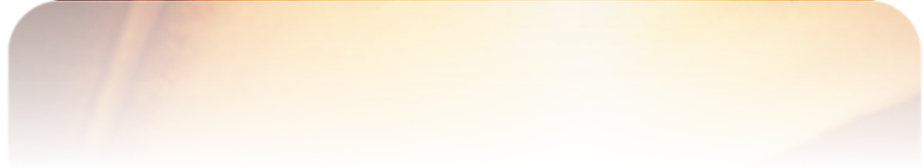


My Journey:

From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach



My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

Part I – The Starting Point: Back in 1986 I was 20 years old. I had been in College for almost two years and had taken some pretty bold decisions. I no longer had an interest in pursuing a degree in business administration and had enrolled in a Social Anthropology and History career track. Not a popular decision amongst my family and friends as it seemed pretty difficult to envision a successful outcome with that choice ('can you make money with that?').

So the pressure was mounting, from all directions, for me to get a job. At that time I was dating a girl whose Father worked for an airline. I didn't read too much into that until she told me they were going on a holiday to South America for a couple of weeks, including stops in Brazil and Argentina. Still no reaction from me, until she said: "... oh, and of course, the family gets to fly for free... since my Dad works for the airline". Bingo! A whole new world opened before my eyes... to travel... for free!

In the late summer of that year the airline was looking to add a few employees to its airport operation. I applied and tried to use my 'connections', and finally got an interview. Given my new 'social conscious' persona as an Anthropology student, I failed to dress up for the occasion: jeans, corduroy jacket, borrowed shoes and tie, and... long curly hair. The airline's General Manager himself conducted the interview, a very drastic and stern man from Albania who was not impressed by my attire. However, my fluent and almost accent-less English seemed to change his opinion and a few weeks later I was told I had to report for my first day of work.

This was a big deal. This was truly my first real job and I had to make the most of it. To show all my critics I was able to take responsibility as an adult, and to fulfill the dream I had shared with my girlfriend back then: work for a year, save enough money and travel to Buenos Aires, her favorite destination in the whole wide world. I still had expectations to complete my Anthropology degree and become a teacher or field researcher of some sort. As it happens to most people, those young adult visions had little resemblance with my actual life, almost 30 years later. Although I did fulfill the Buenos Aires promise (and shortly after that trip, we broke up!).

The job was an entry level position as a 'Passenger Service Agent': six days on, one day off, learning on the job how to prepare for each of the six daily flights the airline operated into our airport. The duties included: checking passengers and bags at the counter, boarding and deplaning at the gates, selling tickets and some other less glamorous administrative tasks dealing with office supplies and taking calls. Five of the days we would start working at 04:30 and the day after our day off we would end after 22:00. Not great considering I had to go to the University from five to nine in the afternoon every

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

day. My monthly salary was, adjusting for inflation in today's dollars, a whopping 500USD! But the package included "...free and unlimited travel on the airline's network, including upgrades to First and Business Class for a minimal surcharge." I don't remember anyone of the new recruits working there for anything other than the free tickets.

The job had, like most jobs, its ups and downs, a few exciting days in the middle of routine and boredom, and the schedule was indeed grueling. It was almost painful to get up at 02:30 to catch a company bus (since I still didn't make enough to buy a car), work a full shift, go to the University, deal with the homework, and try to catch enough sleep for another tough day at the office.

After my first year the Airport Manager, my boss's boss, asked me to come up with some kind of 'Initial Orientation Training' for a new batch of recruits. Nothing fancy... just come up with a few general things you can talk about the company, the job they will be doing, and some of the 'rules' we follow here. This was in the days when we had no personal computers, the World Wide Web, or smart apps to figure things out. It was a labor of collecting facts and figures the old fashioned way, writing everything by hand or typewriter, and creating a presentation using big flipchart sheets and pasting samples of airline tickets, baggage tags, administrative forms, etc.

