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*From Contention to Collaboration:
Creating Cultural Change in a Polarized
Organization*

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From Contention to Collaboration: Creating Cultural Change in a Polarized Organization

Renee Freedman

When two or more groups that must work together perceive one another as having agendas opposed to their own cares and priorities, an environment composed of distrust, contention, and polarization is created. Changing the quality and dynamics of such a relationship requires building new skills, constructing venues for problem solving, and allowing for a different understanding of one another. This article describes a hybrid process of learning, coaching, and facilitation designed to transform a highly contentious relationship between an airline's union leadership and its operational management into a collaborative productive partnership. The author describes the primary focus areas, or stages, used to develop the group's awareness and practices, as well as the mood shifts and events that occurred throughout process implementation.

INTRODUCTION

When organizations unionize, it is generally due to a perception by the front-line employee base that a company's officers and executive management are not taking care of "their" people. This is evidenced by a long-running breakdown of trust, communication, and cooperation. Unionization, as a basic rule, does not occur in organizations in which employees are happy and feeling cared for. Airlines, such as the one discussed in this article, are great examples of unionized companies. In airlines, there are unions for flight attendants, pilots, maintenance technicians, and others.

When unions exist, contracts are the Holy Grail. For airlines, they delineate almost everything not regulated by the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): pay rates, vacation, benefits, eating, processes for handling disturbances and critical incidents, hotel suitability, communication notification, uniform allowances and professional dress, food and beverage service, inclusion in company events and decision making venues, etc. Contract negotiations have taken as little as two years or as long as six years. The longer contract negotiations take, the more likely the relationship between union leadership and company management will erode.

Without third party intervention, the relationship continues to erode after negotiations. People return to their jobs carrying moods such as resentment, discontent, distrust, and disdain. The only existing form of respect is disrespect. Conversations cease. Partnership is an unheard of commodity.

This article describes a process of transforming an organizational culture from contentiousness to collaboration. It describes the process used to transform a post-negotiation contentious airline work environment into a collaborative work culture. It provides a brief overview of the modalities used during this four-year process and how they were interwoven in order to trigger large-scale change. These modalities consisted of coaching, facilitation, conversation, and learning. We will review the

- transformation through the perspectives of both groups;
- integration of coaching into the specific stages of the process;
- development and maturation of leadership; and
- outcomes.

This article's author designed the process used for cultural transformation. Executive and leadership coaches were selected for co-facilitating the process and for coaching key participants, based on the phase of the process and the needs of the participants throughout the four years. It is important to stress that, although multiple modalities were used, the overall context for the work was underpinned by a coach approach. Specifically, this meant having the client issue central to everything we did and as the determinant of our next steps and approach. The coaches/facilitators did not have the answers. We knew that if we created the right environment and set an appropriate context, the solutions would emerge.

ESTABLISHING AN INITIAL BASELINE

The airline industry operates in a vulnerable dynamic. Changes in global economy, public fear levels, inconsistent fuel availability and costs, and consumer perceptions profoundly influence an airline's financial wellbeing. Fiscal viability is the primary factor for determining bargaining agreements. If the company assesses their fiscal viability as poor or uncertain, corporate officers ask employees for concessions such as reduced pay or benefits. This is accompanied by a corporate promise to reinstate the concession when profits resume. However, there is often disagreement regarding when this occurs. When this difference of perspective occurs, dissension results and relationships splinter.

After four years of negotiations, a collective bargaining agreement had been signed. Although the fallout from the 9/11 terror incident was behind them, benefits and compensation were not restored to pre-9/11 levels. Customer satisfaction ratings were the worst in the regional airline industry and far below those of the parent company. Complaints were rampant among employees as well as customers. Union leaders were disheartened and angry. Contention, distrust, and misery dominated the mood. Union membership was unhappy with the terms of the new contract.

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Grievance hearings and arbitrations were at an all-time high. The union Master Executive Council (MEC) President and Vice President (VP) who negotiated the contract had been impeached. A new union MEC President and board had just been elected. The relationship between union leaders and company management had disintegrated into phone conversations with phones slammed down, emails with capital letters denoting shouting, and meetings often shut down by walkouts. A new company Senior Vice President (SVP) for customer service and VP for Flight Service had recently been appointed. A steering committee (comprised of two senior leaders from the union and the two vice presidents) asked Renee Freedman & Company to help them change the state of the union-company relationship.

