



THE 4-STAR TURNAROUND

How a Struggling Island Airline Revolutionized Service and the Lessons YOU Can Learn from Its Story

Two years ago the national airline of Mauritius was struggling with financial losses, poor customer service ratings, and low staff morale. Thanks to a dramatic culture shift, it's profitable again and has earned the prestigious 4-star Skytrax rating. Global service guru Ron Kaufman, who worked closely with Air Mauritius on the service excellence initiative, lays out some lessons all companies can learn from its example.

In a super-connected global economy, a company is only as good as its reputation for service. It's not hard to see why. As customers we want to be treated like we matter. We want service interactions to make us feel good—or at least not bad. We don't want to feel uncomfortable or slighted or like we're bothering the person whose job it is to bring our drinks or repair our car or help us invest our money.

If we should feel under-served by a company, it's a simple matter to vote with our feet. A surging sea of its competitors waits to embrace us. And yes, if we're treated poorly enough, we can air our indignation via public opinion forums a mere mouse click away.

All leaders know this, don't we? And all companies want to give great service. Yet for

many reasons—not the least of which is how tough it is to get thousands of employees aligned in both understanding and behavior—we fail. Sometimes spectacularly.

The good news, says Ron Kaufman, is that even large companies with terrible service track records can turn it all around. And they can do so quickly—but first they must come to terms with how deep the service problem lies.

“We're talking about a revolution,” says Kaufman, global leader in building uplifting service cultures and author of *Uplifting Service: The Proven Path to Delighting Your Customers, Colleagues, and Everyone Else You Meet*. “This is not about pouring money into customer service training. Many companies try this approach year after year, with no lasting improvement. Their foundation is the problem.



They're making a cosmetic fix to a culture that's on life support."

His point? Don't seek only to improve service performance. Instead, build a service culture from the ground up. When you do, you make customers happier (obviously), and you also create better staff morale, increased profitability and market share, and a better service experience throughout the community.

Through his company, Uplifting Service, Kaufman deploys a proven methodology for helping big organizations (many of them with thousands of employees) make this powerful cultural shift. One of his most recent success stories is Air Mauritius, a national airline for the island nation Mauritius located in the Indian Ocean.

Two years ago the airline was struggling with a \$30 million financial loss, poor customer service ratings, and low staff morale. Set in a difficult commercial environment, the company faced many business and cultural challenges.

Kaufman joined forces with new CEO Andre Viljoen and his dedicated top team and launched a bold attempt to achieve profitability and an impeccable service reputation in just 24 months. Called "Stepping UP Together," the program's objective was to move its 3-star Skytrax rating—a merely average category shared by 147 airlines around the world—to a 4-star rating, a designation awarded to 35 of the world's top airlines such as British Airways, Thai Airways, and Japan Airlines.

Given the difficulty of earning that prestigious fourth star, not to mention shifting the attitudes and behaviors of 2,800-plus employees, this was a gargantuan task.

"We lacked a common service language and a holistic framework," admits Viljoen. "Uplifting Service provided that. There was initial resistance across the board—but as people attended the program, we could see the change right away."

Not only did Air Mauritius reach its 4-star status, it returned to profitability (realizing an \$8 million profit), made the Skytrax "Top 10 Most Improved Airlines" list, and reduced employee attrition to less than 5 percent—all within two years.

"Service improved for customers at every point of contact, including reservations, check-in, arrivals, and inside the aircraft during flight," says Kaufman. "Service also dramatically improved between teams, stations, and departments. People have noticed. The airline has lately enjoyed a major influx of public recognition for its improvements."

So what can other service-challenged organizations learn from this incredible success story? Kaufman says the Air Mauritius journey highlights some key lessons:



**Colleagues are customers too.
You can't serve one without
serving the other.**

When most companies set out to fix their service issues, they start with customer-facing employees. Big mistake. The fact is, frontline service people cannot give better service when they themselves aren't being served internally. So Air Mauritius kicked off its service revolution by addressing the communication problems in its dysfunctional culture, which manifested as bickering, finger-pointing, withholding information, etc.

