

# Case Study

## Can You Cut “Turn Times” Without Adding Staff?

by Ethan Bernstein and Ryan W. Buell

**K**entaro Hayashi buttoned his uniform shirt and wondered if he could really pull this off.

As president of RSA Ground, the subsidiary of Rising Sun Airlines responsible for servicing its planes at airports across Japan, he'd been under enormous pressure in recent months. Thanks to increased demand for air travel, Rising Sun's flights were now fuller and more frequent than ever before. And yet “turn times”—how long it took Ken's crews to clean, check, restock, and refuel the planes—had slipped from an average of 12 minutes to 20 in the past year. In a world of intricate flight schedules, tight takeoff windows, and fickle fliers, those were costly delays.

The problem was easily diagnosed: RSA Ground was trying to do more work with the same number of employees. But Ken knew he couldn't just go to the executive

committee and ask for more money to staff up. Its members would insist that he first try making his crews more efficient. And after several fruitless meetings with the COO, the HR chief, and industry consultants, he'd decided that he needed to investigate the issue himself.

That's why he now wore an RSA Ground uniform. He planned to work undercover as a service crew member for a few days, starting as a cleaner of planes at Narita International, where RSA's bottlenecks were worst. He'd also arranged to spend some time on cleaning and maintenance teams at three other airports—Haneda, Osaka, and Sendai—to get a feel for how his employees were handling all the aircraft in the fleet, from the small

jets that served mainly short-haul, domestic commuters to the massive airliners with multiple cabins that flew long-haul international flights.

When Ken had asked Rising Sun's CEO, Daishi Isharu, for permission to do so, his boss had laughed heartily. “I like your initiative, Kentaro-san—not just down in the trenches but down in the toilet bowls!” Then he quickly turned serious. “I will certainly support this research. However, you must make sure it pays off. A week from now, I'd like a proposal for how to get back to 12 minutes, if not down to 10. The faster we can turn these planes, the happier our customers will be and the more profits we will make.”

The only person at RSA Ground who knew of Ken's plan was the head of staffing, who'd agreed to assign him to various teams as a “temporary worker” over the next few days.

Waiting on the tarmac with five other cleaners while passengers disembarked, Ken was more nervous than he'd expected to be. He'd studied the manuals for all the planes and even practiced some procedures—clearing seat pockets, wiping food trays, vacuuming seats. But now he was responsible for half the economy seats in a Boeing 787, and he couldn't imagine completing the task in the desired 10 minutes (leaving two minutes for inspection). Luckily, bathroom duty had gone to someone else—a short, gray-haired man, his protective goggles and plastic gloves already on, who seemed much more seasoned than the others in the group.

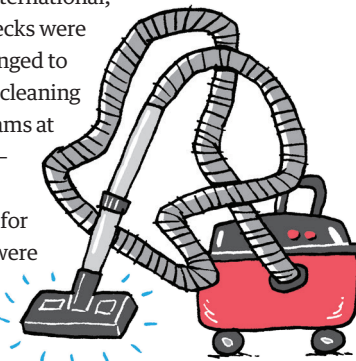
Ken looked at his watch: 6:14 AM. When the door to the jet bridge opened, he and the rest of the crew filed into the plane and spread out to their assigned positions.

### There Are Tricks

Eighteen minutes later they had finished: not terrible, but not



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## Case Study Teaching Notes

Ethan Bernstein and Ryan W. Buell teach the case on which this is based in their leadership, organizational behavior, and service management classes for MBAs and executives.

### WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS CASE?

We think the situation is emblematic of the struggles many organizations have today: a challenging frontline task embedded in a complex process in an environment where managers are trying to do more with less.

### HOW DO STUDENTS TYPICALLY REACT TO IT?

They tend to think that the nature of their work and the problems their companies face are very different from those in the case. But as they dive into it, they discover more parallels than they anticipated.

### WHAT DO YOU HOPE THEY'LL TAKE AWAY FROM THE DISCUSSION?

We want them to consider novel ways of balancing capability, motivation, and license to promote performance among frontline workers, whose roles affect customers. Service excellence can't be enforced; it must be designed.

amazing, either. The schedule said they had 10 minutes until the next plane arrived, so they discarded their gloves and towels in a rubbish bin and retreated to a small waiting room.

"First time?" one of the younger crew members asked Ken.

"Yes."

"I'm Toshi. I've been here only a month myself. It gets better. You'll learn how to do it faster. But not ever as fast as the manager wants!"

"Where is the manager?" Ken asked. She had given him his assignment when he'd clocked in at 6 AM, but he hadn't seen her since.

"Lady Stopwatch oversees another crew in the morning; she's with us in the afternoon."

"Lady Stopwatch?"

