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HBR CASE STUDY

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by Ethan Bernstein and Ryan W. Buell

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Kentaro Hayashi buttoned his uniform shirt and wondered if he could really pull this off.

As president of RSA Ground, the subsidiary of Rising Sun Airlines responsible for servicing its planes at airports across Japan, he'd been under enormous pressure in recent months. Thanks to increased demand for air travel, Rising Sun's flights were now fuller and more frequent than ever before. And yet “turn times”—how long it took Ken's crews to clean, check, restock, and refuel the planes—had slipped from an average of 12 minutes to 20 in the past year. In a world of intricate flight schedules, tight takeoff windows, and fickle fliers, those were costly delays.

The problem was easily diagnosed: RSA Ground was trying to do more work with the same number of employees. But Ken knew he couldn't just go to the executive

committee and ask for more money to staff up. Its members would insist that he first try making his crews more efficient. And after several fruitless meetings with the COO, the HR chief, and industry consultants, he'd decided that he needed to investigate the issue himself.

That's why he now wore an RSA Ground uniform. He planned to work undercover as a service crew member for a few days, starting as a cleaner of planes at Narita International, where RSA's bottlenecks were worst. He'd also arranged to spend some time on cleaning and maintenance teams at three other airports—Haneda, Osaka, and Sendai—to get a feel for how his employees were handling all the aircraft in the fleet, from the small



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jets that served mainly short-haul, domestic commuters to the massive airliners with multiple cabins that flew long-haul international flights.

When Ken had asked Rising Sun's CEO, Daishi Isharu, for permission to do so, his boss had laughed heartily. “I like your initiative, Kentaro-san—not just down in the trenches but down in the toilet bowls!” Then he quickly turned serious. “I will certainly support this research. However, you must make sure it pays off. A week from now, I'd like a proposal for how to get back to 12 minutes, if not down to 10. The faster we can turn these planes, the happier our customers will be and the more profits we will make.”

The only person at RSA Ground who knew of Ken's plan was the head of staffing, who'd agreed to assign him to various teams as a “temporary worker” over the next few days.

Waiting on the tarmac with five other cleaners while passengers disembarked, Ken was more nervous than he'd expected to be. He'd studied the manuals for all the planes and even practiced some procedures—clearing seat pockets, wiping food trays, vacuuming seats. But now he was responsible for half the economy seats in a Boeing 787, and he couldn't imagine completing the task in the desired 10 minutes (leaving two minutes for inspection). Luckily, bathroom duty had gone to someone else—a short, gray-haired man, his protective goggles and plastic gloves already on, who seemed much more seasoned than the others in the group.

Ken looked at his watch: 6:14 AM. When the door to the jet bridge opened, he and the rest of the crew filed into the plane and spread out to their assigned positions.

There Are Tricks

Eighteen minutes later they had finished: not terrible, but not

EXPERIENCE



Case Study Teaching Notes

Ethan Bernstein and Ryan W. Buell teach the case on which this is based in their leadership, organizational behavior, and service management classes for MBAs and executives.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS CASE?

We think the situation is emblematic of the struggles many organizations have today: a challenging frontline task embedded in a complex process in an environment where managers are trying to do more with less.

HOW DO STUDENTS TYPICALLY REACT TO IT?

They tend to think that the nature of their work and the problems their companies face are very different from those in the case. But as they dive into it, they discover more parallels than they anticipated.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THEY'LL TAKE AWAY FROM THE DISCUSSION?

We want them to consider novel ways of balancing capability, motivation, and license to promote performance among frontline workers, whose roles affect customers. Service excellence can't be enforced; it must be designed.

amazing, either. The schedule said they had 10 minutes until the next plane arrived, so they discarded their gloves and towels in a rubbish bin and retreated to a small waiting room.

"First time?" one of the younger crew members asked Ken.

"Yes."

"I'm Toshi. I've been here only a month myself. It gets better. You'll learn how to do it faster. But not ever as fast as the manager wants!"

"Where is the manager?" Ken asked. She had given him his assignment when he'd clocked in at 6 AM, but he hadn't seen her since.

"Lady Stopwatch oversees another crew in the morning; she's with us in the afternoon."

"Lady Stopwatch?"

"Yes. She holds one up and shouts out times to help us keep pace. Sometimes that's good, but it can also get annoying. They want us to do the turns in 12 minutes. That's fine for a half-full 787. But last week we



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were on 747s all day—with only six people in the crew—and it was just impossible. After the first two turns went overtime, we had to start skipping stuff. The next day Lady Stopwatch was angry and on our backs because of the customer complaints."

"So the crews need to be bigger?"

"Yes. Maybe seven people for a 787, 10 for a 747. But listen to me talking about planes! I grew up on a farm, and this was the only job I could find when I moved to Tokyo. I haven't even told my family I'm doing it; they would be embarrassed. I hope to be out of here in another month or two. If you're going to stay longer, you should talk to Nobuo-san." He pointed to the gray-haired man, who was in the corner sipping from a canteen. "He's been here forever."

They had five minutes left in the break, so Ken walked over. "Hello, Nobuo-san," he said, bowing slightly. "That whippersnapper over there said you're the expert around here."

"That is probably true," Nobuo replied with a small smile.

"Is it good work?"

"Hard work. Dirty work. But it pays the bills. And some of us take pride in doing it well."

"The turns do seem tough. I was working as fast as I could, following all the techniques in the manual, and it still took me 18 minutes."

"I was done with the bathrooms in eight. People could go faster. The more experienced people do. But fewer of us are around now."

