

Kindergarten at 20,000 Feet

Pat Lencioni

I learned a simple, amazing lesson during a recent flight on one of the big, legacy air carriers. I won't mention the name out of courtesy. Besides, I'm finding it harder and harder to distinguish between the big airlines these days.

Anyway, I was sitting with a colleague in business class (something that I don't take for granted), waiting for everyone to board so we could take off. The flight attendants weren't in a particularly good mood, something I've grown accustomed to over the years. They seemed annoyed that their jobs were being made harder by having to deal with passengers. As they were doing their best to avoid smiling or making eye contact while barking orders at us, something occurred to me.

I turned to my colleague: "You know, the way I get treated when I fly makes me feel like a child. It's like I'm a kindergartner again."

She laughed and agreed with me.

As humorous as it seemed, there was something quite disturbing about the situation. Here we were, adults, on a business trip. It didn't seem unreasonable to expect people to treat us with respect. After all, the clients we had just visited treated us like adults, with respect, as we did for them. The waitresses, shuttle drivers and hotel staff we met were polite and courteous enough, for sure. No one else we came across during our trip scowled at us or avoided eye contact, or barked at us at all, for that matter. It was only these flight attendants who seemed to mistake us for incorrigible six year olds.

I wish I could say that I was detached enough to simply observe this odd situation with objective curiosity. But I wasn't. I was pretty annoyed. And I must admit that when I fly, I have to resist letting my least generous and empathic side come to the surface. I don't really like that part of me, and I'm working on it.

Anyway, as our plane reached cruising altitude, an unexpected wave of courage and empathy washed over me. I decided I was going to talk to the flight attendants about the poor treatment I was experiencing, but in a kind way. So I went up and stood near the bathroom, waiting to be scolded and told to return to my seat. But when the flight attendants looked at me, I quickly struck up a conversation. "I'm just wondering how things are at Unameridelta Airlines these days." Before they could answer, I made a leading, follow-up comment, trying my best to be gentle. "Because it seems to me like things aren't so great."

One of the flight attendants looked at me, knowing exactly what I meant, and smiled. I was glad she could tell that I was trying to be nice, and not just complaining about her surliness. Then she said something that floored me.

"You know, we just get so tired of being treated like children by this company."

I couldn't believe what she had said, and I immediately confessed to her about the comment I had made to my colleague just minutes earlier! The flight attendants smiled sheepishly and shook their heads; they weren't at all offended or surprised. After all, it made perfect sense. They were being treated like children and so they in turn treated their customers the same way. Not that they were proud of it, or justifying it, really. It just made sense.

We talked for a while about management at their company, or the lack thereof. I was surprised to learn that they were as frustrated with their union as they were with management. They told me that they actually liked what they did but were so disillusioned by their leadership that they found it hard to care.

I asked them what they wanted most from their management. It didn't take them long to answer. It wasn't money. It had nothing to do with benefits or schedules or free travel vouchers for their spouses. What they really wanted was to be recognized for doing a good job. By someone. Anyone, in the chain of command. They then told me a few stories about flight attendants who did heroic things, going above and beyond for passengers, but who never heard anything from management. It was at once comical and tragic.

I think they were glad to be able to vent a little, and I was glad to be able to empathize with them. It was certainly better than being bitter. Eventually I went back to my seat, hoping that their management would become enlightened enough to realize that the only way to get their people to treat us customers better is for them to treat their employees better. It doesn't get much more basic than that. Why is it that so many airlines have the hardest time understanding this?

Well, the realist in me wasn't hopeful that these big airlines would be changing any time soon. So I decided to hope that my new flight attendant friends could get jobs at one of the handful of other airlines that actually reward and recognize their people for doing a good job. But then again, relatively few of them make the move to another airline because of seniority restrictions and union rules and... what a drag it is for these people!

So I was left hoping that they might have the courage and initiative to leave one day. After all, people staying in miserable jobs because of job protection, pension promises and seniority benefits doesn't benefit anyone. It doesn't help customers, who have to deal with bad service. It's not good for companies who have little incentive to reward good employees and dismiss bad ones. And ironically, it's worst of all for the employees themselves who find themselves trapped with rusty handcuffs in a frustrating situation.

Well, as for my two flight attendant friends, I couldn't help but think that they owe it to themselves to do whatever they can to find careers that would be more rewarding and fulfilling.

Hey, maybe they'd be good kindergarten teachers.

Yours,

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