

RESILIENCY EDGE:

By Michelle Adams

Program Gives Airport Employees Tools To Manage Pressure

When Gerard McLaughlin saw a woman looking lost on the Air Train platform late one night at New York's Kennedy International Airport, he had a choice to make: McLaughlin, an Air Train agent whose shift had just ended, could go off duty as he was entitled to do, or he could engage the woman and try to solve her problem.

McLaughlin chose the latter. When he approached the woman, he learned that she had wandered onto the Air Train platform after her flight to Miami, the last flight of the night, had been canceled. She started to cry, and McLaughlin reassured her, then he offered to ride with her to other terminals until they could find an alternate way to get her home.

McLaughlin, a participant in the Resiliency Edge program at Kennedy International, made a choice that all employers hope their employees would make in these pressured times. But it's getting harder for employees to engage distressed customers, studies show, because stresses on them are intensifying even as they are accelerating for travelers. When pressures build, experts say, the normal human impulse is to pull back and disengage rather than engage. That can kill an airport's hard-earned service image.

The Resiliency Edge program, offered through the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education, is keyed to support service levels by giving airport employees tools to manage their pressures so they are able to meet the needs of travelers with problems.

In a nutshell, the goal of the program is to support airport employees to be more resilient so they can be more productive. When employees remain fully engaged, they create three winners: travelers win because they have their problems solved, employees win because they learn how to manage their pressures, and airports win because they protect their businesses and the bottom line.

Resiliency Edge is designed to complement an airport's existing customer training efforts, or operate as a stand-alone. The program was introduced in 2008 for New York airports under the leadership of Susan Baer, deputy director of aviation for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Baer, along with the general managers of Kennedy International, Newark Liberty and LaGuardia airports — Jerry Spampanato, John Jacoby and Warren Kroeppel, respectively — wanted to give New York airport employees a means to deal with the pressures of congestion, delays and security anxieties travelers were displacing onto them. A survey conducted with employees at Kennedy International by Fordham found that four out of five front-line workers were feeling a "spillover" effect from stresses affecting the travelers, creating the potential for productivity liabilities.

"We saw the spin on the ball," said Spampanato. "As travelers grew more stressed, they were putting their anxieties onto our front-line people. We wanted to support our employees, so they could support our customers."

Based on success in New York, where 97 percent of participants in a pilot said they found the tools “helpful” and the program operates as a complement to the port authority’s “Customer Care” effort, AAAE Chair John Duval, A.A.E., took the lead to create a partnership between AAAE and the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham to make the program a signature of his year as chair, one in which he has identified the economy as his main theme.

“The quality that makes Resiliency Edge unique,” said Duval, “is it’s two things in one. It’s a next-generation customer service program, but more importantly the program increases productivity — and that can help airports optimize their investment in their employees and save costs, while boosting service.”


Dr. James Hennessy, dean of Fordham’s Graduate School of Education, sees the partnership as a perfect link between business and academia. “In business, if it can’t be measured, it can’t be managed,” said Hennessy. “We’re excited to provide the metrics to prove the relationship between resiliency and productivity.”

The program achieves its blend of service and productivity enhancement with a three-part approach that includes:

- A two-hour training module that uses four key resiliency traits — adaptability, engagement, optimism and “pro-action” — to give workers the tools they need to become problem-solvers for harried travelers.

- Training for supervisors to enable them to become coaches to motivate front-line employees to apply the tools in the field.
- Enlisting airport stakeholders to provide support from the top, including an incentive, to recognize top performers and ensure long-term success and sustainability.

“There’s been a marked difference in our employees’ attitude since they took the program,” said Sanchita Jimenez, director of Bombardier, which operates the Air Train at JFK. “They appreciate that the airport recognizes the pressures they deal with. This translates as greater enthusiasm on their part to get involved with our customers’ problems, and that helps Air Train and the airport.”

Or as the woman from Miami said to Gerard McLaughlin one late night as he rode the Air Train with her instead of hopping in his car and heading home, “Thank you for taking an interest in me.” 

To learn more about Resiliency Edge and the partnership between AAAE and Fordham to expand the benefits of this program to airports nationally, contact Tom Murphy, director, Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham, through the program Web site, www.humanresiliency.com, or at tomurphy@fordham.edu, or (360) 731- 0603, or contact Will James, AAAE consultant, at will.james@aaae.org.

Michelle Adams is marketing director for Fordham University’s Graduate School of Education. She may be reached at miadams@fordham.edu.