

FRIEDMAN: Do you remember about how many suppliers?

SIMMONS: *No, I don't remember the numbers.*

FRIEDMAN: You're talking for large equipment?

SIMMONS: *Everything, from paper clips to cargo loaders for the airplane.*

FRIEDMAN: Did that bring savings?

SIMMONS: *Absolutely it did because our price per item went down; just getting those discounts was good. Our cost of transportation was down. For example there is a supplier not far from the airport who supplies a lot of things for Firestone. He brings goods up in bulk. The airport had stopped dealing with him because they had refused to pay him. But transportation costs went down. Instead of having to truck everything directly on a unit cost basis, we were sharing cost advantage with the Firestone plantation, things like that. We noticed—it was all of these initiatives that enabled us to bring costs of operating down.*

FRIEDMAN: Are there any other saving initiatives outside of the ones that you've already mentioned?

SIMMONS: *Well we had to get more efficient in how we deliver services. Right after my taking over the operations at the airport the US ambassador, Donald Booth, sent the counsel, Mr. Lou Mizzell who said that the US government had made a commitment in 2003 to provide about 3 million dollars to the airport to buy some equipment. Well a lot of our equipment was old and ratty so that was a Godsend. Don't ask me why nobody took advantage of that or why it didn't happen but what we did was to then go ahead and see if the number of equipment we thought would be purchased could still be purchased with the dollars available. We did that exercise.*

*I went back to Ambassador Booth and told him we needed more money. He said thanks for doing your homework; I'll find you more money. He did that and we were able to order a lot of equipment for the airport, fire trucks and busses and stairs. But there were things that we needed more urgently and we couldn't wait for the process because the process of getting funding through USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and the US government is lengthy. We went on the market and saw some of those items that we needed urgently and we purchased them from airport revenue.*

*We looked at things like our communication equipment in the tower. It was old. They needed to be upgraded and we paid for those. We had to send people for training. We sent them to South Africa, to Sweden, to Malaysia, to the United States and we paid for the training from the airport resources but we had to do those things to ensure the reliability of the services that the airport promises its customers. They're navigating here; the navigation equipment at the airport should work. Communication equipment should work. If you can't get them here, you can't make any money. We spent money doing those things.*

FRIEDMAN: At what point did USAID approach you?

SIMMONS: *Probably about two months after I got there. The ambassador called. I should have contacted him earlier. I had planned to but when I got there I was trying to get my hands around the many problems and challenges that were there. But we did get together; we worked together very well until his departure from his assignment here.*

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- FRIEDMAN: In a sense you had to balance short-term priorities versus long-term priorities.
- SIMMONS: *Absolutely.*
- FRIEDMAN: First, how did you delineate your set of priorities, short-term and long-term?
- SIMMONS: *You look at your operation; you know what has to be addressed today to make tomorrow happen. You look at all those things and you hit them hard and do them as rapidly as you can but you cannot keep your eyes off the long-term goal. The long-term goal was to get what the study called the phase one activities completed.*
- FRIEDMAN: Was this based on the World Bank report?
- SIMMONS: *Yes, based on the World Bank report. That would allow you to operate at a certain capacity level for three years and in that time you can start planning doing things for phase two and then for phase three. Basically that's what we did.*
- FRIEDMAN: What was the significance of those benchmarks? Where would you be at the completion of stage one?
- SIMMONS: *The number of passengers you were able to handle would increase to a certain level. Your throughput would increase. You would know what sort of revenue you could generate at that level. It is the service delivery quality improvements that you wanted to raise to that phase one level. For example, we did a complete renovation of the arrival/departure area at the airport and ensured that the place was air-conditioned, the lavatories were improved, the restaurants were upgraded. Seating was improved. We did those things that would improve the service delivery at the airport, even for people waiting. Waiting guests had nowhere to sit; there was a tent under a tree. We worked with some private firms to build a little restaurant on the outside so people would have a place to sit and have a cold drink or a sandwich if they could not go in the sanitized areas of the airport. We tried to do that with other facilities such as planning for a clubhouse type operation on the edge of the river. Those are the kinds of things you need to look at and do.*
- FRIEDMAN: Were most of the short-term goals financed internally?
- SIMMONS: *Most of them were internally financed. Our only external source of funding was from the donation from the US government for equipment purchases, that was it. Everything else was from internally generated funds.*
- FRIEDMAN: When were those larger purchases made?
- SIMMONS: *If you're talking about airport handling equipment I'll say about by the end of 2007 we had an agency in Washington DC that was going to handle the acquisition of all these items. In 2008 we did the final scrub on the list and started placing orders and by the time I left in February of 2009 equipment was in the pipeline coming in.*
- FRIEDMAN: You mentioned, is Roberts now in the process of stage two?
- SIMMONS: *I have no idea; I haven't followed up on anything they're doing.*
- FRIEDMAN: Okay, so did you complete stage one during your tenure?

