From a Frontline Leader's Perspective: An Organizational Communication Audit of SkyWest

Customer Service Leaders

A Project submitted to Southern Utah University

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Master of Arts in Professional Communication

By

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ABSTRACT

This project was created as a tool to incorporate interpersonal and organizational research combined with open-coding to assist front-line leaders within the SkyWest Airlines customer service organization. The objective of sharing this information was accomplished through development of a summary of coded data based on answers received through an organizational audit of the customer service department managers.

The purpose is to assist leaders in breaking down communication barriers within their organizations and find ways to increase effective communication within their work-groups. Research conducted included finding what roles these leaders play within their organizations, and what ways they can affect their organization's culture. Key questions within the audit survey asked leaders to rank their preferred methods of communication, what company sponsored "best practices" assisted in communicating to subordinates, what managers' biggest obstacles to communication were, and what types of company sponsored assistance could help leaders interface more often face-to-face with their workgroups (i.e. evaluations, meetings, shift briefings, working side by side).

Survey responses were gathered through the Qualtrics program, and open-coded to find communication strengths and issues within each question's response and then coded to find emerging core categories. These core categories will be compiled into an executive summary to be presented at a future company-wide customer service department meeting where most respondents will be in attendance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As I have proceeded through my time in the Professional Communication field of study at Southern Utah University, and with the line of work and training I have received at my current profession, my interest and focus has pointed me toward the importance of organizational communication within workgroups. With this focus in mind, I wanted to produce a project that could help benefit the customer service department at SkyWest Airlines.

SkyWest History

SkyWest airlines was founded in April of 1972 when Ralph Atkin bought Dixie Airlines, an operation which included aircraft maintenance, air ambulance service, air charter service, and a flight school. Approximately 3 months after purchase, SkyWest ran its first commercial route between St. George, Cedar City, and Salt Lake City, Utah with a 6-seat Piper Cherokee aircraft, transporting 256 people that year. Over the years the company would grow exponentially, adding larger aircraft and capacity to the fleet, from the 19-passenger Fairchild Navajo in 1978, to the 30-seat Embraer Brasilia in 1986, to the 50-seat Canadair Regional Jet in 1993, to now the 76-seat Embraer E175 dual-class jet (skywest.com, 2015).

SkyWest would start off as its own flight entity, booking reservations only through the SkyWest brand until 1977, when the first interline agreement was made with American and United Airlines, allowing passengers to book flights, check in, and transfer baggage. As major airline carriers begin to acquire regional carriers in 1983, SkyWest purchased Sun Aire and became the eleventh largest regional airline in the country and the number two carrier in the Salt Lake City hub, behind only Western Air. With the purchase of Western Air by Delta in 1986, SkyWest became a Delta Connection code-share partner and Delta took over all SkyWest

reservations systems. One year later in 1997, SkyWest received the title of Regional Carrier of

the Year from Air Transport World and posted its most profitable year ever (skywest.com,

2016).

Presently, SkyWest partners with four of the world's largest network carriers including

United Airlines, Delta Airlines, American Airlines and Alaska Airlines to offer flights to

millions of people each month to destinations throughout North America, Canada, and Mexico.

With a fleet of 348 aircraft, SkyWest employs more than 11,300 aviation professionals and

operates more than 1,600 flights a day to 205 different destinations (skywest.com, 2016). Today,

SkyWest strives to be the airline of choice, employer of choice, and investment of choice

(skywest.com/about/our mission) by focusing of seven guiding principles which include: health

and safety first, excellent service and quality, personal and operational reliability, fairness and

consistency, respect and teamwork, personal and corporate integrity, and superior profitability

and efficient use of all resources (skywest.com/about/our mission). The airline is currently

headquartered in St. George, Utah.

Customer Service Department

SkyWest's Customer Service department is the largest department within the airline,

employing over 3,700 people. These employees are the agents who serve the company's

frontline, and are the face for each mainline partner airline (Delta, United, Alaska, and

American) they serve. Each frontline group belongs to a station. Stations are located throughout

the United States, stretching from Yuma, Arizona to Houghton, Michigan and range from small

stations (West Yellowstone, Wyoming with 6 employees) to large/hubs (Salt Lake City with over

800). Currently, there are approximately 75 stations located within the SkyWest system, with

number of stations varying depending on mainline partner bidding for work (skywestonline.com,

2016). Each station employs a general manager, who is responsible for running the day-to-day

operation of flights in and out of their location. I am currently a customer service Support

Manager for SkyWest Airlines having served previously for more than 15 years as a General

Manager, starting my journey as manager in IDA (Idaho Falls, ID) in 2005 to manager of the

CDC (Cedar City, UT) station until 2017. My new role with the company has me travelling to

support new station openings as well as cases where a manager has transitioned out of a station

where I fill in until a replacement manager is hired.

SkyWest front-line general managers formerly met monthly at regional meetings, where

much of the needed information was communicated, and managers had a chance to ask questions

and receive valuable insight on how to lead and direct their stations. Some of the most

productive conversations on policy and procedure would occur at these regional meetings.

Unfortunately, as financial cut-backs have occurred throughout the system, these meetings have

shifted to quarterly meetings occurring four times a year. With productive conversation and best

practice opportunities now limited, I wanted to do something to help the manager group share

best practices in order to increase the quality of organizational communication within the

company.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to use grounded theory to "pick" the general manager's

brains and find common communication themes. There are a number of incredible leaders

throughout the system who have amazing ideas on how to communicate and lead their groups to

success. These leaders have developed dynamic workplaces, working tirelessly side-by-side

their frontline agents, assisting in the daily operation all while modeling impeccable customer

service, balancing HR, payroll, training, and the station's overall well-being.

This project surveyed these leaders in order to see what methods they use to foster

communication and lead their groups to meet mainline partner's stringent goals and metrics

while building relationships and leading their organizations. Data was gathered and coded to

create a communication summary in an attempt to help all general managers increase

interpersonal and organizational communication throughout the SkyWest system.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Communication Process

Before we can define organizational communication we must define the communication process. Pamela Shockley (2006) describes the process as the "attempt to construct shared realities through social interaction" based on each person's "individual competence and perceived competence of the other" (p. 11). Each person provides his/her own individual set of experiences to the interaction. One individual is considered the source, and the other the receiver. Messages are the symbolic attempt to transfer stimulating meaning between the source and receiver. How these messages are transmitted is called the channel. Channels can be used in combination through "verbal and non-verbal, oral and written, face-to-face, and tele-mediated, with some channels more credible than others" (p. 12).

Throughout the interaction between source and receiver, messages are encoded and decoded. Encoding is "the process of formulating messages, choosing content and symbols to convey meaning (what we want to be understood)" (p. 11). Decoding is "the process of assigning meaning in the role of receiver to message symbols generated by the message source and deciding how it should be interpreted or understood" (p. 11). Encoding and decoding are influenced by the level of communication competence each person has and perceives the other has, what intentions each person has with the message, past experiences, and the communication context.

As messages are given and received, and encoded and decoded, they can become distorted, providing a discrepancy between the meaning intended by the source of a message and the one received. This distortion is referred to as noise. Noise can be anything ranging from

"physical distractions, channel interference, communicative competence, communication

context, or psychological predispositions" (p.12), and is typically always present throughout the

communication process.

Each person brings to the interaction his/her own competence, experience, and context.

Competence is the "ability to understand appropriate behaviors, our specific intentions, our

willingness to engage in communication, and our ability to interact with others to generate

shared realities" (Shockley, 2006, p. 13). An individual's competence as well as his/her general

impression of the competence of the other determines the effectiveness of encoding and

decoding the message and assessing the interaction.

Experience is a "set of specific experiences or background that all parties in

communication bring to bear on the interaction" (Shockley, 2006, p. 13). What a person might

do in a certain situation depends greatly on past experiences the person might have had.

Likewise, the experiences of others in an interaction might help a decoder change in his/her

thoughts, decisions, or behavior of a receiver based on the source's experience.

Communication context is "the environment of the communication interaction"

(Shockley, 2006, p. 13). The context can include the time and place of the interaction as well as

the specific roles, relationships, and status of the communicators. Context involves the

intentions of the specific message whether it is seeking clarity, openness, deception, or control.

An example would be openly disagreeing with a spouse or loved one versus openly disagreeing

with a boss. How an individual conveys expression varies based on the knowledge and

competence of the other person, as well as the expectations of the particular culture and

environment.

The result, consequence, or outcome of the communication exchange is defined as the

communication effect (Shockley, 2006, p. 14). If a boss and subordinate get in an argument

because the subordinate has done something wrong and the subordinate is terminated, the result

of the exchange would be considered the effect. Effects are directly related to communicative

interactions.

The end goal of communication is to "construct a shared reality; meaning help others

understand our world as we do or as we want them to" (Shockley, 2006, p. 14). This process is

dynamic and can be influenced by context, culture, competency, knowledge, and experience.

Therefore human communication is always changing our learning processes as we try to

understand or have others understand our world, and in no other place is this shared reality

needed more than within an organization.

