

LEVINE ON LEADERSHIP

## Why I *still* love JetBlue and CEO David Neeleman

I may stand alone in America this month (his wife and children notwithstanding), but I love JetBlue Chief Executive David Neeleman.

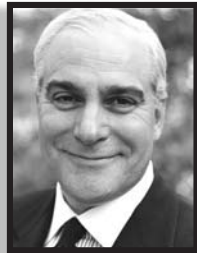
What an incredible leadership lesson he's giving us right now, and a rare one. It's not often that a superior company such as JetBlue loses its footing so dramatically – and publicly. We often watch weak leaders in trouble. They seem to find their way there, almost effortlessly. But Dave Neeleman is an exceptional leader of a fine company, so I'm encouraging everyone I know to watch him carefully right now. I predict this will turn out to be JetBlue's finest hour; at the very least, there's a lot to learn.

Following JetBlue's meltdown last week, Neeleman is getting his company back on track. As a lifelong student of leadership, I have to take note of what's making this moment so important for him and for JetBlue. He's delivering brilliantly on the five key factor of effective leadership in crisis:

**Visibility:** Neeleman stepped up in a big way, appearing on every major television news show in the week following the debacle (my personal favorite: his appearance on Letterman). It's tempting to hide when things have gone wrong, but it's always the wrong move. Neeleman walked right into the spotlight, bringing only contrition and the truth. That takes guts.

**Personal responsibility:** Neeleman assumed full responsibility.

In addition to the high-profile public appearances, he made a video for the JetBlue Web site. It's not the slick, polished kind you're probably imagining. I'd guess there was no "handler" there telling him how to appear sorry. He was sorry. (If you haven't seen it, it's worth looking at: [www.jetblue.com/promise](http://www.jetblue.com/promise).)



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**Honest examination of the issues:** It's clear from Neeleman's message in the week following President's Day that within 72 hours they had assessed the problem and determined a course of action. You can't fix systems that fast, but you can decide what needs to be done. To move that quickly,

though, you have to be completely honest with yourself. You also need to be the type of leader with whom your team will be completely honest. This exercise should never be a witch hunt, but a sober analysis of systems and training. The specificity of Neeleman's explanation – poor communications, inadequately trained staff, a failed reservations system that left flight crews stranded in the wrong cities – tells me this happened.

**Accountability for change:** JetBlue crafted and introduced an explicit customer's Bill of Rights (an industry first) that creates meaningful financial consequences for the organization if it doesn't get things right for customers. Neeleman also created accountability for himself and put in a system that holds him to it.

**Values:** As I consider the first four

things on my list, I'm struck by the courage that each requires. This is where values come in. In my experience, confident leaders are those who know their values. They know who they are, and for that reason they're not defined by success or failure. This liberates them to do the difficult things without fearing their very identities are at stake. I interviewed Neeleman for my last book; he's clearly a man of strong beliefs. I'm certain those beliefs enabled his literally fearless leadership following the events of mid-February.

It's easy to be a super leader when things are going great. The true mettle of a leader and a company is shown on the very dark days, and we've all had them. Maybe not as publicly, but we've all felt that sick feeling of events spinning out of control as we work desperately to get them back on track. The great leader is not someone who captains a smooth, uneventful voyage; the great leader can take you through a storm.

Watch Dave Neeleman this spring. I guarantee you'll see something worthwhile.

Stuart R. Levine is chairman and chief executive of Stuart Levine & Associates LLC, an international consulting and leadership development company. He is author of "Cut to the Chase: And 99 Other Rules to Liberate Yourself and Gain Back the Gift of Time" and "The Six Fundamentals of Success: The Rules for Getting it Right for Yourself and Your Organization." For consulting and speaking engagement information, please call (516) 465-0800.