SIMMONS: *Yes we did.*

FRIEDMAN: You said it was supposed to take three years essentially?

SIMMONS: *Phase One allows the airport to operate for three years.*

FRIEDMAN: And you were there for about two years.

SIMMONS: *I was there for about twenty months. But phase one was done which enabled the airport to operate for three years. During those three years they should have been doing things—for example, start building a new terminal building, start putting in a new runway, putting in a new water system, power generation—how are you going to run this new airport. Things of that nature. Those plans should have been done, completed by the end of year three so that construction can begin on Phase two expansion.*

FRIEDMAN: Those should have been done during the three-year period beginning after the completion of stage one?

SIMMONS: *After the completion of stage one.*

FRIEDMAN: Essentially we're in year two of that three-year process.

SIMMONS: *It took twenty months to complete phase one that allows us to operate for three years.*

FRIEDMAN: I've got it. What about meeting international standards, ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization) and TSA (Transportation Security Administration) standards play in setting priorities?

SIMMONS: *Well, you have to do that. For example, the airport is insured and the insurance company is not going to carry you if you are not operating to international standards. We have reviews by our insurer. We have reviews by international agencies. We have reviews by the airlines operating here because they have to do a review of the airport to ensure that the conditions here are safe for them to continue to operate here. One of the short-term things we had to do was to fix our NAV system and that meant spending about \$400,000 right off the bat. We got a company from England, gave them a contract to come in and start doing that. That was necessary because it ensured reliability that the level of service that you are providing, ensures that these guys can come in here any time of the year with some degree of certainty. You won't have unnecessary diversions because this is out and you hit minimums and you can't come in. We had to do those things.*

FRIEDMAN: Were you meeting international standards when you first arrived?

SIMMONS: *No. We had shortages; we had gaps that had to be addressed in communication and navigation equipment, lighting, airport lighting, those sorts of things, markings, repairs to certain areas of the taxiway and runway. Those things had to be done.*

FRIEDMAN: Do finances, revenue and procurement practices, do they play a role in international standards as well or are they—

