

REORIENTING CULTURE FOR BETTER BUSINESS RESULTS

How JetBlue Engaged Crewmembers to Solve their Operational Problems

By Brian J. Glaser and Chris Cancialosi | gothamCulture

INTRODUCTION

JetBlue Airways Flight 15 taxis to the runway at JFK International Airport bound for Fort Lauderdale. Customers enjoy the “JetBlue Experience” in their comfortable leather seats equipped with personal televisions. Although thunderstorms throughout the afternoon caused several delays, JetBlue’s people were working together to minimize the impact to Flight 15 and to ensure a safe operation — the company’s first value. All afternoon in the System Operations Center (SOC), the nerve center of the airline, decisions were being made based on data flow from streamlined processes to help ensure that the approaching thunderstorms would not cause performance issues in the operation. Back on board Flight 15, few customers realize the complexity of the operation behind the scenes as a multitude of teams worked a myriad of logistical issues to keep more than 600 flights across the Americas moving on time.

Unfortunately, this was not always the case.

Thunder and snowstorms ground every airline from time to time. Any hiccup in the system — an isolated weather incident, mechanical problems with a single aircraft, or a last-minute crew re-scheduling — create ripple effects that can result in a major operational meltdown. JetBlue, which recently celebrated its 10th year in business, was particularly vulnerable to this. By 2007, the airline was operating at full throttle with 500 daily flights to 50 destinations under a complex labyrinth of systems that had developed organically in response to rapid growth, but which ultimately lacked the infrastructure necessary to sustain what had become a massive operation. In 2006 alone, JetBlue opened 16 new cities — a record among air carriers. Expansion to international destinations, the addition of a second type of aircraft in 2005, complex route networks, and external changes in the operating and regulatory environment added new intricacies to an already complicated situation. Snowstorms and unexpected thunderstorms only exposed the weaknesses in the system.

JetBlue’s operational challenges were in no way associated with the skill or ability of the airline’s people. Rather, it was a situation of good people working very hard at executing inefficient processes, which created outcomes that only confused and derailed an already overtaxed system.

PREPARING FOR DEPARTURE: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

After a particularly stormy summer in 2008, with near daily operational difficulties in the airline’s main hub of New York City, a dedicated team of frontline employees (known as “crewmembers” at JetBlue), came together to tackle the challenges of irregular operations (IROPs) and to find effective and lasting solutions to improve the way the airline canceled flights, restored regular

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Photo courtesy of JetBlue Airways

service, and communicated within the organization and to customers before, during and after service-disrupting events. The effort was dubbed “IROP Integrity” and was one of four strategic initiatives set by the Executive team, aimed at enhancing the airline’s operational performance.

The very nature of the problem — the high degree of complexity of flight operations — meant there were no easy solutions for JetBlue and that no one crewmember, no one leader, and no one department at the airline knew precisely how to address this multidimensional issue. Targeted solution teams had been formed over the years to solve issues (or challenges) for their piece of the travel experience, but the airline needed a holistic approach to solving the issues.

Such a large-scale problem demanded a large-scale solution and, by design, more than 200 crewmembers at JetBlue were officially involved in IROP Integrity. Prior efforts were top-down in nature, and typically were limited to the area of the organization led by that Vice President or other leader. Fundamental to the new approach was a reliance on the “wisdom of crowds” to leverage the knowledge of the people closest to the work for ideas and a focus on creating a new system that would enable crewmembers to work more effectively and efficiently as a team when confronted with delays and cancellations.

This new, frontline, employee-driven approach relied on the collective expertise of crewmembers from all major operating groups and key departments, including the SOC, Crew Services, Airports, Reservations, Pilots, Flight Attendants, & Information Technology. If an issue or operational process was determined to play a part in the way the airline canceled, recovered, and communicated during irregular operations it was deemed within the scope of the initiative. No part of the operation was left untouched.

The goal of IROP Integrity was to turn JetBlue’s operation from a liability into a competitive advantage. Crewmembers were told that there were two ways to be the best at irregular operations: Move the hub from New York, where external elements (both man-made and Mother Nature) would always challenge the operation, or own that space and become the best airline at handling irregular operations.

PUSHING BACK FROM THE GATE: CREATING THE COALITION FOR CHANGE

The primary focus of IROP Integrity was to build a culture of cooperation and shared responsibility among departments that would help the airline react quickly and effectively during irregular operations. New relationships were forged across department lines, which improved communication and organizational alignment. With new relationships came new empathy for the “shared pain” in other departments that enabled IROP Integrity teams to, for the first time, effectively use techniques like process mapping on a large scale. One such example was Maintenance Routing, a sub-team of Technical Operations who resided in the SOC. Before IROP Integrity, SOC would identify flights to cancel due to a weather event based on aircraft and crew balancing. This may have been the right decision for that day’s operation, but it nearly always resulted in a “mini-IROP” three days later for the Maintenance teams, with aircraft out of position for mandated or mandatory inspections or work. Once this additional element was added to the SOC’s decision-making process, “downstream” IROPs were reduced. Breaking down the barriers between departments was the first step to tackling the complex issues that had stymied the organization for so long.

Before work could start, gothamCulture, assessed the culture and temperament of the crewmembers whose very careers were built on a failing system. Restoring professional pride would power the initiative’s overall success, but first, the team would have to address the inherent cynicism and other emotional roadblocks that would derail the effort before take-off.

