

# THIS AIN'T NO DISCO

BY CARL VAN, ITP

(Excerpt from his book *The Eight Characteristics of the Awesome Employee*)

*This ain't no party; this ain't no disco; this ain't no fooling around.*

*No time for dancing, or lovey dovey. I ain't got time for that now.*

*“Life During Wartime” – Talking Heads*



I promised you a story about, “Oh, her? She’s new.” Well, here it is.

I fly all the time, as part of my job. Every week I’m on a plane going somewhere. My nickname is Carl “Moving” Van. So I have a fairly veteran perspective of the customer service I get on planes. I fly so much I usually get bumped up to first class just for flying. I hardly need to use my miles to upgrade anymore.

Now first class is nice, but it’s not like on *Seinfeld* where they

put little slippers on you and serve you hot fudge sundaes or anything. But it’s usually pretty comfortable.

One day, several years ago, I was sitting in first class and there was this somewhat overbearing flight attendant. My favorite T.V. show is *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. So we’ll call her Sweet Dee.

Sweet Dee was being very pushy, telling people what to do. “Close that laptop.” “Put that up there.” “Put that seatbelt on.” “That can’t go there.” “That has to be turned off.” She wasn’t

really asking people, she was just ordering them around, in a demanding, unnecessarily authoritative tone. At some point, this really started to bug me, and I couldn't resist. I finally said to her, "You know, I think your customer service skills could really use some improvement." Of course the other passengers were all nervous looking around at each other thinking, "Oooooooo.... he's gonna get it."

"Well sir," she said snidely, "I'm here mainly for your safety."

Ah, that's all I needed to know. With that statement she answered my question on how someone in the customer service business could be so lacking in skills. The answer is she's not lacking. Her ability is just fine.

If you fly as much as I do, you know that pilots say this all of the time, right? "The flight attendants are here mainly for your safety, but if there is something they can do to make you feel more comfortable, please feel free to ask..." You've heard that right? Well, Sweet Dee actually believes this!

So, let me pose a question: What's driving her performance? She knows how to be polite if she wants to. She knows she's a representative of the airline. She probably has to deal with huffy customers every day. So, what's driving her poor customer service performance? This poor woman thinks she's in the safety business. She doesn't know she's in the customer service business. She believes her job is safety. She even said it, "I'm here mainly for your safety." What's driving her poor performance? Her attitude!

And her attitude is: *I'm not here for your pleasure. I'm not here for your comfort. I'm not even here to ever make sure you come back again. I'm here for your safety.* And because of that, she can be mean. She can be nasty. She can be bossy. Why? Because she's not in the customer service business, she's in the safety business. And because of her attitude, she is perfectly okay with pushing customers around.

So, I responded, "Yes, I agree you are here for safety. But you're not in the safety business. You are in the customer service business. You see, I think you made a mistake by separating the two. Safety is part of the customer service you provide. It's an important part, but still just a part."

As she rolled her eyes, I continued, "Think about it. 99.9

percent of the time, you are dealing with people and their needs; serving drinks, answering their questions, and getting them things. You're not dealing with safety issues. Most of your time on the job is spent providing customer service." I said to her, "Flying is very safe, as you know."

I even asked her, "Have you ever been on a plane that's crashed?" "No," she replied. "Well, there you go then," I said, "You've never even been on a plane that's crashed. Yet it's your excuse for bossing people around." Again, she demanded, "I'm here mainly for your safety...SIR!" I was getting tired of this conversation. Noticing that all of the passengers had pulled their earphones out and were listening intently to the conversation, I finally said, "Okay. You're here mainly for my safety. Fine then, why is the other flight attendant back in coach being so nice? You know, the one who is always smiling? Why is she being polite? Why is she being courteous, helpful, and friendly? Why is she asking people to do things and not barking orders? She's doing the same job you are, yet she's making people feel good about it. Why is that?"

Sweet Dee looked down the aisle, looked back at me, smiled at me condescendingly, pointed down at the other flight attendant, and said, "Oh, her? She's new."

There you have it. A perfect example of someone who's attitude is driving their performance. Was it her ability? Probably not, she knows how to smile. She knows how to ask instead of demand. She knows how to talk to people, without yelling at them. Her ability is just fine. What was driving her poor performance in customer service? Her attitude!

It's her attitude about what she does for a living which is driving her poor performance. Maybe her attitude is that she is in the safety business. Maybe her attitude is that she is in the transportation business. Maybe her attitude is that she is in the "keeping the airplane clean" business. Who knows?

It's not that she has a nasty attitude in life. It's just that she doesn't understand her job. You see, in my opinion, she's not in the transportation business. She's not in the safety business. She's in the customer service business. Performance is 80% attitude and 20% ability. ■