

TRANSFORMING SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING LOW-COST AIRLINE

By Brian Glaser and Dustin Schneider | gothamCulture & Susan van der Ryst | Comair Limited

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2011, Comair Limited in South Africa, embarked on a journey to a new and better way of working, when it strategically selected Sabre Airline Solutions (Sabre)* to provide a comprehensive end-to-end airline solution. The new platform was designed to deliver benefits such as integrated systems, improved customer experience, integration with third party systems, an opportunity to enhance and grow its distribution footprint, and ultimately to grow its revenue. Sabre acted as the catalyst for a great change for Comair and was seen as the 'voice of possibility'.

A technological transformation like the Sabre cutover can create procedural, attitudinal, and behavioral complexities among organizational members, resulting in decreased levels of efficiency and customer service, which impacts bottom line business performance. With this on the forefront of the leadership's mind, gothamCulture, an organizational development firm that helps companies achieve exceptional performance through the lens of culture and leadership,

was retained to facilitate the change management process within Comair. With guidance from gothamCulture, Comair was able to create a clear case for change by gaining commitment from key stakeholders through engaging and creative methods and by providing the necessary structure, skills, and tools to assist people working through the change.

BACKGROUND

In 1946, Commercial Air Services began operating with Fairchild UC-78's (found in Cairo after the war) as a charter service to some of the remotest places in Africa. It has grown organically, from offering its first scheduled service in 1948 with a new Cessna model 195, to entering the main domestic routes in 1992 with Boeing 737-200 and Fokker aircraft, to currently carrying an average of 4.8 million passengers per annum in its Boeing 737-300/400/800 aircraft.

Comair underwent major changes in 1996, when it became a franchise partner with British Airways. From this point, Comair became known as British Airways Comair, as it took on the colors and livery of British Airways International. The next major step was launching South Africa's first 'low-cost' carrier in the form of kulula.com, in 2001. kulula means 'easily' in Zulu and has, since inception, revolutionized air travel in South Africa by making it much easier and more accessible to the general public.

Evident to Comair's innovative and creative culture, it launched the Comair Training Centre (CTC) in the early 2000's, which provides operations training for the Boeing B737-2/3/4/5/800 series for both local and international flight deck aircrew, cabin crew, and flight operations personnel. Comair Travel offers travel/



Photo courtesy of kulua.com

holiday packages to South Africa's largest and broadest digital travel distribution network and the SLOW brand, and in partnership with FNB and RMB Private Bank, sets a global standard for airport lounges, and continues to win awards for its creative excellence. As a part of their global standard, Comair launched its very own catering unit, Food Directions, in 2012.

For close to 70 years, Comair has provided a product and service of consistent value, reliability, and professionalism with an aviation record of 67 consecutive years of operating profit. Today, the organization employs over 1,800 employees across southern Africa, serving ten cities with both its British Airways and kulula.com brands. It is the reputation of quality and passion for service that will ensure that Comair continues to play a major role in the South African aviation and travel industry.

THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC CHANGE

Having grown organically, Comair had a number of systems that had been "cobbled together" with which it was operating its business. After a strategic review of the business in 2010, the leadership team at Comair took the decision to implement an integrated system to replace the previous jumble of systems (specifically to the kulula.com operations), allowing for streamlined operations and better cost control, directly affecting the company's bottom line.

Sabre Airline Solutions was appointed to offer products and solutions specific to Comair's needs. The objective was to enhance and streamline the organizations' operational and reservation booking systems by applying industry best practices and processes that would be facilitated through the solutions that Sabre would provide. Sabre's "software as a service" implementation methodology was chosen with the view that it would assist to grow and be scaled to support the strategic initiatives the leadership team was planning in the future.

After a careful review of the initial implementation plan, the leadership team appointed a Program Delivery Executive with the mandate to deliver the solution at an enterprise level. He along with his team of resources quickly realized that great systems don't make great organizations. Rather, it is the informed, skilled, and engaged staff with access to great tools who do.

As Comair embarked on the largest change in its history; the transition to a new platform for their reservations booking engine, staffing, and operational control systems, the journey kicked off. Commonly used models of change were found to be limiting given the scope of the implementation ahead. It was then agreed upon to develop a framework and approach that aligned with the company's culture that would ensure that the "wisdom within the organization" would be garnered.

In order to minimize the impact on the corporate culture and climate that the implementation of such a major technical transformation could have, gothamCulture was retained to develop a change management strategy. A Change and Communications Manager, with a strong marketing and communications background, was appointed within Comair and collaboratively Comair and gothamCulture gave form to the change management program.