Building a broad coalition to support such a large-scale change was a challenge that had to be addressed from the start. Crewmembers had seen other efforts fizzle and fade in the past due to the lack of global scope, and doubted IROP Integrity could actually deliver. The executive sponsor acknowledged these feelings head-on and challenged people to be skeptical but not to be cynical. As crewmembers saw that the organization was serious about addressing the operational situation by dedicating proper resources and providing laser-focused executive attention to it, skepticism turned into optimism.

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CLIMBING TO ALTITUDE: BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

The fundamental belief used throughout was that the frontline crewmembers were the ones who really knew what was actually taking place during IROPs because they had hands-on experience. This principle informed every design decision, including not to involve operational consultants in the diagnostics phase. gothamCulture was retained to assist the core team in data analysis through the cultural prism. The success of the entire initiative hinged on the process by which frontline subject matter experts were engaged to not only identify what didn't work but also to play an active role developing executable solutions that considered all of the stakeholders affected by each situation.

Accordingly, frontline crewmembers who played a role in handling IROPs were the focus of all of the data collection, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, and process mapping sessions. Techniques designed by gothamCulture were shared with crewmember leaders, who then led team sessions to gain insight from the frontline experts.

Thousands of issues and challenges were identified through the crewmember-led sessions. With assistance from gothamCulture, those data points were organized into specific initiatives and teams of crewmembers were selected to work the issues. The only way to get from the current state to the desired future state was to engage these same crewmembers in working to close these gaps themselves. Had the recommendations been left to executives, the change might have stalled due to limited time availability, approval processes, and the perception that this was yet another top-down approach to change.

That said, executives did play an important role. The design of IROP Integrity demanded that executives lead in a very different way. Because they had chosen not to take a top-down approach, executives needed to support the effort without controlling it. Securing executive sponsorship and the airline's commitment of resources ensured IROP Integrity was able to gain the traction necessary to change the entire system rather than bits and pieces.

As the project got underway, communication was key to building momentum. Throughout the process, members of the working teams were kept informed of the progress being made in other teams through regularly scheduled meetings, an online collaboration tool, and formal offsite gatherings. Information about the work underway was intentionally limited to the working teams, rather than sharing with the entire organization, in order to avoid creating a situation of claiming victory in the operation before real results were evident. This strategy ensured that the results spoke for themselves—a key refrain when pushed for “PR” support was “talk is cheap; actions speak louder than words.” Word-of-mouth updates from crewmembers working on the initiative were leveraged to keep people informed of high-level progress and to ensure those who were curious were kept in the loop.

This tactic created an incredible buzz among crewmembers and the effort maintained a level of transparency among the working group necessary to keep people comfortable with what was happening.

CRUISING SMOOTHLY: MEASURING CHANGE

Solutions and procedural changes designed in the IROP Integrity initiative were rolled out just before the summer travel season in 2009. Summer typically brings thunderstorm activity, which can disrupt operations far more than winter snowstorms. (The key difference being that snowstorms are slow-moving, and therefore allow for operational planning time. Thunderstorms, on the other hand, typically form quickly, not allowing for the airline to pre-position aircraft and crews for a fast recovery.) The new efficiency and nimbleness achieved by the airline helped JetBlue boost operational performance to the highest levels in five years. Key metrics included: canceled flights before the weather impact versus after the impact; recovery time required to full operations; and number of downstream impacts reduced (fewer cancellations to support the maintenance line or crew unavailability due to out-of-position aircraft).

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Photo courtesy of JetBlue Airways

JetBlue's crewmembers and customers will continue to face challenges during irregular operations—no airline is perfect, and no plan can ever be developed to completely eliminate the impact of IROPs. However, the IROP Integrity initiative was successful in mitigating the negative effects of these operational obstacles and smooth operations are becoming a competitive advantage for JetBlue.

The year-over-year summer performance demonstrates the success of the initiative. FastCompany magazine's August 2010 feature of the JetBlue initiative reported that the company, "... had its best-ever on-time summer. Year over year, JetBlue's refunds decreased by \$9 million. Best of all, the efforts dramatically improved JetBlue's 'recovery time' from major events such as storms... from two-and-a-half days to one-and-a-half days." JetBlue's overall airline ranking also moved up four places among U.S. airlines.

In addition to the operational improvements realized as a result of the IROP Integrity process, the initiative served as a significant cultural milestone in the evolution of JetBlue. Crewmembers who participated in the effort felt the impact of the process in their own work experience:

- 90% of the crewmembers who participated indicated that their input and effort made a difference in the outcome of the initiative and JetBlue's operational success
- 70% felt that the opportunity to participate in the initiative helped them develop key networks with people in others departments that helped them be more effective in their jobs
- Nearly 60% of participants felt that their participation was a career development opportunity which supported JetBlue's commitment to developing internal talent for career advancement
- Over 90% of participants felt strongly that the IROP Integrity initiative significantly improved JetBlue's ability to cancel, recover, and communicate during irregular operations

FLIGHT PLAN FOR THE FUTURE: THE WAY FORWARD

By capturing the "wisdom of the crowds", engaging frontline crewmembers in issue identification as well as actively closing the gaps, JetBlue has achieved remarkable improvement to their operational reliability during IROPs.

The IROP Integrity mission lives on, as the process of operational improvements were designed to be continuous, and members of the organization still strive to improve the way in which the airline prepares for and recovers from unplanned disruptions.

IROP Integrity was as much a cultural transformation as it was an operational performance turn-around effort. By understanding the roles and responsibilities of other work groups in the organization, crewmembers today have a newfound appreciation for how their actions or inactions affect other individuals and teams. Moreover, by including crewmembers in the process their personal relationship with the organization changed in a way that brought about new levels of pride and affiliation resulting in increased loyalty and accountability.

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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.