

“COMMUNICATION FROM THE TOP IS ESSENTIAL”



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The plane was sitting on the runway of Hancock International Airport, filled with people mostly headed toward warmer weather and much needed sunshine. Syracuse was having another one of its famous blinding lake-effect snowstorms and the pilot was waiting for the situation to clear enough to take off.

Between the poor runway conditions and accumulating snow and ice on the wings the plane was delayed, full of people, for over two hours. Usually in situations like this, people get anxious, complaining, and sometimes downright nasty. But not this time. Even though the passengers were feeling their frustration and wondering if they would even be able to get off the ground at all, the climate inside the plane was that of calm resignation, with only hushed conversations on cell phones or with others nearby.

No one screamed and yelled, no one made a scene and no one took their frustrations out on the flight attendants. What made this situation so different from what it might have been? The captain. Starting about fifteen minutes after the initial delay, the captain spoke frequently over the PA system to let people know exactly what was going on.

Many times in business, particularly in troubled or uncertain times, those at the top do not understand the correlation of their actions to those of their employees. Rarely do they look at their own behavior and understand that honest, open and frequent communication (or lack of it) by the leader is the single most influential factor in how employee's will react and behave in tenuous situations.

Here are some leadership lessons that management can learn from the positive examples of that airline pilot:

- 1) **Acknowledge and empathize with the situation.** "I know this is very frustrating for everyone, especially those of you who have connections they need to make in Detroit. We do appreciate your patience while we make every effort to do all that is needed to be able to take off."
- 2) **Communicate and clarify actions or activities that might be misconstrued, or likely to be fuel for rumors.** "Ladies and gentlemen, I am now sending my co-pilot through to the back of the plane to physically inspect the wings up close to be sure that they are in safe condition if we are able to get clearance for take off."
- 3) **Identify and acknowledge all the possibilities, including the worst possible scenario, since it is probably in people's minds anyway.** "Folks, we're still doing everything we can, but this weather is pretty severe. I need to inform you that there is a possibility that we will not get off the ground this morning. "
- 4) **Maintain frequent and regular communications, even when there is no "new" news to report.** "Hello, this is your Captain again. Things are pretty much status quo, the plows are still trying to clear the runway and we'll be heading for our second de-icing shortly. Thanks again for your patience."

Even though the passengers were not in control and totally helpless to influence the situation, they were made to feel included in the process through open, specific and frequent communications from the one at the helm. His having approached the situation in this way calmed their frustrations, while increasing his credibility and the people's trust in him, regardless of the outcome.