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REVIEW



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Continental Airlines A TEAM FOCUS ALL THE WAY

The last decade wasn't too bright for Continental Airlines. The high-flying company went through two bankruptcies and lost \$55 million a month. To really rub salt into the wound, they were ranked at the *bottom* of Fortune Magazine's "most admired" list ... a rating of the Fortune 500 companies and their corporate reputations.

But in December last year, Continental made a very different Fortune list, one that publicly heralded the fact that the company has turned around and is now considered one of the top 100 companies in the US to work for. With literally thousands of others in the running, this is impressive enough for any company, let alone one with Continental's corporate history.

So what happened? How did Continental transform from a huge white elephant to a company with \$2 billion in the bank and one of the youngest fleets in the air, in just 4 years? According to David Bentley—General Manager of Continental's Chicago Midway Airport operation, the answer is surprisingly simple ... *team work*. In 1994, with new CEO Gordon Bethune, Continental decided to change their corporate culture to focus on their people—the building blocks of the business.

"Gordon brought with him something called *working together*," Bentley explains. "This is the idea that every single individual makes a difference. If we listen to our people, instead of working against them, we can do just about anything."

And, in fact, that's just what Continental has done. They've aimed for a work environment where all employees are treated with dignity and respect, and enjoy coming to work. "We encourage all our line leaders to think about their operations," Bentley says. "We want them to think of their people, whether they have 10 or 8 thousand

"If we listen to our people, instead of working against them, we can do just about anything."
David Bentley

working for them, as individuals." He adds that leaders work with their team to get the job done, but, at the same time, try to make each person feel good about their role and the bigger picture.

In turn, the feedback on morale and job satisfaction is remarkable. Since the change in attitude, absenteeism has been reduced by a third, while employee turnover and on-the-job injuries have halved. On a more personal note, 20 thousand employees and their families enjoyed last year's company picnic, and employees are now proud to wear the Continental logo, with sales at the company store up by 400%!

Bentley points out that a phenomenal turnaround like Continental's isn't just for giant, international corporations. He believes that stepping back to simple, but tried-and-true concepts such as team work, can work for any business. He puts success down to selling to employees, leading by example, and giving reliable feedback.

"You have to remember," he explains, "that selling doesn't stop with the customer. If you're a leader, you're actually selling to

your employees the whole time. Why do they want to do what you want them to do? Tell anyone, but it's much more effective to sell to them." Bentley also recommends that business owners *walk the talk*; that is, do what they want their employees to do. This also means doing nice things unexpectedly, saying 'thank you' for example.

Continental's example shows just what can be achieved when businesses work for their people as well as their customers. "It's old stuff," Bentley says, "but it's so important to focus on the people. Companies that forget this, are companies that go bad, and they go bad very quickly."

Continental



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