CORPORATE CULTURE AND CLIMATE DIAGNOSTIC

A clear understanding of the internal dynamics and issues already present within Comair was critical in order to design and execute a meaningful change plan. Interviews were conducted by gothamCulture with all members of the Leadership Team as well as focus group discussions with all the departments. The discussions focused on exploring high level themes, specifically general perceptions around Sabre, prevailing corporate culture and dynamics, leadership issues and challenges, how change has been dealt with in the past, and the insights that could be gained from these previous change processes. Input and recommendations for the effective implementation of the pending transition to the Sabre solution was obtained from all staff involved in this phase.

- The findings from the diagnostic survey indicated a skepticism around Sabre based on historic experiences of ineffective change management processes and also because of fear and insecurity around potential job losses
- A general skepticism existed around Sabre as a “savior” or being better than the previous systems
- The vision and strategy of the Comair leadership was unclear to many of the employees and there was a general lack of understanding around how Sabre aligned with the overall strategic direction of the organization
- General communication across the organization was felt to be lacking and levels of staff engagement were reported to be poor
- The impact of a misaligned leadership team manifested in a lack of collaboration and integration across businesses
- General findings suggested that the prevailing culture was experienced as:
 - Innovative and creative
 - Focused on safety and customer service
 - In transition from a family business to a professionally run organization
 - Change averse
 - Inconsistent

The high predominance of long serving staff members had both a negative and positive impact. There was loyalty and commitment to the organization and high levels of brand identification; however, the challenge was one of change fatigue and change averseness as a result of excessive change over the past few years. A positive cultural theme that emerged was that of “we make it happen”. In spite of numerous challenges, this was an organization where people were inventive and had learned to improvise, deal with ambiguity, deal with challenges, and implement change. In addition to understanding Comair’s culture, gothamCulture’s familiarity with South Africa’s culture from prior client engagements in that region of the world helped to ensure that aspects of the national culture and their impact on this transformation were taken into account.

THE CHANGE PROGRAM

An organizational change of this magnitude can create challenges for people as they work to become functionally competent on new systems and processes. This transition necessitated the development of new thinking around leadership and culture as they impact the contextual environment of people who require new tools, skills, and behaviors in order to adjust to the new system. Fortunately, many of these risks can be mitigated by proactively and thoughtfully working to inform and engage people in the process and by taking a holistic approach to navigating this change.

The development and execution of the integrated change program included key recommended activities over a one-year period such as:

- Re-conceptualizing and formulating Comair’s vision, mission, and strategy
- Formulating plans and implementation support for the Sabre transition
- Formulating mitigation plans and tactics to address significant, or likely risks associated with the process of changing to Sabre, that can have negative employee, customer, and brand impact
- Developing and implementing a comprehensive communication plan and tactics, including all technical and non-technical changes that need to be cascaded through high-impact and multi-touch channels to employees, customers and other stakeholders, aimed at increasing engagement and effectiveness
- Revisiting the role, behaviors, and attitudes of leaders and the Leadership Team

The objectives of the change management program were agreed to be as follows:

**Alignment among the Leadership Team and other stakeholders
about their role during the Sabre implementation**



An agreed upon architecture and detailed schedule for the change program



**Communicating a consistent “drumbeat” of strategic messaging
to employees and customers in order to avoid confusion about multiple
initiatives and communications**



Managing risks associated with resistant attitudes and behaviors



Providing the necessary tools and resources to support employees and leaders



**Positively shaping opinions about critical changes by aligning
the change with Comair values**



Sustaining enthusiasm throughout the lifecycle of the transformation



Protecting and building upon the Comair culture

From the outset, Comair and gothamCulture structured the change management process from a holistic point of view, relying on internal leaders, task forces, and a dedicated internal Change Management Team.

THE JOURNEY: OPERATION CROSSOVER

One of the change management tactics identified was to tell a compelling Sabre story and so 'Operation Crossover' was born.

Operation Crossover was launched with the fundamental focus on the theme of bridges – its history, what it stands for, its purpose, its strength, as well as the planning and work that goes into building a strong bridge.

Operation Crossover is about the journey and the experience Comair had while crossing the bridge to a new mindset as well as a smarter and better way of working. Comair was building a bridge between an old way of working with old equipment and systems to a new and better way of working with new equipment and systems. The focus was based on 5 pillars - having the right price in the market (Pricing), the right equipment (New Aircraft), world-class systems (Sabre), operationally effective (Processes), and a streamlined business (Policies). These 5 pillars act as the structure and foundation for the bridge Comair was building.

