

## **The Ride from Boston to Toronto feat. Rick Leary**

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**Tommy:** Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next.” On today's episode, we chat with Rick Leary, a proud double Husky and the current Chief Executive Officer of the Toronto Transit Commission. In this episode, we'll discuss his Northeastern roots, starting at the ground floor in your industry, and everything he likes about Northeastern's Toronto campus. Let's get into it.

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**Tommy:** Hello everybody and welcome back to the “Northeastern Next” podcast. I'm sitting here today with Rick Leary. How are you doing today, Rick?

**Rick:** I'm doing wonderful. Thank you. How are you doing?

**Tommy:** Good. I'm doing great. It's beautiful weather here in Boston. It's finally cooling down after a pretty bad summer with heat. I don't know how it is in Toronto, but I hope it's just as nice as it is here.

**Rick:** It's a beautiful day today in Toronto.

**Tommy:** Oh, that's awesome. That's great to hear. So why don't we just jump right into it? Do you mind giving us a little bit of background on yourself?

**Rick:** Yeah, sure. You know, as I said, my name is Rick Leary. I'm the CEO of the Toronto Transit Commission. I've been with the Commission for almost 10 years. I've been the CEO for about six of those years, so I'm very fortunate.

And I'm a double graduate, as you know—a double Husky I should say—from Northeastern when I was in my Boston days. You know, I originally went to Northeastern when I was working at the MBTA in Boston, actually operating trains. And you know, I spent 25 and a half years in Boston. I was very fortunate when I left there. I was the chief operating officer for the last four-plus years.

I went to York Region, a wonderful location just north of Toronto. When I looked at it, it was a diamond in the rough. A new transit system, new development, huge population growth. So, you know, being on the ground level of expanding public transit up there. And then it came to the TTC. So, I've been a Canadian for about four years now, although I've spent about 14 years in Canada. I got my citizenship back in 19.

So, I'm very fortunate, what I do and what I have today, and very fortunate to be here. I often tell people I'm a very proud American, but I'm an honoured Canadian, is what I say, having been allowed to come here and become a Canadian citizen.

**Tommy:** I like that. I like that a lot. That's a really great way of putting it. Now, my question for you is, what was that transition like going from the MBTA to the TTC? Because, you know, I've only looked at numbers. And it appears to me that Toronto is a little bit bigger than Boston. So, was that something you had to take into consideration? Or was it just an easy transition, going from one city to the other?

**Rick:** Well, you know, I gotta tell you, what I like about the TTC, and it has very similarities to Boston. They're old organizations, right, that demonstrate the significance of their being within the city that they operate, right? Yeah. So, I'm not sure if you're aware, but the Toronto Transit Commission is actually the third largest transit system in North America.

**Tommy:** Wow.

**Rick:** Only New York City and Mexico City carry more customers than the TTC. So, this is a big operation, you know, and Boston was a great operation, as I said, York Region as well. But this is big in comparison.

**Tommy:** Wow. Yeah, that seems I mean, I looked at a map of the TTC before I jumped onto this call. And it just it's so vast. And I think that's really cool about it. So just to go back a little bit, you mentioned being a double Husky, just out of curiosity, going to Northeastern and getting two degrees. That's obviously...that's nothing to sneeze at. That's very impressive. Did your Northeastern experience lead you to the path that you're on now?

**Rick:** It actually did. So yeah, just a little bit of background on myself. You know, I went away to university, but it didn't quite work out, I would say. So, when I was 20, I came home and you know, you that's what mom and dad say you got to get a job if you're not going to do the traditional four-year college route or university route. I actually started working at the MBTA, and then decided to go back to school.

And what I saw was Northeastern University had flexible arrangements with a co-op program and a program that I was really interested in since I was in public transit, and it was, you know, transportation logistics and the business school. So, they kind of went together for me to let me start over at university with Northeastern, as well as continue being a full-time operator at the MBTA. It gave me some...I looked at the opportunity of continuing in both areas, because I couldn't go back to university and without working. So, I did them both in parallel. It was really great. It gave me a good opportunity, great education.

**Tommy:** Yeah, no, that sounds like it. And you know, that's really like one of the cornerstones of Northeastern is the co-op program. So, I'm really happy to hear that you were able to utilize it to its full extent. Now, can you elaborate maybe a little bit more on your co-op experience?