"Yes. She holds one up and shouts out times to help us keep pace. Sometimes that's good, but it can also get annoying. They want us to do the turns in 12 minutes. That's fine for a half-full 787. But last week we



HBR's fictionalized case studies present problems faced by leaders in real companies and offer solutions from experts. This one is based on the HBS Case Study "Trouble at Tessei" (case no. 615-044), by Ethan Bernstein and Ryan W. Buell.



were on 747s all day—with only six people in the crew—and it was just impossible. After the first two turns went overtime, we had to start skipping stuff. The next day Lady Stopwatch was angry and on our backs because of the customer complaints."

"So the crews need to be bigger?"

"Yes. Maybe seven people for a 787, 10 for a 747. But listen to me talking about planes! I grew up on a farm, and this was the only job I could find when I moved to Tokyo. I haven't even told my family I'm doing it; they would be embarrassed. I hope to be out of here in another month or two. If you're going to stay longer, you should talk to Nobuo-san." He pointed to the gray-haired man, who was in the corner sipping from a canteen. "He's been here forever."

They had five minutes left in the break, so Ken walked over. "Hello, Nobuo-san," he said, bowing slightly. "That whippersnapper over there said you're the expert around here."

"That is probably true," Nobuo replied with a small smile.

"Is it good work?"

"Hard work. Dirty work. But it pays the bills. And some of us take pride in doing it well."

"The turns do seem tough. I was working as fast as I could, following all the techniques in the manual, and it still took me 18 minutes."

"I was done with the bathrooms in eight. People could go faster. The more experienced people do. But fewer of us are around now."

Ken winced. Attrition rates had indeed spiked in the past year, along with turn times. Mari Kata, his HR chief, had been rapidly hiring temporary and part-time workers—20 to 30 a month—to pick up the slack, but few of them stayed on. They found the work too difficult and stressful and, like Toshi, were

probably eager to find better-paying and more prestigious jobs.

"Why have you stayed?" Ken asked.

Nobuo shrugged. "I have no education or training to do anything else. This is what I know. And I'm good at it. The manager says I'm the only one she trusts with the toilets."

"How did you get so good?"

"There are tricks," he said. "But"—Nobuo's voice dropped to a whisper—"they aren't in the manual."

"Would you share them with me?" Ken asked, unsure why he was whispering too.

"Not now. The next plane's coming. If you're still around next week, we can talk then."

By lunchtime Ken was exhausted. He grabbed the container of cold teriyaki his wife had packed the night before and tried to approach Nobuo again, but Lady Stopwatch intercepted him in the break room.

"How is your first day going?" she asked.

"Very well, thank you," he replied.

"My other crew also has a new temp, and although I would have liked to watch both of you in the morning, I couldn't risk putting two inexperienced workers on one team." She looked at a spreadsheet on the tablet she was carrying. "I see your group is averaging 18-minute turn times so far. The other crew did 16. So we'll see if we can get you down to that." She was cheerful but stern.

Amazingly, in the afternoon Ken's team did cut its time to 16 minutes. He didn't know if that was because everyone had fallen into a rhythm or because Lady Stopwatch's shouting ("Five minutes—half done, team! Let's finish strong!") had inspired them to work just a little bit harder.

After each turn she quickly inspected the plane and pointed to the cleaner who had not only finished in the desired 10 minutes but had



done so without any mistakes or omissions. It was Nobuo the first three times, which he acknowledged with a nod and a smile. Another older employee, a woman, won the next two rounds, which left her beaming, and then it was back to Nobuo through the end of the shift. Ken worked faster and more diligently in an effort to win just once, but he wasn't sure the competition had the same effect on the rest of the group. During one of Lady Stopwatch's announcements, he thought he'd seen Toshi roll his eyes. And as he'd shuffled past the flight crew on the jet bridge, he'd sensed that a 16-minute turn was well below their expectations as well. They looked impatient and frustrated and barely acknowledged the cleaners.

As Ken clocked out at 2:30 PM, the manager told him, "You do good work. And you look familiar. Have you been with us before?"

"Not as part of the cleaning crew, ma'am, but elsewhere in the airport, yes," Ken said carefully.

"Well, I hope you'll be back."

"I think I'm heading to Haneda tomorrow."

"I guess we're all struggling to find good workers," she replied.

*Yes we are*, Ken thought.

### More Nobuos

His stints on service crews at the other airports were similar. Ken met experienced employees, accustomed to grunt work, who knew how to get the job done but somehow seemed discouraged. He talked to newer workers, many of them part-time, who viewed RSA Ground as a distasteful and, ideally, brief stopover on their way to better employment. And he saw managers who were effective but spread too thin.

When he called a meeting with his executive team to share these

observations, his colleagues were flabbergasted.

"Forgive me, Kentaro-san, but you did what?" Mari sputtered.