Initial interviews conducted with senior leaders of both groups revealed that civility, objective listening, fairness, and respect were missing and desired. Many unsubstantiated assessments about the integrity of each group existed. Trust was a slippery commodity. Neither group knew how to proceed or, more importantly, how it wanted to proceed. Opinions about the “right” way to move forward differed for both groups. Most everyone indicated the need for a respectful, communicative, and productive relationship.

In discussions, we discovered one common factor: everyone was happy to tell us the “truth” about the causes for the current state of the relationship. This encouraged us. Perspectives of the senior leaders who requested our services were used as the basis to develop a questionnaire designed to identify a baseline in three areas: trust, hope, and stewardship.

We conducted 29 interviews. The purpose of the interviews was two-fold: First, we intended to create a baseline delineating the condition of the relationship in terms of trust, hope, and stewardship. Second, we wanted to ascertain whether or not the individuals in each group were willing to spend two workdays together in a room.

Of the 29 people interviewed, 15 were airline managers and 14 were union leaders. One union leader who responded to emails and calls, however, did not show up for the scheduled interview. Interview findings were not surprising.

- Suspicion, anger, and distrust were revealed as the primary moods.
- Trust was non-existent across group lines and within each group.
- At least one member of each group was distrusted by almost everyone interviewed.
- There was one person in each group that was trusted by 90% of the people interviewed.
- Neither group felt treated as professionals by the other group.

The coaches/facilitators did not have the answers. We knew that if we created the right environment and set an appropriate context, the solutions would emerge.

- Everyone, without exception, felt inadequately appreciated for his or her work.
- Clear distinctions between concepts such as “personal” vs. “professional” were absent.
- There was a misconception regarding the role listening plays in conversation.
- Monologue was the preferred method of speaking.
- Managers expressed frustration that company rules were not being strictly adhered to across the board. Union leaders expressed frustration about rules being applied unfairly and inconsistently.
- No one felt cared for by the other group.
- Each group had their own concept regarding what constituted appropriate working conditions for the flight attendants.
- The group consistently perceived as most powerful was the one to which the interviewee did not belong. They felt the intention of the other group was to control them.
- Everyone was concerned with backlash.
- Union leaders did not believe that senior airline managers were authentically committed to improve the relationship or working conditions of the flight attendants. Senior airline managers did not believe the union would willingly participate in a process that could improve the relationship.

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The intensity in which the polarity of the relationship was expressed surprised us. Descriptors such as “toxic,” “cruel,” “bullying,” “eat their own,” “back-biting,” “animalistic,” and “unforgiving” were spoken with ease. There was name-calling and tears. No one stopped the interview. Two people questioned the safety of providing honest and full answers.

Each interviewee believed that the problem resided with the other group. The union insisted on being treated as professional equals during joint business matters, while some first line managers only considered the union leaders as flight attendants, and therefore, subordinates. Some managers also felt that strict adherence to rules, even if not applicable, must be agreed upon by the union before the managers would listen to union concerns.

Overall, we found little or no trust. When someone initially stated trust existed, further explanation revealed distrust. Everyone *wanted* to trust, especially in the area of maintaining confidentiality. Furthermore, there was overwhelming doubt that a reciprocal partnership could be sustained. However, 90% of the interviewees believed that the problem with the relationship could

be repaired. Underneath the doubt existed hope for partnership and collaboration.

The initial leadership group concurred with the accuracy of the findings. We were given a charter to facilitate one “workshop” to address the issues identified in the interviews. We were to set the groundwork for a relationship and working environment in which professionalism and kindness prevailed. This charter was based on two premises. First, if both parties were kind and civil to one another, the relationship would be healthy, productive, and positive. Second, this could be accomplished in one session.

SHARING A ROOM

Both parties committed to attend a two-day dialogue session. Sixty-five people (representatives and managers from each of the seven hubs and headquarters) attended. Some individuals attended only after pleading from their leaders and a promise that they could leave if the session became a sham. We expected the groups to sit on separate sides of the aisle. Instead, clusters of 3-5 union leaders and clusters of 4-6 managers sat amongst one another. The front row consisted of the MEC Vice President, the MEC Employee Assistance Program chairperson, and the company SVP. This row arrangement played a critical part in the session’s success.

Each group restricted what they said and engaged in while in the other group’s presence. The union postponed the start of the session until one of their highly regarded officers arrived late due to a flight delay. The company went along with the delay. Each small gesture by one of the groups was noted and used towards determining “can we trust that this is a true effort versus a manipulative one?” Historically, trust became so decimated that every action and statement was assessed as a means to determine each other’s credibility.

These were our goals for the session:

- Both groups remain for the two-day session.
- Both groups participate in the learning activities.
- Conduct non-confrontational conversations.
- Both groups acknowledge one another positively at the end of the session.
- Both groups agree to and request a follow-on session.