Ken winced. Attrition rates had indeed spiked in the past year, along with turn times. Mari Kata, his HR chief, had been rapidly hiring temporary and part-time workers—20 to 30 a month—to pick up the slack, but few of them stayed on. They found the work too difficult and stressful and, like Toshi, were

probably eager to find better-paying and more prestigious jobs.

"Why have you stayed?" Ken asked.

Nobuo shrugged. "I have no education or training to do anything else. This is what I know. And I'm good at it. The manager says I'm the only one she trusts with the toilets."

"How did you get so good?"

"There are tricks," he said. "But"—Nobuo's voice dropped to a whisper—"they aren't in the manual."

"Would you share them with me?" Ken asked, unsure why he was whispering too.

"Not now. The next plane's coming. If you're still around next week, we can talk then."

By lunchtime Ken was exhausted. He grabbed the container of cold teriyaki his wife had packed the night before and tried to approach Nobuo again, but Lady Stopwatch intercepted him in the break room.

"How is your first day going?" she asked.

"Very well, thank you," he replied.

"My other crew also has a new temp, and although I would have liked to watch both of you in the morning, I couldn't risk putting two inexperienced workers on one team." She looked at a spreadsheet on the tablet she was carrying. "I see your group is averaging 18-minute turn times so far. The other crew did 16. So we'll see if we can get you down to that." She was cheerful but stern.

Amazingly, in the afternoon Ken's team did cut its time to 16 minutes. He didn't know if that was because everyone had fallen into a rhythm or because Lady Stopwatch's shouting ("Five minutes—half done, team! Let's finish strong!") had inspired them to work just a little bit harder.

After each turn she quickly inspected the plane and pointed to the cleaner who had not only finished in the desired 10 minutes but had



done so without any mistakes or omissions. It was Nobuo the first three times, which he acknowledged with a nod and a smile. Another older employee, a woman, won the next two rounds, which left her beaming, and then it was back to Nobuo through the end of the shift. Ken worked faster and more diligently in an effort to win just once, but he wasn't sure the competition had the same effect on the rest of the group. During one of Lady Stopwatch's announcements, he thought he'd seen Toshi roll his eyes. And as he'd shuffled past the flight crew on the jet bridge, he'd sensed that a 16-minute turn was well below their expectations as well. They looked impatient and frustrated and barely acknowledged the cleaners.

As Ken clocked out at 2:30 PM, the manager told him, "You do good work. And you look familiar. Have you been with us before?"

"Not as part of the cleaning crew, ma'am, but elsewhere in the airport, yes," Ken said carefully.

"Well, I hope you'll be back."

"I think I'm heading to Haneda tomorrow."

"I guess we're all struggling to find good workers," she replied.

Yes we are, Ken thought.

More Nobuos

His stints on service crews at the other airports were similar. Ken met experienced employees, accustomed to grunt work, who knew how to get the job done but somehow seemed discouraged. He talked to newer workers, many of them part-time, who viewed RSA Ground as a distasteful and, ideally, brief stopover on their way to better employment. And he saw managers who were effective but spread too thin.

When he called a meeting with his executive team to share these

observations, his colleagues were flabbergasted.

"Forgive me, Kentaro-san, but you did what?" Mari sputtered.

"Worked undercover on the crews for four days."

They sat in stunned silence. Finally Mari spoke up. "Well, sir, I applaud you for understanding how very important the people on the ground are to our business. And I believe that what you saw confirms what I've been saying all along. We need to invest in our personnel—hire more crew members and give them better training and higher wages. We need to make sure that the Toshis learn the ropes quickly and that the Nobuos stick with us. That's the only way we'll get to quicker turn times."

"What sort of budget increase are you suggesting we ask for?" Ken said.

"I'd have to run the numbers, but perhaps 20%."

Ken turned to his CFO, expecting a reaction, and got one: "Respectfully, Mari-san, I would be extremely uncomfortable putting a request of that size to management. We've promised them, and they've promised shareholders, that we're going to improve margins this year."

Ken didn't want to shoot down Mari's proposal immediately, but he agreed with the CFO. He would have to push very hard to win approval for half that amount, and Daishi Isharu would no doubt expect a near-immediate return on it.

"Well, of course we could make headway with less money," Mari said.

Mayuka Mori, the COO, jumped in: "May I offer my perspective? The message I take away from Kentaro-san's report is the importance of managers. The teams perform best when they are following best practices and fully coordinated.



Tell us what you'd do in this situation. Go to HBR.org.



Stopwatches and competitions are terrific ideas. If we want to hire people or pay more, it should be at the managerial level. But we could achieve stronger oversight and tighter controls with our current staff if we worked at it."

Yoshiyuki Taniguchi, the CTO, was next: "I like your thinking, Mayuka-san, but why not use technology to achieve the same result? Make a onetime investment in a system that uses wearable tracking devices to monitor employee performance, including individual and team turn times and the quality of the work performed. We don't need more Lady Stopwatches—we need the next generation of oversight."

Yoshiyuki had mentioned this to Ken before, but like Mari's suggestion, it would require a significant up-front expense. Pilot programs using such systems at other companies had shown some promise, but the results were mixed.

"Aren't there any more-creative, less costly ways to solve this problem?" Ken asked. It wasn't the first time he'd put the question to the group, and he'd asked it of himself too many times to count. The "undercover boss" experiment was supposed to have given him some new ideas, but the only one he'd had so far was to clone Nobuo. That proposal would surely make Isharu-san laugh again. But Ken needed a plan that would impress him. ♥

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What steps should RSA Ground take to improve its turn times?