

PART I

TEAMS

I

The Challenge

You are director of in-flight services for a major airline, responsible for some 2,000 flight attendants who look after passenger service and cabin safety.

Most of the markets in which your company operates are highly competitive. You dominate a few of them, but rank second or third in others. Recently, your load factors (the percentage of available seats actually occupied) slipped a couple of points in some key markets. The vice president of marketing, to whom you report, commissioned a study to find out why. The results reinforced what was found in previous market research. After price and schedule, the most important factor affecting repeat business is the quality of the service passengers receive.

Although your position is a responsible one, you have no direct influence on price or schedule. There may be little leverage in these factors anyway, since these days the fares and schedules of competing carriers scarcely can be distinguished from one another. What you *do* control is the work performed by flight attendants. Given the current competitive

situation, you expect that the vice president would allow you to do whatever you think needs to be done—so long as your actions eventually result in a quality and consistency of on-board service that surpasses that of your competitors.

That is your opportunity. Your problem is that the key encounters between flight attendants and customers occur in a metal tube moving through the atmosphere at 500 miles an hour some 35,000 feet above the ground. Worse, there is no manager on board to make sure the flight attendants perform well. First-line management is provided by a group of flight service managers (FSMs), each of whom has administrative responsibility for a subset of flight attendants. The FSMs also manage, under your direction, the selection, training, and scheduling of in-flight staff. But all the FSMs work on the ground, at headquarters, rather than in the air. They rarely even see the flight attendants, except when someone has a personal problem or there has been an in-flight incident or complaint that requires a headquarters discussion. So there is no realistic way that the FSMs can monitor and manage what really counts—flight attendants' direct encounters with the customers whose patronage is so critical to your airline.

It is time for some fresh thinking about the design, staffing, and management of in-flight services. You have considerable power and influence, and you have a clean slate: Anything and everything is open for consideration. Thus, the question is,

What would you do to increase the likelihood that flight attendant teams at your airline consistently provide superb service to their customers?

Airline managers around the world wrestle every day with precisely this question. Different airlines have answered it in quite different ways. The strategies used by two airlines my colleagues and I have studied illustrate two radically different alternatives for structuring and leading work teams. Managers at both airlines realized that, for better or for worse, flight attendants become self-managing teams the moment they step on board an aircraft. The first airline to be described, an international carrier, attempted to minimize the risks that invariably accompany team self-management; the other airline, a domestic carrier, sought to exploit the many benefits that self-management can bring. Neither strategy worked as well as airline managers hoped. By analyzing what went well and poorly in the experiences of

these two carriers, we will begin to see what is needed to set the stage for great performances by work teams more generally.

THE INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE

When we studied this airline several years ago, it employed over 2,500 cabin crew members for work on aircraft such as the Boeing 747, which routinely carried 350 or more passengers on intercontinental flights.¹ Seven supervisors each looked after some 400 flight attendants—a span of control that ensured that the cabin crew teams would indeed be self-managing.

Cabin services at this carrier were part of the marketing organization, and a marketing orientation is evident in the statement of objectives that management printed and distributed to all staff: “Every passenger, from the moment of entering the aircraft to the moment of leaving it, shall receive such a degree of service, attention, care, courtesy and consideration that, by the end of their flight, they are committed to [our airline] for their next trip.”

Management carefully designed a cabin product and in-flight delivery routines to achieve that ambitious objective. Analysts researched competitors’ products and customers’ preferences and then generated detailed specifications for food, beverage, and entertainment services. Workflow experts laid out the exact procedures flight attendant teams were to use in delivering the service product, and fine-tuned these routines using full-scale cabin mockups at the airline’s headquarters. Cabin services management conducted rigorous training programs to ensure that every flight attendant understood both the airline’s service objectives and the specific procedures to be used to achieve them.

The level of detail was impressive. The overall team task was broken down into specific duties to be provided by specific crew members at specific times. Each position on the team was designated by an alphabetic letter, and flight attendants were trained in the duties required for any lettered position to which they might be assigned. Most positions involved either galley work or serving food or drink to passengers, but special duties also were specified in detail. The flight attendants assigned to the “A,” “B,” and “D” positions, for example, were responsible for tending to

the special needs of any unaccompanied children, mothers with infants, and sick or very elderly passengers. Flight attendant “C” was responsible for tidying the galley areas and for keeping track of equipment the crew brought on board. And so on.

The idea was to create a choreographed team performance that, although carefully worked out in advance, would not seem so to customers. What customers would see was seamless service of such quality and consistency that they would insist on being booked on the same carrier for their next trip. It was a beautifully engineered product and, importantly, one that could be implemented with no manager on board. All that the flight attendants had to do was to execute their duties, to dance the choreographed ballet, with competence and style.

The flight attendants had more than enough knowledge and skill to execute the work. The variety and glamour of work as an international flight attendant attracted many more applicants than there were positions, so the carrier was able to be very choosy about whom it hired. After a demanding initial training course, recruits started work with the title of Flight Attendant I. They became eligible for promotion to Flight Attendant II after a year of satisfactory service and could apply for a senior flight attendant position after three years. Although advancement to Flight Attendant II was routine, promotion to senior flight attendant was a higher hurdle. Not all eligible candidates chose to submit to the rigorous review for promotion to senior status, since the small increment in pay seemed to some insufficient compensation for the relatively large increase in worry and responsibility they would take on.

At the time of the research, crews on board 747s at this carrier consisted of fourteen members, of whom at least three were senior flight attendants. One of the seniors was the flight attendant in charge. He or she conducted the preflight briefing of the crew, handled various administrative chores, and had primary responsibility for coordination with ground staff and with the flight deck crew. Two other seniors served as subleaders for the first class and economy cabins.

Crews were formed essentially randomly. Each day, scheduling staff listed the trips that would begin twenty-eight days in the future, and then went down the list of available flight attendants until the crew roster for each trip was filled. Trips ranged from three days (for example, across the

Atlantic and back) to almost three weeks (an extended set of flights with numerous layovers in cities around the world).

A Trip through Europe and Asia

You are a Flight Attendant II at the international carrier with over two years of service behind you. It is early in the morning on the first day of a five-day trip that will dogleg through Europe and Asia. You arrive at the crew base (a building about a mile from the airport) an hour and a half before your flight's scheduled departure. The deadline for reporting is seventy-five minutes prior to departure, so there is time to spare. First you stop by the check-in desk, where your arrival is noted and you receive your duty assignment card, which brings some good news and a small disappointment. The good news is that your assignment for the next five days will be to provide meal service in the middle of the economy cabin. Your position involves no extra duties, so if passenger loads are light and the weather is good, this could be a routine, nondemanding trip. The disappointment comes as you scan the roster and find that you know no one else on the crew; you like it better when there are at least a couple of people with whom you have worked before. (This is not unusual. I asked an operations researcher at the airline to estimate, if he and I were rostered together on a trip, how long it would be before we could expect to be rostered together again. The answer was 5.4 years.)

You next check your mail slot and find it empty except for a routine management notice announcing changes in expense allowances for certain cities. A glance at the union bulletin board reveals nothing of special interest, nor do you see any friends in the crew lounge as you pass by. So you head down to the briefing room. About half the crew is already there, including the in-charge senior flight attendant, who is looking through the papers for the trip. You nod vaguely at those colleagues who glanced up when you walked in, and then settle into a chair to wait for the rest of the crew to arrive.

A few minutes before the seventy-five-minute deadline, the in-charge looks up, finds everyone present, and begins her briefing. She introduces herself and quickly reviews the itinerary for the trip and the passenger loads for the two legs that will be flown today. She then conducts the