

COAST AIRLINES

Coast Airlines is a large airline serving about 25 cities, or stations. The organization of the station at Detroit, where I work as a ramp agent in the Ground Services Department, is typical of all of Coast's stations serving large and medium-size cities. There are two main groups of employees at the airport. In one group, the employees are highly visible—they are the personnel who work at the ticket counter and gate positions handling passenger ticketing and the boarding of passengers onto the aircraft. The employees in the other group are less visible. They are called ramp agents, and they handle aircraft ground power units, airstart units, the loading and unloading of baggage and freight, and the directing of aircraft in the ramp area.

Most of the flights into Detroit are through flights with only a few turn-around flights near the end of the day. Through flights are those that stop for only a short period to discharge and enplane passengers, load and unload freight and whose flight number does not change. Turn-around flights are those that end a particular flight in Detroit," such as a flight from St. Louis to Chicago to Detroit. The plane will stay on the ground for a longer period, before starting a new and different route. The important difference is the amount of time available for servicing the aircraft and changing passengers and freight. Time is critical on a through flight, especially if the plane arrives late. In such cases, the airline tries to make up for the lateness by getting the plane off the ground in a shorter time than is scheduled. On turn-around flights, there is plenty of time; and if the flight arrives late at night, the plane "lays over" at Detroit during the night and leaves in the morning as a different flight

Most of Coast Airlines' flights are through flights and they usually do not arrive on time. Therefore, most flights are handled in a rush manner. For example, as soon as the passengers are boarded, the aircraft doors are closed and the engines are started. The engines quickly work up to an enormous roar while baggage and freight are still being loaded. When personnel hear over 135 decibels of sound from the running engines, their response is to load the aircraft in the fastest manner possible. As soon as the baggage doors are closed, it takes only a few minutes to move the aircraft onto the runway and then into the air. However, for every minute the plane is on the ground with its engines running, crew salaries and operating and maintenance costs of the aircraft are greater than you would believe.

Records are maintained that show how late the plane is and how long it is on the ground. The records are part of an efficiency control system used to judge the speed of handling planes and the aircraft's time lost or gained on the ground. This information is used as one performance index for each station and thus each station manager. Performance on this index is the most important measure of the Ground Services Department. Supervisors, for all practical purposes, rise or fall by their performance on this index.

The fare structure for airlines is rather complex in the number and types of fares offered for a single trip. However, the important fact to remember is that all airlines on the same route, offering the same type of equipment, the same type of service (first class or

economy class), and the same departure time (day or night) have very similar fares. To meet this type of competition, Coast Airlines initiated its own campaign, aimed at improving service. The aim was two-pronged: to improve service among the visible employees, the ones who have direct contact with passengers, and also to improve the behind the scenes services, especially baggage handling, where much improvement was needed. Nothing sets passengers against an airline more than arriving in a city only to find that their bags or briefcases didn't arrive with them. When bags don't arrive with passengers, it's either because the bags are loaded onto the wrong flight at the point of origin or because they are not unloaded at the point of departure. On through flights, when the plane has a number of stops, the baggage compartment (with the loose luggage) has different stops. Thus, if a bag whose destination is Detroit is put in the Cleveland section, it will not be removed until the plane gets to Cleveland. This phenomenon is called an override.

Therefore, Coast's goals in its new program with respect to baggage handling were:

1. Cut down on the number of mishandled bags; that is, get the luggage off the plane at the same place the owner gets off.
2. In cases where this fails, assure a speedy return of the luggage to the owner.
3. Cut down on the number of damaged bags.

Most of these problems in Detroit occur because of the rush to get the plane loaded and in the air.

The program to correct this situation has three parts to it. The three parts of the program in order of importance are:

1. Stop the mistakes.
2. When mistakes are made, correct them as quickly as possible.
3. Make employees aware of the problem and the importance of the problem to the company.

The first part of the program consists of programmed text-on the proper handling of baggage, prepared by the Ground Services Department Headquarters in Chicago. The programmed text covers the frustration of passengers whose baggage isn't available for claiming when they arrive at their destinations. A sample of the text follows:

Most of our customers arrive at their destinations delighted with our service; they have dealt with friendly, knowledgeable agents and have been served by a pleasant attendant. But it is in the Baggage Claim Area that all the services that have gone so smoothly can be overshadowed by one jarring disservice. We are talking about: (choose one)

- A. Misdirected, delayed and lost baggage
- B. Unattractive claiming areas

If you selected A, you are correct.

Another topic which the text covers is what to say if you are approached by passengers who want to know where their bags are. You shouldn't say, "We'll begin an immediate search and let you know when we learn something about your bag," but you should say, "Your bag is enroute now. We will deliver it to your hotel or home early this evening." The text instructs you to give this answer to the question whether you know where the bag is or not.

The text also stresses the importance of careful loading and the use of the proper procedure to ensure that only bags with the proper tags are loaded or unloaded.

When I filled in the programmed text and attempted to turn it in to my supervisor, as per the instructions, and receive the next book in the series, I found that he didn't want the text, had mislaid the next book in the series, and didn't seem to worry about it.

The second part of the program is described in a pamphlet and a letter from the Ground Services Department describing a system to recover "misdirected" bags in the shortest amount of time. This program is called System-wide organized Search (SOS).

As you might expect, SOS is really a communications system. It consists of coded messages coded for purposes of efficiency, not security sent over telephone or teletype. The pamphlet covers the proper codes to use for different types of bags and the letter covers the proper procedure to use.

The SOS system works as follows. The coded messages are in capital letters. If a passenger arrives without his or her bag, a report is sent to CHI (Chicago), and to the city shown on the baggage tag held by the passenger, stating that a bag is NEEDED, with the proper code describing the bag. If a bag arrives and nobody claims it, a message is sent to CHI stating that a bag is HELD. The NEEDED and HELD are matched, and the bag is routed to the proper station. The search is continued until the bag or the owner (whichever is missing) is located. When the bag reaches the proper destination, a CLOSE FILE message is sent.

The SOS System is a standard procedure that is to be used when baggage is lost or misrouted. It is merely a clarification of the old system with minor refinements and thus is no great change. The procedure set down is followed; and if the proper codes and messages are not used, there is always the direct telephone line or the teletype from headquarters to remind you that you are in error. Headquarters knows the number of lost bags by the number of NEEDED and HOLD messages that are sent to CHI each day. This isn't reported to each station.

The final part of the program is a campaign to stress the importance of careful handling and identification of baggage. It is done through the use of posters, signs, employee letters, and articles in the company paper. The main part stressed is the relationship between the handling of bags and the well-being of the airline. Put in the extreme, it says