

Chapter 36

The Saga of Middle East Airlines (MEA) in War and in Peace: A Case Study – A Success Story, in Spite of All Odds

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ABSTRACT

The pragmatic attitude of MEA management in meeting the crises that plagued its existence was only matched by a dogmatic determination that its planes must, under all circumstances, keep the immortal Cedar of Lebanon, which adorns its wings, continually and proudly roaming the skies. The fact that MEA has now recovered, survived, and prospered crowns its management decisions as best business practices. These practices include adaptability and change through organization transformation mode, using change interventions in its vision, structure, culture, skills, and procedures in many of its departments, such as the human resources, employee benefits, the recruitment and training departments affecting all of its employees. Events in open-system organizations such as MEA exist at equilibrium in a field of conflicting forces. Changes in the environment will consequently put pressure on such organizations causing a shift in the state of equilibrium.

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, a San Francisco news paper wrote an article about Middle East Airlines labeling it as “the Airline that refuses to die”. In the same year BBC published a book about MEA’s “Battle for Survival” during 1976-1977 civil war (Gubish, 2011). In 1991 CBS television featured, twice, a “60 minutes” program about the resurrection of MEA. In 1992, Flight International Magazine covered a long article

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about “MEA out of the Ashes”. In 1996 the “Airways” magazine wrote MEA – “the Airline that would not surrender”.

Dozens of articles, in various magazines all over the world were written about MEA history of ordeals and about its resilience and its success in overcoming these disasters during its 67 years of existence (El-Hout, 2006). However, the saga of MEA is not simply a history of the crises and the difficulties it passed through, but rather a record of its management effective responses, its visionary leadership, its strategic thinking, its management of change, its concern for the welfare of its human resources and its business enterprises, coupled with the fanatic devotion and loyalty of its staff.

In the late 1970s and until the mid 80s the aviation industry in the USA and in Europe embarked on a deregulatory pressure. Nowadays, the highly competitive and turbulent airline industry is intensifying rivalry across the world. (O’Connell, J. & Williams, G., 2005). So, airlines are trying to improve their performances by entering into a rapid expansion period. However, the high pressures of rapid expansion can create downward spiralling quality (Rhoades, D., & Tiernan, S., 2005)

The pragmatic attitude of MEA management in meeting the crises that plagued its existence was only matched by a dogmatic determination that its planes must, under all circumstances, keep the immortal Cedar of Lebanon, which adorns its wings, continually and proudly roam the skies. The fact that MEA has now recovered, survived and prospered invite us to consider its management decisions as best business practices. It is these practices that one has to focus on while reviewing this chapter

ADAPTABILITY AND CHANGE

When we review the history of MEA, we have to keep certain concepts of management in mind. Events in an open-system organizations such as MEA, exist at equilibrium in a field of conflicting forces. Changes in the environment will consequently put pressure on such organizations causing a shift in the state of equilibrium and the field of forces. If the organization were to survive such shifts, it needs to exercise flexibility in its decisions and resort to change interventions in order to restore stability.

Change interventions could be of two kinds: Organization Development (OD) and Organization Transformation (OT).

Organization Development interventions target the skill, paradigm of thinking, focus and standards of performance. Organization Transformation, on the other hand, targets in addition to what (OD) does, the vision, strategy and structure of the organization. We will notice that MEA resorted to (OT) in the seventies and at the end of the 20th century in order to survive. We have also learned that there are three departments within the organization that are corporate in nature, namely, Finance, IT and HR. The rest are simply functions restricted to what is being done such as Marketing, Production etc... Human Resources Department plays various roles. In addition to being a strategic partner to upper management and a champion of employees, it is also a change agent. Hence as we review the changes MEA went through, we can see the contribution of the HR Department in implementing these changes. HR Department as the Human Dimension of the organization is naturally qualified to play that role.

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