

Leadership gap bridged with crew leaders' development program

JetBlue Airways Corporation carved a unique niche in the airline industry with its promise to “bring humanity back to air travel.” The company wanted to redefine the airline–customer relationship by offering a compelling mix of value, service, comfort, and style. But in a fiercely competitive and reactive environment, even companies on the fast track to success can experience problems.

Two years after its founding, JetBlue realized its massive growth was fueling a leadership gap within the organization, as many employees (called crewmembers) with little supervisory experience were being hired or promoted to crewleaders. JetBlue’s annual crewmember survey revealed that both managers and employees felt their leaders needed better tools and training to help them become more effective.

Solution

To bridge the leadership gap, CEO David Neeleman and president Dave Barger envisioned a new leadership development program. With a view toward learning as a lifelong process, they proposed a corporate culture initiative embracing development for crewleaders at all levels: supervisors, managers, directors, and VPs.

As part of this initiative, JetBlue used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) assessment.

Business Challenges

- Rapid growth created a leadership gap
- Leaders promoted (or hired) with little supervisory experience

Company Profile

JetBlue was founded on the belief that there had to be a better way of doing business—a better way to approach air travel. They were right. JetBlue launched in 2000 and has enjoyed the distinction of being named Best Domestic Airline by Condé Nast Traveler in consecutive years.

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The initiative's goals were summed up in an executive memo to crewmembers: "As in the past, we will continue to rely on our JetBlue leaders to guide our crewmembers as we delight our customers and pave new roads in air travel. It is leadership that will enable us to stay small as we grow, to continue the unique and special JetBlue experience that distinguishes us from any other company".

Once the need for leadership development had been identified, Neeleman and Barger knew they'd have to provide a vision for their employees if they wanted to maintain the spirit of a small, service-driven company offering a unique customer experience. This vision encompassed five leadership principles: 1. Treat your people right. 2. Do the right thing. 3. Communicate with your team. 4. Encourage initiative and innovation. 5. Inspire greatness in others.

They tasked JetBlue's Learning and Development (L&D) group with creating an intensive training program incorporating these principles that would be expected for anyone in a leadership role. (The L&D group is responsible for providing crewmembers and crewleaders with avenues for them to learn and enhance career skills and organizational culture.) In response, using feedback from the Speak Up Survey, L&D created a curriculum of workforce development courses called the Principles of Leadership (POL) series.

The POL series consists of an introductory course called POL Foundations, a more hands-on, implementation-oriented course called Principles of Leadership in Action which leverages the Myers-Briggs® assessment, and a number of follow-up lectures, open to all POL graduates, including a lecture series on leadership that was introduced a year later.

In the three-day POL Foundations course, the crewleaders are introduced to how JetBlue envisions leadership—both as a concept and in practice. They explore the five leadership principles, as well as such critical leadership skills as self-awareness, relationship building, interpersonal communication, performance management, and gaining commitment. Additionally, crewleaders begin to learn how their behavior affects both corporate culture and performance.

Solution

- Use MBTI instrument as foundation for training and leadership development
- Deliver training for all levels of crew leaders
- Design program to maintain the spirit of a small, service-driven company

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POL Foundations also helps crewleaders develop some of the basic supervisory skills they'll need. On the first day senior officers conduct sessions, walking through each of the principles of leadership and how the senior leaders apply those principles. Days 2 and 3 introduce more leadership skills using a basic personality assessment focusing on individual communication and performance management.

Crewleaders participate in skill-building exercises under a “progressive guidance” model that helps them learn how to handle problem behaviors and develop action plans. Following the exercises, they receive feedback from one another and discuss strategies they can use to motivate crewmembers. The program is designed to include “teach backs” where new leaders teach the material they have just learned to help them experience it as a new practice.

Because JetBlue believes in leaders teaching leaders, David and Dave, along with other senior executives, take the time to participate in the course and personally pass along their principles and expectations to crewleaders. David and Dave lead a group of about 25 to 30 crewleaders. David talks about why they are here, why being a good leader is important; Dave walks through “inspire greatness in others” and leads a panel discussion, allowing new crewleaders to ask any question of current senior executives about leadership at JetBlue. Overall, executives spend 60 to 90 minutes with participants, providing insights and answering questions.

After completing POL Foundations, crewleaders take the intensive three-day POL in Action course, which focuses on skill building. This second course, modeled after the Leadership Development Program at the Center for Creative Leadership®, is personalized to each participant. It moves beyond the basics of leadership to build effective and actionable skills that will make participants better leaders. The course teaches crewleaders how to build relationships with their teams in order to improve performance.

