Manager of Flight Operations Consultancy Report

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Executive Summary

When deciding on a manager to interview, our team had great options: the airline industry or an accounting firm. We ultimately decided that we wanted to learn about the airline travel industry and its managers' struggles. Cue Cierra, a hard-working people-person who moved her way up in the airline travel industry. We interviewed Cierra and learned she entered the airline industry as a flight attendant in 2011. She was recently promoted to the Manager of Flight Operations for Alaska Airlines at the San Francisco Airport. She spends most of her time collecting and analyzing data, but her true passion lies in supporting flight attendants.

Cierra's latest role has led her to have many employees under her command. She wants to support the entirety of her team, but she is stretched too thin. On top of that, her company is expected to double its flight attendant numbers in the next couple of years. Unfortunately, Cierra does not have strong support from her own supervisor, so she has little power to change the flight attendant support structure. Delegation is a skill that Cierra will need to develop to succeed.

Cierra wants to support her team members as much as they ask. This leads to an unmanageable workload, which in turn leads to feelings of burnout. She loves the airline industry and the people she supports but cannot continue operating as she does. Managing expectations and emotions is key when dealing with an overwhelming workload.

As Cierra's role changed and developed into a management position, her relationships with her peers shifted. She finds it difficult to have tough conversations with her team members. Cierra lacks a support system with her supervisor, so she relies on her mentor. She needs to find a new approach to tackle both levels of her relationships.

Introduction

Alaska Airlines, based in Seattle, Washington, was founded in 1932. According to the company's Glassdoor webpage, the airline has grown to over 10,000 employees. It supports 44 million guests

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annually with 1,200 daily flights across the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Costa Rica. The company earns around $5 to $10 billion (USD) in revenue. Their mission states, "We are creating an airline people love. Each day, we are guided by our core values of safety, do the right thing, be kind-hearted, deliver performance, and be remarkable at work and in our communities" (Glassdoor, n.d.).

Cierra joined the airline industry in 2011 with Virgin America, before they were acquired by Alaska Airlines in 2018, as a flight attendant. After two years in this role, she realized she needed more time at home and was feeling burnt out but wanted to stay in the industry. Cierra decided to talk with management about finding a different position: crew scheduling. This position organizes the team for flights and adjusts the crews as needed due to weather, delays, attendance, etc. Her next promotion was a lead scheduler position. She loved the daily challenges, but the process became repetitive.

Cierra shifted into a supervisor role for flight attendants based in Seattle. Since Seattle wasn't for her, she eagerly sought a similar role in San Francisco, which she eventually received. Seeing her potential, Cierra's new superior trained her to take over the Manager of Flight Operations position in San Francisco, the role she is in now. Pre-COVID, she had 900 flight attendants under her team's support; now that number is closer to 600, but the number will likely increase over the next few months. Her team consists of 3 supervisors who each support several flight attendants.

Cierra is a people person who loves making a difference in the lives of the flight attendants she supports. Her job relies heavily on data analysis, which she does not take joy in, but she is passionate about the company she works for, Alaska Airlines, and enjoys attending recruiting events. Cierra appreciates her team, but she used to be their peer, so acting as their manager and having difficult conversations can be challenging.

Cierra's greatest strength is her people-focused perspective. She understands flight attendants' struggles because she was once in their shoes. Cierra has no strong relationship with her supervisor

since they work at two airports. However, she has a supportive mentor, one of her previous supervisors, to whom she can turn.

Leadership Building

During the interview with Cierra, we discovered areas to improve, and shortly after, we began our research.

One of the key factors we noticed with Cierra is the organizational chart within her company. Cierra's role as the In-Flight Operations Manager has a staff of two supervisors, one administrative specialist, and over 600 flight attendants based in San Francisco. The flight attendants are spread evenly across herself and her subordinates, each responsible for 200 employees.

