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“Talking helps keep trouble at bay, Southwest's approach coordinates workers from all service areas”

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DALLAS — At 9 on a Thursday morning, a dozen people cram into an airline conference room to tally the damage from the previous day's extreme weather: thunderstorms in the East, heat in the West.

The results were ugly: 17 flights delayed more than four hours, four jets diverted to other airports, five planes still in the air at 5:30 that morning. On top of that, the software that was supposed to help the carrier schedule its flight crews went down for two hours. Several people groan.

Southwest Airlines holds two such meetings daily at its headquarters. They're aimed at not only assessing what went wrong but figuring out what can be done to make things better, a reason why the carrier receives high customer-service and on-time performance marks, executives say. It's also part of Southwest's push for a more open culture.

Most airlines tend to have top-down, military-like cultures. As a result, the people closest at hand when things go amiss -- customer service agents, baggage handlers, ramp workers -- often aren't encouraged to report problems. In fact, they fear being punished for doing so.

At Southwest, front-line troops are prodded to report service problems immediately so things can be fixed and customers kept in the loop. As delays and cancellations worsen across the industry, Southwest has drafted new ways to get everybody working in concert when weather, air-traffic control or freak events disrupt its schedule.

Even so, it has taken a while to get people to adapt. Take the twice-daily meetings, internally called MOM and DAD, acronyms for Morning Overview Meeting and Daily Afternoon Discussion.

Although the sessions have been in effect since 2000, it took most participants a long time to feel comfortable owning up to mishaps, said Fred Taylor, senior manager for proactive customer service communications and the executive team's eyes and ears at the meetings.

"They were very guarded in what they would discuss," said Taylor, who began attending in 2001 at the behest of Southwest President Colleen Barrett. "They saw it as I'm prying, and I could cause their department to be reprimanded. Slowly, I built up their trust."

It's Taylor's job to keep customers and company officers in the loop on the airline's service gaffes.

On this day, he probes for details on two particularly hellish excursions. Flight 2133, from Las Vegas to Reno, aborted its takeoff after an alarm sounded in the cockpit as the plane whipped down the runway at 170 m.p.h. Its brakes also overheated, which was no surprise given the sudden stop and 100-degree air temperature.

But mechanics couldn't figure out what set off the alarm. The plane appeared fine.

Taylor pushes the pilots at the meeting on possible culprits: Takeoff vibrations? A pilot bumping a sensor? Nobody could say for sure. Flight 77, from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, was the worst of the many flights sent off-track by severe thunderstorms in the East. It arrived hours late because of a combination of lightning, air-traffic restrictions and refueling. Midway across the continent, the plane made an unscheduled stop in St. Louis to replace its pilot, who had logged the maximum number of duty hours.

"I think we're going to write on this because it just got absurd for customers," said Taylor, referring to letters of apology and explanations that will be sent to every passenger on these two flights. Taylor's group sends about 39,600 letters each year.

The communications strategy is the brainchild of Barrett, a 39-year veteran of Southwest who got her start as an executive assistant to Herb Kelleher, the airline's founder.

"I'm not suggesting we're perfect," Barrett said. "When we mess up, we mess up big time. But when we do mess up, we get out there, tell people that and give them an explanation."

When things go amiss, workers often are reluctant to let superiors know when problems snowball. "The last thing they'll do is be candid, with customers or superiors," aviation consultant Robert Mann said.

It's a dilemma confronting every airline: How to keep things from getting worse once operations break down or planes get stuck in giant conga lines on runways.

In the aftermath of last winter's storms, American Airlines created a position to monitor diverted planes. "We're very concerned about what happens to our airplanes," said Mary Frances Fagan, an American spokeswoman. "Aviation is an orchestrated ballet. We need airline operations, the [Federal Aviation Authority] all working in harmony."

Southwest's challenge is to ensure that information moves quickly across its sprawling enterprise. It carries more passengers within the U.S. than any other carrier, 300,000 per day, and makes more domestic flights than any other airline, 3,300 each day. At 494 airplanes, its fleet is now larger than United's.

Keeping communication lines open is Barrett's responsibility, and she says the airline's 34,000 workers are taught to exhibit a "warrior spirit, service heart and fun-loving attitude."

"We empower our people to make decisions on the spot," she added. "You can't violate laws, but every rule, procedure and guideline that's written down is just that -- a guideline. You can have a set of circumstances that don't fit the guidelines and you have to use common sense."

Last November, in an effort to improve communications, Southwest brought into one room dispatchers, ground operations, customer service and other teams that had been scattered around its headquarters building.

That move paid off quickly. In the face of the Feb. 14 storm that crippled JetBlue Airways, Southwest shut down operations in Baltimore and Philadelphia, two of the airline's busiest centers, as well as those in seven other cities. And just as quickly, Southwest resumed operations once the weather cleared the next day.

That's not to suggest that Southwest never makes mistakes.

For example, the airline misjudged the crush of passengers leaving Las Vegas following the NBA All-Star Game on Feb. 19. The line of people trying to get into the airport stretched three-quarters of a mile from Southwest's ticket counter, according to news reports. Many had decided to take advantage of Southwest's liberal ticket restrictions and leave on Monday instead of Sunday.

In hindsight, the airline should have had staffers work all night to check in passengers, Barrett said. "It was the infamous domino effect: Once it breaks down, it's almost impossible to catch up."

Afterward, Southwest sent 22,000 apology letters to customers.

Southwest's nerve center is the new operations coordination center, kept dark to cut down on eyestrain because many of the 60 or so employees work across multiple computer screens.

Bill Kalivas, a dispatch superintendent, pulls up a computer map of the U.S., showing every flight in progress. The central part of the country and East Coast resemble a giant beehive, with planes seemingly swarming over every inch of air space. At that moment, 6,043 aircraft are in the air over the U.S.

Kalivas and other dispatchers keep track of each of Southwest's 494 jets, most which will touch down in seven or more cities in a typical day. The company's in-house software uses color coding to let dispatchers know which planes are on time, which are late. They know when the pilot releases the brakes to push back from the gate, or when flight attendants shut the door.

Southwest takes such data seriously as it works to get the most use of its aircraft, which is a strategic advantage the carrier holds over its competitors. The average taxi time for each flight takes 7 minutes, Kalivas said. The airline's average turn, the amount of time needed to unload passengers and reload the next flight, is 22 minutes.

If the plane sits on the ground for more than 30 minutes after releasing the brakes, a notification pops up on Kalivas' screen -- a feature added after the February travails.

"You've got to be careful," he said. "That's why we're in this business."

Through the ebb and flow in the control room, workers listen to each other keenly. The dispatch superintendents sit elbow to elbow, as do the customer service managers in the aisle behind them. This is deliberate.

"By design, I can say stuff and get people to react," Kalivas said. "How many connections are on 2694?" he calls out, asking for the number of passengers meeting connecting flights.

"Nine," comes the response from the customer service folks.

Like many workers at headquarters, Kalivas is wearing shorts.

"We're not proper, we're real reactive, real fast," Kalivas said of the free-wheeling culture in the center.