"Worked undercover on the crews for four days."

They sat in stunned silence. Finally Mari spoke up. "Well, sir, I applaud you for understanding how very important the people on the ground are to our business. And I believe that what you saw confirms what I've been saying all along. We need to invest in our personnel—hire more crew members and give them better training and higher wages. We need to make sure that the Toshis learn the ropes quickly and that the Nobuos stick with us. That's the only way we'll get to quicker turn times."

"What sort of budget increase are you suggesting we ask for?" Ken said.

"I'd have to run the numbers, but perhaps 20%."

Ken turned to his CFO, expecting a reaction, and got one: "Respectfully, Mari-san, I would be extremely uncomfortable putting a request of that size to management. We've promised them, and they've promised shareholders, that we're going to improve margins this year."

Ken didn't want to shoot down Mari's proposal immediately, but he agreed with the CFO. He would have to push very hard to win approval for half that amount, and Daishi Isharu would no doubt expect a near-immediate return on it.

"Well, of course we could make headway with less money," Mari said.

Mayuka Mori, the COO, jumped in: "May I offer my perspective? The message I take away from Kentaro-san's report is the importance of managers. The teams perform best when they are following best practices and fully coordinated.



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Stopwatches and competitions are terrific ideas. If we want to hire people or pay more, it should be at the managerial level. But we could achieve stronger oversight and tighter controls with our current staff if we worked at it."

Yoshiyuki Taniguchi, the CTO, was next: "I like your thinking, Mayuka-san, but why not use technology to achieve the same result? Make a onetime investment in a system that uses wearable tracking devices to monitor employee performance, including individual and team turn times and the quality of the work performed. We don't need more Lady Stopwatches—we need the next generation of oversight."

Yoshiyuki had mentioned this to Ken before, but like Mari's suggestion, it would require a significant up-front expense. Pilot programs using such systems at other companies had shown some promise, but the results were mixed.

"Aren't there any more-creative, less costly ways to solve this problem?" Ken asked. It wasn't the first time he'd put the question to the group, and he'd asked it of himself too many times to count. The "undercover boss" experiment was supposed to have given him some new ideas, but the only one he'd had so far was to clone Nobuo. That proposal would surely make Isharu-san laugh again. But Ken needed a plan that would impress him.



What steps should RSA Ground take to improve its turn times?  
See commentaries on the following pages.

# The Experts Respond

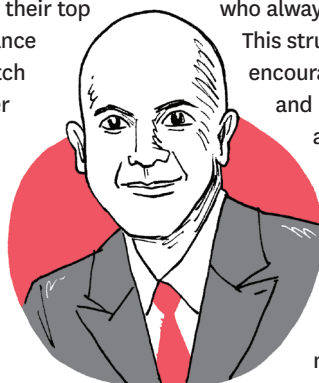
Nobuo's talent should be showcased, not hidden behind a bathroom door.

**Atilla Korkmazoğlu** is the president of ground handling and cargo operations at Çelebi Aviation Holding.

**OF COURSE** Ken can't clone Nobuo in a literal sense, but he can certainly try to clone what he does in a couple of ways.

At a minimum, he should encourage RSA Ground's managers to capture and document more of the knowledge held by their top cleaners and maintenance workers. Lady Stopwatch is already reviewing her team members' work and acknowledging strong performance, but she's not asking enough questions about how Nobuo and her other star employee are doing their jobs so well. She should be incentivized to do so and to share what she learns with the rest of the group.

Ken might also create team leader roles for Nobuo and other seasoned workers. Give them the trust and respect they deserve and put them in a position to routinely share their "tricks" with teammates. There's no reason why the best cleaner on staff should be given one of the worst jobs. Nobuo's talent and hard work should be showcased, not hidden behind a bathroom door.



RSA Ground should also think about appointing the Nobuos of the organization, along with the company's most observant and motivational managers, to a project team tasked with redesigning processes by systematically documenting and spreading current best practices. That is how Starbucks, for example, achieves such consistency in its offerings. Its baristas are all trained to do things in the same efficient way. They're also taught that if they find ways to speed up or improve the work, they should volunteer those ideas.

One specific change I might suggest is the creation of smaller, more stable teams: three or four employees, including at least one with significant experience, who always work together.

This structure would encourage people to trust and learn from one another, enhancing coordination, collaboration, and efficiency. The groups could be merged—also in as consistent a manner as possible—to clean larger planes.

None of these suggestions would require a significant investment—just the time and energy to see them through. After Ken has implemented one or more of them, he should focus on longer-term solutions for attracting and retaining talent. At Çelebi we're able to find quality people to do lower-level jobs because we offer them clear opportunities for advancement. A cleaner might become a baggage cart driver or a pushback operator. We also reward people when they do

great work. A nod from Lady Stopwatch isn't enough. So at some point, Ken should go to Isharu and ask for a budget to track performance by means of a point system and offer monthly bonuses to the most efficient individuals and teams. We have a similar program, and we've found it to be a great motivator.