According to the article *Organizational Structure – Organizational Behavior,* Cierra's hierarchical level is a flat structure involving a wide span of control with minimal management layers between the front line, employees, and top level (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2010). In Cierra's case, her span of control of reporting directly to managers will be extensive. She cannot provide close supervision and attention to each employee. Studies show that employees who are part of flat structures experience greater roles of ambiguity, which is necessary for flight attendants, whose role is extremely autonomous and nonstationary.

Cierra began her employment with Virgin America Airlines, which was later acquired by Alaska Airlines, as a flight attendant in 2011. She quickly worked her way into corporate and her position within 2.5 years. In organizations with flat structures, opportunities for advancement are more limited since fewer layers exist. To accomplish this, Cierra sacrificed and even moved out of state to Washington to transition out of her role and into management.

We understand the constraints and roles and that the easiest solution would be for her to hire additional staff to offset her bandwidth and employees. However, this may not seem feasible; Cierra

should take note of this as she gets promoted and moves up to focus on the balance of managing and delegating enough responsibilities to her subordinates.

Big Five Personality Assessment

We requested Cierra to complete the Big Five personality test so we can analyze her managing style and how it relates to her personality. The Big Five personality test identifies five fundamental dimensions of a personality, and she was kind enough to share her results with us. Her results read as follows:

Cierra scored in the 94th percentile for Open-Mindedness. Individuals who score high enjoy having novel experiences and seeing things in new ways. One of the major perks of working in the aviation industry is the ability to travel the world, flexibility in one's schedule, and a genuine passion for their work. Cierra has worked in the aviation industry for over a decade and travels up to six times per month. The results would conclude that Cierra is an industry that aligns with her personality.

Cierra scored in the 79th percentile for Conscientiousness. Individuals who score high tend to be well-organized and reliable. She is responsible for organizing the flights for flight attendants and adjusting the schedules due to weather, delays, and attendants. One's conscientiousness is related to career, success, and being satisfied with one's career over time (Judge & Higgins, 1999), Cierra expresses longevity and enthusiasm for her company. Still, individuals who score high on this characteristic tend to be entrepreneurs. If Cierra ever decides to leave the industry, she has the traits to start her own business.

Cierra scored in the 80th percentile for Extroversion. Individuals who score high tend to be sociable, friendly, calm, and fun-loving. In her work life, Cierra mentioned that her passion is speaking her truth. She's very passionate about her job and her company. She will often attend hiring events where she can share her experience as a flight attendant for new employees. Extroverts have an easier time than introverts when adjusting to a new job. They actively seek information in feedback and build

effective relationships which help their adjustment (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). A recommendation would be for Cierra to request feedback from her colleagues to monitor her performance.

Cierra scored extremely high on Agreeableness, with a score of 89. Highly ranked individuals in this category tend to be good-natured, sympathetic, and courteous. Agreeable people may be valuable addition to their teams and may be effective leaders because they create a fair environment when they are in leadership positions (Mayer et al., 2007)

Finally, Cierra scored in the 61st percentile for Negative Emotionality. The score was the lowest of all her personality scores for the Big Five tests. Individuals in this category tend to be nervous, high, strung, insecure, and worrying. Cierra mentioned that she often worries at night about her job and whether she did all she could for her staff that day. She mentions that one thing that keeps her up at night is a list that she has completed all her daily tasks, and she must organize her day through a notebook. Studies show that people who score high in this category tend to be habitual, unhappy, and report high intentions to leave their current company, but they often stay with the company (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; Zimmerman, 2008).

Managing Emotions

People can achieve success through their competence, motivation, and/or reciprocity style (Grant, 2013, p. 3). A person's reciprocity style is determined by their ability to give, take, and match others. Givers are described as "other-focused" because they pay more "attention to what others need from them" (Grant, 2013, p. 4).

Cierra is competent and motivated in her profession because she was promoted to a management position in her company, and she is a giver because she enjoys helping others at work. Additionally, due to her giving nature, Cierra struggles to say "no" to people.