"They started with the realization that everyone on staff either directly serves the customer or serves those who serve the customer," notes Kaufman. "Everyone had to embrace the Stepping UP Together mindset—engineering, ground staff, the technical crew, registration and sales, people at the counters, people at the gate area, people on the aircraft. That meant they had to serve each other as well as the customer."

For example, the reason for air traffic delays preventing an on-time departure may be well understood by pilots, but these reasons must be communicated clearly by ground staff to waiting passengers. And when these passengers eventually board the plane, cabin crew must also be fully informed so they can answer questions and thank passengers for their patience. All of this requires a positive and proactive communication between three departments.

The airline also invested in improvements aimed at making life

easier for employees. For example, it set up a dedicated staff check-in counter, made sure uniform service counters were open during lunch hours, and so forth. It also held an award ceremony to recognize the contribution of long-serving employees.

**Go big, go fast, and touch
everyone quickly.**

Incremental or piloted approaches don't work well when you're seeking a revolutionary shift in service culture, says Kaufman. You must engage the entire workforce quickly and aggressively to get everyone excited about service and to prevent outdated behaviors and mindsets from resurfacing and breaking the momentum.

Mauritius rolled out a multi-pronged program, including a series of service leader workshops, training programs for 24 carefully selected employee course leaders, and intensive two-day courses that immersed all team members in fundamental service principles. This all happened—boom, boom, boom—in the space of a couple of months (lightning fast compared to the glacial pace of most big corporations).

"One reason for this rapid total immersion is to instill a common service language in the culture," says Kaufman. "Why? Because human beings create the world in which we live by using language. We create meaning with language and we can change our world by adopting or inventing new language."





stepping **UP** together

For example, the vision of “Stepping UP Together” communicated in just three words the challenge and the opportunity the airline faced. First, it needed to move to a new level of action and results. Standing still was not an option; thus, the active word “Stepping.” The airline needed to raise service levels and customer perceptions at every point of contact. The commitment to do better than before is captured in the single word “UP.” And Air Mauritius needed to do this collectively, with all departments working as a unified group and not as separate functions. Hence the third word, “Together.”

Don't focus on tasks. Focus on meaning.

What is service, anyway? Kaufman defines it as “taking action to create value for someone else.” But what Person A values, Person B may not. This is why scripting and checklists alone don't work; they're about procedures, not outcomes. One customer might want to make small talk when you bring her coffee, another might want to be left alone to read the newspaper, and still another might need you to notice that her child is getting restless and offer him a coloring book.

“The idea is to switch the focus from ‘what to do’ to ‘who am I serving and what do they value?’” says Kaufman. “When you get this on a visceral level, you realize that whether you're an internal or external service provider, service isn't ‘someone else's job.’ It's

your job. More importantly, it's your essential purpose.

“This is why Mauritius focused so much of its training on the meaning, mission, and purpose of service itself,” he adds. “This approach provides a foundation for lasting change and sparks an appetite in people for finding new and better ways to serve.”

You can expect resistance. Keep pushing.

When Air Mauritius kicked off its “Stepping UP Together” campaign, complete with exuberant rallies and bright banners and soaring balloons, not everyone bought in to the changes they were being asked to make. There was skepticism aplenty. People didn't believe it, didn't want it, didn't support it. Yet the CEO kept pushing, pushing, pushing forward. Eventually his positivity, the positivity of the course leaders, and the understanding and enthusiasm generated in the two-day classes broke through the dam.

“Resistance is natural,” says Kaufman. “If you aren't getting resistance, you aren't trying to change what really matters. You're asking people to change not just their behaviors but their attitude, sometimes their world view, and that's the toughest change there is. Yet when people feel the difference it makes in their own lives, they'll do it.”

Even the most diverse workforce can overcome differences and pull together.

The staff of Air Mauritius reflects the multiethnic makeup of the

island: a mixture of Chinese, Indian, African, and European. And while Mauritius has never had any type of military conflict, there are (as is true everywhere) racial and cultural tensions beneath the surface. Throw in the fact that Air Mauritius is the national airline—necessitating an alliance of government and private business—and you can imagine the possibilities for dysfunction.

