



Rule-Bound Leadership

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A few weeks ago, I flew on Delta from Minneapolis to Tampa on business. Over the next two days, I learned a lesson in leadership from the circumstances I encountered with the flight and gate crews.

Originally scheduled to depart at 9 a.m. on a Monday, heavy rainstorms in the Twin Cities and several states between me and Florida delayed the flight several times, until it finally departed more than three hours late. This scuttled my scheduled meeting that afternoon, but it was unavoidable. Thankfully, the gate crew kept us informed as the delay lengthened and the flight crew was apologetic as we boarded.

On my return trip the following evening, there were storm systems still lingering in the area and surrounding States, and, again, my flight was delayed. The gate crew was helpful and understanding as we waited for a plane to arrive which could take us to the Twin Cities. About three hours later, our plane arrived, and it was then that I began to notice the rule-bound leadership at Delta (and, I assume, at all major airlines).

First, the plane had to be cleaned and the baggage taken off for the arriving passengers. The baggage removal was delayed due to lightning in the area, which apparently is not allowed under THE RULES. After the arriving passengers and their bags were cleared, the gate crew boarded us, the departing passengers. We were greeted in a very friendly manner by the flight crew, who seemed really glad to have us aboard (more on this later).

Then, we sat on the plane. After a while, the pilot came on the intercom and announced that handling our bags was delayed, because there was lightning in the area, which was against THE RULES. I used a method I had learned in junior high school to count how many seconds separated the visual lightning from the accompanying thunder, and figured that the lightning was about three miles away.

Finally, our baggage was loaded, but then the plane needed fuel. The pilot got on the intercom again to inform us that the fueling process would be delayed because THE RULES did not allow fuel to be pumped while there was lightning in the area. We waited some more. Then, the pilot got back on the intercom and warned us that we might not be able to depart after all. You see, the flight crew that was so friendly to us when we came aboard could only work 15 hours in a row, according to THE RULES, and it would take one hour more than that to get to the Twin Cities, after the re-fueling process.

So, they de-boarded the entire plane. There was mass confusion as no one on the flight crew or at the gate gave clear instructions as to what our next move should be. I got on the phone with Delta to board another flight as soon as possible, but my original flight had not been cancelled officially. THE RULES did

not allow me to find another flight until mine formally cancelled. So I waited.

With me in the aptly named “waiting area” were about 100 others, many of whom had infants, toddlers, and small children in tow. It was now about 10 p.m., and we should have been landing in the Twin Cities. While we waited, our flight crew sat on the plane for another two hours, and then left to go to their hotel rooms, where they probably got a bit to eat and a good night’s rest.

Finally, after midnight in Tampa, a replacement crew arrived from Atlanta. They were not nearly as friendly as our first crew when we boarded, however. I guessed that they had had no intention to spend the night in Minneapolis, and were not happy about being shuttled off on another three hour flight, because THE RULES required them to.

So, we passengers trudged sleepily back onto the plane with an unhappy and unfriendly flight crew, with a pilot who was perturbed about the delay and the actions of the first flight crew, and a gate agent who made it very clear that she blamed the first flight crew, as well, for our pain. In my tired mind, I imagined that there would be some sort of free food and spirits for us after this long series of delays (and because there were no open restaurants or even vending machines at the Tampa airport). But, no, apparently THE RULES prohibited flight crews from offering a small token of food or drink. We arrived in the Twin Cities around 3 a.m., and I was home in bed by 4 a.m., which gave me exactly 7 hours between my head hitting the pillow and me speaking to a group on a leadership topic for 2 hours.

What can we learn from this kind of experience that you can apply to your leadership?

1. **Bend the rules when the safety or comfort of others is at risk.** As far as I know, THE RULES cited throughout my attempt to get home are Union rules. The FAA rules require only that crew members do not exceed 100 hours in any 672 consecutive hour time period. I would have been willing to risk a spilled drink or dropped peanut bag due to a sleepy flight attendant, in order to avoid waiting another three hours. I’m sure the parents with small children on the flight would have been even more willing to bend the rules.
2. **Remember who the customer is.** Union rules are not the customer. If there are no paying customers, there are no flight crews or baggage handlers, and there is no Union. The baggage handlers and fueling crews could have used the same equation I learned as a teen to determine how far away the dangerous lightning actually was, and then taken leadership to get the bags and fuel onboard so the flight could take off. I am in favor of protecting workers from lightning strikes, but logic tells me that there is a zero probability of harm when the strikes are more than a mile away. In addition, the flight crew could have sided with the pilot and gate agent and decided to put in 16 hours of duty that day.
3. **Encourage people to practice leadership at all levels.** Most organizations have rules of conduct, lines of authority, values, and decision-making practices to govern it. However, within those systems and structures, people at all levels can demonstrate leadership. I’m so inspired, for example, that police officers and fire fighters—who also have unions—are often willing to go beyond the Union rules to serve and protect. I’m also impressed by educators who go beyond the rules to meet with parents after school, or give students special attention during their lunch or prep time. These and so many other unionized employees often go beyond the rules to meet the needs they see.