Organizational Communication

The term "organization" refers to "the process of organizing a dynamic system in which

individuals engage in collective efforts for goal accomplishment" bringing "order out of chaos"

and "establishing entities for purposeful activities" (Shockley-Zalabak, 2006, p. 15). Amitai

Etzioni (1964) referred to organizations as "social units or groupings of people deliberately

constructed and reconstructed to strive for specific goals" (p. 16). As these groupings of people

strive to complete goals, they are divided by authority and leadership and become dependent on

each other. To coordinate and achieve goals together, effective communication is needed.

Organizational communication is similar to the communication process listed earlier. It

involves sources and receivers who encode and decode messages. These messages travel

through distinctive channels which can be affected by noise. Organizational communication can

be effected by the "competencies of individuals, their fields of experience, the communicative

context, and the effects or results of their interactions" (Shockley-Zalabek, 2006, p.17).

Organizational communication involves more than just interaction between individuals, but the

process to create and meet goals.

Goldhaber (1990) defines organizational communication as "the *lifeblood* of the

organization, the *glue* that binds the organization, the *oil* that smooths the organization's

functions, the *thread* that ties the system together, the *force* that pervades the organization, and

the *binding agent* that cements all relationships" (p. 5). Recent research documents the value of

organizational communication showing the correlation between effective communication and

high overall organizational performance with leaders in business speaking out about the

importance of effective communication in their organizations. Edward Carlson, former CEO of

United Airlines, traveled more than 20,000 miles a year to communicate face-to-face with the

company's more than 50,000 employees. He held formal meetings, informal chats, and

handshaking tours to launch a program he called "visible management". United Airlines credits

the program with being a major reason they were able to turn around their company culture and

finances (p. 5).

Goldhaber (1990) calls organizational communication "the process of creating and

exchanging messages within a network or interdependent relationships to cope with

environmental uncertainty" (p. 16). Thus Goldhaber contends that this process includes seven

key concepts: process, message, network, interdependence, relationship, environment, and

uncertainty.

Organizational communication is an ongoing process without definitive beginnings or

ends which includes patterns of interactions that occur between the members of the organization.

These patterns of interactions are ongoing, ever-changing, continuous, and culturally dependent.

Zalabak (2006) defines it as "the ongoing process of creating and transmitting organizational

messages reflecting the shared realities resulting from previous message exchanges and evolving

to generate new realities that create and shape events" (p. 17). Process occurs in setting goals,

creating strategy, planning, making decisions, and completing work in an organization. Process

also occurs due to unforeseen changes in the external environment, unexpected problems, and

competition from other businesses.

Messages are verbal or non-verbal symbols that we perceive and to which we attach

meaning. Organizational communication is the creation and exchange of messages about people,

objects, and events through the interaction of source and receiver within the organization. The

exchange of verbal messages occurs through letters, emails, speeches, and conversations. Non-

verbal exchanges occur through body language, touching behavior, vocal cues, personal space,

objects, and environment (Goldhaber, 1990, p. 19). Both verbal and non-verbal exchanges are

crucial in an organization, and as understanding is shared, effective communication can be

achieved.

Messages are assimilated throughout an organization from one person to another, either

upward or downward through a set of pathways called a communication network. A network

can consist of only two people, a small group, or an entire organization. Different factors can

"influence the nature and scope of the network such as, role relationship, direction of the

message flow, serial nature of message flow, and content of the message" (Goldhaber, 1990, p.

21). Network effectiveness relies on which network members are integrated into the system as

well as the degree to which groups are connected to each other and the entire system.

An organization is "an open system whose parts are all related to its whole and to its

environment" and the nature of this relationship is "interdependent or interlocking because all

parts within the system, called subsystems affect and are affected by each other" (Goldhaber,

1990, p. 23). Changes in any part of the system can affect other parts of the system and revolve

around the relationships of the different people within the organization. Thus, when managers

make a decision they must consider the possible results of said decision amongst the entire

organization. Managers must also consider the amount of information as to not give too little or

conversely overload subordinates with information.

Since an organization is an open, living, social system, its success depends on work and

interpersonal relationships between people within it. Thayer (1968) lists three levels of

communication within the organization: individual, group, and organizational (p. 24). Pace and

Boren (1973) use the term *interpersonal* to refer to "situations in which communication occurs in

a face-to-face relationship" and identify four specific face-to-face relationships depending on the

size of the group: dyadic communication, serial communication, small group communication,

and audience communication (p. 25). Dyadic communication occurs between two people. Serial

communication involves a message relayed from A to B to C to D to E by a series of small

interactions and messages are transmitted along the chain. Small group communication occurs

when approximately three to twelve people interact. Audience communication involves a

gathering of thirteen or more people (p. 25). No matter what size face-to-face relationship,

positive interpersonal relationships are paramount.

Goldhaber defined organizational communication as "the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network or interdependent relationships to cope with environmental uncertainty" and uses Duncan's (1972) definition of environment as "the totality of physical and social factors that are taken into account in the decision-making behaviors of individuals in the system" (p. 313). The organization's environment is internal and external with internal environment referring to personnel, functioning staff, and the organization level. The internal environment refers to customers, suppliers, competitors, technology, etc. (Goldhaber, 1990, p. 24). The environment of an organization is often referred to as an organization's culture. Schwartz and Davis (1981) define culture as "the pattern of beliefs and expectation shared by the organization's members – which produce norms that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in the organization" (p. 31). Goldhaber (1990) states that culture entails the "beliefs, rituals, myths, mores, and stories that differentiate one organization from another" and in the examination of "symbols, language, and ideology of an organization's culture can typically describe how it behaves" (p. 25).

Many of today's successful organizations offer perks to employees in order to build a family culture and productive workforce. Enterprise security company OpenDNS hosts an off-site company-wide event at a Ritz Carlton or Lake Tahoe. At their workplace, the company offers a Ben & Jerry's ice cream truck in the summer, board game nights, "waffle Wednesday", and roof-top yoga sessions. Google, one of the most well-known companies for their strong culture, offers their employee's gourmet meals, gyms, bowling alley, game rooms, basketball courts, massage parlor, barber shop, and a laundromat (http://www.recordnet.com, 2015). These unique perks offered by today's companies would have been abhorred in previous decades, but help today's companies to attract the best possible workforces to create a dynamic company

culture. My feeling is that companies who offer unique perks and build a strong company

culture, attracts employees who are energized, happy, communicate, and produce.

Recent research by O'Sullivan and Carr (2017) on interpersonal and mass

communication have uncovered a new type of communication concept called masspersonal

communication (MPCM). MPCM takes the traditional means of communication channels (face-

to-face, personal phone calls, and personal messages) and introduces new channels made

available through cyberspace advances (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Skype). These new

channels give a message giver the ability to send personal messages to individuals and in mass.

The airline industry uses MPCM in a variety of ways, from posting recruitment videos on

YouTube, to responding to customer interactions personally on Twitter, or giving leaders the

ability to lead meetings or interact personally through skype meeting messages and training.

In the exchange of messages within the network, an organization's goal is to decrease the

quantity of uncertainty amongst its employees. Goldhaber (1972) defines uncertainty as "the

difference between information available and information needed" (p. 26). Organizations face a

fine line of releasing too much or not enough information to its members and thus must do a

good job of defusing the information it receives and only releasing information needed by its

members. Weick (1969) discussed that "while organizations are information-processing units

that interact with their environments to remove as much uncertainty from their informational

inputs as possible, the organizations will process only those information inputs relevant to them"

(p. 26). In summary, Weick contends that organizations will interpret and assimilate information

to the needs of its members. As a message receiver at my organization, it is my responsibility to

code all the information I receive and only disseminate the information that would be pertinent

or beneficial to my agents. Oftentimes I receive information that is only applicable to managers

who have different aircraft types or serve different mainline partners. This information is not

applicable to my organization and is not released.

Managerial Roles within an Organization

Leaders at SkyWest Airlines work at an unrelenting pace with a variety of daily

responsibilities. Often there is little time for planning or communication. Much like a study done

by Henry Mintzberg (1995), managers at SkyWest have no time to plan, but jump from issue to

issue, continually responding to the needs of the moment (Banks et al., 1995, p. 121). In

analyzing manager's daily time constraints, consider some of the similar SkyWest managerial

constraints:

- A study of 56 U.S. foremen found that they averaged 583 activities per eight-hour shift,

    an average of 1 every 48 seconds (Foa, 1956, p. 478). In one eight-hour shift a SkyWest

    station manager's daily activities can include: assisting frontline agents at the ticket

    counter, ramp operations, and gate, training new agents, answering phone calls and

    emailing co-workers, evaluating and recognizing performance, ordering supplies and

    running bank errands for station sales reports, and filling out online and paper audits of

    performance metrics and operations.

- A diary study of 160 British middle and top managers found that they worked for a half

    hour or more without interruption only about once every two days (Stewart, 1967, p.

    185). A SkyWest general manager faces frequent interruption ranging from co-workers

    who need assistance while working, to phone calls from other departments, to passengers

    who need assistance with ticketing or boarding flights. Very rarely is non-interrupted

    time found throughout a manager's workday.

- Studies of managers' information flow suggest that managers play a key role in securing "soft" external information (much of it available only to them because of their status) and in passing it along to their subordinates (Banks et al., 1995, p. 135). SkyWest managers receive information from numerous sources, whether it is from corporate headquarters, regulatory offices, training departments, or mainline partners. Managers are responsible for evaluating, preparing, and disseminating this information to their subordinates in a timely manner as airline industry information frequently changes.

