

# **In the Air and On the Ground: Different Businesses, Similar Goals**

by Les Cunningham

*Posted: January 8, 2010*



I spent 20 years working as a commercial airline pilot at the same time I ran my own construction company. I would drive to the airport from my office, actively empty my mind of my company's business, and fill it with what I needed to know and do to fly the aircraft as safely and as efficiently as possible.

As a result, I was constantly comparing the ways each business was being operated and how to get the best bang for the buck from the experience. I was able reach some very good conclusions as to the "right way" to run both businesses.

As the owner of my own company, I had the responsibility for making the company successful for whatever profit I could generate. When I functioned as a pilot, I worked as a company employee who was paid by the hour.

My No. 1 responsibility as a pilot was to operate the aircraft in a safe manner, with no harm coming to anyone or anything. If I could not operate the aircraft in a safe environment, I was required to get help as soon as possible.

To be able to operate the aircraft safely, I had to be trained to a specific level of ability and knowledge, and then I had to be regularly tested to ensure I was constantly operating at the required level. The training was regular, conducted in realistic situations, and always helped me get better.

I knew what was expected of me, and I attempted to fly the perfect flight every time I was in the air. You guessed it: I never achieved the perfect flight, but I never lost sight of the need to keep trying to reach my goal.

Compare the way your company runs to the way a commercial airline runs. I get the opportunity to travel and work with a lot of restoration companies, those in good shape and those working hard at improving. One common trait is that employees feel they are not told enough of what is going on in

their company. They want to know more so they can be more effective in their jobs.

A lot of owners, when asked why they don't keep their employees informed, get very frustrated. But when they realize it is not a complaint about their management skills, they begin to realize that it is actually an opportunity to help move the company to the next level.

When the entire team knows what is required, they go to work striving to do the best job they possibly can.

Today's economic situation is the toughest business environment I have ever been involved in. If you have been following the homebuilding and the remodeling industries, believe it or not but they both have it much worse than the restoration industry.

I would hasten to add that the current restoration economy could get worse than it already is, and it could do so very quickly. What I would have you do is look at your existing company and see where and how it might be improved.

I believe the smartest people in the restoration industry are the contractors who compare notes with other contractors regarding "best practices." That said, you must be very sure that you are getting factual answers to your questions.

Some contractors have a tendency to fudge things the further away they get from their place of business. In fact, the further they get from their business, the higher the amount of money they are making and the better their company is operating.

Let's compare workflows.

The contractor and the airline have to brand the company and make the public aware of what it does. Your goal is to convince potential customers that you will treat them fairly, safely and return them to their pre-existing condition. Both industries do their business development along the same lines.

Both businesses have to keep track of and respond to all leads, bids and sales. You usually get paid after the job is completed, while the airline is paid at delivery of the ticket.

You prepare for the job the policyholder needs performed, assembling your equipment, people and materials and then transporting all three items to the job site. The airline does the same thing, but instead of going out and rounding up the necessary pieces, the passengers bring themselves and their luggage to the airport for transport.



Once you are on the job, you (usually) have the advantage of working at a fixed location. At the airport, the passenger and their belongings will be transported by aircraft from one airport to another.

On the jobsite, you communicate with your people electronically and physically. At the airport, the aircraft is communicated with electronically and physically on the ground, both when leaving the airport and arriving at the next.

Both companies have protocols that are supposed to be followed by each set of employees for their respective company from start to finish:

- When the job is repaired and clean, you return any goods you removed back to the jobsite. The airline does the same thing in their baggage claim area.
- Both companies sometimes have to deal with broken or missing pieces.
- You try to deliver the job as promised and on time. So does the airline.
- You hope that when they or their friends have a need for your services they will call you again. The airline has the same hopes regarding past clients.
- You both start the business development process all over again, always attempting to do it better than the previous time.

Here is what I learned from my 20 years as a pilot employee vs. a contractor employer and what I tried to do to improve my company:

- Checklists are not a luxury, they are a requirement.
- You must have a plan as to what is supposed to be done by each and every person from start to finish.
- You must train all of your people in all of your necessary company procedures.
- You must conduct on-going training with all of your people to maintain

the company level of needed proficiency.

- You must trust, but verify, that all of your people are functioning at the company desired level of needed proficiency.
- You must be constantly learning and leading your company to use correct industry trends through education.
- You must keep in mind that both you and your company are going to make mistakes. The outcome must be that whatever is done incorrectly will be corrected and made right by you and your company as soon as the mistake is discovered.
- The use of checklists, electronic communication and software allows all company members to know what is going on, how they can help to bring the work experience to a successful completion and a profitable completion.
- Learning is an on-going process that all company members need to regularly and continually participate in.
- The company must operate at a 10 percent net profit before taxes or there can be no long-term future for anyone in the company.

I wish you the best for 2010, and here's to the most profitable year you have ever experienced!

---

Les Cunningham

Les Cunningham, CGC,CR,CCR,CGRa, is president and CEO of Business Networks, Inc. He is a restoration industry expert and can be reached at 1-800-525-1009, ext. 14 or e-mail him at [Les@BusinessNetworks.com](mailto:Les@BusinessNetworks.com).