Our approach focused on creating a two-day experience that opened a window to seeing each other as human beings instead of “opponents.” The current “opponent” perspective of the group negatively influenced all conversations, mindsets, and the capacity to build trust. We did not ask them to start liking one another or to declare peace. We allowed them to be authentic in their feelings about one another and the overall relationship. We

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asked them to listen without interruption, to focus on listening for what could be learned, and to refrain from name-calling or enraged emotional outbreaks.

Four critical elements were designed into the session: fun, learning, interaction, and food. Learning focused on clarifying distinctions of trust, using guidelines for engaging with one another, identifying shared values, practicing acknowledgment, and modeling collaboration. Conversational exchange was limited to discussion about the concepts of partnership, trust, and acknowledgment as well as their experience of the session. We did not engage in conversations about past experiences and history. To build a new foundation that encouraged trust, collaboration, productive conversations, and new actions, we needed to stay away from the minefield of the past.

To set the framework for productive engagement, a set of guidelines for listening, speaking, and thinking was developed. As the participants read these aloud, members of each group shouted with glee at having a list of practices for engaging with one another in a peaceful and respectful manner. They expressed hope that this set of behaviors would create a sustainable practice of interaction and thus productive and positive conversations.

The groups played a game to demonstrate the difference in outcomes between collaborative efforts and competitive efforts. Each group was divided into teams based on job and officer functions, and had the choice whether to collaborate with or compete against one another. Both groups were surprised by what they learned. First, having fun together was easy and, for the time being, distrust of one another disappeared. Second, a large amount of competition existed within each group. Without exception, the group with less given power perceived the groups with more given power as the “bad guys.” Third, the difference between the results attained and the capacity to “win” increased five-fold when they collaborated instead of competed.

In contemplating the session design, we decided to devote only one module to teaching a new awareness of trust. In this module, we discussed trust based on the work of Fernando Flores and Robert Solomon. In their book, *Building Trust* (2001), it's stated that “trust is a matter of reciprocal relationships” (p. 14) and “...it means entering into a relationship in which control is no longer the issue” (p. 45). They identify three types of trust: blind trust, simple trust, and genuine trust. The group easily recognized that they operated in the simple trust mode. Each statement, action, event, and/or situation was treated as a “do or die” phenomenon. If one statement was untrue or situation unfolded with an unpleasant outcome, the person responsible was deemed untrustworthy for life. Judgments of untrustworthiness made ten years prior were still considered relevant, even without a single instance of

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untrustworthiness since then. There was no capacity to rebuild trust or for building genuine trust – trust that allows for a person to be trusting in the long term although individual occurrences of broken trust might occur from time to time. The participants greeted the concept of genuine trust as if we were asking them to build a plane without a manual.

We asked them to collectively create a common definition of trust to be used as a basis for building trust together. The participants divided into small groups composed of both company and union personnel. The room woke up! Everyone had an opinion. An hour later, each group had a definition of trust. Voting determined the two favorites, which were then discussed, combined, and tweaked. The discussion was easy, focused, and productive. A first milestone was reached. A logo was selected AND all applauded their first collaborative effort.¹

A similar approach was implemented for developing a collective set of values. Our goal was to ensure that value selection represented the diversity of the value systems present among the combined group. Once again the room came alive with conversation.

An acknowledgment exercise, the session's last activity, was by far the most challenging exercise of the two days. Both groups were asked to acknowledge three positive qualities or actions of the other group. It took the groups 40 minutes to craft safe, general, yet authentic, acknowledgments.

As mentioned previously, the role of sharing food played a significant role in the success of the two days. One area where shared values were evident was in their value of food. Each group, independently and without prior coordination, brought snacks to share and broke bread together during lunch and breakfast. Perhaps due to the importance of food and beverage service on flights, dining and snacking appeared to be a peace zone for small talk and humor – untouched by history and antagonism.

The session's secondary purpose was to determine the capacity of key union leaders and senior managers to be coached. Activity discussions and comments made to us during break time instilled optimism for the “coachability” of the groups. Another encouraging factor regarding the coachability of the leadership group was demonstrated by the previously mentioned front row. During the session, those three individuals laughed, joked around, and shared comments with one another while engaging fully in the learning. They visibly had a great time together – as if they were long-time friends seeing a show. It was their consistent interaction throughout the two days that provided optimism that the groups

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¹After the session, the trust logo and the interaction guidelines were printed and laminated on a card equivalent in size to their company identification badges. These were distributed to everyone and are still being used.

and their members were indeed coachable and could develop a productive and collaborative working relationship.

