



**Ten Minutes of Your Time. Lasting Business Impact.**

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“A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

**- Paul Romer, Stanford University economist**

## **What's On My Mind This Week**

### **The Second Path**

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JetBlue Airways messed up my travel plans last week and I have a personal apology from the CEO to prove it.

Yes I'm a big jetBlue fan ([http://www.taketenminutes.com/pdfs/Take\\_Ten\\_Minutes\\_Issue\\_16.pdf](http://www.taketenminutes.com/pdfs/Take_Ten_Minutes_Issue_16.pdf)) but this time their celebrated culture, specifically the “no cancellations” philosophy, grounded me in Boston when I could have been in Orlando. The incident demonstrates that failing to focus on your customer's ultimate goal can create problems for you both, and that good intentions are no substitute for making your customers successful.

Like many adventures, this one starts with a big business trip and a bigger snowstorm. I awoke Sunday to a blizzard and little chance of reaching Orlando: only the plows were moving, Logan Airport was closed, and Massachusetts was in a state of emergency. Still no word from jetBlue however, as my flight's status remained unchanged. I rebooked my flight, rearranged my meetings, and prepared to leave Monday morning.

On Monday the airport remained closed but was opening soon. JetBlue's 6:30am flight was showing on-time, although it was already late. My 9:10 flight was delayed until 11:37, while the rest of my group was taking the on-time 10:40 flight. These departure times didn't seem right, but when the customer service representative insisted the information was correct we headed for the airport to get the real story.

#### **A Snow Job?**

Upon arrival we immediately noticed problems. First, the 9:10 and 10:40 flights both showed 11:11 departure times. The 6:10 was boarding, which gave me hope, but that was tempered by the massive list of cancellations at other airlines.

JetBlue's “no cancellation” philosophy, however, was on full display. Only one flight was cancelled and those passengers were being quickly rebooked. Reaching the counter, the cheerful agent assured us our flight would leave, checked our bags, and directed us to security.

Of course the gate area was packed, and none of the gates listed flight information. With so much confusion, triangulation seemed our best strategy. First check the website, then the departure monitors and gate agents, and finally call customer service.

Around noon, the website showed the 9:10 flight delayed until 12:37 and the 10:40 flight still on time. Gate agents said mine would be the fourth flight out, but hadn't yet arrived because there was only one operational runway. Everyone was confident I'd make it to Orlando, they just didn't know when.

Then the airport rebooted.

### **Snowballing Issues**

At least that's how it felt when the airport's power went out and came back on. I hoped this would erase the problems and create a steady stream of departures, but the only item erased was my flight from the airport monitors.

This puzzled the gate agent, but he assured me the flight was still scheduled. It wouldn't leave soon, he added, since only one gate had been plowed. As I watched the lone bucket loader chip away at the mountain of snow near the gate, I seriously questioned the optimism of the jetBlue team.

I restarted my computer and checked other options. Most of Delta's flights were cancelled, but larger planes to hub cities were departing. They still had available seats and if we made it to Atlanta or New York there were many connections to Orlando.

But changing to Delta wouldn't be simple because we had a baggage problem. We could easily make the flight, but if we wanted our bags to reach Orlando we'd first have to get them from jetBlue. As we moved to cancel our reservations and request our bags, a jetBlue pilot informed me my flight had been cancelled and other flights would follow. We could still make our meetings, but there wasn't much time.

When we reached baggage claim the conveyors were stopped. The power outage had knocked out the system, forcing luggage to be hand-carried to the claim area. At first handlers looked for individual bags, but as more flights were cancelled all luggage was brought up on carts.

The indefinite wait for bags ruled out the Delta option, so we rescheduled our meetings once more and made plans to leave in the morning. After several hours our luggage was returned and we headed home.

### **Thawing Out**

Tuesday at Logan Airport was a different experience. Lines were nonexistent, gates showed departing flight information, and planes left on-time. There was one surprise however, jetBlue's CEO David Neeleman was working the Boston terminal. Boosting morale, consoling passengers, and helping people onto planes, his presence said "I care" to employees and passengers alike.

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The gesture was appreciated, but the real test of a company isn't how well it apologizes for errors, it's what it does to eliminate them. In the aftermath of a service failure, organizations must choose between two distinct paths. One is to see problems as a result of rare events, unforeseen circumstances, and issues beyond control. The other is to accept responsibility for the entirety of the situation and own every failure. Companies that choose the first path repeat their mistakes; companies that choose the second prevent problems from recurring and discover ways to mitigate "acts of god".