I loved the challenge. This is what I needed to keep myself engaged. I was getting bored and had started to consider jumping ship. For whatever reason they decided to give me the job of 'Station Trainer' (with no extra pay, mind you), it opened a whole new path for me that, to this day, I continue to walk on. The training went so well that I was then promoted to 'Team Leader', and I got to travel frequently to the airline's head office in Miami with other Station Trainers to get more content and materials, now that the airline was going fully automated in all of its customer facing processes. This is when I started to appreciate the chance to interact with people from other countries and cultures, to hone my presentation skills and training delivery, and most importantly, to start acting as a Leader. After all these new experiences, just over a year after I signed up, I reconsidered my decision to leave the company and stuck it out to see what this airline industry had in store for me.

Part II – The Formative Years: A lot happened to me through the early 90s. I almost got promoted to Supervisor (with a pay increase), but the airline ceased operations at the end of 1991 and with that, the closing of a very rich and formative chapter in my career. I had learned some things about leadership and management, I had a mentor that had supported my career, and I had traveled a little bit around the world, enough to get my

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

appetite for globetrotting really started. But the company was shutting down and I had no real prospects for another, similar job. I had to also consider my degree in Anthropology, which by then was almost complete, but the last year required almost undivided time and attention. After the holidays in 1991 a new airline announced it was taking over the routes and the flights that the other company had left vacant, and they would start a recruiting campaign. My big chance!

At the time I had no larger ambition than getting hired for an entry-level job, just like I had almost six years before. For some reason I felt that even with my training and supervisory experience, I wasn't good enough for the new airline's management positions. By comparison the new company was larger, better managed, had more advanced technology, procedures and standards.

I, and basically everyone else in my former company, applied and went through the recruitment process. This included an interview where you sat in front of four company officials, some from HR, some from management. All interviews were conducted in English and given the number of applicants we were told they would only take between 15-20 minutes with each candidate.

In preparation for my interview I assembled a binder with examples of my work as a trainer, commendation letters from management and customers, some course certificates issued by the other airline, and a few 'proposals' that I had submitted to my former boss on how to improve the productivity and work climate (yes! Without any knowledge about what 'Consulting' was all about).

When my interview slot was confirmed I arrived nervous and worried about my performance. I had not interviewed for a job since my first one ever, but I was a bit more experienced and at least arrived with a proper haircut and my own suit and tie. They kept telling us they had to cycle everyone fast, since the number of people applying for jobs exceeded their plan.

I finally got to enter the room and sat in front of not four but five individuals. They all looked serious, extremely professional and sharp. After the first few basic questions I continued to hold my binder with sweaty palms and thought it had not been such a great idea to bring all that junk after all. But somehow I got into a rhythm and slowly built some confidence in my answers. Finally one guy asked me '...why should we consider you instead of any of these other candidates'.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

I remember putting my binder down, still unopened. I started talking from no previous script in my head about my passion to the airline business, to serving customers, and most importantly, to leading and representing a team. I gestured with my hands and probably had an almost manic appearance talking about how much I had enjoyed learning and training people, and started to present some of my own ideas on how to organize and manage the operation in ways that would be highly productive and successful. I probably rambled for about 15 minutes and finally came to the end of my pitch saying something like ‘... if you hire me you will get the most committed and dedicated individual to make your company the best one in this airport’. I was thanked and told to wait for their call, in about 2-3 days. As I walked out of the room people stared at me and asked what had happened in there... I had been interviewed for almost an hour!

Unbeknownst to me, I had done something that would serve me well into the future. I had prepared consciously and had visualized the interview in my head many times, I had thought out different possible outcomes, and I had focused on a few, specific messages about my value as a future employee and the potential I could deliver to the new organization. Indeed, a few days later I got the call to return and discuss my interview results.

I was prepared to take any job and I would have been happy to be hired as a check-in agent again. At the time I had researched enough about this new airline and was very excited to be part of it. They offered me a job as a Supervisor, with better pay and benefits than I had expected, and I was congratulated on being the first ever employee the company hired in that country.

From that point on I had a very rewarding and fruitful career in that airline. I was promoted to Station Manager, the youngest in my region, just a few months later and the process that led to that promotion was not a conventional interview. I met a guy from the Division at 05:00 to start discussing some performance problems with the operation. Too many delays, misplaced baggage and long customer wait times were discussed. I had to provide a detailed breakdown of everybody’s shifts, on a typical month, to demonstrate if we needed more staff (again, using a calculator and an electric typewriter).

