

Do We Measure the Right Stuff?

Sitting in the Charlotte Douglass International Airport (North Carolina), I'm reflecting on my all-to-common travel experiences last night and their influence on attitude and behavior. Yesterday I was in Orlando, Florida attempting to return home from the annual PDC of the America Society of Safety Engineers. Lightening storms had periodically prevented the landing and take-off of aircraft, and therefore most departures were delayed, including my flight to Charlotte.

The delay of my flight was only about an hour, and I actually felt fortunate because so many other flights had been delayed much longer or were cancelled altogether. The travel plans of numerous airline customers were thwarted, including numerous children on a high from their fun-packed visits to such exciting places as Sea World, MGM Studios, and "The Magic Kingdom." Needless to say, the Orlando airport was crowded and noisy, and I was glad to get out of there.

On the flight to Charlotte, I contemplated whether I'd make my flight to Roanoke and get home that night. I recalled the numerous times my USAIR flight waited several minutes at the departure gate for customers whose incoming flights had been delayed. It was not uncommon for the pilot to come on the intercom and apologize for the delay with a statement like, "We are waiting a few minutes for passengers whose flights had been delayed. Since this is the last flight to Roanoke this evening, we'd like these people to make their connections. I'm sure you understand."

We did understand. I felt gratified by such actively caring, even on the few occasions when the wait was as long as 30 minutes. After all, someday it might be me on the verge of missing my connection.

Last night, however, I wasn't optimistic I would make my flight to Roanoke. The estimated arrival in Charlotte was 40 minutes after the scheduled departure of my Roanoke flight. We arrived at the Charlotte airport ten minutes earlier than expected, and thus I was a bit hopeful I could make my flight. Perhaps the Roanoke flight was delayed for natural causes. Or, since the airline knew of our delayed arrival, they might wait for us.

As our plane pulled into the gate, many passengers got ready to spring to their feet, collect their baggage, and sprint to their next departure gate. The flight attendant announced she had no information about connections, but told us the number of our arrival gate and advised us to check our tickets for departure gates. "The Charlotte airport is not too large," she said, "and you can get to any departure gate in five minutes or less, if you hurry."

Passengers in the seat behind me were talking about their need to move fast. Their flight to Nashville would depart at 10:45 and it was almost 10:40. I told these people not to worry, surely their aircraft would wait a few minutes. I informed them of my prior experiences in this situation, and their flight crew is aware of their tight connection. I let these people get in front of me, and told them not to worry.

I did hustle off the plane myself, but was not optimistic, since my Roanoke flight was scheduled to depart 30 minutes earlier. Sure enough, the flight attendant at the off-ramp told me my flight had left on time. So I disappointingly hurried to the ticket counter to beat the crowd at rescheduling a departure the next morning. To my surprise I could not get my checked baggage. It was "in the system and would be on the next flight to Roanoke."

After being booked on a late morning flight, I received another surprise. The airline would not cover my hotel expenses, since the delay was weather related. The ticket agent did give me a list of nearby hotels to call with courtesy pick-up service. There were no vacancies at the first two places I called, but others who missed their connections told me of one motel with vacancies. Therefore my third phone call was rewarded.

I then proceeded to Zone B for pick-up, and got my third surprise of the evening. One of the passengers who had the Nashville connection was waiting for the hotel van. He was passionately explaining his negative experience with several other individuals. He and seven other passengers on my Orlando flight got to the gate for the Nashville departure at 10:45 p.m., the scheduled departure time. In fact, two teenagers among this group had actually reached the gate a few minutes earlier. They had run ahead to inform the gate personnel of their arrival. However, the plane to Nashville had already left the gate, four to five minutes before the scheduled departure time. As a result, eight customers were stranded in Charlotte until the next day.

The person telling us this story, repeated it several times with intense negative emotion. "We were there on time, why didn't they wait." He and I shared stories of USAIR waiting for delayed passengers in the past. Why not this time? What has changed? Incidentally while my next-morning flight to Roanoke left the gate, I checked my watch and it read 10:46 a.m. The flight was scheduled to depart at 10:50 a.m.

What Gets Measured Gets Done

How are airlines ranked? What measurement criteria define the public opinion of the different airlines, at least as disseminated by the news media? Well, the index I

hear most often is the average delay in departures and arrivals. In fact, I've seen recent statistics that rank USAIRWAYS near the top with regard to "mean delay between scheduled and actual departure."

Could it be that a top-down focus on reducing departure delays and gaining a high media ranking for "timeliness" influence a disregard for customers trying to make a tight connection? Might a flight crew actually try to leave the gate early in order to shave a few minutes off the mean gap between scheduled and actual departures? Of course, the answer to these questions is "Yes" if this outcome measure is a key indicator of "success" as defined by the airline management.