At the end of this first session, the SVP ran up to us with a huge grin and thanked us profusely. The MEC officers did the same. Both groups agreed that objectives were exceeded. They desired to do this again. They also requested that we visit the seven hub-bases and work with the appropriate local management and union representatives.

LOCAL FLAVOR AND A LITTLE GROUP COACHING

Prior to the second national session, we visited all seven bases. The relationship between union leadership and Flight Service Managers varied in degree of compatibility and productivity. At two bases, the Flight Service Managers and union leaders engaged in pleasant and productive relationships. At two bases, there were contentious relationships. Three bases had a civil, yet distrusting, relationship. The purpose of the local sessions was to identify the conflicts and the obstacles to partnership and to develop a vision for a positive local relationship.

These sessions provided an opportunity for group coaching and some spontaneous individual coaching. For the most part, the coaching resulted in insights and a shift of opinion about the other group. However, in cases where an individual operated in the victim-perpetrator-rescuer model, there was great resistance. We observed at least nine individuals taking a stand in order to keep their victim status alive. We observed seven people digging their heels in to keep their rescuer status alive. And, we found three persons working really hard to create perpetrator personas. Since we were there to transform the current working environment into a collaborative one, those folks that operated from the victim-rescuer-perpetrator model perceived us as perpetrators. The current environment worked well for their chosen role personas, and there was no desire to change.

The coaching focused on different issues depending upon the base. They included questions like these:

- What's safe and not safe to speak about?
- What role does the *need to blame* play?
- What would a collaborative local partnership look like?
- What's the distinction between *managing from care* and *managing from forced power*?
- What role is fear playing?
- What does the current relationship cost you?
- What responsibility does each person have for creating the current relationship?

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Of the seven bases, six local teams engaged in conversation to move them forward into partnership. They discussed issues of an inter-relational nature and began to learn about each other's patterns, thought processes, assessments, sense of humor, and quirks. Many assumptions were put to rest. They reflected on the questions asked and revealed themselves to one another. Each of the six teams left the session with commitments for applying specific new actions and practices. Some of these included listening from a learning perspective, initiating a casual conversation, creating a different body posture when making requests, having lunch with someone from the other group, asking each other for help, and asking for someone's ideas.

When a person was, at first, hesitant to share or admit not knowing, they eventually joined in. Everyone reported gaining something valuable. Union leaders, who originally doubted the company's sincerity, began to rethink their belief and allow for the possibility of that the company was sincere.

The session with the seventh and last group did not go well. They stated that they wanted a better relationship. However, this did not mean a partnership. Amongst the tension, victimization, and perpetration, we learned that each longed to be rescued by the other. They were fighting over the victim role. We found no one open to coaching. In this session, we experienced the historical cruel and destructive relationship described during the interviews. In each case, the person declaring victimhood was perceived as a perpetrator by the other group. The remaining participants assumed roles as co-victims or rescuers. No one expressed interest in learning. Each group wanted to hear that they were right and the other group was wrong.

A CHAOTIC SECOND SESSION

It is not uncommon that the first try of a recipe is delicious but the second try of the recipe doesn't quite come out as tasty. This was our experience with the second national session. The tension that spilled over from the failed and hostile seventh group session was apparent. The mood created in the first session was overpowered by the angry and resentful mood generated by the people from the seventh base. Shifting this tense mood was critical. We chose to use the learning activities to do so.

Session two's theme was learning. We presented distinctions associated with being a learner and the act of learning. These distinctions included habits that shut down the learning process, the role trust plays in learning, some learning models, and making a commitment to learning. We also addressed distinctions that were often confused with one another such as commitment versus expectations, commands/demands versus requests, and reaction versus responsiveness. The activities were conducted in triads or small groups.

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Three factors shifted the mood from tension to openness: the continued use of the interaction guidelines, teaching the qualities and pitfalls of the victim-rescuer-perpetrator model, and an exercise that distinguished hearing from listening. In the exercise, many participants observed that they engaged in little, if any, intentional listening with members of the other group. After the exercise, the folks who had clustered protectively around the seven “victims” dispersed to other areas of the room. Additionally during the exercise, a regional director and the local union President of the seventh base addressed their distrust of one another. As they shifted from hearing to listening, both identified erroneous assessments they were making about one another.

We discussed competencies required to be both trusting and trustworthy. A short quiz was given and the results discussed in small groups. Each person discovered at least one area where they were not engaging in trustworthy behavior and one area in which they were distrusting.

