

# How we saved continental essay



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In this article, Greg Brenneman recounts his experience with Continental airlines and how he was able to successfully turn the company around. Continental had achieved the ‘luxurious’ place of tenth out of the top ten airlines in the US based on customer service areas, and this was due to a number of problems. Brenneman explains that the method to reviving the crippled company was by correcting five major operating principles. They needed to “fly to places people needed to go; when they wanted to go; in clean, attractive airplanes; get them there on time with their bags; and serve food at mealtimes”.

Through Brenneman’s leadership of the 40,000 workers at Continental, he was able to save the airline. Brenneman began his assignment at the company with Gordon Bethune, the newly appointed CEO of the company. Together, the duo created a strategy dubbed the Go Forward Plan. Included with this strategy was a financial plan, product plan, and people plan. Brenneman and Bethune analyzed areas of the company that were bleeding cash, and together they cut unproductive workers along with useless routes. Throughout this process, the duo stressed the creation of a workspace that encouraged workers to feel comfortable with the company.

The duo held strong faith in each other and emphasized the concept of leading the company, not managing it, out of peril. Through belief in these guidelines and the men and women of Continental, Brenneman and Gordon Bethune were able to dream up a vision of turning the company around. But it was the extraordinary leadership abilities and traits of the duo that inspired their followers to believe in a future of prosperity after years of

misguided visions. Great qualities of leaders are the ability to have a vision and the courage necessary to inspire followers to align with change.

The author wrote that “ It was scary. And for me, it was a defining moment. I was thinking, ‘ Greg, this is one of those times in life when you step up to the plate or you chicken out’... I wanted to make things happen”(5). Brenneman and Gordon Bethune stepped up to the plate and allowed their vision to inspire a widespread revival of Continental. One main issue that Brenneman faced was recreating a culture within Continental. He believed that the only way to create a change in the company was to get all the employees behind the strategies that he had created.

In a sense, he and Gordon Bethune strived to incorporate a cultivation culture into Continental. This culture emphasizes the strong commitment to organizational value and trust. Brenneman stated that “ cleaning house needn’t be a brutal or humiliating experience. Every turn around involves creating a new culture”(7). Brenneman believed that creating a new culture meant respectfully retiring the old culture so as to give encouragement and a sense of security for those workers coming in. This illustrates Brenneman’s ability to be conscientious with his leadership.

Reading this article, I believe I saw many examples of the numerous traits described by the trait theory of leadership. This theory suggests that real leaders possess certain traits that differentiate themselves from the rest of the population. Brenneman illustrated the first trait, drive, in his enthusiasm for his upcoming project. He wrote how the process of reviving Continental would be grueling, painful, and possibly embarrassing. Yet despite these

negative barriers to his success, Greg Brenneman was excited about doing something great, something that would benefit 40, 000 workers.

He had the drive, and he executed it until his vision was a reality. The second trait; a desire to lead; was illustrated when the author officially signed on for the company. He wrote that “ In spite of my reservations, I signed on. I truly believed the men and women of Continental could make the airline great again. We just had to get in there and do it” (5). This example also demonstrates one of the five abilities of a leader, openness to experience. Brenneman was partly able to succeed because he was open to the idea of experiencing something completely new and fulfilling.

The author then illustrated the third trait, honesty. He revealed to his partner that the company’s cash would be exhausted by the time January payroll arrived instead of concealing the fact like the financial advisors before him. The 4th trait, self-confidence, can be shown through Brenneman’s actions in response to poor strategy implementation. He discussed with his scheduling team about how one route was made multiple times a day without many passengers at all boarding; and spoke the words “ Does someone’s boyfriend or girlfriend live there? ” (5-6).

He had the confidence to point out a faulty operation area in the company because he believed in achieving his vision. This example also incorporates one of the five abilities of a leader, agreeableness, through Brenneman’s strength to actually disagree with a previous strategy of the airline. He allowed all input to be brought to him on the issue, and then courageously made the executive decision to correct it. Cognitive ability, or keen

mindedness, the fifth trait of the trait theory was illustrated through Brenneman's conversation with the creditors of the airline.

In a heated move, Brenneman asked the creditors “ Do you know what the first step in problem solving is? The first step in problem solving is asking, Who has got the problem? As near as I can tell, if you take the share price times the number of shares outstanding, this entire company is worth 175 million and you are in hock for 3. 5 billion. You run the company” (7). In this moment, the author was able to persuade his audience while keeping a cool head and not giving up on his goal. This example also illustrates two of the abilities of a leader, conscientiousness and emotional stability.

Finally, both Brenneman and Bethune had to possess the final trait of the trait theory to achieve their vision, knowledge of the business. This was imperative to really grab a hold of the company and reverse its downfalls. The author writes that “ we chose measures that could be verified by the Department of Transportation... To monitor our performance in the marketplace, we decided to track our monthly load factor, revenue per available seat mile, and quarterly cost and profit margins” (6). These along with other calculations were extremely important for the team to find and correct the financial issues of the airline.

If Brenneman and Bethune had possessed all the other traits of leadership, they still would not be able to effectively lead their team through this crisis if not for their knowledge of the business. For example, Brenneman realized that the airline had previously only focused on cost rather than creating a product for its customers. The solution: focus on the customers and creating

an atmosphere that is inviting, and cost will no longer be an issue. Through their actions and goals guided by these traits and abilities, Brenneman and Bethune were able to become successful leaders and inspire the workers of Continental.

Their vision was strong, backed by confidence, ethics, and selflessness. In my opinion, Brenneman's work with the company mirrors the characteristics of a level 5 leader. He carried with him the abilities of a true leader, yet he also possessed the humility required for level 5 leadership. His vision was inspired by the thought of helping more than just himself or his paycheck as seen in his belief and love for the workers of the airline. I believe it was this humility that allowed all the employees, the creditors, even his partner to believe and align themselves with his vision and eventually make it a reality.