- In two British studies, managers spent an average of 66% and 80% of their time in verbal (oral) communication, and in a study of five American chief executives, the figure was 78% (Mintzberg, 1975). As working frontline employees, SkyWest managers spend a large majority (up to 80%) of their day communicating orally with co-workers and passengers. Oftentimes this oral communication is vital in assisting passengers, working safe and on-time flights, and accomplishing performance metrics set by the company and mainline partners the airline serves.

In addition, managers within the SkyWest organization have various roles in which they must adhere to in order to foster a productive work environment. Among some of the roles as discussed by Banks, Bantz, Corman, and Moyer (1995), are interpersonal, informational, and decisional roles.

Interpersonal Roles within an Organization

Each manager within the organization plays a *figurehead* role within his or her

department. As a figurehead, some of the manager's duties may be interpersonal, and some

ceremonial. A manager might serve as the company's representative in airport board meetings

or community events. Other managers might be used as references for former employees, give

letters of recommendation for promotional opportunities, or sign legal documents representing

the company for awards and recognition.

Managers within the SkyWest organization also take on the role of *leader*. Managers are

responsible for interviewing, hiring, and developing their staff through company training

materials. Managers also set departmental goals and performance metrics, and are responsible

for motivating their workforce while paying attention to each individual's specific needs within

their organization. This includes staff meetings, yearly evaluations, and pre-shift briefings. How

effective managers are at leading their specific groups typically determines how well their

organization will perform, and ultimately meet the goals and performance metrics that have been

set by the leader and partner airline.

The last interpersonal role a SkyWest manager fills is the role of *liaison*. These are

instances where the manager interacts with other leaders not in his immediate chain of command

(Banks et al., 1995, p. 137). Managers spend a large amount of their time interacting with other

managers (peers), and departments to find information and discuss best practices. Most of this

communication is done through email, instant message, and occasionally by phone. Usually,

little time is spent interacting with a manager's immediate superior, and interaction between the

manager and his subordinates usually only occurs during scheduled flight times/shifts. Managers

must make the most of the little time spent interacting with immediate superiors and

subordinates.

Informational Roles within the Organization

Because a SkyWest manager fills the role of liaison, and due to the nature of his many

interactions throughout a given day within his network, the manager becomes the "go-to" person

within his organization. Although the manager might not know the answer to every question

asked by his subordinates, he will typically know more than any member of his staff, and is

responsible for providing correct information to his subordinates.

Much of a manager's typical day is spent seeking and scanning information received

from mainline airline partners, regulatory bodies (Transportation Security Administration and

Federal Aviation Administration), and different departments within the SkyWest organization.

Most of this information is received through memos and emails. The manager is responsible for

determining which information is vital to his organization, and thus shares it with his individual

organization through email, posting, and face-to-face contact at meetings and shift briefings. If

the manager fails to pass on vital information he has received, his subordinates could miss out on

policies and procedures that have changed within the airline organization and his unit could be

subject to fines or disciplinary action.

Decisional Roles within the Organization

As important as it is for a SkyWest manager to receive and disseminate information to his

group, the major role of a manager lies in his ability to make decisions within his organization.

As so eloquently stated by Banks, Bantz, Corman, and Moyer (1995) "as its formal authority,

only he can commit the unit to important new courses of action; and as its nerve center, only he

has full and current information to make the set of decisions that determines the unit's strategy"

and performance. Therefore, a manager's decision-making ability can make or break the

performance of his organization (p. 138).

The airline industry is a constantly varying industry with many changes occurring

without advance notice. Technology upgrades, changing flight schedules, weather, and irregular

operations are among some of the changes that occur on a frequent basis. A manager must often

times be able to handle the different pressures and make correct decisions in the face of these

changes. If these changes are ignored or not handled right away, disturbances can occur within

the manager's organization, or even the travelling public. Effective managers use the

information they have received to make the best possible decisions when faced with irregular

situations, or even anticipate the irregular situations before they occur.

Managers can help ease the burden of irregular situations by efficiently designing their

organization's structure, and effectively allocating their time. By designing their organization's

structure, a manager can authorize daily work decisions to be made by supervisors and staff,

leaving only the most important decisions to be made by the leader. Choosing effective

supervisors and staff within his organization helps assure that the correct decision will be made

more often than not. Also, when the team all has the same information as the manager as to what

the organization's goals and procedures are, the chances of making incorrect decisions are

greatly mitigated.

Charismatic and Visionary Leadership

It is my belief that leaders have the ability to affect culture in a number of unique ways. Leaders at SkyWest have the ability to make a difference to the company's bottom line as well as the culture of their individual work-groups. One of the ways leaders can affect the culture is through symbolic leadership in which a leader (1) possesses a vision; (2) has the ability to articulate it; and (3) uses slogans, symbols, ritual, ceremonies, and stories of success that amplifies desirable values and promotes identification within the organization. Effective leaders align symbolic leadership with personal and organizational goals to achieve positive results (Jablin & Putnam, 2001, p. 80).

Leaders who use visionary leadership can help establish, maintain, and help their culture survive environmental changes. Alternatively, those visionary leaders may also be the source of conflict and poor performance when discrepancies between the vision and environmental changes arise. It is a leader's responsibility to establish an achievable future direction, purpose, a set of principles, and a means by which to reach the desired future direction (Jablin & Putnam, 2001, p. 83). In a study of entrepreneurial firms in 1998 on vision content, vision attributes, and vision communication, Baum, Locke, and Kirkpatrick found that vision content (growth imagery) and vision attributes (clarity) affected venture growth directly, but the indirect impact of these variables through vision communication held the greatest impact. Ultimately, research has argued that the success of a leader's desired vision depends on his/her ability to communicate it (p. 84).

In articulating a particular vision, Conger and Kanungo (1998) dispute that the verbal aspects of a vision must focus on the negative problems in keeping the current path and the

positive aspects of selecting a future path while targeting the self-concept of those with whom

they are communicating (p. 87). These leaders can encourage constituents to "catch the vision"

by making references to (1) values and moral justifications, (2) the collective and its identity, (3)

history, (4) constituents' positive worth and the efficacy as individuals and a collective, (5) high

expectations from collectives, and (6) distal over proximal goals (p. 88). In addition,

constituents can become more committed to the vision when they understand their role within the

organization and the organization's mission.

The History of Communication Audits

One of the first records of recording and analyzing communication patterns within

organizations occurred in 1953 (Davis, 1953, p. 310). Keith Davis created a study he called "eco

analysis," which focused on "timing, media, subject matter, and organizational level as

communication pattern variables" (Shelby & Reinsch, 1996, p. 98). A year later, George

Ordiorne used a communication audit developed by the National Society of Professional

Engineers (Ordiorne, 1954, p. 237). This audit was "focused in the accuracy and direction of

communication, using a questionnaire with 16 dichotomous items to survey top managers and

project engineers" (Shelby & Reinsch, 1996, p. 99). His focus was to take a "snap shot" of an

organization at a particular moment. Ordiorne was the first person to use the term

communication audit in academic literature (p. 100).

One of the largest and most comprehensive audit tools was created by members of the

International Communication Association (ICA). Their goal in creating the ICA audit was to

"create standardized instruments and procedures, establish a data bank as a basis for identifying

norms, and provide visibility for the ICA and professional opportunities for its members"

(Goldhaber, 1979, p. 359). The ICA audit uses five different ways to gather its data. They

include: questionnaire survey, interviews, network analysis, critical-incident analysis, and

communication diary (Shelby & Reinsch, 1996, p. 101). These five methods of gathering help

look at organizational communication from a wide angle, covering nearly every facet of

communication within an organization.

Howard Greenbaum (1974) was also influential in helping develop and make audit

instruments more effective. Greenbaum used a "systems analysis based on purpose, operational

procedures, and structure" which identified four "functional communication networks"

(regulative, innovative, integrative, and informative-instructive) (p. 740). He then compared the

communication policies in the different networks to the communication activities with regard to

the policies. This identification gave researchers the ability to analyze the entire system while

finding specific communication activities (Shelby & Reinsch, 1996, p. 102). Goldhaber (1979),

gave support to the process, noting that the "approach permits questions from two different

viewpoints": (1) "How well is the entire communication system working?" and "Does the

communication system have the elements required to achieve objectives?" and (2) "What are the

efficiency and effectiveness of specific activities?" and "Which activities require support and

what is the nature of that requirement?" (pp. 342-343)

Another large, comprehensive audit was developed by Wiio and Helsila (1974). They

called it the LTT. Lewis (1987) gave the following description of the LTT audit,

> The LTT seeks to gather feedback on (1) demographics; (2) access to information; (3) job
>
> satisfaction and dissatisfaction; (4) communication satisfaction about the organization,
>
> about one's own work environment, about types and adequacy of information and about

effectiveness of different communication channels; (5) quality of information and

possible communication improvements; and (6) about the entire organizational climate.