Givers are less prevalent in the workforce when compared to takers and matches because the giving trait is most often utilized in close relationships. In the workforce, givers statistically earn 14 percent less money and are "too caring, too trusting, and too willing to sacrifice their own interests for the benefit of others" (Grant, 2013, p.7). Ironically, the worst performers and the best performers are givers, therefore givers "dominate the bottom and the top of the success ladder" (Grant, 2013, p. 7). Givers can easily become doormats and pushovers at work, but they can also triumph at work. Therefore, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a giver.

Philosophers have hypothesized that parts of the world would freeze or burn if the sun, the moon, and the earth did not rotate on their axis. Therefore, life on Earth would be nearly impossible. If the sun, the moon, and the earth's natural order work in the life-giving direction, then givers should naturally strive for the same goal. So, how can Cierra work in a momentum that is satisfying and rewarding for her life and the lives of others?

First, Cierra can stand in her power of saying "no." Saying no will give Cierra more opportunities to say yes to tasks that will bring her joy, which will prevent burnout and complacency over time. As an exercise and to ensure Cierra can balance her workload, we recommend that she check her calendar first and wait at least 24 hours before saying yes to an additional task. Cierra can respond to a request by stating, "I am happy to help, but I need to check my calendar first. I will let you know by tomorrow." Or, she can say, "Let me look into this, and I will get back to you shortly." In addition, we recommend Cierra develop a more thorough "yes" or "no" response to build more confidence. To do this, we recommend that Cierra learn how to be assertive. Many libraries offer free online courses, and there are free YouTube videos and Podcasts that teach assertiveness. First, we recommend Cierra watch a YouTube video created by Jennifer Brick titled *How to Be Assertive at Work (STOP BEING A DOORMAT) (2022, 11:53).* The link to the video is included on the reference page. Once she completes the video, we recommend Cierra either sign up for an assertiveness class or listen to a podcast on assertiveness twice

a week for one month, preferably in the mornings, so she can practice the content she learned

throughout the day. Saying "no" also applies to managing relationships; therefore, more guidance is

provided in the next section.

Relationship Management

      Cierra has first-hand experience as a flight attendant, which is valuable because she understands

her employees' roles. Her transition from peer to supervisor is an ongoing challenge because she wants

to ensure the 600 flight attendants under her are heard and supported. With this dynamic of being their

boss, she must navigate to maintain the respect and authority of people who used to be her peers. To

succeed in this new dynamic, it is recommended that she establish credibility in her role, ensure her

actions match her words, and maintain a professional relationship between herself and the crew.

Additionally, if not done so already, meet with individuals one-on-one or in small groups so that she can

acknowledge this change and receive feedback from her direct reports. On a monthly or quarterly basis,

a coffee and chat session can be scheduled for flight attendants who are available and can meet with

Cierra and her supervisors to provide feedback. Also, it is advised not to immediately make any sudden

changes or shifts to the team that could cause alarm or concern, and slowly implement changes if

needed. Lastly, she uses her knowledge of being a flight attendant to her advantage when it comes to

matching people with their assignments and delegating what she can to those who show strength in

certain roles.

      Another area within relationships Cierra could further develop is in saying yes too much. Her

giving nature steers her towards wanting to help everyone and not disappoint a team member;

however, sometimes you have to say no. Cierra can learn to say no by providing a time at which she

would be available instead, suggesting an alternate resource or guideline, or helping find someone else

they can turn to. Cierra acts out of selflessness and giving perspective, which can be taken advantage of

if not careful. Redirecting people to Human Resources (HR), for example, while maintaining care of the

situation, could help transfer the bulk of the load onto another team member and free up Cierra to focus on her main responsibility. Cierra can implement these suggestions the next time she is faced with a request for which she doesn't have the time. Time management and prioritization will also help ensure she is focused on the most important task, and if something is less important, it will have to wait. Additionally, if she is tied up with HR issues for the bulk of the day, this leaves after hours to finish her main work, which leads to exhaustion and burnout. Delegating work to other team members and optimizing her time could help create more balance in her day and allow more focus on the bigger picture.