The learning theme provided a clear context to speak about coaching. We did this by modeling what the interaction sounds like. No volunteers were forthcoming. This was no surprise considering the state of trust. Instead, one facilitator coached the other. There were four points we desired to make:

1. Questions were for exploratory purposes and not for making someone wrong or right.
2. Being coached could be fun and interesting.
3. Confidentiality is mandated by the International Coach Federation’s Ethical Standards.
4. Coaching is an opportunity to experience intentional listening.

This module ended with a request by the union for the company to fund coaching for them to work through internal issues with other union leaders. It also ended with a request by the managers to have access to coaching, as desired. Both requests were granted.

The session ended with the group acknowledging what they learned about themselves and declaring their desire to continue the learning and partnership-building process. The acknowledgments came much easier and quicker than during the first session.

After this second session, in 2006, we were requested to design and facilitate a customized process to build trust, open communication, teach skills needed for effective partnership, and to facilitate dialogues that encouraged listening, problem solving, and the enhancement of working conditions for everyone. After receiving input from most managers and leaders, a set of offerings, including coaching and live events, was agreed upon for annual delivery.

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THE PROCESS

This process is a long-term effort directed and managed equally by management and union leadership while being funded by the airline. The process is conducted primarily via facilitated sessions between the two groups on national, local, and leadership levels and individual executive coaching sessions. Novice Training Sessions are conducted on a yearly basis to train new union officers and airline managers in the practices foundational to the process and to provide recurrent training as needed. Coaching is provided to support the learning initiated by the sessions.

To create the process, we reviewed the feedback from the first two sessions, our observations regarding their speed of learning, and the interview responses. Conversations with the original steering committee were conducted. After considering many sources and conducting many conversations, we chose to construct and implement an evolutionary process that could be adapted and customized as changes occurred. Additionally, a model founded on stewardship, loosely based upon Peter Block's book *Stewardship*, represented the intention we wanted to develop and see implemented in practice. We developed the process using the structure of stages. A description of the process stages is provided in the next few pages.

Stage One – Developing a baseline and vision

In the first phase, representative members of each team are interviewed and a baseline of the current relationship, the challenges ahead, and a vision for what is desired is constructed. The first set of national and local open dialogue sessions are conducted. In them, the findings are presented and initial training is conducted that focuses on building trust, identifying shared values, and introducing basic protocols for expressive (speaking) and receptive (listening) communication.

Stage Two – Creating a learning culture

Stage Two begins once there is some trust built between the two groups. In the second phase, an organizational learning structure is created to encourage individuals to learn together across and within each group. The primary focus is on learning competencies that are foundational to several critical distinctions: building genuine trust, creating willing and objective listening, acknowledging one another, allowing for cultural and perceptual differences, and conducting conversations that are based on common understanding.

Stage Three – Practicing partnership

Stage Three is implemented when the collective group demonstrates some autonomous competency in the skills learned in Stage Two. In Stage Two, participants create a common definition and template defining the qualities that must exist for the partnership to be genuine and productive. Challenges are identified, partnered

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communication is learned and practiced, trust is tested, joint decision making and problem solving is initiated, and issues are articulated and discussed in accordance with the guidelines and skills learned in the previous stages of the process. Dialogues are conducted to problem solve and discuss issues important to and affecting the flight attendants, union leaders, and management.

Stage Four – Accountable action

Stage Three and Stage Four overlap. The overlap begins when there is articulated commitment to the partnership and problems begin to be resolved, first and foremost in the interest of the flight attendants. In this phase, the team learns and practices responsibility and committed follow through. The groups make definable commitments to one another that are discussed and tracked. These commitments are defined by action, the name of the individual responsible for completing the action, and the date or time frame the action by which the commitment is to be completed.

Stage Five – Integrative communication

Once commitments are being completed and trust is further fortified, Stage Five begins. In this stage, the teams move from defensive and offensive communication techniques to genuine open communication techniques. Breakdowns and challenges are discovered and addressed. The need for negotiation and intimidation lessens as the leadership and management groups begin to communicate as an integrative team with similar objectives and focus. Skills such as speaking on behalf of healthy conflict, conflict resolution, contextual listening, and instilling trust through listening are practiced. Additionally, new interviews are conducted and the integrated team's vision is reviewed and updated.

Stage Six – Generativity

In Stage Six, the learning and results begin to flow directly to the local bases and flight attendant population. One set of positive results acts to catalyze another set of results, thus creating networks of actions. Conversations are conducted daily. Recurrent practice transitions into transparent behavior. Learning transforms to teaching coaching skills and “in the moment” problem resolution practices. Additionally, in this stage, the robustness and commitment for the process is tested for viability in external and informal situations and environments.