POL in Action is taught by skilled facilitators from the L&D group and also involves feedback coaches. Crewleaders receive in-depth attention and support, including administration of the Myers-Briggs

Results

- Increased employee satisfaction in all areas of work
- Crew leaders understand how behavior affects company culture
- Enhancements in company culture drive the improved customer experience

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assessment and a 360-degree feedback assessment, videotaped activities with group feedback, and one-on-one coaching sessions. At the conclusion of the course, they create a detailed action plan to support their ongoing development and behavioral change.

One of the fundamental aspects of POL in Action is introspection. The course concentrates on developing self-reflection, self-understanding, and recognition and understanding of others' differences, and then applying these skills to actions and communications. To facilitate participants' learning, JetBlue L&D selected the MBTI personality inventory. Working with a certified professional, JetBlue crewleaders take the multiple-choice questionnaire to identify their preferences on four preference pairs: Extraversion–Introversion, Sensing–Intuition, Thinking–Feeling, and Judging–Perceiving. With this knowledge, they are able to determine which of 16 possible personality types best describes them.

In addition to learning their own type, JetBlue crewleaders learn about type theory and how people with various types perceive and interact with the world at large. Participants typically share their MBTI type voluntarily so the group can benefit from this collaborative experience and understanding. Crewleaders can then give each other feedback and talk about how their type played out during a given exercise. The class is also able to talk about group dynamics based on what types are represented in the group. The insight gained through use of the MBTI assessment helps improve interpersonal communications, teamwork, and general self-knowledge.

To help crewleaders appreciate the effects of personality differences and to recognize the resources each team member brings to the table, the MBTI personality assessment is used with the 360-degree feedback assessment and a personal biography. At the end of the three days, a coaching session is conducted, and the MBTI tool is instrumental in providing key learnings JetBlue crewleaders can take away and apply in their work environment.

The combination of the MBTI assessment and communication-oriented activities helps JetBlue L&D open a dialogue to confront potential conflict between crewleaders and their coworkers, address self-management issues that might arise, alleviate work–life balance issues, and help crewleaders recognize when they're stressed.

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Results

In a competitive environment with a ramped-up demand for leadership talent, David Neeleman and Dave Barger responded to an internal need for leadership development and initiated positive change. Their goal for the Principles of Leadership series is to create a better leader for crewmembers, which will result in a superior customer experience.

Two years after implementation, an impact study was conducted that involved small focus groups of graduates of the POL series. In addition, the company surveyed crewleaders, asking them about the training's impact, how they had applied the various skills and concepts they acquired, and how they viewed the overall value of the POL series to the company's success.

What the study and survey overwhelmingly showed is that the POL series sets an expectation that all leaders at JetBlue play an integral part in the company's success. Says David Neeleman to JetBlue leaders, "You're a leader. We're asking you to inspire greatness in others because that's what leaders do."

The study and survey also revealed that participation in the POL series and the production of action plans positively supported the ongoing development of the company's current and future leaders. The POL series has been integrated into JetBlue's culture, and leaders now better understand how their behavior affects the culture. JetBlue's annual Speak Up Survey asks crewmembers how they feel about JetBlue, what it's like to work at the company, and what needs to be improved.

In an interview for Fast Company, David Neeleman said, "When you start out building a new airline, a leadership program is probably the last thing on your list. There are so many other things to do first. Maybe we would have been better to realize we needed it earlier, but we had a mechanism in place to identify the need. And the program is working so far. Even though only 20% of the company had been through Principles of Leadership when we did last year's [Speak Up] survey, every single category went up."

Four years after the company initiated the POL series, JetBlue has been named Best Domestic Airline three years in a row by Condé Nast Traveler 's Readers' Choice Awards.

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JetBlue's leadership development was later expanded to include more of an educational continuum for the different leadership levels—supervisor, manager, director, and VP—and focus on those core skill sets people at each level need to help them go from one stage to the next. In their book *Destination Profit*, Scott Cawood and Rita V. Bailey took a look at the subject of leadership development as it relates to corporate profitability in the airline industry. JetBlue was one of the two airlines profiled in their study. They had this to say about the airline: "There is no doubt that JetBlue will face a tough year. Rising fuel costs, higher-than-expected operating costs, and rapid expansion plans present more challenges for the airline. We believe, however, that JetBlue is positioned as best it can to work through these issues because it realizes the power of people. Engaged employees will lead their organizations to profitability. We have studied many successful organizations that have done it: They all started with the mind-set that investing in people yields high returns."

According to Neeleman, "You have to remain focused on your people. That's the key to great service. I want our crewmembers to feel that they're important and that we're on a mission together, to put humanity back in air travel. That's where a strong culture comes in. Hopefully, it makes them feel this is the best job they've ever had. If they like coming to work, that gets passed on to the customer. It all starts with hiring, though. We're highly selective. We want crewmembers who like people, not just 'certain' people."



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