A big problem in Cierra's work structure is the number of direct reports under herself and two managers. If the flight attendant team is expected to double soon, Cierra must advocate hiring additional managers under her to support this growth. Through proper recruitment, training, and an onboarding plan, Cierra can prepare for adequate staffing. This will likely require buy-in from her senior management to hire more staff, so it is recommended that she create a hiring plan with the backup justifications to execute this growth plan in proper time. A good resource for a recruiting plan can be found on Indeed's website, link included in reference. In addition, we recommend Cierra review a step-by-step delegation plan (please see Appendix). This plan will strengthen Cierra's delegation skills.

Networking and building connections through a large organization spread out over the country is extremely valuable but time-consuming and a large commitment. She has an established mentor who is fabulous and a huge supporter; however, she is not local to San Francisco (SFO). Her direct supervisor, who is also not local (Southern California, LAX), could stand to make a better connection and interaction with Cierra. If she does not make the effort, Cierra must pull more weight on her side of the relationship to maintain that presence and communication. She could ask to make additional trips to LAX to have more face-to-face with her boss or even work from there a few days a month for her boss to appreciate the great work she does. Another option would be to network with management at SFO and try to

source a local mentor. As Cierra seems to enjoy more of the HR side of things, a mentor from that side of the organization could prove worthy to expose her to that world and also gain awareness of the resources they can provide so that she may utilize them more effectively.

Conclusion

The knowledge and tools we shared with Cierra will strengthen her problem-solving skills and increase her job satisfaction. Cierra was provided with an understanding of her personality through The Big 5 Personality Assessment, which uncovered her greatest weaknesses: nervousness, high strain, insecurity, and worrying. Her weaknesses correlate with her giving nature, so we provided her with tools to say no and become more assertive. Additionally, Cierra was guided on how and to whom to delegate tasks, such as HR and/or her team members. Cierra manages a large team, so we provided her with resources to develop a recruiting plan to submit to HR. A developed recruiting plan will urge HR to hire more supervisors on her team. We plan to follow up with Cierra in early December to understand how the recommendations impacted her career, and we want to encourage her to continue her professional growth.

Our team worked cohesively because we communicated weekly, established team etiquette, delegated tasks, and set deadlines. Therefore, we established clear goals and expectations for the team. One challenge we faced was citing in APA format, but we are all growing in that area. We were able to refer to Purdue Owl, an online site that provides instructions for in-text citations. Overall, each team member had a valuable strength to contribute to the group dynamic, which included being detail-oriented, organized, encouraging, and creative.