- SIMMONS:** *Of course they did that because you couldn't address any of those issue without revenue. Nobody with the government was writing a check to do it so you had to do that.*
- FRIEDMAN:** Meeting international standards would have benefits both in reducing your insurance payments as well as attracting—.
- SIMMONS:** *It makes it more attractive for airlines to come here. They can now increase their frequency of coming here; for example Brussels Airlines did. People reenter the market. Kenya Airways and other carriers were coming. It pays both ways. Once you have a product that is predictable and it meets the level of acceptance of your clients they'll utilize it.*
- FRIEDMAN:** Attracting new airlines, was that a stated priority or was that—?
- SIMMONS:** *That was one of the goals. It was not a consequence, it was one of the things we tried to do to make the airport better; bring it up to a level where people will be encouraged to come back into the market. We had discussions with them. Airlines are going around the world looking for opportunities for extending their routes and gathering more passengers and improving their services, improving their revenues. They'll do that if you are able to accommodate them and provide the level of service they require.*
- One of the things we didn't get to was putting in a catering system, getting an airport hotel built in case of unscheduled failures, people don't have to scramble to come back to Monrovia. Those were all things that we have in the cards to get done. Those are things that need to be done; a lot of things need to be done yet at the airport.*
- FRIEDMAN:** Can we talk a little bit more about the human resource issue? You mentioned one of the first things you did was a functional review.
- SIMMONS:** Yes.
- FRIEDMAN:** Was this soon after taking your post?
- SIMMONS:** *Yes we started it right after I got there, day one. Who is on board, what are they doing and how does it contribute to the operation of the airport?*
- FRIEDMAN:** Who assisted you in conducting this review?
- SIMMONS:** *For the security sector we utilized UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia). We brought in people from the Liberian National Police to do part of that assessment. It wasn't just interviews, we had to do background checks and things of that nature. There were various agencies involved. For some of the areas we had people from the Ministry of Labor brought in. We had consultants to assist in the process, talked to different organizations, looked at organizations—because once we started putting together the airport policy manual, the operations manual, we had about four experts from the US who came in to assist in that process. We utilized their services to look at different aspects of the operations here. What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Then we just have to marry the number of bodies to that, identify where the gaps are in skill sets and start doing things to improve that.*
- FRIEDMAN:** How long did the functional review take?

**SIMMONS:** *It went on probably I'd say for a four or five month period.*

**FRIEDMAN:** The four American consultants, were they from a single consultancy firm?

**SIMMONS:** *Yes they were.*

**FRIEDMAN:** At the end of the four or five months what changes did you make as a result of the review?

**SIMMONS:** *Basically we looked at the organization, the organizational interfaces. We shrunk some departments, grew some others. In security we were able to reduce the number of persons there by about fifty or sixty individuals. We looked at operations, we looked at ramp support. We looked at fire service. We made the necessary changes. Then you get a core that you start building around, improving the quality of the individuals in the department, getting them the tools they need, getting the equipment repaired or replaced, making sure that maintenance for example is done regularly so you don't have unscheduled failure. There were a lot of things that we had to do.*

**FRIEDMAN:** Did you do an assessment of the staff as part of the review?

**SIMMONS:** *Yes we did.*

**FRIEDMAN:** How did you conduct the assessment? Was it you personally or did you have a team?

**SIMMONS:** *If the guy reported directly to me I was in on those assessments myself. We looked at the individual, the responsibility he had. We looked at what was required. If there were areas where he needed additional training then you sent him to get the training he needs. In the electrical support area, we did that in aircraft handling and operations. We did that in fire service. We did that in air traffic control, just everywhere. People needed the training; people needed to be treated because they had been in a time warp for ten, fifteen, twenty years where nothing was done. We sent them off to different places and scrambled and had a back-up plan in case that didn't work. Then we'd get people coming in from another airport to fill in. We had contingency plans. Luckily we had things scheduled to the point where we didn't need to bring in people from other airports. It worked out okay.*

**FRIEDMAN:** Was the training your own initiative? It was your response to the situation at hand or was it encouraged externally?

**SIMMONS:** *It was driven by the needs that we had at the airport. There were no international organizations saying go and do training in air traffic control. Nobody said that. Nobody gave us a penny to do it. But once we found out there was a need after the assessments that were done, we found out what schools would be best for meeting those needs and providing those improvements. We sent people off to do that.*

**FRIEDMAN:** How did the results of the functional review mesh with the plan that was the product of the World Bank report? Did they in some ways conflict or overlap?