Stage Seven - The business of business

This stage begins once the combined team is resolving issues, keeping commitments, and communicating openly with little, if any, concentrated effort. The vision is operational and the group is ready to collaborate on projects that increase the sustainability of the organization, including with those departments outside of In-Flight Services. Brainstorming, project management, financial conversations, business distinctions and generation are added to

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the complement of skills building and activities engaged in by the participants.

Stage Eight – Sustainability and stewardship

In this last phase, the group becomes self-sustaining. National sessions are formally facilitated twice a year for vision update, check-in, and applicable new learning. The Novice Training Session continues to be conducted yearly. Leadership sessions increase to twice yearly. Group, individual, and/or team coaching is provided as the primary means of support. Management and leadership mentor new participants, schedule non-facilitated local dialogue sessions, and update value sets to ensure relevancy. Flight attendants are integrated into the process and crew lounges are stocked with learning material for professional development.

Focus, results, and outcomes

Stage One, baseline development, was defined by the initial interviews, the first two national sessions, and the seven local sessions. There was no coaching in this stage. The pivotal accomplishment was the agreement of both groups to transition the conversations and learning into a longer-term process. Other results included

- selection of a shared list of values to practice as a priority over irrelevant or non-applicable rules;
- a relevant and usable definition of trust;
- accepted guidelines for interaction;
- three experiences of authentic acknowledgment;
- exchange of ideas, concerns, and agreements at local bases;
- commitment by each participant to continue attending the sessions;
- feedback to incorporate into future sessions; and
- emails written with a combination of lower and upper case letters that represent civil conversation versus the previously used total upper case letter approach that represents yelling.

Stage Two, creating a learning culture, overlapped with Stages One and Three. Elements of Stage Two continue to be present in the sessions today, four years later. A key awareness that emerged is that when the group becomes competent in one skill, the need for learning additional skills becomes apparent.

During this stage individual coaching sessions were offered to the group. Approximately 15 people, some from each group, requested spot coaching for specific issues or conflicts. Only the VP of In-Flight Service requested ongoing coaching. She recognized that a change of leadership style and organizational changes within her department was necessary for the process to be successful.

The pivotal accomplishment was the agreement of both groups to transition the conversations and learning into a longer-term process.

An *ontological* model of coaching was employed. This approach enables the person being coached to observe how they take action, respond to situations, and perceive the world through the domains of language, body, emotion, history, and practice. Each person was encouraged to reflect on the logic they used and the experience they were having in the situations they encountered. Each session produced a shift in thinking and perspective.

Union leaders actively took advantage of the individual coaching sessions to work out relationship issues, primarily within their own team. These requests started with one or two solo coaching sessions, culminating in a few two-person sessions. This focus continued until the union-specific session where the majority of the time was spent coaching. The coaching revealed the lack of trust that existed among these elected officers. It became evident that different value systems were competing. The Master Executive officers and chairpersons were interested in accomplishing something new and moving forward. Local base presidents resisted due to their distrust of the company's intention. Through group coaching, we developed a set of values that the union leaders needed to ensure would be respected by the company in order to trust them. This took repeated conversations and resulted in repeated breakdowns. Eventually, this conversation created a new level of trust between most of the union leaders. That being said, during this time period, there were union leaders who resigned in protest of the process and the new values they were being asked to own and practice.

There was one request for coaching between a local union leader and a company director. It was focused, not on their relationship, but the different operational models each wanted to use as the basis for exchanging and tracking problems. Once we established a common language in which to speak with one another, they discovered that they both wanted the same model but were using different words and examples to describe it. This led to the development of tools and procedures that are being used four years later and have been adopted by the other six bases.

Stage Three, practicing action, introduced discussion and resolution of issues. The union leadership had been responsible for introducing 90% of the issues since the start of discussions. As the collaboration process moved into the third year, management began to initiate discussion on issues important to them. All issues were discussed within a conversational structure. First, a small team of people chosen by the topic initiator discussed the issue. Then the larger group was invited into the conversation. Commitments were made at the end of the discussion.

In this stage, the group created a chart to track the commitments agreed upon in the sessions. It is updated quarterly and reviewed at each national session. It has also spawned commitment tracking in regional and local partnership sessions. As of May 2010, there have

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Each session produced a shift in thinking and perspective.

been a combined estimated total of 450 commitments accepted and 390 completed. During this stage, union leaders started to trust that the process was not a “fix” that would be abandoned once an underlying objective was reached.