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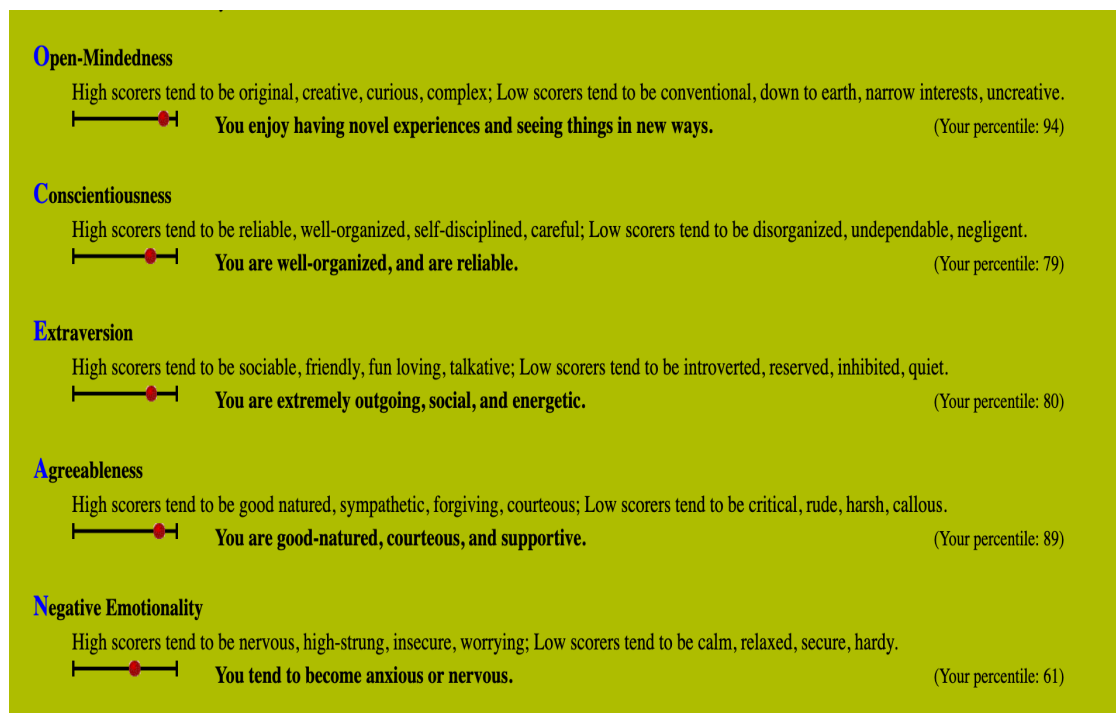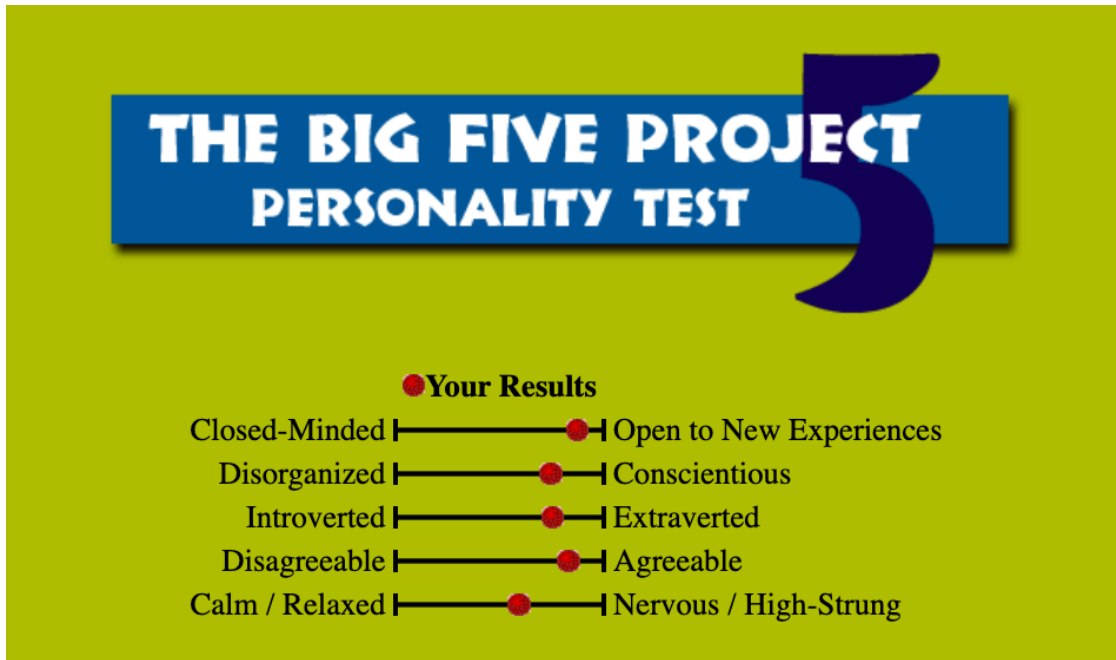
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Appendix

Appendix A

THE BIG FIVE PROJECT
PERSONALITY TEST

●Your Results

Closed-Minded	●┤	Open to New Experiences
Disorganized	●	Conscientious
Introverted	●	Extraverted
Disagreeable	●	Agreeable
Calm / Relaxed	●	Nervous / High-Strung

Open-Mindedness

High scorers tend to be original, creative, curious, complex; Low scorers tend to be conventional, down to earth, narrow interests, uncreative.