(p. 280)

In addition to the LTT, Lewis (1987) noted that a follow-up instrument was developed,

named the OCD, to help "diagnose what is wrong within the communication system so

improvements may be recommended" (p. 281). The audit instrument that I developed to

evaluate organizational communication practices within the Customer Service department at

SkyWest Airlines gathers feedback from managers along the lines of the LTT process with the

goals of: finding out where managers' go for information, how managers communicate with their

subordinates and superiors, how managers' feel about the quality of information given and

received, and how managers feel about the overall SkyWest communication climate.

Chapter 3: Method

For my project I developed and implemented an organizational communication audit

(Appendix: A) to discover leaders' managerial roles, best practices, communication strengths, and

challenges as a SkyWest Airlines Customer Service frontline leader. The audit contains a number

of questions relating to current managers' leadership styles, communication preferences, and station

operational procedures. Many questions in the audit were open-ended questions, allowing the

respondents to openly and honestly share their best practices and communication strategies,

allowing leadership to assess and develop common practices to use across the department, and

discover ways to better interpersonal communication within the customer service department. Once

the audit was completed, it was sent and approved by the Institutional Review Board in (September,

2014).

The audit was introduced and discussed at two different individual meetings with the Vice

President of Customer Service, Jim Boyd, at SkyWest headquarters in St. George, Utah. Once the

final draft of the audit was reviewed and approved, it was introduced at a system-wide general

manager meeting where all station general managers were present. A week later, a link to the audit

at the Qualtrics site was sent to all customer service general managers' email accounts. Informed

consent was received electronically before the general managers could proceed to the survey

questions.

The sample chosen for this audit were company general managers throughout the SkyWest

system, responsible for leadership at their individual locations. In this study, as the researcher, I am

personally involved with the subject as I was previously a general manager of a location and faced

many of the time and communication restraints as those respondents to the survey. There is almost

no way for me to completely separate my own experiences and set them aside in the questions and

analysis given, but I hope that my experiences with the subject can help add to the analysis and

discussion as I had served as a General Manager within the organization for the past thirteen years.

Having served thirteen years in two different locations, I have observed and interacted with all

different kinds of managers, management styles, and gathered unique insights that someone who

would be totally removed from this organization could not. Therefore, I feel that my stance as

participant-researcher brings value to the overall quality of discussion and summary of results

found.

Audit results were printed and responses were open using an open-code method to discover

the most common themes, variables, and emerging core categories managers describe their

operation to contain. Once saturation of coded responses was compiled, analysis of the common

themes began. Each manager's open response was analyzed and coded into four to seven common

themes for each question asked. The twenty open-ended questions were then coded to find three

common core categories.

An executive summary of coded audit results and common core categories will be shared

with customer service leadership to analyze strengths and weaknesses of leadership training,

recognition programs, and leadership development. Results will also help develop new programs to

coincide with changing work dynamics within the customer service department, as well as help

leadership better understand and meet the needs of general managers within the department.

Demographics

Of the 50 managers who started the survey (see appendix A), 35 completed from start to finish. Length of employment of respondents ranged from less than one year with SkyWest (2), one to five years (6), six to ten years (8), eleven to fifteen years (4), and more than fifteen years (15).

Of the 35 managers who completed the survey, eight had held the general manager position for less than one year, 13 held the position for one to five years, five held the position for six to ten years, six held it for eleven to fifteen years, and three have held the general manager position over fifteen years.

Educational background for those who completed included three managers with high school completion, 18 with some college or technical school completion, nine with completed college or technical school degree, and five with graduate or post bachelor's degree education.

At the time of the survey the SkyWest leadership development had offered four leadership training courses to those general managers throughout the system. Of those managers who completed the survey, four respondents had not completed any level of leadership training, two had completed one leadership training course, 13 had completed two to three of the leadership courses offered, and 16 had completed all leadership training courses that SkyWest leadership development team had offered.

Respondents were also asked employment history with other companies. Of the 35 leaders who completed the survey, 19 had solely been employed with SkyWest, eight respondents had been previously employed with one other company, and four had been previously employed with two companies and four with three other companies in the past.

Chapter 4: Results

In an attempt to understand general manager's best practices and communication

strategies, the results of this project yielded an overarching theme, that general managers see

themselves in a parent/provider role. Responses were coded to find three common core

categories emerge: managers strive to create a family-like atmosphere at their locations,

managers strive to accommodate those whom they supervise, and managers value their

employees and assist in enhancing their SkyWest journey.

Managers Strive to Create a Family-like Atmosphere at their Locations

SkyWest General Managers finds themselves as leaders over their groups of employees at

various stations. With this responsibility, they are forced into a provider role in trying to develop

a family-like atmosphere at their location. As a parent often does, a general manager attempts to

create this atmosphere through: open-ness, fun, encouragement, manager (parent) availability,

competition, recognition, effective meetings, effective recruitment, group activities, and food.

Many of the above were addressed in the survey and will be discussed further.

Biggest Workplace Priority

In what I feel equates to building a family-like atmosphere, I asked general managers

what their biggest priority was in their workplace during the next 12 months (Question 32). Of

the 32 results, the majority answer (14) was coded to the importance of building morale at their

individual stations through effectively motivating employees. Respondent one replied, "Build

morale, demonstrate to the agents that they are important to what we do. Let them know that we

will always be here to support them however we can." Respondent 10 said, "Always being the

agent's biggest cheerleader, and not asking my agents to perform a task that I would not be

willing to do as well." Respondent 16 replied, "Keep this station close, in-tact, and working well

together as they are now – even if things start to change and we grow. We perform so well and

I'm proud of this station – I want to keep that together." SkyWest general managers have a

temperature on the atmosphere of their individual stations and look to build morale through

support, availability, and recognition throughout performance.

In order to analyze the direct supervisor's expectations in order to build this family-like

atmosphere, I asked respondents (Question 33), *what do you think your direct managers most*

expect from you in terms of performance and priorities as a customer service leader? Of the 32

responses, the majority (17) were coded to the importance of meeting mainline partners' goals,

metrics, and expectations. The other majority (10) were coded to being able to run a productive

and efficient operation. Respondent 10 replied, "I think that I am held to a high accountability

because of the mainline partners we directly handle. I have a good working relationship with

those mainline managers, so I feel that I must always seek a way to shine, as to keep the

relationship with SkyWest/UA/DL on good terms." Another manager (27) said, "I think my

direct manager expects my station to meet the goals that Delta has set out for the station. I think

she would like me to place priority on finding ways to meet these goals and communicating

where our successes and challenges are in meeting them." Respondent eight said, "My manager

wants to see us all succeed. She gives me the range to make smart decisions, but holds me

accountable if my performance doesn't reach the standards. She expects me to ensure that all

agents are working in a safe environment and follow all rules and regulations." In terms of

expectations, SkyWest general managers recognize the expectations brought forth by their direct

supervisors, and the expectations (goals/metrics) provided from the mainline partners we serve.

To build a family-like atmosphere, general managers frequently communicate these expectations

with their supervisors, as well as subordinates at the station level.

Largest Challenge and/or Obstacle for a Customer Service Leader

While understanding priorities and expectations of the general managers, I was interested

to understand the largest challenge a general manager believes they face. In question 30, I asked

leaders what their biggest challenge/obstacle was right now. While many of the past questions

received a majority of similar answers, this question provided a variety of responses. Thirty-four

managers responded, and responses were coded to five major categories of challenges: support

from mainline partners (7), staffing and retention (7), maintaining station morale (6), and time

(6).

While SkyWest general managers understand the expectations, goals and metrics

provided from our mainline partners for which we operate, they often feel that the support from

those partners is lacking. Respondent 22 replied, "Our partner's demands for high levels of

service without the support from them to accomplish their stated tasks and goals." A similar

response was shared by respondent 28,

> Meeting aggressive Delta goals. I like that SOARing (SkyWest-led performance
>
> program) are aligned with the Delta scorecard, but would like Delta to work more with
>
> individual stations to set attainable goals. It is difficult to motivate station agents when
>
> some Delta-set goals are unrealistic and hard to attain. Also, Delta oversight has begun
>
> to become a little overwhelming. It seems like there is a new process, or conference call
>
> every other day and finding the time for everything is a little overwhelming.

Lastly, respondent 34 shared, "United constantly changing the rules and playing the

push/pull/tug game. It's difficult to maintain a positive work environment when United puts the

hammer down on every turn." While operating as a contractor for mainline partners, it appears

that both SkyWest Airlines and those partners need to develop better communication and

conversation to improve goals, performance metrics, and support in order to keep a station with a

family-like atmosphere.

Another major challenge for SkyWest general managers is hiring and the retention of

staff at various locations. Oftentimes in smaller stations, employees are hired for two hour shifts

and only work twelve hours a week. With airports located sometimes thirty plus miles from an

employee's home, as is often the case in Salt Lake or Denver, it is oftentimes a daunting task to

retain agents. One manager with staffing concerns (3) responded, "Staffing issues. Being a

small station with only part-time agents working split shifts, with the exception of myself and the

supervisor, means a lot of turnover. That means a lot of time is spent on recruiting, training, and

such, instead of other things that could improve either the station or myself." Another

respondent (4) said, "I inherited a station with over 50% attrition." Respondent (24) simply

stated, "TURNOVER!" With limited hours, sometimes being odd hours of the day, staffing and

retention is clearly a challenge that SkyWest airlines needs to consider to improve. Creative

scheduling becomes an added task that many managers have to look to in order to retain agents.