Coaching began to be offered to select management personnel in three-month increments as well as shorter periods for specific issue resolution. Most recipients were in the midst of some type of professional transformation. The coaching focused on creating awareness for the new paradigm, encouraging small steps, and developing courage. Each person being coached had a challenge to navigate that they found extremely uncomfortable.

The union continued to use coaching to resolve internal trust issues. As they expressed more comfort with the process and discovered that they had the freedom to determine their own coaching agenda, three to five sessions were requested at a time.

In *Stage Four, accountable action*, management and maintenance of the commitment chart became the joint responsibility of the company and union. Additionally, a procedure for handling and ensuring full communication for critical incidents between the company and union leaders was developed. This procedure integrated functions such as operations, employee assistance, safety, management, and local union coordination. Development of this procedure led to an invitation to the SVP and VP to speak at an international union safety conference. It also resulted in a reduction of complaints by flight attendants who often cited feeling abandoned and forgotten by the company in the aftermath of critical incidents.

The learning in this stage focused on personal and professional responsibility. Attention focused on moving out of the blame pattern and into one of self-accountability. The groups expanded their understanding of the concepts of choice and professionalism. The company was asked to determine clear boundaries for identification and use of alternates (for example, flight attendants assigned special duty in order to support the Flight Service Managers at each base). The company and union also addressed concerns regarding a newly introduced on-board sales program.

Coaching availability was expanded to all directors and senior union leadership as desired. The coaching focus for the directors was to address accountability from the perspective of being a customer for their direct reports. This meant eliciting commitments, providing the support needed to ensure they received a satisfying result, declaring their satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and making clear agreements. The directors moved into this role with enthusiasm. They showed up with clear issues and concerns. They completed their “homework” and compared notes.

The coaching focused on creating awareness for the new paradigm, encouraging small steps, and developing courage.

Coaching for union leadership focused on being responsible for making requests of others, developing leadership presence, behaving consistent with ethical practices, and discussing the effect of personal losses and experiences on leadership. Some leaders recognized that they were playing the roles of victim and perpetrator. Before the coaching, most believed that they were rescuers. After reflecting on events, they realized that the one role not being played was that of the rescuer, although they perceived their position as a rescuing/protecting position. They began to modify what was asked of others and to decrease their reactive expressions. They recognized that each time they reacted, it took a great deal of time to rebuild trust. They came to understand that as a union leader, this was not just a reflection of them but of the entire union.

A major breakdown of trust occurred during this stage. One of the six bases closed and personnel were reduced at a second base, requiring the company to reassign the “home” bases of applicable flight attendants. The company and union developed a joint plan. However, when the moment arrived, the agreed upon plan was not followed by the company. The union’s mood catapulted back to distrust and the union threatened to disengage from the process.

We conducted a group coaching session with senior management and senior leadership. When we asked everyone if they thought we could get through this issue, only two people did not feel that it would work out. Coaching focused on expectations and conflicting commitments. We looked at the commitments inherent in the positions of the executive management team and then provided coaching to reveal the causes for not honoring promises. The union was concerned with the perception of their trustworthiness by their membership, especially in terms of re-election. The company was concerned with the cost and timing of the base transfers. An apology was made to the union and a new plan was created. Additionally, an article was published in the Flight Service newsletter explaining the new plan and the reason for it. Every displaced flight attendant was given a position at another base instead of being laid off. The union felt that its integrity was restored, and the company was able to continue flight coverage with minimal disruption.

Although this breakdown occurred, a pivotal event occurred during this stage that demonstrated the quality of relationship being generated. The MEC Vice President, who was highly respected by the combined group, passed away. He was a passionate advocate for the process and was known for his humor, candor, and willingness to hold others accountable for behavior and commitments. His death was a sad time for all. Instead of flying standby per the contract, airline executive management reserved seats for the union leadership to fly into the main hub. Union leadership and executive management then flew together in a specifically allocated airplane to the funeral service location.

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At the service, the SVP read a message written by the president of the airline. This marked a turning point in the union's involvement, advocacy, and commitment to the continuation of the work.

Stage Five, integrative communication, is the current stage. Due to contract negotiations, both groups asked to remain in this stage until a new contract was agreed upon. In this stage, the groups took ownership of the relationship's vision, mission, and guidelines for interaction by updating them. Activities such as Flight Attendant Appreciation days became joint efforts, equally planned and executed by both groups. These events have evolved creatively from simple barbecues to pamper days with services like massages and bistro cafés with full table service.

