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Too Little Too Late

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EDITORIAL

TOO LITTLE TOO LATE

Few readers of this page would disagree that the U.S. air carrier system is in a shambles and the situation has gotten no better in the most recent past. All airlines are trying just about everything possible to save a dollar here and save a dollar there. There are fare wars almost every day with a continued striving for market share, market share *uber alles*. In some companies, it seems that each day brings news, mostly bad, of a "downsizing" (or the more politically correct term, "rightsizing") within the organizations. Several major air carriers that had never caused their employees too many worries about job security are now laying off employees in large doses. When will it end?

Consider that Americans have always been blessed with a curiosity for the unique, the bizarre, the interesting, the hip. All one has to do is look at the 1950s when chlorophyll was in everything from toothpaste to shoe inserts; the green plant substance was the know-all, fix-all. Then came the 1960s and '70s, when everyone was to make love, not war, while protesting just about anything that was over the age of 30.

Of course, aviation was not immune to the dynamics of change for change's sake. How about cockpit/crew resource management (CRM)? It seems to many in the industry that all we have to do is make everything CRM and "the cure" will miraculously take place. The automobile industry used much the same tactic when trying to counter the loss of market share to Asia. The fix was to make fuel-efficient automobiles that were fast; hang the reliability and do not give a thought to customer service.

Now comes the contradiction to the school of taking a slow, careful, studied approach to a project, making an informed choice, selecting the best plan, and then devoting everyone's energy to the plan. Suddenly, the air carrier community wants to be like South West Airlines (SWA). Let's change to all point-to-point service, get rid of our hubs, cut the amenities, squeeze the seats closer, get lean-and-mean, cut fares to attract passengers, and attempt to be just like SWA and everything will be all right. Well, it takes more than a cheap seat to be like SWA and Herb Kelleher.

The trouble with this picture is that SWA has been doing what they do well (making money, not mistakes) for more than 20 years, during which time many of the mega-carriers have been going from boom to bust on a regular basis. Why all the attention to SWA long after the "horse (sorry, airplane) is out of the barn (hangar)"? If we continue in the historical manner in which Americans seem to conduct much of their business—quick, throw a little chlorophyll at it, make peace, hit it with CRM—we will get nowhere.

Trying to clone SWA with a Freedom Airlines, a CALite, or another similar arrangement is putting things all in the wrong order. Granted, with every airline still shaky with rightsizing while others still are bleeding red ink, something must be done rather quickly to turn the tide. Well, just copying a Herb Kelleher approach is not the complete answer unless such a move is a calculated, long-term venture with every employee (salaried or hourly) committed to such a plan. The notion that a "quick-fix" as a low-cost alternative to a high-priced airline seat will probably not endure. What is needed is a careful re-evaluation of the company's mission, goals, market niche, organizational structure, and so on. Then, if the time is right and the direction is clear, press on. Of course, most air carriers will try too little, too late because isn't it really the American way?

HRL