**Rick:** You know, I was like I said, I was working as a train operator while I was in at the university. So, I go to school days and drive trains at night. Nights and weekends for a good deal of my early days in the career, but it gave me a real good experience of the foundation of public

transit from the entry level, I would say, right in spending that first five years driving trains or operating trains, I should say, while going to school kind of set the foundation for me of the future of my career. You know, I can always say I did the job.

I know how difficult these jobs are at the entry levels and good jobs, good opportunities, but not easy. So, and then it just gave me getting the education from Northeastern gave me that little bit extra that helped me advance within an organization as big as the MBTA, you know, and I actually...double Husky I went and got my master's as well. So those degrees helped me advance within the organization.

**Tommy:** Yeah, no, absolutely. Just out of curiosity, what did you get your master's in?

**Rick:** Public administration. Having an undergraduate degree in business working in government, I thought it'd be a good parallel path to help me in my career.

**Tommy:** Yeah, absolutely. Especially being in the public sector. So just out of curiosity, did you get in contact with the TTC? Or did they sort of tap you on the shoulder? And how did that all work out? If you don't mind me asking that?

**Rick:** No, that's okay. So you know, when I moved to Canada, I got to be friends with the CEO at the time. And he had tapped me on the shoulder and asked if there was an interest that I come back and help operate a large rail property. When I say rail, R-A-I-L, as I always tell people. So, you know, it just brought me back. York Region was wonderful, like I talked about, but he brought me back to a big organization that had a big impact on the city. And wanted to talk about the importance of reliability and customer service, and actually understanding the impact of public transit has to the greater good of the city, and the economy of the city, the environmental aspect of the city, the social importance of transit to the city. So, you know, he convinced me, I came back. And then a few years later, I became the successor. I've been here for almost six years now.

**Tommy:** Wow, yeah, that's a really, that's a really cool story. And you know what, I think that is just awesome about this story, not only to me, but I'm sure to anybody that's going to listen to this podcast is that it really is just a story of—to steal what you said earlier—of just starting at the ground and then working your way up. And I think that through your story really encapsulates the Northeastern experience and just really just the spirit of Northeastern.

So, now correct me if I'm wrong on this, but it's my understanding that you might have come from a family of other Northeastern graduates. Is that true?

**Rick:** Yes, that is true. My father was a graduate, my sister's a graduate, and I actually have my daughter who's in graduate school now at Northeastern in speech pathology.

**Tommy:** Oh, wow!

**Rick:** So, it'll be a third generation, third generation of Huskies, should I say.

**Tommy:** Wow, congratulations to that. And just congratulations to just being three generations of Huskies. That's incredible. So, I mean, I, of course, I have to ask because this is just me being a little curious, too. Did that influence your decision to go to Northeastern at all? Just, you know, knowing that you had family there and that there were just sort of roots already in place at the school?

**Rick:** Yeah, I would tell you that. I'd also say that my mom at the time worked at the school.

**Tommy:** Oh, okay.

**Rick:** With my dad graduating, I remember him graduating. And I remember the ceremony when I was a young boy, I'll say, and my mom working there, you know, it allowed me to be introduced to Northeastern early. I still went away to school originally, like I said, it just didn't work out.

But when I came back, and I started working, I think it was my parents' influence on me that said, you know, this would be a good opportunity. The co-op program, the flexibility of the schedules will accommodate you if you want to get the education, you can do it through Northeastern. And they were right. It's just it's a fabulous school, great opportunities from it.

**Tommy:** Yeah, absolutely. And like, I will admit, I've only been working in this position for just over a year. So, I've only been with the university for just over a year. But the opportunities that I've had as an employee are incredible. I can't even imagine what a double Husky somebody who has been around the school for, you know, as many degrees as you have been the opportunities that must have been presented to you. It must have been incredible.

**Rick:** You know, I always tell people though, getting a degree is important. But also, you had mentioned earlier, like I said, starting at the bottom, learning the business, making yourself valuable, right to an organization, moving around and taking opportunities, right? I made it a point to move around as much as I possibly could.

