

“Accepting Responsibility Can Calm Angry Customers”



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It was 5:30 AM at Los Angeles International Airport. The check-in line for American Airlines domestic flights was getting fairly long. Noticing that the International line had only one person waiting, an airline service attendant, at the direction of her Supervisor, invited a dozen people to move into the International line so that they could be serviced more quickly.

The passengers were appreciative until they found out that the persons being served at the International counter had a situation which was taking the staff quite a while to straighten out. Almost fifteen minutes passed and not one of the people who was shifted to the International line had been serviced. They watched as the domestic line moved right along and they realized that had they not been moved they would have been processed and heading for their gate by now.

The affected passengers started to buzz among themselves, expressing some frustration, but mostly making jokes about “Murphy’s Law” and trying to make the best of the situation until they could be serviced. One passenger, however, did not see any humor and started making loud and angry remarks. He became angrier and louder until a young airline rep went over to assist. The angry man lashed out at the rep. The rep listened, but got flustered at the intensity of the man’s comments. Doing his best, which was awkward and uncomfortable, the rep stated, “Well, you’re entitled your point of view, Sir. We’re doing the best we can.” The passenger became angrier and demanded to see the shift supervisor.

In a few minutes, a willowy woman of African American decent approached the angry man. She was the operations supervisor for that shift. “How can I help you, Sir?” The angry man continued his tirade, insisting on having the woman’s name in order to write a letter of complaint to the president of American Airlines. “I will be happy to provide that to you, if that’s what you would like,” she stated calmly. That did not stop that man from ranting and raving. The other passengers, while themselves frustrated about the situation, could not help but have compassion for the Supervisor, who by this time had become the recipient of accelerated verbal abuse by a red-faced man who was almost out-of-control.

The Supervisor was a model of grace under pressure. When the irate man paused, the woman approached him. She looked gently and directly into his eyes, and said with much sincerity, “Sir, this situation which has upset you is my fault. I take full responsibility. When I saw you and the other passengers waiting in the long line, I thought we could get you processed more quickly by moving you. I had no idea that there would be a delay this long. With all good intentions, I made a decision that I now realize turned out to be a poor judgment.”

The line became hushed as the passengers observed the incredible power of truth-telling and the willingness to accept responsibility. The anger dissipated. The angry man mumbled something inaudible and stepped back in line. Remarkably, several passengers who were also becoming anxious over the delays approached the supervisor and thanked her for what she had tried to do.

Customer service jobs are difficult at best. People who choose these roles do so because helping customers and clients to resolve issues is satisfying and gratifying for them. Unfortunately, they will have to sometimes bear the inappropriate and unfair treatment from people who demand someone’s head in blame rather than seeking resolution to the problem.

Are good customer service people made or born? While we can develop certain customer service techniques and skills through training, people who generally excel in this role have in their personalities certain characteristics that we can identify and capture in the hiring process. These include helpfulness, compassion, a willingness to accept responsibility, and the ability to stay grounded in the face of tension or conflict. The L.A. shift supervisor demonstrated all of these qualities, creating a satisfying job for her, and an exceptional employee for the airline.