

16 People on an Airfield

This story comes from Jan Carlzon, former Head of Scandinavian Airlines. He said: “I woke up in a cold sweat one night, having had a nightmare. I dreamt that I’d been watching a conversation between



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three of my staff, on the apron of the airfield, standing alongside one of our planes which was due to take off.

The first one said: “Look, the plane has to go. We pride ourselves on punctuality, it is one of our key performance criteria. It needs to go in the next 5 minutes, to be punctual.”

The second one said: “No. We have a commitment to customer in-flight service, and a lot of our reputation is

built on this. We have 180 passengers on board, and only 165 meals. We need to wait until the extra 15 meals have been delivered – which will take 10 minutes.”

Then the third one chipped in: “That’s all very well, but I just don’t like the look of this rivet holding the engine on...”

Carlsen’s concern was this:

How would they decide?

For Carlsen, it was clear: safety first, then punctuality, and compensate the passengers without the in-flight meal. But it was no use him knowing – it was the staff on the ground who needed to decide... and he realised that they might not use the same stacking of criteria that he felt was obvious...

Leaders must communicate, and in terms of performance management, it isn't enough to say what the business objectives are.

They need to say what the key criteria are for successful product or service delivery. But Carlzon's nightmare takes it further. There is no point in setting several performance criteria – safety, punctuality, customer service – if you do not clarify their stacking order (priority order) if and when they conflict.



“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (R. Kipling)

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