

Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

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Spot the Northwest flight attendant

I flew to London and back on Delta Airlines, which was great because I got to play my new favorite game: spot the old Northwest Flight Crew. Northwest and Delta merged last year to form America's largest airline. Though the planes are now painted the same and the crews all wear the same uniforms, they do not all act the same way. The cultures of the two companies, more specifically how management treated their people, significantly impacted how their people treat their customers. So much so, you can tell from which company a flight crew came from simply by observing how they treat customers.

The rules are pretty basic; when you fly Delta Airlines, try to guess if your crew is native Delta or ex-Northwest. The game goes beyond just a couple of bad eggs - those employees who, no matter what the corporate environment is like, will always do the wrong thing. This game is about identifying a common pattern or theme among a group of employees that provides clues as to how they have been managed or treated in the past.

I admit, it's a pretty easy game. Northwest must have treated its people so badly for so many years for the difference between the two crews to be so stark. Here are some pointers to help you should you ever decide to play:

Impatience: Ex-Northwest employees have no patience for customers. They can regularly be seen rolling their eyes when passengers ask for anything or perform even the slightest infraction of any rule or command. The native Delta crews, in contrast, are more likely to smile if a passenger asks for anything and show a little more patience.

Hate Thy Customer: The ol' Northwesters can often be heard in the galleys complaining about a passenger or two (this among other things they can find to complain about). If someone who has a customer-facing job seems to have such contempt for customers, think about how that will impact their behavior towards the customer. In contrast, you may stumble upon a conversation of Delta folks gossiping about their personal lives or figuring out how to solve some issue that was raised on the flight.

Short Fuse: The grumps from Northwest are all on short fuses. It takes barely a squeak from a passenger for a flight attendant to berate that customer. Public

shaming of a passenger over the intercom is also a favorite. I find Delta natives to have much more patience for those with whom they are charged to look after and will often address specific customers directly should they need to.

Pass the Buck: Despite the ease of this game, you'll be hard pressed to find a Northwest crew who accept accountability for how they act. Northwest employees, you see, don't like to take any responsibility for anything that happens. If they are abusive, impatient or generally unhappy, they will justify anything they have done by passing the buck. "It's not our fault. If we don't do it that way," they rationalize, "we'll get in trouble."

There is a side of me that feels sorry for the old Northwest people. Like abused dogs who become unfit to have as pets, so too have many Northwest employees been so abused over the years, it is actually left many of them unfit for to work with people anymore. Like any person on the receiving end of an abusive relationship, they have completely lost trust in management to help them in anyway. They hang all their hopes on their union to protect them even though, with their union, they received lower pay and poorer benefits than the non-unionized Delta flight attendants. The mistrust runs so deep, that they will work to preserve their unions for fear of what would happen if Delta management had direct influence over their jobs even though Delta crews like their jobs...and their management much better. In this humble passenger's opinion, if management has the option, axing some of the most abusive staff may not be such a bad thing for all involved.

The point is, corporate culture matters. How management chooses to treat its people impacts everything - for better or for worse. Gordon Bethune, the former CEO of Continental Airlines, was able to transform Continental Airlines from the worst airline in the industry into the one of the highest rated without changing the equipment or the people. He did it by focusing not on the customer, but on the employees. He managed the culture and worked to empower his employees. He showed them that keeping a plane clean serves their interests more than the passengers. The passengers leave the planes, the flight attendants often have to stay and fly one, two or more legs on the same aircraft. The same goes for helping people or being nice to them. It makes for a better day at work when you treat people well. Well-treated customers are also nicer to be around.

On a recent cross-country trip, I met a Delta flight attendant who plays a similar game to me. It's called Spot the ex-Northwest Elite Passenger. She told me she can tell if a passenger used to fly Northwest based on how the passenger treats the crew. Apparently, the abused Northwest employees abused their customers for so long that the customers also became combative and mean. Sadly, they tell me, it's a really easy game to play for them als

The moral of the story: corporate culture matters. A sour corporate culture can actually make an entire society unhappy. This means that a strong corporate culture can have a positive impact on a society. So for the good of the planet - treat your employees well.