Flight Attendants: Aviation’s Under-recognized Safety Resource

Meeting the motivational needs of an airline’s number one contact with its passengers can make great contributions to passenger safety and corporate goals.

by

Robert O. Besco, Ph.D. (Capt., American Airlines, retired)
President, PPI Inc.

Flight attendants have a greater opportunity to influence passengers than any other group in commercial aviation. Marketing executives, sales managers, ticket agents, pilots and telephone reservations people do not have a comparable opportunity to interact with and to positively influence the passengers at the “point of service.”

Flight attendants can and do accept the premise that passenger safety, comfort and economics are intertwined with their own career enhancement and job satisfaction. When they accept these goals, customer exposure opportunities become positive for everyone. However, when the flight attendant group looks on either the passengers or on the airline’s corporate goals with an adversarial perspective, then a corporate tragedy is in the making. The long-term exposure opportunities will be counterproductive when the flight attendants are at odds with passenger and corporate goals.

One of the most cost effective corporate strategies to gain a customer-perceived advantage over the competition is to invest in improved performance on the part of the flight attendants. An effective investment in improved flight attendant performance is well spent money by an airline. The primary return of improved flight attendant performance will take place in flight during long exposure times. The secondary benefit is that flight attendants are generally the largest single employee group in an airline; they make an effective army of good will ambassadors for those airlines which have made them proud of their companies and of their personal contributions to corporate success. This good army can have as much positive impact on the customers as millions of dollars spent on advertising and promotion.

Mark Twain, the well-known American writer and philosopher, had a constructive idea that could be invaluable to present-day airline operations. He put forth a basic common sense principle that is being used as a powerful concept in modern business management practices. Twain said very simply, “Get people in the same boat with you. They will not drill any holes in it. They might even pull an oar, if you will take them where they want to go.” When an airline makes a concerted effort to get the flight attendants in the same boat with the stockholders, passengers and management, an astounding edge will be gained over those airlines that treat their flight attendants as if they are in a different boat.

Counterproductive Attitudes Were Overcome

When airlines started hiring flight attendants in the 1930s, a professional nursing background was required to provide for the safety and comfort of the passengers. In less than a decade, some counterproductive policies invaded airline corporate attitudes. The first negative was to
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Several decades ago, when the 32-year-old age limit was
first challenged in the United States as being discrimina-
tory and not related to good business practice, U.S. Sena-
tor Margaret Chase Smith joined the flight attendants in
their campaign to change the policy. A prominent airline
president replied to Senator Smith by writing that young and attractive women were es-
tial to his airline’s success. He stated that most of the passengers were male
businessmen who entertained sexual fantas-
ties about these young, beautiful flight attendants. He further maintained that
business would suffer if the airlines were
forced to retain flight attendants into middle
age. Senator Smith sent reproduced cop-
ies of his letter along with her response
and sent them to all of the news services.
Her response was “My Dear Mr. Airline
President: Are you running an airline or a
whorehouse?” Corporate policies ban-
ting marriage, motherhood, maturity, males
and myopia now have all but disappeared. The only
restriction that remains is the physical weight standard,
related to safety, job performance or health maintenance,
rather than to physical appearance.

**Broader Contributions by Attendants**

Most flight attendants are highly motivated to provide
safe and excellent services to their passengers. When
you walk on an airplane staffed by flight attendants who
truly enjoy their jobs, they are easy to spot. This climate
of hospitality may be found on small commuters, large
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A senior flight attendant can be to an airline what a master
sergeant is to the army. Like master sergeants, senior
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Attendants Require Motivation Too

Flight attendants have the normal range of human moti-
vations. Most of them want to be productive at meaning-
ful tasks that provide them with a high sense of achieve-
ment and contribution, (Besco 1988a and 1989; Chaney,
1987; and Peters & Waterman, 1982). When these moti-
vational needs are recognized and satisfied by an airline, flight attendants make an
enormous contribution to improving pas-
er safety. In addition, significant in-
creases in passenger service, long term growth
and profitability are more likely to result.

The airline that treats its flight attendants
with a high regard for their professional
value will reinforce the feelings of self
respect and professional pride that are in-
valuable in a high performace organiza-
tion. Airlines may benefit by training their
flight attendant supervisors in the tech-
niques on the one-minute reprimand as sug-
gested by Blanchard (1982).

Some persons argue that wages for new flight attendants are
not keeping pace with the wages of new hires in other
defined groups in the airline industry. Some airlines do not
compensate flight attendants during their two- to six-week
initial training periods. The first year salaries of some
airlines are not competitive with entry level wages paid by
many less responsible jobs. The industry will benefit by
reevaluating the contribution of the flight attendants and
making provisions for attracting the level of applicants that
will insure long term corporate needs will be met.