As the day flowed I was told that in a few hours the airline would declare an ‘Emergency Response Exercise’ simulating a crash near our airport, and we would be a critical component in establishing how prepared the airline was to deal with an accident in our location. While we had reviewed the emergency protocols a few times, I did not feel we were up to the task. And yet as the exercise unfolded and we experienced the most gut-

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

wrenching couple of hours being put through all the motions of a significant crisis, I managed to do a more than acceptable job leading the team, interacting with the head office, displaying on the spot decision making and keeping a cool head in spite of all the chaos that was role played on purpose.

By that evening, I was exhausted. And yet there was more business to take care of. We had a presentation by the HR team on new, enhanced benefits for the employees. Shortly before their presentation that guy I met earlier that morning took me to a smaller room. He told me that it was decided I should become the Station Manager, my first significant leadership role, and that should I accept it would be announced in a few minutes in front of all the employees from our airport, sales and administrative teams. I was excited, happy, but also concerned and even a bit afraid thinking if I was going to be up to the challenge and expectations of so many people.

Being a Station Manager requires a lot of skill and patience. You now deal not only with employees and customers, but also airport authorities, the head office, the division, other station managers, suppliers, etc. You are responsible for budgets, disciplinary actions, for any and all mishaps that take place in an operation where hundreds of flights are operated each month, carrying thousands of people and valuable freight, and where you have to 'feel' ready to take on a major crisis on any given moment.

I dealt with another airline's crash, an erupting volcano threatening the safety of our flights, firing front line and management staff, conflict with my peers and supervisors, and getting savvy on how to prepare financial reviews, reports of all kinds, audits and inspections, and meeting far more experienced managers in meetings where I was expected to talk and act like the best of them.

A year after that promotion I was called by that same guy who recommended my appointment as Station Manager and invited to come to the Head Office in the U.S. for a '...3 to 6 month special assignment'. I was told that a senior director had taken an interest in me and wanted to mix some of the international field managers with the head office teams in order to create more diversity and have a better view on what the field needed to perform and be more effective.

When I landed in the airline's main hub, seeing hundreds of planes with the distinct tail logos, I was overwhelmed. I did not know if I would be up to the task but I felt deep inside this was my calling and the right choice in spite of some hardship on the personal side. The 'culture clash' was enormous. I sat in a little cubicle, in the middle of thousands of cubicles, and people looked at me in a weird way. For the first month I came to work

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

every day, sat in my little desk, looked at the computer (yes, finally... a computer!) and had no clue what they expected from me. At some point during that month I questioned if in fact this had been a good idea... but in the end, it all worked out for the best.

Let's fast forward a little: the 3 to 6 month special assignment turned out to be almost eight years of ever increasing responsibility positions, as a project manager, a manager and a regional manager. I traveled to more than 35 countries dealing with some of the most exciting, cutting edge and profoundly transformational assignments. I led teams to open new routes, destinations, products and airports, to change processes and procedures to benefit our customers in the most singular ways. I designed and executed every aspect of major meetings between our station managers, airline partners, senior and field executives, I started a ground handling company from scratch, I supported families in yet another airline accident, and I transitioned to another business area for the company dealing with airline partnerships and alliances.

During those years I got exposed to different leadership and management styles, bosses who displayed the most effective coaching and mentoring style, and those who were fierce in their command and control behavior. I saw the benefit of involving middle management and front line teams as 'experts' on how to serve the customer, deliver the product and run the operation better than any person sitting in a comfortable head office desk. I saw the entire world open before my eyes, meeting and working with people from the most diverse cultures and geographies I ever imagined. I gained so much confidence, skills, experience and learned to trust my gut when situations turned from bad to worse. Overall, I believe that most of my fundamental beliefs and views on leadership and 'service' to others got consolidated in this period and were crucial to take me to the next level.