The third most popular answer to the question involved the task of maintaining a family-

like atmosphere by creating a positive workplace environment and keeping station morale high.

The airline industry is a changing industry, especially at SkyWest Airlines, with factors

oftentimes not within the manager's control. One manager (16) responded, "Staying positive

and helping employees to stay positive – in an environment where we control nothing. The pay

cuts, loss of holiday pay, etc.…has really taken a toll on employee morale." Another manager

(5) responded,

> Understanding that our department is dispensable and that our senior leadership uses that
>
> reality as means to justify department programs that simply are not fair with respect to
>
> the rest of the company. Customer service has taken massive cuts in both compensation
>
> and support while other departments grow and gain. My raise last year was $0.12 per bi-
>
> weekly paycheck. After nearly 19 years I get a $0.12 raise, a smile, and another 20
>
> hours' worth of work per week.

Lastly, one manager (26) responded with one line, "Maintaining my enthusiasm in spite of all the

cost-cutting measures being made." It appears that in order to help managers create a family-like

atmosphere, SkyWest also needs to look into the concerns and needs of their leaders. In taking

care of their leaders, the leaders then can take care of their employees.

One of the other huge challenges many managers expressed was the issue of time. With

a lot of work on their plate, and being pulled in and out of the operation, many managers find

difficulty in completing all of the tasks required of them on a daily basis. Respondent 29 stated,

"Time management, especially now with all the extra reports and accounting procedures required

by United. Then we still have to do training, evaluations, daily auditing…there is never enough

time in a day to do all of this as well as working flights. A lot of times I skip doing a large task

until my office day, because I feel as though I don't want to start a big project that is going to

take up a lot of time." Another manager (31) added "Time – too many responsibilities, too many

hours. Workload is exhausting and stressful, which defeats positive leadership." Two other

leaders (21) and (27) said, "Time" and "Time management" respectively. To help build a

positive family-like atmosphere, it appears that SkyWest needs to look for ways to give time

back to their leaders to get through their daily workload.

Managers Strive to Accommodate Those Whom They Supervise

In filling a parent-provider role, general managers have the responsibility to set up their

work location in order to accommodate those whom they supervise. This accommodation is

reached through a variety of ways, including: work scheduling, training plans, and daily

assignments, job-shadowing, daily briefings, communicating performance metrics, competitions

with other stations, leadership training, and specialized workforce checklists. Managers attempt

to accommodate those they supervise in order to provide an efficient workplace to meet the goals

and demands of the different mainline partners they serve. In analyzing the data collected, I

coded a variety of questions that centered on the ways managers attempt to accommodate their

employees.

Training and Developing Part-Time Agents with Varying Hour/Shift Restraints

As outlined earlier, at many SkyWest locations staffing is limited to when flights occur.

At most locations, general managers' staff most of their part-time employees for 2-3 hours at a

time, and often-times split throughout the day. One of the major challenges is the amount of

training (computer based, classroom, on the job) a new hire employee has to complete (up to 200

hours for a station that serves more than one carrier) before they even work a flight. With that

challenge, I was interested in finding how SkyWest leaders train and develop part-time agents

with varying hour/shift restraints (Question 17). Of the 34 responses, replies were coded as

follows: flexible scheduling/training (12), communicate expectations and personally support

(12), assign a supervisor or station trainer to job shadow (9), and outlined challenges (8).

A majority of responses to question 17 involved setting and keeping a flexible schedule for agents to complete their training. Respondent 27 stated: "I am the only customer service trainer (CST) at the station. With our split shifts it is possible to train a part-time agent 5 hours (with breaks) each day. I also work with agents on whatever shift they need to train on, be it A.M., P.M., or the RON (remain overnight flight), working the particular flight with them." Another manager (2) replied, "Try to offer as much flexibility in training times/dates as possible." With the amount of training required, managers accommodate an agent by remaining flexible in scheduling training assignments.

In addition to remaining flexible, general managers often assigns their supervisors, CSTs, and lead agents to help tackle the challenge of helping new agents complete their required training. In answering question 17, one manager (19) stated, "I train them during the day shifts for the first month with me and then on some of the night shifts with the supervisor so they get used to the different shift times and people." Another leader (8) responded, "I added another CST to the station because it was very difficult to give each new hire the attention and training they deserve." Lastly respondent 31 said, "I rely heavily on supervisors to set the tone and instill strong skills." In accommodating a new hire through their initial training, it is all hands on deck.

While responding to question 17, many managers outlined the difficulty that comes with trying to get a part-time agent the required training he/she needs. One manager (26) responded, "This is one of the most difficult challenges a small station has. Finding a time to work one-on-one with an agent who may only be here for a few hours/days a week." Another (30) said, "That's sometimes next to impossible. Some of our employees are here for the flight benefits alone and while they work hard and well while they are here, they do not have extra time to hang around for 'development'." Lastly, one manager (14) stated,

Training is most often trial by fire. Training part-time agents from a system standpoint is

not conducive to the group of part time agents we look for [sic]   I look for mature, stable

employees generally employed elsewhere or retired. The types of employees I want do

not always have the ability or willingness to be gone for training for more than six weeks

in the initial six months of employment. That requirement is very detrimental to our

'Employer of Choice' ideology.

It is very clear that with short shift times and the amount of training needed, a restraint is

placed on a manager's ability to accommodate a new agent.

In resolving the training dilemma that question 17 posed, many leaders responded about

their strategy in getting their new hires through all their required training; communicating

expectations, and personally supporting the agent. Manager 28 stated,

During the interview process, I really try to stress that in the first month or so there will

be a lot of initial training, and I try to get a time frame commitment from them on when

they will complete. Typically, after they are hired, and have committed, it isn't usually

an issue to get them to come in between shifts, or off hours to complete training and

development.

Another leader (10) responded, "It never has been a problem here. From the time they

are first hired, (new hire) expectations are made very clear that hours will vary and that there is a

lot of training." Respondent 1 said, "Make sure you're available during the time they are here by

adjusting your schedule as needed. Let them know they are just as important as any other

employee. Support them." Lastly, one leader (33) responded, "Show by example and take the

time with them while they are here. Sometimes it means I have to work more hours than they do

in a week." By clearly outlining training expectations and following through with support,

leaders are able to help accommodate their agents through their "new hire" progression.

Motivating Agents to Perform

A huge part to helping an agent to perform at their highest level involves accommodating

the agents' workplace in order to help them succeed. Two questions (29) and (16) touched on

what procedures general managers implement at their individual stations, and what do general

managers do to help motivate agents to perform at their highest level.

Question 29 posed some interesting results, as the majority of respondents (8) had

nothing they could think of procedure-wise to help accommodate agents to succeed. One

respondent (10) said, "I cannot think of a response for this" while two others (3, 19) simply

stated, "nothing". The only other top two responses (4) and (5) coded to checklist of

duties/assignments, and specialized workforce/positions, respectively.

For the general managers who implemented checklist of duties and assignments, one

respondent (6) stated, "We have a daily checklist of duties. It is fluid, but it is a great reference

to get everything done and teaches all the new agents how the system works at our station".

Respondent 22 replied, "I use a daily work schedule which shows who is working, their

assignments, and any extra duties they may have." Lastly, respondent 25 shared,

> Two things that have been very beneficial to my station have been a shift assignment
>
> board, which shows each agent where they are working for every flight (ramp, floater,
>
> gate) and an assignment board for each shift (morning and afternoon) which is basically a
>
> checklist reminder of everything that needs to be done before that shift can be concluded

(clock out). Agents work together to make sure everything is checked off the list before

the shift has ended.

With regard to local procedures, it appears that SkyWest stations who are doing

"nothing" could benefit from stations with set procedures, checklists and assignments to help

accommodate their workplaces to help agents know where they are to be and succeed.

In asking question 16, I was interested to see what general managers do to help motivate

those agents who appeared to need help or were "lower performers" at their locations. Of the

thirty-four responses, the overwhelmingly coded response (21) involved showing by example

and one-on-one coaching. Other responses included goal-setting and evaluation (9), and

incentives and recognition (4).

There were a number of great responses to choose from with question 16. One general

manager (22) stated,

> Communicate expected results in a simplified and directed manner. Evaluate to
>
> determine if the team member is in need of additional training to meet desired standards.
>
> If not, communicate specific expectations in conjunction with anticipated repercussions
>
> of not meeting the defined standards.

Respondent nine replied, "Put them in a position to challenge themselves with attainable goals,

then move on to the next step to get them to become a well-rounded agent." General Manager

(10) responded, "Giving them more one-on-one direction, or even face-to-face pep-talks. It is

amazing to see how a few minutes of time with someone can turn a corner for them [sic] in

performance." Respondent (17) stated, "Motivating in a positive and caring attitude with open

discussions can direct the 'lower performers' toward doing a better job. We can hope that by

working alongside their 'great agents' (fellow co-workers), this will be motivational." Lastly,

general manager (30) replied, "I try to always take an interest in their personal lives, asking

questions about the things I know are important to them. I work alongside them and try to

convey my own satisfaction in working hard, hustling, and giving great service to our

customers." It appears that SkyWest customer service leaders have a very good handle (goal

setting, performance planning, and individual attention) on ways to accommodate their

workplaces to improve performance with the individual agents they supervise.

