

United Airlines O'Hare Fiasco: A Lesson for All Leaders



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The management of every large organization has to think about crisis; has to anticipate dreadful things that might happen and have a response plan at the ready. But too often they focus only on the big things, overlooking how poor training or flawed judgment at lower levels can produce disastrous consequences.

When United Airlines employees in Chicago dragged a passenger, bloody and screaming, off a plane on Monday so an airline employee could take his seat on an overbooked flight, it triggered a firestorm that will be extremely costly and not quickly overcome.

United needed to get four employees to Louisville for a flight the next morning. When no passengers volunteered to give up their seats and take a later flight in exchange for compensation, the airline started playing hardball. They called in airport security with instructions to remove four passengers, by force if necessary, so the plane could leave. Three got off the plane. The one passenger who strongly resisted, saying he was a doctor who had to see patients the next morning, was jerked out of his seat and dragged down the

aisle and off the plane.

Passenger videos of the incident went viral online with condemnation of the airline coming not only from huge numbers in the U.S. but from around the world. There were 100 million views in China alone. The deplaning became the most popular topic on Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. Over 150,000 Chinese commented on it and it was played up heavily in mainstream media. The passenger's apparent Chinese ancestry ignited charges of racial discrimination in Chinese media outlets. China is a major United market and a key target for the airline's growth.

The passenger, identified by the *Louisville Courier-Journal* as 69-year-old Dr. David Dao of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, is not the most sympathetic victim. The *Courier-Journal* reports he was convicted a decade ago on drug-related offenses and accused of having sex with one of his patients. He clearly was not an easy man to deal with. But, the viral videos show only one aspect of the incident—a man clearly being manhandled and bloodied. And, people today make judgments on what they see rather than what they read, if they read at all.

Whether right or wrong, the videos painted a horrible picture of the “friendly skies” airline that will be extremely costly, both long and short term, and both in the U.S. and abroad.

The damage includes the following:

- An immediate million dollar drop in market value
- The worsening of the airline's already poor reputation for service
- Vows from thousands of passengers “never to fly United again”
- Congress could decide to look into this incident and into the entire performance of airlines in regard to treatment of passengers.

United's response to the incident only compounded the

situation. CEO Oscar Munoz publicly apologized in a brief statement but only for “having to re-accommodate the customers.” That statement should have gone much farther and passengers should have been offered travel vouchers in light of what they endured. Even if Dr. Dao’s own behavior played a key role in the confrontation, an apology should also have been directed to him, citing “regret for this unfortunate incident” and a promise to determine all the facts and take appropriate action.

Ironically, *PR Week* recently named Munoz “CEO Communicator of the Year,” a point frequently noted by online critics and wags who also joke that perhaps United’s motto ought to be “If there’s not enough seating, prepare for a beating.” It’s doubtful that Mr. Munoz is finding any aspect of this situation humorous.

Here are some central questions:

- Why didn’t somebody (flight crew chief, captain, ground crew) step in and call a halt to the situation before it got so far out of hand?
- What level of crew diplomacy was employed prior to the forceful removal?
- Was United’s O’Hare Airport manager consulted while this was going on?
- Why did the compensation top out at \$800 or \$1,000 (reports vary)? If the price gets high enough, surely somebody would take it and drive to Louisville. I would; wouldn’t you?
- Couldn’t the four passengers or flight crew have been routed to Louisville through another city or sent to Cincinnati or Indianapolis and then bused to Louisville? United has a lot of flights to both.

In big companies a small, singular incident like this often gets out of hand because of management failures such as the following:

- Inadequate training of lower-level employees in customer relations
- Neglecting to create awareness of the fact that videos of bad behavior can immediately go viral
- Insufficient empowerment of line employees to make critical decisions in challenging situations that don't quite conform to the book
- Excessive pressure on workers to meet tough deadlines and timelines at almost any cost (a common complaint against airlines)
- A tough work environment that makes employees fearful of making a mistake or upsetting higher management

Were any or all of these factors at play in Chicago? Time will tell.

Meanwhile, United has a huge job to do in building its reputation and flyer and shareholder loyalty. It needs to begin right now with a broader apology from the CEO, one made not just in brief statements but in live interviews in major media outlets. The airline also needs to generously and publicly compensate all passengers on Flight 3411 for their stress and inconvenience.

Television commercials and print ads apologizing and promising to do better would also help.

The company's employee training programs need to be re-examined, assuring that employees have training in how to handle unusual and difficult situations such as this.

The airline needs to take a closer look at employee job satisfaction and morale to determine whether its workers feel free to make a prudent decision that may go against the book.

Most important, United needs to accelerate its program to improve customer service and repair its image.

These solutions are costly but so is bungling or inaction in a

crisis.

Will United's management take such positive steps or just hope the whole thing blows over? That's a question passengers, shareholders, and the board of directors will be asking. The answer could be critical to the airline's future.

***About the Author:** Often referred to as "The Dean of Media Trainers," Virgil is considered one of the world's foremost communication experts. In a 30-year career that has covered 26 countries on five continents, he has provided coaching and counsel to heads of some of the world's largest corporations and government leaders. Virgil is a prolific writer and speaker. His book, *World Class Communication: how great CEOs win with the public, shareholders, employees, and the media*, written with his son Ken, was named one of the 25 best business books of 2012. His column, *In the C-Suite*, appears in every quarterly issue of the *Public Relations Strategist* and is read by leaders of major public relations agencies and global heads of public relations of large companies. He has written or been featured in articles that have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *Reuters*, *Investors Business Daily*, and numerous professional publications. Two of his speeches have been reprinted in the prestigious *Vital Speeches of the Day*. Prior to founding *Virgil Scudder & Associates* in 1990, Virgil headed the media training units of two of the world's largest public relations firms, *Hill & Knowlton* and *Carl Byoir & Associates*. Earlier, he was an award-winning news broadcaster at major radio and television networks and stations in New York City. He was a first-night Broadway drama critic for six years during that period, broadcasting reviews on NBC's all-news radio network and all-news WINS radio.*