Every three plus years, you want to try something different, if you can. I thought that was important for me. And that was advice that was given to me years ago, make sure you take advantage of all opportunities, don't be afraid to say, "I'll try it." Now, I would tell you, from my perspective, you try things...people make mistakes, right? But you make mistakes once and you learn from it.

And so, I always encourage people try, you know, push the envelope a little bit, see what you can do. Because you want to be known as someone that can get things done and understand the business you're in. The education helps open doors, but then you still have to, you have to be successful on your own. But it's all about working in partnership with others and in getting things accomplished.

It's, it's helped me because many times people have asked me, "How do you go from a train operator in Boston, to running or operating the third largest transit system in North America in another country?" Right?

**Tommy:** Yeah.

**Rick:** And you make opportunities for yourself by opening doors and working hard and trying to be successful. There is no, and I often say to people, I'm not sure how, at some point, how I got here. But I know that the education I got from Northeastern, the foundation I had from working and understanding the business, it opened doors for me to look at other jobs and move to another country and have this type of opportunity. So, I don't know if I was lengthy on that. But...

**Tommy:** No.

**Rick:** It's the truth.

**Tommy:** I think, honestly, that's fantastic advice. Just every part of that answer. I think somebody can take something from that answer and be able to apply it to their, you know, not even their professional career, but even their personal life. So, thank you for that. You weren't lengthy at all. I thought that was awesome.

You know, I especially like the advice that you just gave about trying something different every three years, because I think especially younger alumni who may be listening to this podcast, I think that's just a great way to add tools to the toolbox, if that makes sense.

**Rick:** Well, that's a great way of putting it adding tools to the toolbox. You're absolutely right. You know, it was advice that was given years ago. And I just always give that advice to others within an organization. A lot of people want to move right up, right? And if you do, you want to be you want to be one that people need at the table to help be successful.

**Tommy:** I completely agree. Thank you so much for that advice. I really think that's going to resonate a lot with our audience. So, Northeastern now being a global university, we have 13 campuses across the world. Have you been to the Toronto campus yet?

**Rick:** Oh, absolutely. It's a beautiful campus.

**Tommy:** Oh, that's awesome.

**Rick:** Just a few weeks ago, I got the tour of it. I was very impressed, very modern. I love the fact that it's a modern look and has a modern appeal to within the city of Toronto. So loved it.

**Tommy:** Would you say that's your favorite aspect of it? Or is there something else about Northeastern's Toronto campus that really just jumps out to you?

**Rick:** For me, when I was there, right, what I really liked was when we reached out to them, it was about the partnerships, right? We were there, I got the opportunity to tour the campus and talk about partnerships with them. Right?

We are trying to develop a climate and a culture here at the organization. And I was very fortunate with having public transit with my—I'll say my blood—but also being taught with transportation logistics, trying to partner with Northeastern University to try to bring people in, you know, have them take a look and may possibly make a career in public transit. So, I love that aspect of it here in Toronto.

You know, you asked me what I was impressed with and having an opportunity to be impressed with the campus. But I was also impressed with the staff at Northeastern here. Their commitment to advanced education, their commitment to Northeastern. The staff at the university up here is just second to none, when I got to take the tour.

So, you know, it reminded me of my days when I was actually going to Northeastern Boston, being so impressed with the commitment of the staff at the time there, whether it was the professors or the administrative staff, always trying to help the students learn and move on, and do the best they can.

**Tommy:** That's great to hear. Yeah, no, that's something that everybody who is a part of the Northeastern network, I think that they should have an opportunity to get out there. I'm hoping to get out there sometime soon, not even to see the campus, but I've heard nothing but great things about Toronto as a city. So would love to catch, honestly, I'd love to catch like a Leafs and Bruins game out there one day. I don't know if that'll ever happen. But that'd be something very much that I would want to look forward to.

So now this is just also, you know, just a quick little thing. And I know that, like you said, you spent a long time in Boston, and Boston is a good food city. But do you have any favorite restaurants in Toronto, maybe even near campus that you'd like to give a quick shout out to?

**Rick:** Well, there's a bunch of places that I love to eat when I go downtown. You know, at the CN Tower, for instance, I've always they got a beautiful seafood tower that I have. But I also like, you know, I did some, I'm gonna say some local pubs around in the city that I like to just pop in on, you know? It's hard to give a shout out to one without not doing many to be honest with you.