**SIMMONS:** *The World Bank report was pretty thorough because it identified weaknesses in various departments. The reviews confirmed them. We had to now go in and fix it*

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*and fixing it required either getting new candidates, improving those who were there who had a certain level but giving them additional opportunities to improve their skill sets to meet the organization's objectives, that's what we did. There was no conflict where the World Bank study said, for example, you need to have a more organized security department and we said, "no, we don't think so, we think we're pretty good." That didn't occur.*

FRIEDMAN: Perhaps prioritizing the acquisition of certain equipment over others, or was that an issue that the functional review—?

SIMMONS: *The functional review drove the priorities; otherwise we would have just waited and said, let's do human resource training first and then we'll come in and do equipment. But you didn't have that luxury. There were begging needs operationally so you addressed them.*

FRIEDMAN: You mentioned that you—.

SIMMONS: *But you addressed them knowing the overall plan. If we're getting a K-loader now, then we look at our needs for purchasing that equipment downstream and say, "Okay, we don't have to do that or reduce the number from two to one or from three to two because we are making this acquisition now because the operational needs are driving that."*

FRIEDMAN: I know it is four years ago and the numbers would be iffy, but as a result of the functional review do you remember about what overall changes were in the number of staff?

SIMMONS: *No, I don't remember.*

FRIEDMAN: Was it a significant amount of staff?

SIMMONS: *It was significant, it was over 30% but I don't remember the exact number.*

FRIEDMAN: For the staff that remained you mentioned that you stressed training them, building their capacity—.

SIMMONS: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: Did you have the flexibility to change, to augment their pay or bring in other incentives?

SIMMONS: *Yes we did. We did a review of the pay scale in the organization. We realigned the organization and did a comparative pay scale review; it was submitted that to the Board of Directors and was approved.*

FRIEDMAN: And that led to augmented salaries?

SIMMONS: *Not only did we augment the salaries but we offered them more benefits. One of the things we had to do was to start repairing a lot of the houses that were destroyed during the war years. As we put a plan together across the entire spectrum of employees we had people living in low-level housing, mid-management housing and upper management. We started repairing houses and offering people accommodations at the airport. It improved attendance because they are now there at the airport, they don't have to commute anymore. It was a pretty good incentive for those who remained still working at the airport.*

FRIEDMAN: Had attendance been an issue?

SIMMONS: *Yes it had. A lot of people were commuting. If it is this time of year and it is raining and people can't get cars, they come to work late. Unfortunately the airline that is coming isn't waiting, it has a schedule and it is going to be there.*

FRIEDMAN: It was more an issue of difficulty getting to work rather than—?

SIMMONS: *If it is difficult people don't like to do things that are difficult. But if you make it easier for them to do it and, when at the airport you have regular busses running and you ensure that you can get them to work at a certain time and get them home, it made it very easy. Attendance went way up.*

FRIEDMAN: Did you make any changes to the promotion system?

SIMMONS: *Changes to the promotion system identified what it took to be promoted. If you wanted to get to this level, as we identified the different levels in the organization, we had criteria established. If you met those criteria and there was an opening, you knew what you had to do to be considered. It was all in the operations manual of the airport.*

FRIEDMAN: Was there criteria before you arrived? Was there a clear process for promotions in place?

SIMMONS: *It had not been identified because a lot of people felt they had been passed over, a lot of the appointments were done as different leadership groups came into power in the country. They would write and say who is going to hold what position at the airport.*

FRIEDMAN: Were any of these factions obstacles to you? If you were to fire an employee who was put there by a previous leadership group were there instances where that leadership group posed a potential obstacle to you or could try to intervene or subvert what you were doing?

SIMMONS: *No because I wouldn't allow them. They're not running the organization and I'm not going to do things contrary to what I want to achieve in an organization because somebody objects. If I am going to do that I might as well just turn it in and do something else. I was doing it more out of a need to see the organization improve; I wasn't looking for a job. There was no leverage they had. What could they do? Tell me to stop? I'd tell them, "Okay, goodbye, end of story."*

FRIEDMAN: Did you have the freedom to hire and fire?