But what about the stranded passengers? Surely an increase in frustrated and disgruntled customers will influence corrective action. Well, that depends on how this effect influences the numbers used to hold airline personnel accountable. Since airlines no longer pay food and lodging expenses for passengers stranded due to weather, experiences like those reflected in my anecdote would not affect the airline cost data.

The Hidden Costs

But negative experiences with air travel will surely decrease customers, right? And in some cases increased frustration among airline passengers is bound to lead to aggressive behavior. Indeed, at the time of this writing, I was contacted by a newspaper reporter to discuss the causes and ramifications of "air rage" – an apparent increasing series of hostile and dangerous episodes on airplanes whereby emotionally distraught passengers attack a flight attendant or pilot. Recently, for example, a passenger actually rushed into the cockpit and bit the pilot on the arm.

Given an apparent increase in unhappy, frustrated, and aggressive airplane passengers, airline personnel should do everything possible to please, even delight, their customers. This means attending to the process of airline travel, and doing things like: a) waiting a few minutes for delayed connections, b) covering the lodging expense of stranded customers, c) announcing information as soon and as complete as possible regarding delayed incoming or outgoing flights, d) providing sufficient personnel during “emergencies” to help customers reschedule their flights and find suitable interim accommodations.

There are perhaps numerous reasons for the current deficit in customer service in the airline industry. But I suggest a most significant factor is the measurement or accountability system in place. There seems to be plenty of people purchasing airline tickets these days, so why worry about a relatively few disgruntled customers? According to a report in the July 2000 *Newsweek*, “U.S. airlines are expected to carry a record 665 million passengers this year, up 5 percent from last year” (p.39).

Bottom line: The outcome numbers – from profits to media rankings based on timely departures and arrivals – motivate airline management and employee behaviors that can contribute to negative customer attitudes. And since negative customer attitudes does not *seem to* affect the bottom line, corrective action is not called for. It’s business as usual.

Relevance to Industrial Safety and Health

Are you wondering what all of this has to do with industrial safety and health? I’m sure safety leaders have seen the relevance all along. And it’s more than the fact that frustrated people and “air rage” present a safety hazard. As you know, an outcome

focus in safety results in the same kind of problems many of us are experiencing with air travel.

The popular phrase, “what gets measured gets managed” is unfortunately true. So when injury rate or compensation costs are the key or only indicators of safety success, you can expect limited attention to process activities that do not directly and immediately affect these numbers.

Just as the outcome measurement system motivates pilots to depart the gate early when they can, a ranking by OSHA recordables motivates employees to hide their injuries when they can. And sometimes this is explicitly supported by a safety incentive or bonus system.

What about attitude and morale? Do these feeling states influence the safety and health of an organization? Of course they do, just as they influence the pleasure and safety of air travel. What should we do about it?

Those who have recently encountered the displeasures of air travel can list a number of basic process activities that could reduce the frustrations and negative emotions linked to that experience. Similarly, we can imagine ourselves in a number of work situations and consider what could be done to improve attitude and moral about occupational safety. Most of these behaviors, including continuous and caring interpersonal conversation, will not be monitored nor measured. But we do them anyway because they are the right thing to do. Our emotional intelligence tells us that in the long run these process activities will benefit people’s safety and health. And if we extend such actively caring beyond the confines of our work setting, we give others, including airline personnel and passengers, opportunities to learn from our example.

In Conclusion

I taught nothing new nor profound in this article. The basic lesson that an outcome focus in occupational safety can stifle the reporting of injuries and lower people's attitude and morale about safety is not new. This is now common knowledge among safety professionals. Yet this basic assessment problem continues throughout a majority of U.S. work cultures. Obviously, we need to do a better job convincing others, especially top managers, of this measurement problem.

In that regard, this article may be useful. Most managers have experienced directly or vicariously negative emotions linked to air travel, including frustration, loss of personal control, helplessness, and even aggression. And if they travel a lot, they've experienced these negative feelings on numerous occasions. Obviously, many factors are responsible for this displeasure, but the accountability system in place is certainly one root cause. A top-down focus on reducing departure delays in air travel likely influences the kind of disregard for customer service reported in my personal anecdote. Likewise, an overemphasis on injury rate as an indicator of safety performance can hinder the variety of process activities needed to prevent injuries.

By E. Scott Geller, Ph.D., professor of psychology, Virginia Tech, and senior partner with Safety Performance Solutions, a leading consulting/training firm that helps organizations customize processes for improving safety-related behaviors and attitudes. For more information, call (540)951-7233; e-mail: safety@safetyperformance.com; or visit www.safetyperformance.com