

Governing Energy

Ground Stop Chaos

Volume 3 Number 13—July 2, 2014

Recently, weather caused substantial problems with air travel in which this author was caught. Recognizing that airlines, air traffic control and others cannot control the weather and none of us want to be exposed to unnecessary risk, the unfolding events were interesting to say the least.

As most travelers know, once the daily flight schedules are substantially impacted by negative events they almost never recover until at least the next day. For example, this writer had already checked his baggage at the San Francisco airport on October 17, 1989 and was headed to the gates when the Loma Prieta earthquake hit.ⁱ

Clearly the airport and other infrastructure stopped. Fortunately, my business host (and his lovely wife) allowed me to spend the night at their condo without electricity (walking up many flights in his downtown condo sans toothbrush et al.).

The next day with some difficulties, my (reunited) baggage and I returned to Houston. Much relieved to go home but strong feelings for those whose hometown would take weeks and months to return to normal.

Twenty-five years later, a much less traumatic event seemingly caused more angst among many travelers. One male passenger decided to challenge in a loud tone the airline employees delivering the message that things were delayed and not going well. Polite, but at one point one male employee expressed a comment along the lines of, “what do you expect me to do about.” While for some tensions remained high, others took to their electronic communication devices and/or the bar.

This traveler’s flight was rescheduled (usually in 30 minute intervals for approximately five hours before finally being cancelled).

However, the real problem began when this author attempted to retrieve his checked luggage and drive home. First, the typical forms necessary to find the bags.

Hours later, I was told that the process was still underway and that the actual search for the luggage had not yet started. Frustration beyond belief as this was just a thunderstorm not an earthquake that destroyed a city.

Finally, a young male baggage handler started to take control of the lost baggage “tickets” and found the bags. He was later joined by his colleagues (men and women) and they made things happen! Baggage was cleared and this author and others went home.

Decades ago, as a young lieutenant in the US Army, an experience sergeant “bailed me out.” My apologies, as I do not remember his name, this individual moved in on chaos and made sense out of it and made things happen while I was trying to follow “the book.”

From my perspective, these airline employees did not “throw the book out” but they simply stepped up! For example, access to the secure areas and their access card, none of them in hours I watched this process violated the “don’t tailgate” dictate (posted)—meaning don’t let anyone follow you into the secure areas.

Hats off to these individuals! I do not believe that any of them violated corporate policy or security requirements, but once the magnitude of the problem was identified, these individuals made things happen—this author got his luggage back! However, management may want to review their standard operating processes (SOP) so that herculean efforts by their people are not the norm.

Are your people empowered to make things happen in times of adversity?

About the Author

Dr. [Scott M. Shemwell](#) has over 30 years technical and executive management experience primarily in the energy sector. He is the author of three books and has written extensively about the field of operations management. Shemwell is the Managing Director of The Rapid Response Institute, a firm that focuses on providing its customers with solutions enabling operations excellence and regulatory compliance management. He has studied cultural interactions for more than 30 years--his dissertation; *Cross Cultural Negotiations Between Japanese and American Businessmen: A Systems Analysis (Exploratory Study)* is an early peer reviewed manuscript addressing the systemic structure of social relationships.

End Notes

¹ <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/nca/1989/>