Part III – The Grown Up Phase: When I think back, those years were wonderful from a professional and personal perspective. I got more than I had ever hoped for, in many aspects, but still... it wasn't always perfect. My passion to my job and ambition collided with my ability to be a good spouse and partner. My ex-wife and I had plotted our relationship according to where my job took us and had to deal with long absences, stress, and the cross-cultural shock that is most prevalent for couples living as ex-pats in a foreign country. The spouse of the employee most often remains at home, dealing with the frustration of getting residence and work permits in order to continue a career or start a new job, navigating in an almost hostile environment to do the most simple of things like shopping or driving around. Sometimes the language barrier is an added aggravation, and in general, there is always imbalance of how the two individuals (more if children are involved) face the new environment.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

For me it ended up in a very painful separation, and later a divorce which was more amicable and constructive than I could have hoped for. I remember traveling to my home country to spend the holidays with my family and deal with my then wife's decision to not continue the marriage. As it happened we had dinner just before the New Year, the start of 2000 (remember the whole Y2K thing?), and after years of struggle and conflict we were able to acknowledge each other's feelings, to ask for forgiveness and recognize how the other had worked so hard and contributed to the marriage. With this weight lifted from each other's shoulders we decided to remain friends and approach the divorce as a healthy and necessary step to continue on with our lives.

As I took off in early January to go back to my little apartment, in the freezing U.S. Midwest, and I looked outside the plane's window watching my former place of work and my country becoming smaller, I had a wonderful thought.

What if... I could start all over again? No longer bound by what I perceived were obligations and tied to a specific job, city and country... If I had all the freedom and nothing in my way to choose what I wanted to do next, what would I do?

One of the first and lasting thoughts was of a small town, somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea. I remember seeing such towns only in movies or magazines. It seemed so inviting, so remote, peaceful and promising. I had no idea how, when or why I would go there, but that was the vision and all my energy and talent would be focused on getting there.

After some interesting events, one would say that Fate played a hand, and a lot of hard work and persistence, I managed to get a job in a smaller but growing airline based in the Spanish island of Mallorca: you could not get more Mediterranean than this.

To this date I always tell people that I approached this very significant and profound change in my life not from a perspective of 'what should I do next in my career', which could have well taken me to Brazil, the U.K. or Hong Kong... but, 'where in the world do I want to be in, to settle down and create roots'. And this different perspective has proven to be truer to my values and beliefs. Yes, I was lucky that there was an airline which was looking for my skills and experience at the same time, but that company no longer exists and in spite of the many things and places where I could be making a living, my sense of belonging here is so strong that I prioritize major aspects of my life in a whole different way.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

It's no longer about career, about money or my ambition to be a senior executive with a glamorous life. It's about peace of mind, matching my professional interests with a place where I feel in balance, with the Sea always in sight, and knowing that my little island is not just a beautiful place to live but a safe refuge where I can do my best thinking and feel connected to something bigger than myself.

From the end of 2000 through the middle of 2010, I had yet another wave of successful, interesting and rewarding professional development. I arrived here with a fancy title and the perks of a senior executive, bringing ideas and a different way of doing things to this smaller company. For the first six years I had what I thought was the best job ever.

As Senior Vice President of Alliances my job was: to travel around the world, in the comfort of business or first class seats and posh hotels, and set up agreements with other airlines. These agreements were almost always a 'win/win' proposition, so the negotiation was not so much about how to fight the other and take a larger part of the joint benefits, but rather how to make the execution as smooth as possible. All of this work was always done with the representatives of the other companies acting as exquisite and proud hosts of their own company and country's cultures, and included nice meals, sightseeing and sharing the local customs and traditions.

Another aspect of my job was to sit at the table of the Big People. As part of a global marketing alliance, with airlines from all over the world including some of the most professional, successful and recognized brands, I got to be on a first name basis with the top leaders of the top companies. We would meet 3-4 times each year to discuss the most exciting strategic directions for our industry, sharing knowledge about how to better serve customers, the latest technology, the launch of new aircraft, airports and products, and even discussing what the future of mobility would look like (I will never forget a seminar in which a guy described in a very serious manner some inroads on teleportation).