SIMMONS: *Absolutely, I wouldn't take the job without that. Even people who were recommended by the current administration after elections in 2006, I fired them.*

FRIEDMAN: And the administration was on board?

SIMMONS: *Yes, they went and cried but eventually I got a call that said, "Don't worry about it." It was what I expected because that was the agreement when I took over.*

FRIEDMAN: Was it the Minister of Transport who was essentially your ally? Who supported you in the political sphere?

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**SIMMONS:** *Let's start with the President; she appointed me. The Minister of Transport didn't but he was chairman of the board and we had a good working relationship. The first Minister of Transport was good to work with; he is now the Minister of Labor, Jeremiah Sulunteh. The second one was Jackson Doe. I think that was a mistake, he didn't last long after that. That was it.*

**FRIEDMAN:** What was the division of responsibilities between yourself and the board?

**SIMMONS:** *As the managing director you have a responsibility to report to the board quarterly on all aspects of the airport. As we wrote the airport operations manual there were certain limits imposed on the managing director, that he has to go back to the board for approval before he can exceed them. Those areas or interfaces are clearly defined now. It is easy to know where the boundaries are, what you can and cannot do but you are operating with the consent and approval of the Board of Directors.*

**FRIEDMAN:** What sorts of issues did you need approval from the board?

**SIMMONS:** *You look at acquisitions, there are limits. Changes in salaries if it exceeds the established boundaries, engaging in new enterprises at the airport, that has to be a board decision. Board review is required. For example if you want to go in and establish a manufacturing facility for aviation-related items at the airport you have to go back to the board for approval before you can do that.*

**FRIEDMAN:** Did you have a good relationship with the board?

**SIMMONS:** *It was a good working relationship. It wasn't a carte blanche stamp thing. We had our arguments and disagreements, but if the content of your argument persuades members of the board to work for you it is an open vote. It is not a secret ballot in there. You make your presentation, you get the information to the board ahead of time so they have time to review it and they can come prepared for the discussions which makes for a nice easy meeting rather than throwing surprises at them in the meeting; it worked well.*

**FRIEDMAN:** What was the role of the GEMAP comptroller, Alex Cuffy?

**SIMMONS:** *Alex was the top financial top guy; he also served as the trainer for those in that area. He was involved in reviews of all of the persons in the financial or finance-related area. He served as a primary contact with our consultants that were provided by the US government. He was very, very effective as a comptroller. Where there were things that had to be done, reports done, studies that had to be made, he mobilized the resources within the organization to make sure that it was done so that we get a clear picture of where the organization was financially. Alex was very effective.*

**FRIEDMAN:** He played a role in the functional reviews?

**SIMMONS:** *Absolutely, yes. He sat in all of the board meetings. I don't recall any board meeting at which the members of the board asked him to be excused because he was not a designated member of the board. He was in all of the board meetings, participated in the discussions when asked. There were times when he made presentations to the board on certain financial matters. When we looked at salary structure and allocation of resources and things of that nature he did the financial presentation. Later on as part of the transition process we started bringing Jacob Corneh, who is now in charge of the financial operations of the*

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*airport on board. It worked well. It was a nice transition from Alex to Jacob. He was aware of what was happening and I presume things are working well over there.*

FRIEDMAN: When it comes to GEMAP, was Mr. Cuffy able to bring extra resources to the financial or technical—?

SIMMONS: *He did. For example he knew that when we were looking at upgrading our IT (information technology) at the airport there was a way we could get additional funding from an agency of the US government to supplement what we wanted done. Just having that knowledge saved the airport some money. There were other little ways he was effective besides his regular GEMAP financial control responsibilities.*

FRIEDMAN: Were there any conditions—Mr. Cuffy, did he have co-signatory authority over financial transactions? Did he have any authority in that region?