## Comments from the HBR.org community

### Train, Reward, Promote

Give the cleaners simple countdown timers to help them pace themselves. Assign them to the same area for a month in order to streamline their training in best practices and "tricks." Create a rewards system for top performers like Nobuo. And start promoting him and other senior workers to management positions.

**Kenneth Goh**, airline cabin crew member

### Engage Passengers and Crew

I'd try to figure out how passengers and crew could be engaged to help with these cleaning tasks for a small reward. If RSA Ground "gamified" the process, explained why they were doing it, and made it fun and not icky, the cleaners could be turned into inspectors.

**Penny Osborne**, consultant,  
*This May Hurt*

### Rebrand the Company

RSA Ground should rebrand itself as an important contributor to airline safety, efficiency, and customer experience and use "lean" principles to redesign its work processes and recognition systems around teams.

**Mel Blitzer**, senior partner, *Partner2Win*



### Create Awards

If Nobuo isn't comfortable sharing his tricks immediately, the culture may not be permitting him to challenge the status quo. I would instruct management to create "change agent" awards for employees who introduce new ideas.

**Fhatuwani Lidovho**, MBA candidate,  
Wits Business School

**Vikram Oberoi** is the managing director and CEO of EIH Ltd., the parent company of The Oberoi Group.

**KEN'S PROBLEM** starts with hiring. RSA Ground seems not to select the right people for its critical cleaning and maintenance jobs. Given Japan's aging population, one solution might be to hire older, full-time workers, who, like Nobuo, may take pride in even menial work. But the company could also consider more-creative initiatives.

At Oberoi we hire people who have the potential to grow two levels in the organization with the right training and support. We choose hotel school graduates who are willing to start in entry-level positions—front office, housekeeping, or food and beverage—and work their way up. Because many young people in India don't have access to that kind of education, we also select high school graduates to work for us five days a week and spend the sixth day engaged in a three-year distance-learning bachelors program in hotel management. The company pays for this education, and it enables us to find talented employees and groom them from an early age.

Training, too, could be improved at RSA Ground. Nobuo and others have expertise that needs to be shared, so Ken should get them together to rewrite the employee procedures manual.

An important question is whether it's feasible to turn the planes as quickly as Rising Sun wants without cutting corners. People can be stretched, but they can't deliver the impossible. Ken's instincts are right: He needs to listen to people on the ground.

Lady Stopwatch emphasizes time and creates a sense of urgency. However, Ken could invest in technology to count down milestones and keep people on track—thereby freeing her and other managers to focus on creating winning teams.

When I started as a general manager at the Oberoi Rajvillas, in 1997, I and other members of the leadership team set aside time every day to work and support the operations groups in various parts of the hotel. If many guests were checking in, I would be a bellhop; if the laundry was busy, I would load the machines; if the bar was crowded, I would serve drinks. This gave me insight into our business's strengths and weaknesses and

also emphasized the importance of jobs that in India's highly stratified society might otherwise have been disdained as low-caste positions.

We also use autonomy and recognition as employee engagement tools. One of our programs, called Empower, allows employees to spend up to \$30 to delight guests in a meaningful and personalized way. Recently a guest checking in to one of our hotels mentioned to a housekeeping associate that his back

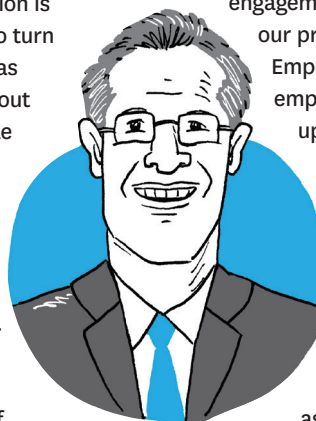
was sore after a long flight; the associate recommended and then booked him a complimentary 30-minute massage at the hotel spa. Managers collect such stories to share at their evening briefings, and the best are e-mailed around the company so that everyone can learn from them. We rejoice when people perform well and innovate, and we confer recognition awards monthly, quarterly, and yearly.

One last, low-cost idea is to make RSA Ground's efforts to turn planes quickly more visible to passengers. The Indian airline IndiGo tells travelers that on-time departure is extremely important for passengers and for the airline—it asks passengers to help achieve this by collecting their own rubbish and handing it to flight attendants just prior to landing. If Rising Sun's planes have front and back doors, passengers might even be able to start boarding by row while cleaners finish their tasks. ♥

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**Ken's instincts are right: He needs to listen to people on the ground.**

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