“All the problems any organization is prone to—turf wars, power struggles, disagreements, low morale—were likely exacerbated by the diversity among Air Mauritius employees,” says Kaufman. “And yet, when people were given a common mission that could overcome the differences that divided them, they were able to come together and accomplish great things.

“That’s how powerful uplifting service is,” he adds. “Being ‘in service’ isn’t what people think it is. Service isn’t servile. And it creates a sense of fulfillment, personal satisfaction, alignment with purpose, and joy for the service provider. Once people get this, they want to join forces to accomplish it.”

There is great power in your inherent culture. Harness it.

After reading that last bit about diversity, you might think Mauritius is a seething cauldron of ethnic strife. You’d be wrong. The reality of being a nation of immigrants from all over is that you’re welcoming to people from all over. There are no “native Mauritians.” Thus, a natural sense of hospitality has evolved in this lush tropical land of sugarcane, sand, and turquoise waters. This

makes Mauritian culture a perfect fit for a national airline.

“Mauritian hospitality is naturally warming and welcoming—the underlying attitude is ‘who you are is great and we are here to take care of you,’” says Kaufman. “It’s all about empathy, assurance, responsiveness, reliability. So the airline was fortunate to have this foundation to build on as it sought to create a culture around uplifting service.

“What worked for Air Mauritius won’t work for everyone,” he adds. “Every culture has its inherent strengths. The idea is to find out what your culture is all about and accentuate the positives of it. You can’t reinvent an organization’s culture. If it is not a natural extension of who you already are, your culture shift won’t work.”

Know the industry standards. Continuously exceed them.

The visible changes Air Mauritius made as part of its journey (some of which were necessary to attain Skytrax 4-star status) were impressive. It stepped up its facilities on the ground and on its planes. It expanded entertainment options. It offered a better departure lounge experience, new meal concepts, including route-specific menus and wellness offerings, as well as a better selection of liquors. But the step up in service is what truly made the difference.

Old regulations that had prevented crew members from helping passengers during refueling were lifted. Dedicated “special assistance” staff were added at key locations.





Employees were taught to carefully monitor passenger needs and solicit feedback from them. And of course, everyone began to put into practice all that they had learned in their training on the meaning, mission, and purpose of service.

All these changes had the net effect of delighting customers. But customer delight, says Kaufman, can't be a one-time thing. Service excellence is a journey, not a destination.

"You have to keep upping the ante," says Kaufman. "People get accustomed to a certain level of service, so you have to step it up to the next level, then the next, then the next. I like to use the escalator analogy: In the eyes of customers, your level of service is always going down relative to their expectations. Since their expectations are always increasing, and competitors match what you are doing, you must keep stepping it up. And you must keep doing it sooner, faster, and more often than your competition."

Sometimes small service touches can have a big impact. You may be thinking, My company doesn't have a huge budget for customer service improvements; in fact, we're barely making ends meet. How can we afford to step up service? The answer, says Kaufman, lies in a fundamental truth of service: Small changes can lead to big leaps in customer perception—and they don't have to be costly at all.

"Simple gestures can create powerful impressions," he explains. "For example, Air Mauritius had captains to start greeting passengers as they board the plane. This small

gesture creates a huge impression of welcome and respect for passengers. It also asked captains to provide memorable information as they fly over certain areas—like descriptions of cities, landmarks, volcanoes, and so forth. This literally turned flights into guided tours. Passengers loved these changes.

"Oh, and a group of Air Mauritius team members now play Santa Claus for passengers who come through the terminal on December 24 and 25," adds Kaufman. "No one wants to be stuck in an airport at Christmas, but a lot of people have to—so helping them celebrate a bit means a lot."

Let the kudos flow.

Your employees want to know that customers appreciate the service they're providing. Compliments are highly motivating and inspire employees to keep coming up with newer and better service ideas. That's why it's a good idea to a) actively solicit feedback from customers, and b) regularly share positive comments with employees.

[Kaufman reports that after Air Mauritius kicked off its Stepping UP Together program, the positive customer comments surged. From a starting ratio of 1:1 customer compliment/complaint, the airline steadily moved to a 12:1 ratio. Yes, that means 12 compliments for every one complaint—an astonishing improvement.](#)

The company constantly shared these compliments as they arrived with employees through meetings, announcements, and company newsletters.

