

Heathrow T5 – Another Great British Cock-Up

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For those of you who gain joy from seeing the failure of others, the events at Heathrow Terminal 5 over the last few weeks have brought a level of excitement not seen since....well, the last major British management cock-up, whether it was the Millennium Dome (unfinished for the Millennium, never used for the public, ended up costing the taxpayer millions of pounds), or Wembley Stadium, (overran by 2 years and tens of millions of pounds and still under legal review), or even Northern Rock, (the British bank that went bust after using money it didn't have to lend to people who couldn't pay it back). The simple fact is that the UK does not do large scale management projects very well. However, as in all disasters (and believe me, this is a disaster of the first order), there are often lessons to be learnt that are equally relevant to all operations, even those that don't operate on a global level like T5. So, with that in mind, what went wrong and what can we learn by it?

The first thing is that all operations, when they start, will throw up unforeseen problems that will have to be dealt with at the time and on the run. That is why you have pilot schemes, bedding-in periods, trial runs or whatever you want to call it. The number one problem with T5 is they thought that they could go to almost full production from a standing start, with almost no preparation time whatsoever. In fact the problems started stacking-up even before they got started. The scale of the project mean that even the people who were at the heart of it – the people who had to deliver the front-end service - did not know where to park their cars, or even how to get to the place where they were meant to be working. As there was only one person working at the car-park, there was soon a backlog of people trying to get in there so that they could then start getting to their work places. The second problem was (not unexpectedly) technology. The passes that staff had been issued to gain access did not work, and there was no-one around who could by-pass (or even better, disable) the system to allow the people to get into the building, to their work-station and then log-on to the machinery whilst someone else worked out how to get the technology working.

The third clear problem was that there was almost no concept of what to do if things started to go wrong. Based on Toft and Turners fourth and fifth indicators of crisis development, when things started to go wrong there were not enough resources, as in manpower, machinery, and especially, management capability, to identify problems,

create alternative solutions, and then manage those solutions to success. The Fifth Indicator, that of Unintended Consequences, soon came into play, because the very system that was meant to prevent over-load of the system by preventing additional baggage to be added to the system when a certain level of backlog had been reached, then reacted by completely closing down the system once it decided that enough was enough. At that stage, the problem made the classic move from Incident to Crisis, as it changed from being a problem within the system to total system closedown.

And yet, from an operational management perspective, the main problem had not yet made its appearance. And that was, when all this started to happen, and it was clear that the system was beginning to break up and then close down, there was no-one on the ground who had either the authority or the capability to do something about it. The overriding impression was of an organisation that genuinely did not have a clue about what to do next. All of the basic fundamentals of operational and crisis management were nowhere to be seen: strong communications, clear lines of authority, and a process that ensured that more over-load did not join the system. Willie Walsh, the Chief Executive of BA, did not make a statement for two days; the people at the front-end who were dealing with the angry customers didn't have any information to give them; passengers were told to turn up, then told to go through customs – and only then told that the flights had been cancelled (but they couldn't get their luggage back because it had already disappeared into the system) – all in all, it was just about as bad as it can get.

New systems are always problematical, and always in ways that are not predicted. The larger the system, and the more complex it is, the greater the inevitability that something will go wrong. Being aware of that, we should try and keep everything as simple as possible, and create a system where we can be in control, and make changes, as required. The purpose is not to have revolutionary change – revolutionary change in itself creates chaos. The purpose is to have incremental and managed changes that creates revolutionary results.

BA, and Willie Walsh, boasted that T5 would create a whole new experience for the international traveller. Nobody can claim that he and BA didn't deliver on their promise, though it probably wasn't exactly in the way that he meant.