You could not ask for a better place. It was glamorous, it was exotic, it was rich and powerful, and they paid me to do this! Sure, my contribution to the airline was as significant. It was now trading in a global market, getting a significant boost in revenues and presence, and it made employees proud to be part of the experience. And yet, sometimes too much of a good thing can also get stale and boring. I was also getting a bit tired of jetting around the world, sometimes traveling to Asia or North America, investing 20+ hours of airplanes and airports for a few hours of meetings. So, as it usually happens, the world takes care of reconfiguring your place and position, opportunity and challenge, and I was dealt yet another card that would prove life changing.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

In late 2005 a significant management reshuffle took place and I was told things weren't going to be the same anymore. The new leadership had taken over after a serious dispute in the Boardroom that revealed losses of hundreds of millions of Euros, and the clear qualification that the business was very sick. Unless urgent and drastic actions were taken, its existence would be compromised and bankruptcy could be around the corner.

At the time I had to admit I was out of touch with the reality of the business. All my traveling and deal making had been positive, but I had no clue about the financial situation and even on how the organization was digesting the news. I was very ignorant on people policies and procedures because, quite simply, they didn't apply to me. In that context the CEO asked me, the alliances guy, to come up with a presentation on Leadership that would inspire him and his executive team, and put fresh thinking on the table as to how we could mobilize and energize the employees in the face of serious and no-return challenges.

Why me? In the end the rationale was that I could bring an outside-looking-in perspective and incidentally, didn't I complain frequently that there could be other ways of leading, communicating and developing our managers? The dice were rolled and I made the most of that presentation. I worked hard for a couple of weeks researching all I could find on the most effective trends in leadership and management, and I made my own assessment about the things that worked and didn't in our company. The day came, I presented, and the feedback I got was very positive.

A few months later, while sharing a cab with the CEO on a business trip, he proposed me to take the job as head of HR. I was shocked. I had no experience, training or insights about that function, and I knew it was a tricky proposition because it included the main interface with a large number of militant and hostile labor union groups. I was even told that I should seriously consider the 'offer' because my current job was to be eliminated and it would be downsized to a smaller staff function. In the end I accepted, full of insecurities and fear, even after I was told the pay and benefits would be by far the largest six-digit figure I could have ever imagined.

Taking my original presentation as a road map, I started my new job with energy and focus, trusting my gut on how to approach the new challenge. As a far more visible and accountable Leader in the new management group, I chose to start building a team of direct reports, some from inside and most external candidates, on the basis that I needed experts that knew more than I did on the different critical processes that companies manage in their People function.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

The first two years of my new job turned out better than I hoped. We assembled a great team, we put out new and exciting programs aimed at developing leaders, more people-friendly management styles, improved internal communications to better align the organization and the strategy, and while my reservations about dealing with the Unions was always present, I found that my personal style of engaging them in honest and open dialogue was paying off far better than the previous regime.

There was a lot of hard work involved and not always everything had a positive outcome. While implementing the new strategy, vision and 'change management' plan we had to negotiate labor contracts to cut back on salaries and benefits, changing social policies that were not readily embraced by the Unions and the employees, and we had to manage a strike in the middle of our busy summer season.

While this had been the period of my career where I had to work faster, harder and manage more stress than ever before, I felt that my original 'strategic positioning' of the HR function was working out. HR had to be a strong, fundamental pillar together with the main functions in Commercial, Finance and Operations. Every piece of the strategy and the business plan should be filtered and assessed against the challenges and opportunities it placed on the organization. Communications had to be frequent, transparent and honest in order to get the buy-in of the employees and the middle management.

It was all coming along together, except... none of us had a clue what was in store in 2008 as the world economy began to collapse and our own business became more vulnerable, as no matter how much change we tried to implement, it was starting to look as too little and too late. We faced a peak summer season with lots of operational disruption. Pilots, Flight Attendants and Mechanics, the key labor groups in an airline, were reacting negatively to the change and made their position visible in the way we were accumulating delays and cancellations. For the past year the company was on a track to be sold to a more suitable group of investors, someone who could focus more and better resources to the airline and take us back to the path of growth and excellence. All of that crumbled and failed as the economy took a downward spiral. In June of 2008 we announced that the market conditions were no longer favorable for a sale, and the company would have to reduce its size by a third in order to survive.

This meant laying off a thousand employees from the organization, in addition to even more drastic cuts to pay, benefits and social policies. It was a do or die proposition which the Unions took as yet another exaggerated posture by Management, crafted in a devious

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

manner to hide years of bad decisions, incompetence and failure to put a credible plan together. Or, as most of us from the airline business would say, another day in the office.

