

## Talent trends

# Where myths and symbolism matter



Larry Mayers, business psychologist at YSC, reveals the challenge for leaders in the characteristically turbulent aviation industry – which includes combining a clear understanding of myths and symbolism with a distinct leadership signature

Commercial aviation is a gruelling leadership testing ground. Alongside the rigours of commercially-focused leadership, dealing with the sector's inherent complications ensures that only the best survive. Those who don't, often blame the market for failures. Aviation's complications come in many forms: multi-site operation; susceptibility to political dynamics; national interests; trade unions; regulatory and security concerns; commoditisation, albeit with a high public profile; and living at the receiving end of market shifts. It is for these reasons that, as a leadership consultant, understanding predictors of success in these issues, can shed light on leadership in diverse areas.

In recent research by YSC, we interviewed commercial aviation leaders, both from legacy carriers and low-cost newcomers, as well as industry-wide institutions and finance houses. It shows great leaders naturally understand myths and symbolism. Despite the diversity of aviation people, cultural nuances, educational levels and geographical spread, they give all employees an instinctive feel for what the main proposition of the airline is. Some manage to emphasise punctuality, others cost effectiveness and others reliability. Those that are successful do this with larger than life, simple and easy to communicate symbolic acts. These acts also tend to be memorable over both time and place.

Leadership that understands the importance of myths and symbolism, also use it to build their external brand. They leverage the halo effect to cascade their proposition to passengers by over-emphasising one feature and relying on the power of symbolism to finish the picture. A recurring example is the power of advertising first class travel, even though less than one per cent of passengers fly first class, the assumption being 'if that's what they do for First, I'm sure economy will be great'.

Leaders who do not have a grasp of these concepts often contribute, both internally and externally, to proposition confusion. In extreme cases this confusion results in the airline losing enough of its presence to lose its market share either through closure or takeover. Examples include full fare carriers that attempt to combine their product with a low-cost model, often on the same aircraft, leading to total brand dilution.

Successful aviation leaders understand the value that a distinctive leadership signature brings. This allows both internal stakeholders and the external market to know what their leadership stands for and ensures predictability of senior leadership actions – a valuable commodity in an industry characterised by sudden and violent shifts. However, this predictability needs to be complemented by some flex and the ability to move with the market conditions – analogous to the wing of the aircraft.

Their leadership is strengthened by their ability to deal with their stakeholders in a collaborative and engaging manner. Aviation is a rare industry in that the product (the flight) is constantly co-manufactured by a variety of stakeholders, many of whom are not employed or under direction of the leader. Hence building and maintaining working relations across different entities and cultures in a manner that allows for efficient and safe product manufacture is essential. Airlines that forge closer ties with suppliers – engine manufacturers, air traffic control and so on – are all in a better position to predict the approach of their stakeholders to change and initiatives.

Intellectually, the industry is highly challenging. Data is complex and dynamic, often incomplete and ambiguous. The best leaders have an innate ability to shift, sort and synthesise the overview and to delegate the detail. They can flex and change the relative weight of information depending on the situation and have an intuitive ability to make sense of the 'flight deck' of business indicators, assigning relevance as need arises.

Finally, and crucially, great leaders react to situations foisted upon them in a confident manner sustaining their business's, and their own, confidence in operations through difficulties. They are crisis savvy. The industry is dynamic, often dependent on a fickle and emotional public – those that are able to instil calm maintain position, while others flounder.

These are the leaders who can read the dials and interpret them with a more holistic understanding. They are able to create their future rather than react to inevitable crises. They can guide both the public and internal stakeholders through the turbulence by communicating a longer term, and more predictable, future. ■