General Manager Support

In order for a general manager to succeed in accommodating their individual workplace,

the SkyWest customer service department has set up a support structure (regional area managers,

training department, internal evaluators, "buddy managers", and operational support managers)

to assist general managers. Question 28 asked these managers what kind of support positions

could the customer service department put in place to help them better succeed.

Of the thirty responses coded, ten felt that the support system was good as-is, six would

like a larger support team, four would like to see more "buddy managers", four had issues with

time management, three wanted budgeting assistance, two more visionary leadership, and one

education on motivation and support.

One good take-away from the SkyWest-side was that the majority of the respondents felt

like the system was good as-is. One manager (12) stated, "I feel that I am supported very well

with the positions that are currently in place." Another (23) said, "I honestly can't think of any.

When I need something, I have someone to contact." I third respondent (16) replied, "None that I can think of. For me the structure we have is working."

Ten other respondents would like to see more support, whether it be a more robust support team, or "buddy managers". One respondent (17) replied, "Continue to have support persons available for all managers for all phases of our managerial work; like system support managers when dealing with time-clock system issues, budget planning, etc. Also continue the customer service training support team to assist stations with new learning processes." Another manager (25) said,

> I think we simply have to reach out to those mangers that have been successfully leading
> their stations for years for that extra support. It may have been helpful as a new manager
> to shadow a 'seasoned' manager for a week or so, just to get a feel for how the station
> should run correctly.

A third respondent (14) with regards to customer service leadership replied,

> We need department leadership who are willing to support a vision. Sometimes the
> hardest part of my job is trying to identify where we go from here. We spend far too
> much time in reaction mode and very little time addressing the challenges we face daily,
> weekly, and moving forward.

While many customer service leaders feel comfortable with the amount of support they receive from the company, it appears that there is still more SkyWest could do to help managers feel more accommodated in their day-to-day workplaces.

Valuing the Employee and Assisting in their Journey

As a person responsible for selecting and assisting subordinates throughout their

SkyWest journey, general managers play the role of parent-provider in valuing the work their

employees provide and assist in motivating employees to work to reach individual goals, as well

as goals that mainline airline partners set for their various locations. General Managers

accomplish this task through a number of different ways, including: observing performance,

mentoring and coaching, goal-setting, encouragement, evaluations, honest and transparent

communication, recognition, and promotions. In analyzing the responses from general

managers, I coded questions that involved the ability of SkyWest managers to value the

employees who work for them, and what things they do individually to assist in those

employee's SkyWest journey.

SkyWest's Guiding Principles

As outlined earlier in the SkyWest History section, SkyWest strives to be the airline of

choice, employer of choice, and investment of choice by focusing on seven guiding principles

which include: health and safety first, excellent service and quality, personal and operational

reliability, fairness and consistency, respect and teamwork, personal and corporate integrity, and

superior profitability and efficient use of all resources (skywest.com/about/our mission).

In addition to finding these guiding principles online, SkyWest uses these guiding

principles in employee evaluations and has them posted on walls throughout their various

locations. Questions (24) and (25) inquired which guiding principles were most important to

general managers, and why.

Of the thirty-five answers to question (24), *which of the seven guiding principles do you feel is the most important to you as a leader*, 12 managers responded "respect and teamwork", 10 responded "health and safety first", five said "personal and operational reliability", four "excellent service and quality", three "personal and corporate integrity", one "fairness and consistency", and none replied "superior profitability and effective use of resources".

Question (25) asked general managers why they selected the particular guiding principle as most important to them. Respondents (1) and (16) who chose "health and safety" stated respectively, "You first need healthy and safe agents as a foundation to build other principles" and "The most important thing to me is that my employees go home safely after work. I have to know they are taking care of themselves, each other, and that they are following our safety procedures/policies." One general manager (17) who selected "personal and operational responsibility" replied,

> Personal reliability is key to doing a professional, dependable, caring, hardworking job. With the personal attitude, operational reliability is another key factor in ensuring a job is being done and completed to ensure overall success. Excellent service and quality is key, but both guidelines can tie in together, and we as leaders should recognize this.

With a majority of responses to which guiding principle was most important to them, many managers selected "respect and teamwork". One respondent (19) said, "If you respect the team-members you are working with and work as a team then all other guiding principles should be visible in all that you do". Another, likely a regional manager, (32) replied, "In my position, both respect and teamwork are extremely important since regional managers rely on the general

managers and supervisors to assist with gathering data, enforcing policies, as well as maintaining

the daily operation. Lastly, one general manager (28) said,

> I feel it is my duty to provide for my agents and make sure they are taken care of. If one
>
> of my agents fail at any aspect at the station, I feel it is my responsibility for their failure,
>
> and try to look for the root cause of the failure. I also feel it is important to not ask any
>
> agent to do anything that I wouldn't do. I let them know that I am accessible at all times
>
> through phone and text, and will try to come in if any IROPs (irregular operations) occur
>
> that I believe might be too much for them to handle.

SkyWest Airlines strives to "respect every individual's quality of life and is committed to

promoting dignity and trust in all that they do" (skywest.com/about/ourmission) They also

realize that time is a priceless commodity, and have developed guiding principles to help leaders

and employees navigate their journey with the company. It appears that customer service

general managers both understand these principles and strive to use them on a daily basis

throughout their various work locations.

Recognition and Using Recognition Tools

As valuing employees is a large part of SkyWest's corporate culture, the company has

provided tools to encourage and recognize performance at work locations. Recognition tools

range from RAVEs (online recognition notes) to Carry-On tags (instant tags for employees

exemplifying guiding principles) to personal notes and passenger complimentary letters. General

Managers also have recognition money in their budget to use for gifts, gift cards, and food.

Questions (22) and (23) queried leadership as to what types of recognition they use and what

types of recognition were the most important in fostering performance at their individual work

locations. Of the thirty-three responses to the question, 19 coded responses included the word

carry-on program, 14 included food and candy, 13 included the RAVE program, 12 verbal

recognition, and 10 included personalized notes and cards.

In asking question (22), I was interested to see what type of recognition general managers

took advantage of the most. One manager (10) responded, "I encourage the agents to send

RAVEs to fellow co-workers, I religiously look at the birthday and anniversary reminders and

send cards to celebrate life's moments. If an agent is recognized by a passenger, I forward this to

headquarters for a more formal thank-you." Another respondent (12) said, "Carry-on tags, thank

you cards, occasionally gift cards. One time I made 8x10 photos of a SkyWest plane on our

ramp and gave each agent a title for what they are extremely well [sic] at and add personalized

scripts to each of the photos and distributed them at a station meeting." A different general

manager (16) replied,

> We use carry-on tags, RAVEs, and SOARing (a previously used performance contest).
> We put awarded carry-on tags in a pot, and one winner from each work group is awarded
> a small gift card. We are also big on recognizing and celebrating milestone anniversaries
> as we've got a lot of those!

While a lot of general managers use the recognition tools provided, some confessed that

they were not using them as much as they should. Respondent (26) stated,

> I encourage agents to RAVE each other and add onto the RAVES as they come through.
> I use the carry-on tags for special things at the station. We usually go out at a restaurant
> and enjoy each other's company using the employee appreciation funds. I don't follow
> through with recognition soon enough or often enough.

Another manager (27) responded,

I really like the carry-on program and use the tags the most for recognition at the station.

I also like the carrot manager 'manage to the one' worksheets and have each new agent

fill out when they start at the station so I can purchase specific items (candy, drinks, and

gift cards) when we have special occasions. I admit I could be better at RAVEing

(SkyWest sponsored recognition program) as I also like this program.

While general managers take advantage of the many recognition opportunities available

to them, it appears that more work could be done to use the tools provided from the company to

recognize great performance at individual work locations.

While question (22) was introduced to see what types of recognition was being used at

different work locations, question (23) looked to see what type of recognition general managers

felt was most effective with their subordinates. While a majority of responses to question (22)

included the company sponsored carry-on program, responses to question (23) were different.

The top coded responses included the words: verbal recognition (17), individualized (13), food

(9), carry-on (8), and small gifts (6).

With regards to verbal and individual recognition, respondent (30) stated, "Our people

seem to enjoy being recognized in front of their peers and individual immediate

acknowledgement following a tough day or being seen doing something great." Another

manager (3) said, "I think the immediate verbal recognition of someone or something done as a

group has the most effect on the group, but individualized recognition awards are the most

effective with the individual." A third leader (12) replied,

We enjoy station BBQ's with soaring awards and also carry-on tags, however, sometimes

I believe a simple 'you did a fantastic job today' 'you rock' or 'thanks for your hard work

and dedication' go a very long way, and you can see in the agent's face that they are very

thankful for the recognition.

Continuing with the individual theme of coded responses, leader 27 said,

I think my agents respond well to the carry-ons they receive. I think my agents also like

individual recognition when we have station meetings. I try to bring up individual

achievements at meetings for the group to see. I also like to post achievements on our

station group Facebook page for past and present agents to see. Many of our current and

past agents will 'like' and post well wishes to the group, which is fun.