Positive Leadership Worth the Cost

The benefits of providing top-level leadership to flight
attendants have been underestimated. Consequently, there
have been many supervisors who perceive their function
as one of ensuring compliance with dress codes and proce-
dural details. The supervisors are given limited authority
to support the flight attendants when problems arise with
passenger boarding, catering, cabin service, maintenance
and crew scheduling. As a result, supervisors may be
perceived by some flight attendants as those who administer discipline and punishment for rule violations but who cannot provide organizational support when interdepartmental problems arise.

The negative effects of limiting the role of the supervisor to procedures and rules monitor have been discussed by Bennis and Nanus (1985), Besco (1989), Blanchard (1982), Chaney (1987) and Peters & Waterman (1982). They all emphasize the potential long-term corporate benefits of providing positive leadership. The Professional Performance Analysis Checklist (Besco, 1988b and 1990) lists the following eight factors to consider and analyze when dysfunctional leadership becomes a negative influence on corporate success.

1. Does an individual have to make sacrifices to accept a position of leadership?

2. Are leaders attracted to the supervisory position to escape some factors perceived as undesirable in their current situations or positions?

3. Do potential new leaders seek the supervisory position primarily to enhance their feelings of selfrespect or to compensate for low self-esteem?

4. Does disrespect for the profession play a role in attracting new leaders who view the supervisory position as a status symbol?

5. Are supervisors and leaders expected to be upper management yea-sayers?

6. Do supervisory practices become dysfunctional by serving the goals of specific organizations ahead of the overall objectives of the entire enterprise?

7. Are personal biases, prejudices and subjective practices by supervisors stifling the workgroup performance?

8. Are there any indications that leaders are on power trips in dealing with their work groups.

This checklist can be used to identify the organizationally pathogenic influences that contribute to degrading the performance of flight attendants. Reason (1988) identifies the concept of pathogens and negative organizational factors which undermine safety and add to the general risk levels present in flight operations. The same concept of pathogens is applicable to the flight attendant’s working environment.

Training programs for flight attendants are frequently viewed as fulfillment of a government-mandated program. Airline flight attendant training programs may not be adequately perceived as an investment that will have economic returns; flight attendant training may be viewed as an economic burden.

Flight attendants as a group have performed with admirable success in inflight emergencies, hijackings and ground evacuations. The evacuation performances of flight attendants have undoubtedly saved many lives and reduced injuries. This fact alone has probably more than paid for the cost of flight attendant evacuation training.

Emphasize Flight Attendant Value

A reemphasis of the safety contribution and economic value of the flight attendant function is recommended. Now is an opportune time to revitalize this employee group’s contribution to corporate success. Such an investment in corporate resources would help ensure that full value will be received from the improved performance of the flight attendants — the entire industry will benefit by attracting well-qualified applicants. An investment in training programs will reflect proven business and common sense customer relations principles that can contribute to improved safety margins, reap competitive advantages and provide economic returns.

There is a need to establish communications links between upper management and the wisdom of the experienced flight attendants; allied to that is the need to develop and utilize the interviewing skills of the flight attendants to gather customer opinions and suggestions.

First-line supervisors could be given the responsibility of identifying high-performing individuals. The identification of more effective procedures and techniques would be welcomed by most supervisors and flight attendants. This is the process that Blanchard (1982) identifies as “catching them doing something right.” These high performers could be surveyed to see what special knowledge, skills and attitudes they bring to their jobs. Specific techniques and procedures which have been particularly effective could be incorporated into the training programs for all flight attendants. Recognition and rewards could be implemented for those individuals and their supervisors to encourage future improvements.

For those airlines that respond to this opportunity, they will need to prepare themselves for growth in safety margins, efficiency, market share, passenger miles, competitive advantage and profitability.
References


About the Author

Robert O. Besco, Ph.D. is the founder and president of Professional Performance Improvement Inc., in Lakewood, Calif., U.S. He specializes in the development and implementation of profit improvement, performance management and safety enhancement systems for the aviation industry.

Besco is adjunct associate professor of aviation psychology at the University of Southern California, Institute of Aerospace Safety and Management. He is a consultant to the Flight Training Department of American Airlines, where he flew as captain in the DC-9-80 and pilot on DC-10 and Boeing 707 aircraft.

A graduate of the University of Iowa with a B.A. in psychology, Besco earned an M.S. and a Ph.D. in industrial psychology from Purdue University. His professional memberships include: Association of Aviation Psychologists, Allied Pilots Association, Society of Air Safety Investigators, Human Factors Society and the American Medical Association.