Sabre served as one of the main pillars in the structure as well as the blueprint to help Comair get to the other side. Sabre Airline Solutions was the catalyst for a great change for Comair and the voice of possibility that included ingenuities such as:

LEADERSHIP VISIBILITY

In spite of a misaligned Leadership Team and in some instances detachment from the field, there seemed no better way to get the message out to the frontline than to actually get people out to the frontline. To facilitate this, the CEO visited all the Comair sites to explain how the implementation fitted within the strategy of transitioning from a family-run business to a professionally run operation.

Comair's CEO, Erik Venter, and his colleagues charged with the Sabre implementation spent time crafting the strategy using images and narrative to explain the journey ahead. Armed with a formal visual representation of the strategy, Erik and the Sabre core team took the road and engaged with Comair employees to introduce Operation Crossover.

As these engagements went on, employees began to see the bigger picture of how Sabre would ultimately fit into the broader Comair strategy. Erik and the team talked about the global airline industry and the overall plan for implementation, focusing on how the system would benefit the organization and most importantly how it would impact each and every individual. There was both excitement and concern and whilst many concerns were raised and discussed, the staff still had some unanswered questions.

CHANGE AGENTS

Change Agents, as part of the Change Management Team, were mobilized to assist in the roll out of the change program under the guidance of the Change & Communications Manager. The team was nominated with the help of team leaders and no individual was selected based on their seniority of their current position, or their years of service. Instead, the selection was based on interest shown, dedication, and want of contributing to the process. The Change Management Team included individuals representing a cross-section of the company.

The objective of the Change Agents was to serve as eyes and ears on the ground, assist with the internal communications, and help execute the change management plan in support of the overall Sabre implementation. The Change Agents were either identified as part of the Go-To Team or the Operation Crossover Ambassadors. The Go-To Team played a functional role by answering/finding the answer to specific questions from their colleagues, while the Operation Crossover Ambassadors served as the voice, eyes, and ears of the employees and ultimately determined the mood, understanding, acceptance, or rejection towards the change as well as identifying any potential risks.



O P E R A T I O N
CROSS OVER

MAINTAINING CLARITY

While the teams appreciated the marked leadership presence that accompanied the change initiatives, through no fault of their own, and despite the excitement, they still did not quite understand why the fuss was being made or the details around what exactly Sabre would do. It was particularly important to outline a clear and concise story detailing what Sabre is, which other carriers use it, what benefits it would bring to employees and what new opportunities it would bring the airline.

In the regular email and text message updates from an Operation Crossover platform to staff, as well as updates from the CEO, the story of Operation Crossover unfolded with reference to the bridge selected for that particular communication, progress made specific to the Sabre implementation as well as the rapid approach to cutover at strategic key milestones throughout the project.

INTERACTIVE AND FUN COMMUNICATION TOOLS

In addition to the clear accessibility of leadership, regular communication updates, and an increasingly transparent business case for the transition, it was integral to the success of the initiative to capitalize on the excitement and maintain that momentum over the months and months of pre-Sabre planning.

By creating a self-service repository (Operation Crossover-branded intranet site) of official information, staff were enabled to get the answers they sought, which created a sense of community around the initiative. Games to match the mood, a countdown clock, and updates from training were all displayed prominently on the portal. To complement the 'games' section on the portal, a 'games booklet' was created with games that could match their mood towards change and served as a stress management tool, to ease the stress that comes with change.

Although the posted content was both encyclopedic and dynamic, it still required the active involvement of staff who needed to visit the site. To supplement this initiative and engage employees who didn't proactively view the portal, "push" messages were created, which came primarily in the form of key program milestones, training statistics, reminders of the benefits of transition, and of course, the number of days left to go before the business would be changed for good.

STAYING ON TRACK

Getting information out to the frontline is a large component of any change initiative, but it is by no means the only one. Getting feedback from this group is often even more important. It is imperative that staff don't feel as though this initiative is happening to them, but rather with them.

To ensure success in this challenge, and as a cornerstone to the inclusive approach, short staff surveys were created and disseminated on a regular basis. These were intended to capture the mood of the organization at strategic times throughout the months leading up to cutover. The adoption of these surveys increased with each successive survey, and the feedback gathered from them was invaluable in shaping and refining the approach.

Simply relying on survey response rates to get the information required was not enough. Serving as a key communication channel between the frontline and the core team, the Change Management Team was instituted with a mandate to address all questions from their peers out in the operation. Not necessarily well-versed on all things Sabre, they frequently went back to the core team to get the answers needed, which provided additional and crucial insight as to how the boots on the ground were feeling. Given the prominence of the initiative, committed and competent Change Agents, the well-defined narrative, the predictably and informative drumbeat of information, and the reactivity based on staff readiness, it was clear that the efforts were paying off.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

gothamCulture created a compelling narrative around the Sabre implementation that was disseminated to all leaders prior to launching Operation Crossover. The intent of the storyline was to provide, in common language, a summary that described what Sabre is all about, dispel any myths that had been created due to the lack of official information up to this point and shed some light on the business case for change.

