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Rethinking Aviation Leadership and Culture in a Customer-Centric World

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Imagine a world where an airport is a destination unto itself, complete with ice-skating rinks, movie theaters and pharmacies. This is already becoming the reality (see: goat yoga at Denver International Airport) for leaders in the aviation industry who recognize that “customer experience” — or CX — is far more than a buzzword. It is a business imperative.

This concept was discussed in-depth by senior leaders in the industry at McKinsey & Company’s recent Global Infrastructure Initiative Airport Customer Experience Leadership Forum. Based on these conversations and our own regular discussions with industry leaders, here are some ways we see the growing need for enhanced customer experiences impacting aviation leadership and organizational culture.

“Servant leaders” wanted

In an environment where consumers have more choices than ever before, the customer experience has become a vital differentiator. At the forum and in the course of our executive search and leadership consulting work with airports, airlines and other aviation players, we increasingly hear the request for “servant leaders” who will lead the charge in customer satisfaction. We’ve seen a growing trend in organizations establishing customer experience officers (CXOs) in order to ensure CX is treated as a strategic priority.

One major takeaway from the discussion was how the chief operating officer can be one of the biggest drivers of customer satisfaction. Think of all the pain points you experience when traveling: Crowded, labyrinthine security lines, lost luggage and an absence of healthy dining options, to name

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a few. The Greater Orlando Airport Authority has made major strides in addressing these types of issues to improve the customer and employee experience, including placing information kiosks at critical journey points and offering “farm to terminal” restaurant experiences.

Technology leadership coming to the forefront

With the urge to use automation and other technologies to enhance the “experience continuum” (especially among U.S.-based legacy carriers who are vying for business and international travelers), the CIO and CTO roles are becoming more prominent. Organizations will need these leaders to connect technology to the business and understand what it can — and can’t — do to drive value. It can be tempting for organizations to adopt the newest technologies in the face of pressure to “keep up.” CIOs and CTOs can help determine which technologies will enhance the customer journey and avoid investments in unnecessary tools and platforms.

Additionally, the availability of vast amounts of data and breakthroughs in predictive analytics, cognitive computing and machine learning are changing the relationship between brands and their consumers, requiring dedicated leaders, such as chief data officers and CISOs, to leverage and protect that data. We are also seeing growing demand for innovation and strategy leaders who can help tie technology and operations together and redefine the customer experience in the process. Aviation organizations are turning to hospitality, casino operators, retailers and leading airlines in an effort to find leaders across disciplines with a customer-first mindset.

The key role of culture in customer service

Organizational culture is often something that is looked at as “soft,” but it has a tangible effect on the business and the customer experience. In our recent survey of marketing leaders, 84% said they believe their culture is influential in enabling the brand experience. It’s important to note that customer focus can come from a variety of culture styles. For example, in one retailer with a learning culture, empowerment and flexibility in meeting customer expectations are emphasized. Employees have the authority to do what it takes to deliver a top-notch customer experience. Disney is the oft-cited gold standard of service; CEO Bob Iger’s comments about being open, accessible and treating people fairly indicate that caring is a hallmark of the company’s culture. At airports and airlines, front-line employees can make or break that experience. Does your organization’s culture empower them?

According to one airline executive we spoke with, cross-functional communication and collaboration will also be absolutely essential cultural attributes: “There’s no doubt that with the ability to communicate so much more easily today — along with the spread of information and data so quickly — the need to collaborate is so much more important. You don’t want to have structures that make people go up through a chain of command and then back again to communicate with each other.”

For the airport industry, the challenge will be getting various third parties from airlines to food vendors on the same page from a culture perspective. It will be critical to make customer experience part of the onboarding and training

processes so that it becomes woven into the fabric of the entire airport ecosystem. (Learn more about culture in our recently published piece in *Harvard Business Review*.) The organizations that succeed in today's rapidly changing aviation landscape will be those that truly place the customer first and strive to not just meet, but exceed their expectations — or risk being left behind.

John Davidson brings a wide range of executive search experience to Spencer Stuart's Aviation, Aerospace and Defense, and Automotive practices. He focuses on senior executive assignments at the corporate and divisional levels, as well as operational and commercial leadership roles — primarily in the airline, general and business aviation, cargo, MRO and aircraft leasing sectors. Reach him via email and follow him on LinkedIn.