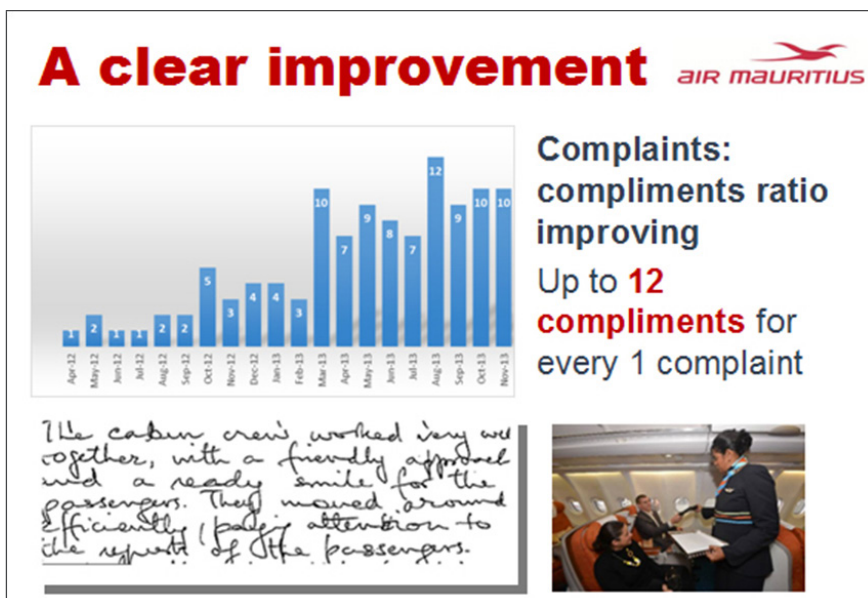
Even in the face of all this this success, Air Mauritius has no plans to rest.

Take the Next Step

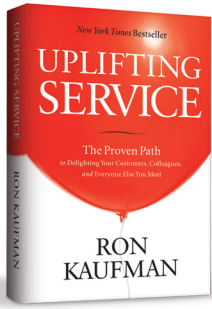


“Yes, we are proud of what we have achieved at Air Mauritius in a short period of time, yet we know that we must keep stepping higher,” says Viljoen. “That is why we recently updated our service vision from ‘**Stepping UP Together**’—which we have achieved—to ‘**Taking the Next Step UP**’—which further builds on our commitment and our heartfelt aspirations for the future.”

“Any organization willing to embrace this reality, that service excellence is not a ‘one off’ but rather an unending journey, can achieve the kind of success Air Mauritius did,” promises Kaufman. “It’s certainly not easy to make and keep this kind of commitment, but the rewards are worth it for everyone. Not only is it better for business, it’s a richer way of working and living.” □



Air Mauritius achieved a dramatic increase in customer compliments in just 24 months.



Uplifting Service enables organizations to quickly upgrade service performance and secure a sustainable advantage by building an uplifting service culture. Its methodology aligns, integrates, and accelerates organizations in three essential areas: Service Leadership, Service Education, and The 12 Building Blocks of Service Culture. This proven approach leads to an action-oriented culture empowering everyone to delight customers and colleagues with consistently uplifting service. Under Ron's leadership, the Uplifting Service team has enabled uplifting service within government agencies and multinational corporations including Air Mauritius, Suncorp, Xerox, Nokia Siemens Networks, Marina Bay Sands, NIIT Technologies, and other leading global organizations. To learn more about Uplifting Service, please visit www.UpliftingService.com

Ron Kaufman, Uplifting Service founder and chairman, believes service is the essence of humanity. He has helped companies on every continent build a culture of uplifting service that delivers real business results year after year. Making transformation his mission, Ron is one of the world's most sought-after educators, consultants, thought leaders, and customer service speakers on the topic of achieving superior service. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Uplifting Service* and 14 other books on service, business, and inspiration. Ron has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*. To learn more about Ron Kaufman, please visit www.RonKaufman.com.



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