Coaching in this stage focused on leadership and strategic relationships, with an emphasis on creating games and strategic thinking. The concern of the VP of Flight Service was succession planning and development of her team into one that engaged in healthy business practices, compassionate acts, big picture thinking, and meaningful relationship building. Additionally, restrictions on coaching for union leadership were relaxed and requests for coaching were granted on a request-by-request basis. Individuals, both from the union and management team, were able to receive standalone sessions as needed.

Midway through this stage, the Senior Vice President was transferred to the parent company. Two weeks later, the President of the regional airline resigned. Great concern was generated. Concern focused on whether or not the new officers would value the process and continue to support and fund it. During his first session, the new Senior VP stated that he was offered the position with the mandate to continue the process and the company's positive relationship with the union. Trust is still being built and his trustworthiness assessed by both groups. During this stage, both groups became activists for the process.

- The Flight Service VP delivered a presentation of the process and key results to the Chairman of the Board of the parent company. The process easily received the endorsement of the board of directors and key officers of the parent company. It is currently being considered for implementation by the parent company.
- The union MEC president and vice president offered to make presentations to the union of the parent company, describing the process and its outcomes.
- At the Novice Training session held in the summer of 2010, the MEC Secretary shared the story that when she attended recent union leadership training in Washington, DC, and heard other leaders bemoan

During his first session, the new Senior VP stated that he was offered the position with the mandate to continue the process and the company's positive relationship with the union.

the relationship between their union group and their associated airline, the worst she could come up with was that the relationship was workable. However, she was quick to add that she was thankful for the trust that now exists between the two groups due to engagement in the process.

- Members of both groups' negotiating teams credit the process with changing the way current contract negotiations are being approached. Instead of being a "no conversation" zone and a polarizing environment, meaningful conversations are occurring, along with meal sharing and friendly banter.

Once the new bargaining agreement is signed, we will move into Stage Six. This is when a true collaborative dynamic can be introduced. It will require building additional trust and openness. The group is ready for this as long as context is set for when it is and is not applicable.

BIG RESULTS, BIG OUTCOMES

As stated earlier, when we began the process, the airline was ranked last in customer service. In an April 2010 survey, the airline ranked 5th out of 19 airlines for customer satisfaction. On average, for every 100,000 passengers, there was less than one (only 0.64) complaint received. Most of the complaints regard communication, delays, and ground service employees. The survey added that this is a 62% increase in customer satisfaction since 2008 (beginning of stage 3). The website, journeysetc.com, presented these results in its June 2010 article, "Airlines Receiving the Greatest Number of Complaints." It stated, "The leap from being America's worst airline to one of the best today is impressive." Furthermore, for the last year, customer satisfaction of this regional airline has been five points higher than its parent and primary customer, a major airline. This is a first.

As another sign of the progress made, flight attendants who were hired by this airline due to layoffs by the parent airline do not want to return to the parent airline. Some have requested union leadership to look into the possibility of them remaining with the smaller airline. Although pay is less, they are happier and desire to stay where they are happy.

In a survey we conducted with the two groups in September 2011, 24 of 25 respondents stated that there was a positive relationship between the company and union and that they support each other's mission. All 25 respondents indicated that the ability to trust one another has improved.

Through the integration of learning, discussing, problem solving, and coaching, a culture has changed. Employees are staying longer. They are making requests for learning. They are making

The design of the process and the learning derived from the process continues to evolve.

Breakdowns occurred when least expected.

Breakthroughs came at surprising times.

consistent offers of support to one another. They laugh. They extend invitations to one another. They celebrate each other. They grieve together. And, most importantly, they trust and co-create a happy, productive work environment with one another.

CONCLUSIONS

As described in this article, transforming a culture from one in which contention prevails into one in which collaboration prevails requires a process composed of multiple modalities that allows for breakdowns and encourages personal learning as well as professional development. The design of the process and the learning derived from the process continues to evolve. Breakdowns occurred when least expected. Breakthroughs came at surprising times. Personnel changes caused turbulence but didn't knock the process or commitment of the groups off the flight path. The airline and the union are both benefiting from its results. The process, though incomplete, is evolving and continuing.

RESOURCES

Institute for Generative Leadership: www.generativeleadership.co
 Journeyetc: www.journeyetc.com

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Themes for Issues 29-32 of IJCO®

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Issue 29, 8(1): Organizational Coaching and Organizational Development/
Organizational Effectiveness

Issue 30, 8(2): Organizational Coaching and Coaching Culture

Issue 31, 8(3): Organizational Coaching in Health Care

Issue 32, 8(4): Organizational Coaching and Change

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