Lastly, touching on food, respondent (29) shared,

I like being able to serve a light supper or lunch at station meetings. While this is not

individual recognition per se, I do feel it promotes the 'family atmosphere'. I've heard it

said that most people work for a person, not for a company. I try to create loyalty by

caring deeply about each person in our employ. At a very small station this is more

possible.

While it appears that company sponsored recognition opportunities are important to

SkyWest customer service leaders, many leaders strive to look for opportunities to provide

immediate, individual recognition, a lot of times verbally and amongst employees' peer groups.

Determining and Promoting "Great Agents"

As stated earlier, SkyWest airlines strives to be the employer of choice and thus looks to develop and promote from within. Many of the current leaders of the company started their SkyWest roots as a ramp agent in Pocatello, Idaho, or customer service agents in Cedar City, Utah and Los Angeles, California. One current tenured general manager has had four different employees who started as station ramp agents, and were eventually promoted to different managerial positions in the company. As for me, I started with SkyWest as a ramp agent in Salt Lake City as just a means to help pay for college tuition, and was promoted to supervisor and general manager in Idaho Falls, transferring to general manager in Cedar City, culminating to my current position of support manager based out of Phoenix, Arizona. In asking questions (14) and (15), I inquired customer service leaders in valuing their current employee base how they determine who their "great agents" are, and what do they do to prepare these "great agents" to move up within the company.

In asking question (15), I looked to SkyWest leaders to see how they determined who their "great agents" were at their individual locations in order to foster performance and promotion within the company. Of the coded responses from thirty-four leaders, the following words were most prevalent: agent attitude/performance (24), observation (working side-by-side) (7), peer recognition (5), teamwork (4), and communication (4).

Respondent (4) provided this lengthy answer as to determining "great agents",

I do my best to give employees opportunities to learn new skills and develop themselves. I try not to shove anyone into a specific activity or discipline, but encourage them to find aspects of their job that they find interesting, or that they are passionate about. I then

make sure that they get the support and resources they need to be successful. Over a

period of time it starts to become apparent which people are truly interested in advancing

themselves by the nature of their passion for the job, the questions that they ask, the

results they achieve, and the informal leadership roles that they assume. When I see

someone who is getting results, having fun, and is admired and respected by their peers

over time, this is someone who I will continue to encourage and spend more time

coaching and mentoring.

Another leader (16) stated,

For me, overall attitude is important, as well as the ability to be friendly and

approachable. These are the agents who care about their job, want to do a good job, and

will put the time and effort into making themselves better agents. Positive, happy, hard-

working employees make great leaders.

Another leader (27) touched on determining "great agents" through performance,

To me, a great agent is one that puts in the extra time every day, grabs the unclaimed

bags off the slide and then follows up on them without being asked. They keep busy

while on their shift even when there is some down time, finding things to do. The great

agents show initiative daily and go the extra mile to help the team. A great agent doesn't

ask if everything is done, they KNOW when everything is done. They see what needs to

be done and simply does it.

Finally, touching on determining a "great agent", respondent (28) shared,

Typically, the great agents to me are the ones who you can show how to do something (a

process or procedure), and once they grasp it, they will not ask how to do it again, or will

do it on their own without needing 'prodding' from their supervisor. The great agents are

also those who will complete training and stay on top of memos and policies in a timely

manner. Great agents are also those that look for ways to help the other agents, whether

it's training or being observant and seeing where they are needed during a flight turn.

In determining who a great agent is, SkyWest customer service leaders look for many

different things, but ultimately look for an agent's ability to work with a passionate, positive

attitude, while staying observant and performing at a high level without needing help from their

superiors.

In querying how leaders determine who their great agents are (Question 14), responses

were coded to surprisingly only four main themes: encouragement (14), increased training and

knowledge (12), empowerment (10), and mentoring (9). Most of the leaders' responses touched

on all four of these themes. Respondent (4) stated,

I encourage my employees to strive for excellence by ensuring that they have the right

tools, training, and support resources; that they understand what the goals of our

[mainline] carriers, SkyWest, and station are, and what we are doing to achieve those

goals. For those who are interested, and show aptitude, I spend more time with them and

make sure that they have opportunities to learn additional skills, work on projects, and

take on leadership roles. I encourage them to take on these additional responsibilities,

and then we spend time talking about what has worked well for them and where they see

opportunities for improvement. This also gives me an opportunity to audit the results of

my work and leadership and make adjustments to improve my skills and knowledge.

Another leader (16) replied,

I try to encourage them whenever possible, especially when I have open positions posted

or when I specifically know about their goals. I try to watch for things that may interest

them. For those that have asked, I have tried to coach them on their interviewing skills,

give them tips on ways to improve performance, or suggestions for reaching whatever

their SkyWest goals are.

Another leader (28) touching on training and knowledge said, "I try to give every agent

as much knowledge as possible. I look for teaching moments throughout their journey with the

company. I try to meet one-on-one frequently with each agent and discuss how they are

progressing at the station." Lastly, respondent (30) replied,

I have always tried to send employees to as much training as possible. I believe this

empowers them in their current position with SkyWest and also exposes them to other

employees from other SkyWest stations as well as the SkyWest training department

instructors and staff. I give them as much positive feedback as possible and also repeat

our station's 'stories' frequently to agents on employees we've had in the past who have

'moved up' at SkyWest.

In using encouragement, increased training and knowledge, empowerment, and

mentoring, SkyWest leaders look to find agents who are looking to 'move up' within the

company, and make SkyWest Airlines a career.

Employee Retention

As a contract carrier for four mainline airline carriers who offer higher wages and better pay, SkyWest Airlines often is subject to employee turnover to those carriers. Question (13) queried managers as to what steps they take to value the employees to avoid them leaving the company to other carriers/opportunities. Of the coded responses (34), the following response words were coded: family/positive work environment (11), listen/value them (10), accommodate/work schedule (10), recognition (5), travel benefits (5), personal encouragement (5).

A majority of responses referred a family/positive work environment. Respondent (12) stated, "Create a comfortable safe and fun environment. Our station feels like a family rather than just co-workers. Everyone cares deeply for others and always wants our station to succeed." Another manager (16) said,

> I try to ensure a comfortable, pleasant work environment. I try to address their questions, concerns, and suggestions openly and in a timely manner. I make sure that my door is always open for anyone regardless of the issue being discussed. I strive for a very friendly, open relationship between myself and everyone at this station.

A third leader (30) responded,

> I do everything possible to ensure that our work schedule enables employees to maintain the other jobs, college classes, and family life that I recognize they have outside of our schedule. No one at our station makes a living on their SkyWest income. Every single employee has other employment or is part of a two-part income unit. We also have a

majority of employees as college students. I try to make our station as fun as possible.

We like to laugh and I encourage everyone to take care of everyone else, so that we

develop a family tie with each other.

Other leader (11) responded, "I try to accommodate them and their needs when it comes

to personal life events and goals within reason. Flexibility is one of the top reasons for working

for our airline. I also encourage them to travel and take advantage of the travel perks the

company has to offer."

Lastly, leader (22) said, "Communicate the value of the team member to the operation

and recognize the team member for positive contributions to the team. Reinforce positive

moments in front of co-workers to promote positive actions."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to query general managers in order to discover common communication themes within their dynamic workplaces. The project looked to see what methods leaders use to foster communication, build relationships, and lead their organizations to meet mainline partners' aggressive goals and metrics all while working frontline aside their agents, assisting in the daily operation, balancing daily HR issues, completing payroll and training, and balancing the station's overall well-being. Data was gathered and coded in an attempt to learn leaders' current communication practices, and where general managers could use more assistance in the future.

In coding responses received from a majority of the questions in this survey, results yielded an overarching theme, namely that general managers see themselves in a parent/provider role, and feel responsible for the employees in which they supervise. In the same way a parent would look to provide for his/her family, three major roles rose to the surface: leaders attempt to create a family-like atmosphere, accommodate their workplace (home), and value their employees (children) while assisting and motivating them to succeed.

As a parent would in the home, general managers have the responsibility to set-up their work locations in order to create a family-like atmosphere. SkyWest leaders attempt to create this atmosphere by: providing a fun and open workplace, being available for questions and working side-by-side their employees, recognizing performance and encouraging agents during difficult times, leading fun and creative meetings and group activities, and providing food! In their effort to meet the goals and demands of the different mainline partners they serve, General Managers attempt to create this family-like atmosphere to succeed. When the location's

"family" is happy, feels provided for, and is working as a cohesive group, positive performance

and upbeat station morale is typically observed.

Effective parenting includes creating an atmosphere in the home much in the same way a

general manager creates it at their workplace. Parents create an atmosphere of fun by

participating in their children's life, whether it be taking them to various activities (sports,

hiking, movies, theme parks) and doing fun things in the home (games, sports, television,

movies). Effective parents also attempt to set up an atmosphere where they are open and

available to their children with any questions they might have. They attempt to have open

dialogue at all times and let children know their "door" is always open for communication. They

cook for their children, providing nourishment and also spoil them once in a while when they do

something good (ice cream/candy)! This was one of the first major themes that emerged from

the audit.