SIMMONS: *GEMAP had to cosign on all expenditures of the airport per the mandate of the program. Any transaction that occurred at the airport, if Alex was not there, there was another GEMAP comptroller who was delegated to do that, had to review it and ensure that it was according to plan and then cosign on it.*

FRIEDMAN: How was your relationship with Mr. Cuffy?

SIMMONS: *Worked well. I didn't find it overbearing at all. It was like my relationship with the gentleman who ran operations or the one who ran all the airport services or any one of the other major direct reports I had. Besides being the GEMAP comptroller, Alex was a direct report on the financial side, so it worked well. He was competent.*

FRIEDMAN: Were there any tensions between Mr. Cuffy and the other staff as a result of his external authorities?

SIMMONS: *People have questions whenever they are questioned but other than that, that's just regular operational issues you find in any organization. If a guy submits a budget for X amount of dollars and he has to justify it and he can't, or if there are things that he is asking for that cannot be justified then of course there will be a little bit of pushback but that's normal, there's nothing wrong with that. It's healthy for an organization.*

FRIEDMAN: Were there any major battles with staff that resulted from Mr. Cuffy's position?

SIMMONS: *I didn't consider them major, no. I mean there were strong opposing opinions.*

FRIEDMAN: From within the airport?

SIMMONS: *Yes, from within the organization, but once it is known what they are and you discussed the issues, you make a decision and everybody is expected to follow.*

FRIEDMAN: Were there other constraints—as a result of being a GEMAP SOE (State-owned enterprises)? Did GEMAP impact your operations or affect your priorities or ability to operate or plan any other way?

SIMMONS: *I don't know of any negative impact that GEMAP had on the operation of the airport.*

FRIEDMAN: Negative or positive.

SIMMONS: *I have some of the positive but I've mentioned getting additional resources, identifying additional training for example. Those were all positive things and those were all things that complemented what we wanted to do. I understand in some other organizations, GEMAP was viewed as a hindrance. I don't know what conditions they were operating under, but I didn't see that at the airport. Number one because I saw no need to hide anything from GEMAP. Number two, if GEMAP was acting contrary to the established goals and objectives of the organization I would have been the one complaining to get it changed and I never had that. I think it was a positive experience, it was something that was necessary, it brought in a caliber of support that the airport needed.*

FRIEDMAN: Throughout your tenure did you face any obstacles along the way that you did not anticipate?

SIMMONS: *Surprises. You are not fully aware of all of the challenges that exist in an organization when you are external to it. When you start peeling the layers away you run into things and say wow, I didn't know that was there. But your job as a manager is to now look at it, see what it is and how you can change it, mitigate the effects or do something that makes your organization keep going.*

FRIEDMAN: Did you face any obstacles in carrying out your reforms either from airport staff, from suppliers?

SIMMONS: *Of course, people object to change. People liked the old system that they've got. There were suppliers who thought I was, I don't know what name they gave me, but they really didn't like what I was doing. When a guy has had a certain relationship of getting things done his way and all of a sudden it is not there anymore, he doesn't like it. People he interfaces with don't like it. But it is a new reality. Your job as a manager is to let those who are within your organization to know why the change is occurring, what benefits accrue to the organization because of those changes and ensuring that people abide by the guidelines that are established. When they don't, you have to ensure that they bear the consequences of their actions.*

FRIEDMAN: One final question. Looking back on your tenure do you have any recommendations that, any thoughts on your tenure? If you were to speak to someone who was entering a position similar to what you went to in 2007, any advice you would give that person?

SIMMONS: *Be organized, be thorough, be fair. Let those who work for you know what you are doing and why. Make sure you have competent people working with you. You're not going to do everything yourself, you can't. If you could you'd be the only guy there in the operation. Competence is key. Values, that's the bedrock of any organization. If you can instill good values, establish good goals and work in a very coordinated manner to get there you'll be successful.*

FRIEDMAN: Mr. Simmons, thank you so much.