One of the things I love about Toronto, I get asked quite often, from the from the people in the States, “What is it about Toronto that you love so much?” And I also I often say the comparison to Toronto to Boston, right? Both are very diverse cities. 51% of the people that live in the city of Toronto weren't even born in Canada. So, you can imagine when you look at the city that the restaurants and the diversity of restaurants absolutely incredible. Like Boston, the academia in the city, incredible. The arts, the entertainment.

And as you mentioned, the professional sports here, right? Very competitive. Hockey's in the blood up here. And those games against Boston, there's a heck of a rivalry there. So, it's a lot of fun to watch.

And I also have to throw a little plug for the transit systems as well. Two wonderful cities that have great public transit systems. And that's important. And that's how you get a vibrant, growing city and an economy that is happening here in Toronto.

**Tommy:** Yeah, no, I completely agree. And just for anybody listening, check out everything that Rick mentioned in Toronto right now. Because like you said, 51%, I had never heard that before. 51% of people living in Toronto haven't even been born in Canada. So that's just even just such a worldly city. That's something that I think everybody should see at some point in their lifetime.

**Rick:** Yeah, it's a place that people want to come to and live. It's a wonderful city.

**Tommy:** Yeah, that's awesome. Now, since this is the “Northeastern Next” podcast, I always ask our guests, what is next? So, what is next for you, Rick?

**Rick:** Well, you know, I like where I am. I love being here. I love the challenge of running and operating a big organization. But I also I'm very well supported by the mayor and my chair and the board of the TTC. And we're on a journey together. A journey of modernization and making sure that this organization, I'm going to say reflects the community in which we serve, right? And a culture of an organization that also reflects the people that take public transit in this city. So, you know, I'm on a journey right now. A lot of it is about state of good repair. It's about reliability. It's about customer service. It's about making a difference in people's lives.

Public transit is not just about moving people, it's about making sure that they get to work or they get to the doctor's appointments, right? Or they get to social events. It's about connections, right? When you're working in a job like this, you realize how important it is to people that are transit dependent. So that's what I love. So, my intention is to stay here now and continue along that journey. I'm very fortunate. And I love what I do.

**Tommy:** That's incredible. You know, we're, I'm glad that it sounds like everything's going great up in Toronto. And we're all very excited to see what happens next. So, thank you so much for giving us that answer. That was awesome.

**Rick:** Yeah, no, and now that I have another connection with Northeastern here, I make that much more enjoyable, you know, being here with you today, or being at the campus a few weeks ago, it brings back the days when I was at Northeastern years ago, and the experiences of sitting in the quad, just relaxing, or, going to Matthews arena. In the later years, I'd take my son when he was younger, to Matthews arena to watch a good hockey game on a Friday night. It was a lot of fun.

Or the days just thinking back when you're sitting in the library and studying. Like I said, mine wasn't a traditional way of going to university. But I had some traditional things that were required to get a good education and learn, right? Like sitting in the library.

It's just kind of funny. I think back of the days I was dating a young lady at the time, at Northeastern, and I really got to learn about the library through dating, right? And it was

something that stuck with me, the importance of sitting down and reading and making sure you learned, right? If you're gonna make a difference in life, you want to learn, right? And then you move on. And I just I've taken those experiences with me and learned and hopefully I'm making a difference in people's lives.

**Tommy:** Yeah, no, and it absolutely sounds like you are—being the second biggest public transportation system in North America—you're probably changing lives on a daily basis. So, congratulations to that. And on top of that, I'm just glad to hear that your Northeastern experience has carried with you, not even just through your professional career, but to the Toronto campus. So that's awesome to hear that even though they're X amount of miles apart from each other, it's still the same Northeastern. So that's awesome.

**Rick:** I love the global Northeastern, you know, how it's expanding and reaching out. That's why I love that part of the organization.

**Tommy:** Yeah, no, absolutely. Well, hey, Rick, thank you so much for taking time to talk to me today. This was a great interview, and I'm looking forward to having everybody hear it.

**Rick:** No, me too. Thank you for taking the time to speak to me. It was enjoyable.

**Tommy:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Music:** Enters

**Tommy:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Northeastern Next. Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at [alumni@northeastern.edu](mailto:alumni@northeastern.edu) to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I'll see you the week after next.

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