In addition to providing a family-like feeling at their locations, SkyWest leaders work to

accommodate their employees to keep them organized and engaged. Managers are able to do

this by: creating accommodating work schedules, setting up training plans that work with the

employee's schedule and life outside of SkyWest, generating daily assignments (chores) to keep

employees engaged, observing daily performance while working side-by-side with the employee,

communicating in briefings the station's performance results, engaging in competition with other

locations, creating extended leadership training for supervisors, and assigning employees where

they are most useful and can support their SkyWest family. Much like a parent would give

his/her child daily information to keep them organized and efficient, SkyWest leaders

communicate to their employees the information (schedule, assignments, goals) to help their

workers and locations identify the right track to success in meeting mainline partner's

expectations.

This theme emerged as something similar that parents do in the home. In

accommodating children, parents often look to setting their expectations, whether it be chores,

homework, TV time, and balance. Parents show children how to work and then work side-by-

side completing household chores or daily activities. Parents sometimes assign children to

activities that they know would be their strengths (As the oldest child with two younger sisters I

was often assigned to vacuum and lawn mowing duty as I had a bit more strength and focus in

completing them). They assist in the child's schoolwork/homework (training) and in term

reward them when good performance (grades) are achieved. Oftentimes parents assist in getting

their children "extra" training (college) and push them to succeed throughout their life. They

encourage their children to gain employment and succeed in life.

Lastly, much like a parent endeavors to value his/her child and assist in his/her journey

throughout life in order to succeed, SkyWest leaders also strive to help their employees

throughout their airline journey. General managers' work to assist their subordinates through the

following ways: listening to their needs and suggestions, honest and transparent communication,

recognition and coaching (individual, verbal, group), setting goals (individual and team),

observing and evaluating performance, empowering agents with tools to succeed, recruiting

employees who will provide value to the company, and encouraging those valuable employees to

look for promotions within the company to continue their journey. Leaders who excel at using

the above-listed methods likely have a very good chance to provide well-rounded, hard-working,

motivated agents who will also in turn provide value to SkyWest throughout their employment.

Parents strive to assist in their child's journey by maintaining open doors of communication whether it be phone, virtual, or face-to-face. Parents invite their children to ask as many questions as they have, and they take suggestions and listen for their needs. Parents have the important role of providing honest and open communication and inviting children to do the same. Effective parents and managers must try to not play favorites with their subordinates but treat them all equally, especially when it comes to enforcing policies and procedures. I believe when the three themes that emerged are followed both in life and the workplace, effective leadership can take place.

Future Recommendations

It was an honor to get the permission to survey leaders at the company where I was employed, many of which are peers and mentors who have helped me throughout my journey with SkyWest. With that being said, there are a few future recommendations I feel would be beneficial to the customer service department down the road.

As I think taking a temperature on any organization is important, I feel it would be beneficial to continue frequent organizational audits on customer service leadership to continue to receive honest and up-front feedback. I also feel that those audits coming from an external entity would one, likely increase the amount of respondents, and two, the quality of the responses. In addition, I think it would be very beneficial to audit the leaders above the frontline to the executive level and cross-compare the results and share with each group to increase understanding from each level. I believe this would help to decrease any future communication breakdowns that could occur. Lastly, future research could audit frontline employees to see if they have similar perceptions as the answers the leaders produced in this audit.

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Appendix A: Organizational Communication Survey for Customer Service Leaders

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SURVEY FOR SKYWEST AIRLINES CUSTOMER SERVICE LEADERS

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY

Cedar City, Utah

Master of Arts in Professional Communication Project

Contact: Dr. Arthur Challis

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LEADERSHIP SURVEY

The following is an independent survey to be utilized for academic research purposes. Though distributed with company permission, the survey is not created or endorsed by SkyWest Airlines. Completion of the survey is optional. As it is a Master's degree project, data and aggregate findings will be shared publicly at Southern Utah University.

This Questionnaire has been designed in order to discover your managerial style, best practices, strengths, and challenges as a SkyWest Airlines Customer Service Department manager. It therefore contains a number of questions relating to your leadership style and operation. The purpose of this survey is to allow you to openly and honestly share your best practices in order to allow leadership to assess and develop common practices to use across the department and discover ways to enhance interpersonal communication within the customer service department.

Results will be shared with Customer Service leadership to analyze strengths and weaknesses of leadership training, recognition programs, and leadership development. Results will also help develop new programs to coincide with changing work dynamics in the customer service department, as well as help leadership better understand and meet the needs of general managers.

For some of the questions you are asked simply to put an 'x' that best reflects your opinion regarding a particular issue. In other cases, you are asked to write in a response and give further information. Please answer all the questions.

Background Information

This section is for statistical purposes only. We do not need your name, but would appreciate the following information. Place an '**x**' in the appropriate box.

In what region is your station (Pam, Gina, Stephanie, Hub)?

_____

Do you work?

_____Salaried Full-time

_____Hourly Full-time

_____Hourly Part-time

How long have been employed with SkyWest?

_____Less than 1 year

_____1 to 5 years

_____6 to 10 years

_____11 to 15 years

_____More than 15 years

How long have you held your present position?

_____Less than 1 year

_____1 to 5 years

_____6 to 10 years

_____11 to 15 years

_____More than 15 years

What is your level of management in this organization?

_____I don't supervise anybody

_____First-line supervisor

_____General/Hub/Upper management

_____CS Departmental management

What was the *last* level you completed in school?

_____Less than high school graduate

_____High School graduate

_____Some College or technical school

_____Completed College or technical school degree

_____Graduate work

How much training to improve your management skills have you had?

_____No training at all

_____Little training (attended *1* seminar, workshop, training activity, or course SkyWest   has provided)

_____Some training (attended a few seminars, workshops, training activities, or courses SkyWest has provided)

_____Extensive training (have attended most of/all of the seminars, workshops, and   training activities, or courses SkyWest has provided)

During the past ten years, in how many other organizations have you been employed?

_____No other organizations

_____One other organization

_____Two other organizations

_____Three other organizations

_____More than three others

Management Style

1. How would you classify your management style (choose one)?

Closely supervised and comprehensive systems, Manager's job to structure work, energize the employee, and follow-up regularly _____

Manager communicates openly with employees, Manager creates comfortable environment, delegates, and employees are self-directed _____

2. Rank your preferred method of communication with your subordinates (1-5 with 1 being most preferred)?

       Face to Face _____MyMessage _____ Email _____ Phone _____ Text _____

3. How often do you meet 1 on 1 with your subordinates?

       Once a month _____ Once every 2-3 months _____ Once every 6 months _____

       Once a year _____ Never _____

4. How often do you meet as a group/station?

       Once a month _____ Once every 2-3 months _____ Once every 6 months _____

       Once a year _____ Never _____

5. How effective in altering employee performance do you believe the following meetings are with your various groups:

1 on 1 with Individual Subordinates:

       Not effective _____ A little Effective _____ Somewhat Effective _____ Effective _____ Greatly Effective _____

Station Meetings/Group Meetings:

       Not effective _____ A little Effective _____ Somewhat Effective _____ Effective _____ Greatly Effective _____

Regional Meetings:

       Not effective _____ A little Effective _____ Somewhat Effective _____ Effective _____ Greatly
       Effective _____

6. How often do you have station/group activities outside of work (i.e. potlucks, sports, parties, etc)?

       Never _____ Once a year _____ 2-3 times a year _____ More than 3 times a year _____

Employee Training and Development

7. As a leader, what do you do/attempt to do to retain your full-time and part-time agents (so they don't leave the company taking with them valuable knowledge and assets)?

8. As a leader, what do you do/attempt to do to prepare your 'great agents' to move on with the company (or in your group/station)?

9. As a leader, how do you determine who your 'great agents' are?

10. As a leader, how do you motivate those that you feel are your 'lower performers'?

11. As a leader, how do you train and develop part-time agents with varying hour/shift restraints?

12. Do you use competition to motivate your agents? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, explain how.

13. Do you use a vision board or any type of motivational board? Yes _____ No _____ Do you know what one is? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, explain how you use it.

14. How do you use our partner's specific station performance metrics/goals to motivate your subordinates?

15. What do you believe is the single best way to effect/improve station performance?

Recognition

16. What type/types of recognition do you use on a local level?

17. What type/types of recognition do you feel are the most effective with your group? With part-time,

and full-time employees?

Best Practices

18. Which of the 7 SkyWest guiding principles do you feel is the most important to you as a general manager, and why? SkyWest Guiding principles: Health and Safety First, Excellent Service and Quality, Personal and Operational Reliability, Fairness and Consistency, Respect and Teamwork, Personal and Corporate Integrity, Superior Profitability & Effective Use of Resources.

19. What training/program has helped you the most to succeed as a manager at SkyWest?

20. What supporting positions/people does the CS department have now that helps you succeed the most at your job?

21. What kind of supporting positions/people could the CS department put in place to help you be the most successful?

22. Name something you do locally that isn't currently taught at SkyWest but you feel would be beneficial to other leaders.

The Challenges Ahead

23. What is your biggest challenge/obstacle now as a customer service manager?

24. What do you think is the greatest challenge that faces your organization/station during the coming year?

25. What is your own biggest priority in the workplace during the next 12 months?

26. What do you think your direct managers most expect from you in terms of performance and priorities right now?