

United Airlines Was Broken Long Before That Doctor Was Dragged Off a Flight. Here's What It Can Do Next

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It's longer than usual but I think you will find this very interesting.

Gene



You didn't have to watch a video of a [man being dragged off](#) a United airplane to know that something was wrong at the company. After more than two decades of flying the "friendly skies," I am all too familiar with the institutionalized dispassion that long ago pervaded the culture there. I have many times marveled at how I could feel so good about myself while eating peanuts in a middle seat on [Southwest Airlines](#), and yet feel so condescended to in first class on United.

And I haven't merely observed this phenomenon passively. I've spent many a long flight talking to flight attendants, trying to understand what kind of employment experience underlies such a consistent lack of [concern for customers](#). The stories I've heard come right out of a Dilbert cartoon. Here's just one.

I talked to a man who, along with his wife, had been a flight attendant for the big "U" for more than a quarter century. When his better half retired, here is how her employer thanked her for her service. United sent her a poorly photocopied form letter with a blank line in the first sentence, where her name had been scrawled. I wouldn't have believed it myself had he not shown me a copy on the spot. I have to admit that it was painful to look at that piece of paper.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a real cost to the cultural failure at United--and many other companies--that goes beyond a customer being ignored, or even dragged down an aisle. Real people who once had aspirations and hopes for fulfilling employment end up spending years and years and years losing heart and transferring their loss of heart onto others. God bless those employees at United who somehow continue to be gracious and patient and generous with customers even while bearing the brunt of a broken company themselves.

Having said all that, I give kudos to the CEO of United, Oscar Munoz, and the men and women of United Continental Holdings, Inc. who recently came out with a report in which they seem to be taking a holistic approach to the deeper issues underlying the latest serious incident. In particular, I credit Munoz for finally acknowledging that "it was a failure of epic proportions" and, even more importantly, for admitting, "We let our policies and procedures get in the way of doing the right thing."

That last sentence says more than it might seem. In fact, based on my experience with the airline, it gets to the root of their problem. United is an organization without clarity. Clarity of purpose. Clarity of values. Clarity of strategy. And when an organization doesn't know why it exists, how it behaves, and what makes it unique, it falls back on policies and procedures, which is as demoralizing for customers looking for service as it is for the employees unable to use their judgment to make decisions.

The best way to understand this is to compare United with a company that is very different. And as much as people in the airline industry might be tired of hearing these stories, there is no better example for creating clarity than Southwest Airlines. That's because clarity at Southwest is not something theoretical, or a PR gimmick. It is a tangible reality, one that pervades hiring, strategy, operations and, yes, policies and procedures. And that clarity allows job seekers and travelers who like what Southwest stands for to seek it out as an employer or service provider, and others to go elsewhere.

For instance, Southwest hires one kind of person, regardless of whether he or she is flying an airplane, repairing that airplane, checking customers in at the gate, or serving them in-flight. That person must have three traits: a servant's heart, a warrior's spirit, and a fun-loving attitude. Those aren't just phrases that adorn a recruiting brochure; they are defined, understood and fleshed out with detailed descriptions that are used in the process of hiring and performance management. People who don't have those qualities generally don't get hired, and if they somehow slip through the hiring process, they don't last long unless they adapt.

Does anyone who has ever flown United believe that there clear and vibrant criteria for choosing who should and should not work for the airline? I've never heard of any, and I certainly should have by now given all the late-night conversations I've had with employees during painful flights. More importantly, I've seen no evidence that there is anything close to an overriding behavioral consistency among the many, many people I've met who work there.

How do I know that Southwest is serious about their values? I see it, again and again, in the people I meet there. From the CEO to the flight attendant to the customer service person I speak to on the phone. Are they perfect? Of course not. Do they occasionally deviate? Yes. But those are exceptions to the rule.

If that's all too behavioral or soft for you, consider the issue of strategy. Southwest is very clear about how they make operational and tactical decisions based on a defined set of strategic decisions they made long ago. Southwest bases everything they do on being affordable, on-time and customer-friendly. If you work at Southwest, or if you're a customer, you know that they try really hard not to add unnecessary costs (free bags, anyone?), delay their flights ("make friends with someone you don't know and sit down so we can take off..."), or inconvenience their customers (the stories of Southwest employees going above and beyond for people in need are numerous and legendary). Within the context of those three big things, Southwest is remarkably consistent about everything from the type of plane they fly to the way they board their planes to the freedom and incentive they give employees to be creative and hokey during flights and to accommodate travelers in awkward situations. Does Southwest make mistakes? Absolutely. But we notice those mistakes because it is clear when they deviate from their stated intentions.

The question is, can anyone tell me what United's intentional strategy is? Anyone? Bueller?

By now, after spending more than a quarter-century flying United (I have finally freed myself from the clutches of their frequent flyer program), I can say that I have no sense of what their strategy might be. The best I can come up with is "be all things to all people and please no one in particular." Do you fly internationally? Yes. Do you fly short haul? Yes. Do you have a frequent flyer program? Yes. Do you serve Kosher meals? Yes. Do you have movies? Yes, sometimes. Do you do any of those things better than your competitors? No. I can think of no single part of United's business that they can hang their hat on as a differentiator.

Which harkens back to the slogan of one of the big airlines (I can't quite remember which one). "We'll get you there." Perhaps that's their strategy. It's not specific. It's not inspiring. It's not actionable. It doesn't help employees know how to say yes or no to their customers. The sad fact is that it would be fair to say that United is a generic, bureaucratic, tired company. A sort of DMV in the sky. No real culture. No real strategy. No real expectations for employees or customers. All of which is a shame.

So, as Oscar Munoz and the other folks at United go about dealing with this latest issue, let's hope they don't see it as merely a customer service issue, or a training problem. It is much deeper. United needs to ask itself some fundamental questions, and better yet, come up with some answers. Otherwise, the best they can hope for is avoiding embarrassing incidents and continuing to make customers and employees mildly miserable. I really hope they figure it out.

Keep Moving!

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