In addition, it was important to ensure consistent delivery of messages from leadership. To that end, a specific leadership toolkit was created and distributed to all leaders and Change Agents that taught the basics of change management, how to deal with resistance in all forms, and even provided instructions for games on promoting acceptance of change; the change management capabilities in the organization were built and reinforced. To support this initiative, a selected number of leaders and all Change Agents were also given an opportunity to attend a workshop with a focus on managing change.

Training the frontline staff on the new Sabre systems played a crucial part in the change process. Failure to empower the staff with the required knowledge and confidently embrace the change would have been detrimental to the success of the cutover to the new system.

Comair needed to train 1172 staff members in preparation for the cutover to Sabre. The company had 10 weeks (including the Easter holidays) in which to achieve this task. The Senior Manager: Learning and Development, who was part of the Sabre Core team, knew this was a mammoth task. Champions and Subject Matter Experts were identified to be part of the Sabre Train-the-Trainer team. Trainers had to identify team leaders for each of the training modules, workshop content, lesson plan design, user manuals, and quick reference guides as well as facilitate classroom assessments.

Modules were staggered to ensure staff would integrate and assimilate the information in digestible pieces. It would also give them time between modules to practice and also process the information. Once all staff members were trained, on-the-job refresher training programs were implemented. This enabled certain changes or refinements to the content to be implemented in the refresher training. The on-the-job refreshers were conducted by champions identified as strong students during the classroom training. These champions acted as coaches and mentors and while they conducted the refresher training they became strong subject matter experts.

Airport 'dry runs' (simulations) commenced at all airports, debriefings were conducted after each 'dry run', and gaps were identified and addressed accordingly.

CUTOVER

Nearly eighteen months after the initial Comair discussions to embark on a partnership with Sabre, Comair was ready to cutover to the new system. The positive attitudes, commitment, support, and hard work from all employees standing as a unity; was a perfect example of a Comair culture of sacrifice, teamwork and collaboration. Comair had something to celebrate!

The change management efforts contributed to a smooth and successful cut over on the 23rd of June 2012, and customers were barely affected by the changes implemented. Internally the cutover brought greater strategic understanding of the business to employees, supported faster user adoption of new systems, fostered a better understanding of its airline product offerings and served in the end as a unifying factor in that everyone felt part of the organization.

The result of embracing a change management program was further acknowledged by Sabre, when Steve Jeans, Program Delivery Executive: Sabre, said; "this is the most successful cutover we have ever been involved in. Comair is impressively professional."



First Customer Checking In on Sabre at OR Tambo International

CHALLENGES GOING FORWARD

A key challenge for the leadership of Comair lies in their ability to optimize the strengths and talents of individuals who have emerged through this process. In addition, individuals with new skills and abilities have become extremely marketable and the challenge for Comair leadership will be to retain and grow these resources. Another challenge is to continue to keep the energy levels high, creating employee commitment, and building on the unity created during cutover.

It is also not the end of Operation Crossover... Operation Crossover Phase 2, Our Journey Continues, launched shortly after the business reached a 'steady state', with the focus on some of the post implementation delivery requirements, enhancements and the opportunities that the new platform provides the business.

CONCLUSION

The year 2012, will always be remembered as the year when Comair embarked on one of the single biggest business transformations in its history. The transition to the new platform provides Comair with an integrated solution that will in the medium and long term, result in greater efficiencies, improved distribution capabilities and the benefit of access to a global community, which is constantly reviewing processes and developing new products.

Much learning and development has taken place throughout the organization and the competencies and skills gained through this process have been invaluable. A few 'uncovered gems' with unique qualities and leadership potential were identified within the organization, giving Comair the benefit of employing and retaining the right person for the job and the individual with the opportunity for self growth.

In addition to implementing a world-class operating system, the change management process has been a unifying experience for Comair. It created a company culture of collaboration and collectively moving towards the same company objectives. The journey continues as Comair positions itself for growth and becoming a world-class airline.

** Sabre Airline Solutions is a privately held company, headquartered in Southlake, Texas and is known as the industry leader in airline software and all major travel channels. Comair implemented Sabre modules from the Sabre AirVision (Airline Marketing & Planning Solution), SabreSonic CSS (Airline Customer Sales & Service Solutions) and Sabre AirCentre (Airline Enterprise Operations Solution) product offerings.*

gothamCulture helps clients achieve exceptional organizational performance through the lens of culture and leadership. The gothamCulture team is comprised of seasoned professionals from a broad array of professional backgrounds who support client change efforts with precision and focus on achieving tangible performance gains.