When reviewing their performance, it would be easy for jetBlue to cite the weather, the power outage and their heartfelt attempt to move passengers despite these conditions. That still wouldn't explain or excuse their role in keeping me off other flights to Orlando.

Accepting responsibility for the situation shifts the focus to identifying the causes of problems and discovering alternate ways of creating successful customers. The second path leads jetBlue to eliminate the inconsistent information between airport monitors, gate agents and customer service agents. It also forces the company to confront an important question: Is there a difference between someone who *knows* they can't deliver but still makes a promise, and someone who makes a promise with good intent but *should have known* they couldn't deliver?

As service providers, we often feel the answer is "yes", but to the customer the outcome is the same. It was wise of Neeleman to infuse his organization with a "can-do" spirit, but his management team is now responsible to ensure it's not recklessly applied.

So the question for jetBlue is whether they'll choose the first or second path in dealing with last week's service failures. As a customer, I'll know the answer in time, but two e-mail messages late Monday make me hopeful Neeleman is using the snowstorm to make his company stronger. The first message cancelled the early Tuesday flight when only one runway remained available. The second quickly restored it when the second runway opened.

At jetBlue, Monday's big lesson was already being applied: sometimes the best way to get passengers to their destinations is to cancel their flight.

**Take Ten Minutes**

Consider your organization and answer the following questions:

- When confronted with service problems, which path does your company typically choose when resolving them?
- What changes in your company are required to make root-cause identification and elimination part of the culture?
- When problems arise, are they usually systemic, cultural or both?
- How can you maximize the value of your next business crisis?

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### About *Take Ten Minutes*

*Take Ten Minutes* is a publication of Philip Crosby Associates and The Capability Group.

The premise behind *Take Ten Minutes* is simple: take ten minutes out of every week to refocus and recommit to business improvement. *Take Ten Minutes* features quotes and interviews to inspire you. We also pull articles from today's headlines as examples of the power of the preventive culture (or the deep problems caused by not having one).

As the name suggests, *Take Ten Minutes* is relentless with the editing razor and keeps each issue tight - each issue should take you no more than ten minutes to read, start to finish. You'll reap even bigger rewards if you kick in an extra ten minutes to discuss the ideas with a colleague or to take an idea found here and plan to roll it out in your organization. We hope *Take Ten Minutes* becomes the business improvement equivalent of your running partner, providing the inspiration you need to lace up and "just do it" when the couch seems oh-so preferable.

We hope you enjoy *Take Ten Minutes*. As Philip Crosby said, improving your business "is a journey that never ends." So let the journey...*continue!*

Please send story ideas or comments to [editor@taketenminutes.com](mailto:editor@taketenminutes.com)

### About Our Companies

In today's marketplace, only capable companies will survive and thrive. The overarching goal of Philip Crosby Associates (PCA) and The Capability Group (TCG) is to give companies the culture, tools, methodology and results-focused support to become 'Capable Organizations' - useful, reliable, adaptable, and ever-focused on achieving customer success.

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PCA and TCG deliver on this goal by first working with clients to assess where they are on the maturity spectrum and where they want to go. For companies early in the process, we work hand-in-hand with management to install a culture of prevention - the culture that has been championed by the PCA side of our business since quality management guru and PCA founder Philip Crosby published *Quality is Free* in 1979. Since then, Crosby's techniques have been implemented by many of the Fortune 500, as well as small and mid-sized companies seeking excellence.

Once the foundation of the Capable Organization is present, TCG steps in to help clients take their efforts to the next level by further reducing costs, enhancing quality and promoting growth. TCG was founded by Kevin Weiss, who was a Quality Leader and Master Black Belt for General Electric when that company first implemented Six Sigma - a program CEO Jack Welch has attributed with "changing the DNA of GE". With a proprietary Cost-Quality-Growth™ Model created based on the knowledge that GE's success was due to much more than a typical Six Sigma deployment, TCG has helped shape Cost-Quality-Growth Programs for companies such as Shimano, American Express and Sony.

Along the journey to the Capable Organization, PCA and TCG provide a comprehensive set of training programs and materials as well as consulting and assessment services to accelerate progress. Products and services range from courses and CDs geared towards the education of hourly workers to intensive seminars for managers and executive teams.

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