├──●─┤ **You enjoy having novel experiences and seeing things in new ways.** (Your percentile: 94)

Conscientiousness

High scorers tend to be reliable, well-organized, self-disciplined, careful; Low scorers tend to be disorganized, undependable, negligent.

├──●─┤ **You are well-organized, and are reliable.** (Your percentile: 79)

Extraversion

High scorers tend to be sociable, friendly, fun loving, talkative; Low scorers tend to be introverted, reserved, inhibited, quiet.

├──●─┤ **You are extremely outgoing, social, and energetic.** (Your percentile: 80)

Agreeableness

High scorers tend to be good natured, sympathetic, forgiving, courteous; Low scorers tend to be critical, rude, harsh, callous.

├──●─┤ **You are good-natured, courteous, and supportive.** (Your percentile: 89)

Negative Emotionality

High scorers tend to be nervous, high-strung, insecure, worrying; Low scorers tend to be calm, relaxed, secure, hardy.

├──●─┤ **You tend to become anxious or nervous.** (Your percentile: 61)
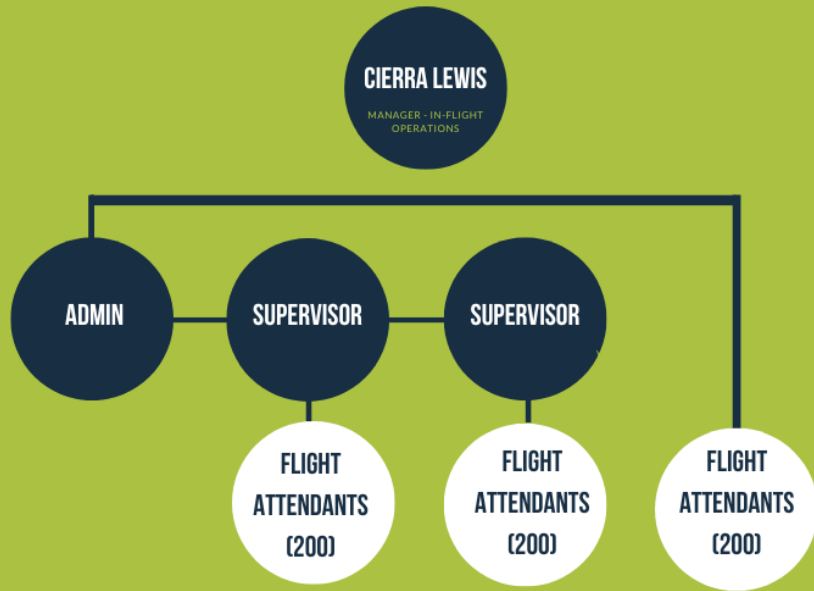
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Appendix B

ALASKA AIRLINES

IN-FLIGHT ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Flat organizations, as shown in Cierra's case, have a very wide range of supervision (603 subordinates total)

Miminal layers between Flight Attentants and management

Challenging to provide supervision to her subordinates and her own Flight Attendants to manage

CIERRA LEWIS
MANAGER - IN-FLIGHT OPERATIONS

ADMIN

SUPERVISOR

SUPERVISOR

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS (200)

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS (200)

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS (200)

Appendix C

10 Tips for Effectively Delegating Work https://asana.com/resources/how-to-delegate
1. Identify work to delegate
2. Practice letting go
3. Clarify Priorities
4. Understand each team member's strengths
5. Provide context and guidance
6. Invest in Training
7. Prioritize communication and feedback
8. Focus on results
9. Trust but verify
10. Give credit once work is completed