

CUSTOMER DISSERVICE

A CHRONICALLY LATE EMPLOYEE CAUSES CASCADING PROBLEMS

Ted Rogers Leadership Centre

You are an Air Canada customer service manager at Pearson Airport in Toronto, helping to support and manage the many customer service agents who assist passengers checking into flights. You are very pleased when Air Canada hires Laila Chung as a customer service agent. The daughter of a Tunisian mother and a Chinese father, Laila speaks not only English and French, but is also fluent in Mandarin and Arabic. After she satisfactorily completes the compulsory two weeks of training, you assign Laila to work at gates for flights departing to China and the Middle East. These flights are among the most demanding: planes are large and customer demands are plentiful. Staff must also double check all passports and visas. Laila is one of the few agents who can manage announcements in multiple languages and address issues for non-English-speaking customers.

After one month on the job, you receive a complaint from two of the lead customer service agents. They report that Laila has been frequently arriving late at the gate, which seriously compromises service, and frustrates her co-workers. Lateness is also a very serious breach of performance protocols: agents are repeatedly reminded that there is zero tolerance for lateness given that departure schedules are non-negotiable. You immediately sit down with Laila to discuss her lateness. She reports that she is experiencing difficulties at home, causing her to miss transport to the airport. You direct her to Air Canada's confidential Employee Assistance Program to get some support, but, at the same time, caution her that lateness cannot be tolerated. A month later, you follow up with the lead customer service agents who report that, while Laila's punctuality seemed to improve immediately after your discussion with her and she is praised for being a hard-working and valued employee when she is at work, she is once again frequently arriving late for her shifts. As Laila is approaching the end of her probationary period of three months, you decide you must act. If you wait any longer, Laila's performance issues can become a matter for the union.

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The Twist

Two months after you have addressed the issue with Laila, Air Canada adds two new flights from Toronto to China, increasing the need for Mandarin speakers. There is an incident in which a number of Chinese passengers miss a flight because of an inability to clearly communicate. It was a costly incident for Air Canada as the stranded passengers had to be put up in hotels for two days. Air Canada management therefore is questioning your ability to manage your agents as the on-boarding of the two new flights was announced many months ago. Laila has also launched a complaint with Human Rights saying you were racially prejudiced against her.

Keywords: employee relations, customer service, discipline, situational leadership