For me the challenge was formidable just on the HR and Labor Relations side alone, but a new CEO had taken over and one of his decisions affected me personally. I was asked to take over the Corporate Communications and Spokesperson role, together with my 'regular job' (and yes, no extra pay or benefits!). I was reluctant, but I accepted because there was logic to the whole picture. The main thrust of our Change Management plan dealt with the People: their pay and benefits, reorganizing the entire landscape of bases and crew domiciles, and thinning out the ranks in the most aggressive and significant way that any Spanish business had ever implemented. So it was critical that all internal and external communications be aligned and that messages to all stakeholders: media, employees, authorities and regulators, partners and suppliers, be exquisite and well executed. I took the new role with gusto and had a lot of support to carry out my new responsibilities.

Unfortunately, in spite of all our hard work and efforts, yet another event would take our entire company's focus and every ounce of talent to deal with the worst possible scenario an airline can face: an accident.

On the 20th of August, shortly before 15:00, a plane carrying 172 passengers and crew crashed shortly after attempting to take off, for the second time, in the country's busiest airport, in the busiest travel season, when the media is hungry for a good story, and everyone in our company was at its lowest in terms of morale and energy.

For better or worse, in addition to my regular jobs, I was also the Crisis Management Director on duty that week so it was my responsibility to activate and manage the company's Emergency Response Plan. This was the single most important undertaking for any individual in the airline's history, and the company's future was riding on how well the protocols were executed.

All the manuals and literature on crisis management suggest that the President or the CEO have to be the public face of the effort. We were challenged because non-Spanish speaking individuals took those roles. The media was in full gear with speculation on the probable causes of the crash already available in the online environment within an hour of the accident, in addition to dramatic photos and real-time accounts. Technology and social media put additional pressure on our efforts to communicate facts and take responsibility.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

We had to assemble two teams of leaders: one to head the crisis management effort on site as quickly as possible, and one to run the rest of the business as best as possible. Communications went out to the media and to our staff to confirm the facts: the airplane had crashed, the victim count was high and rising, and we were operating under the assumption that it was not a systemic problem that would result in the entire fleet being grounded. On top of this a press release by the Pilot Union had been published literally minutes before the crash, criticizing Management and questioning the safety of our operations. Perfect Storm? You better believe it.

I will summarize the events of the following 10 days as follows: A senior team including the CEO and myself traveled to the site of the crash later that evening. We dealt with a major press conference the next day, attended by local and international media. Mounting pressure was felt from the families, the authorities and basically everyone involved, to establish a crisis management team that communicated, resolved and represented the company to all of those stakeholders in an effective, compassionate and professional way.

After the first day, where many involuntary mistakes were made and our company's image was deteriorating rapidly, the CEO appointed me as the leader for the entire effort. I had to act as the Crisis Manager for more than 400 employees who volunteered to assist the families, as the spokesperson to all the media requests, as the main representative to the authorities and to the families, and I had to do this coordinating the work between our parent company and our local management, in English and in Spanish, every hour, every day.

The experiences collected over those days would be enough to fill a book on their own merit. Suffice it to say that my life was changed by that single event, in ways that even to this day I could not have predicted. Hard work, talent and lots of cooperation from all the parties involved got us through that horrible accident. Of course it is impossible to console or make any significant difference to those who lost their loved ones, passengers and crew alike, but in the end the company continued to be in business for a few more years. And for the purposes of this reflection, that was the necessary goal to achieve. But regardless of the success of the work we did, and the continuity of the business, the loss we all experienced that day will be gaping wound for the rest of our lives.

While we recovered as best we could from that tragedy, the business went on. We closed the deals with the unions. We started to implement the layoff and relocation plans, somewhat diluted by the negotiations that took place under pressure from the deteriorating cash position and by the sadness that permeated all of our activities. While

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

not as drastic as originally envisioned, the downsizing was significant and it affected not only those who were leaving the company, but those who stayed.

In early 2009 the company's owners announced that a new investor group had agreed to buy the airline (for 1 Euro!), and that the deal would be closed by the first quarter. It was something that took all of us by surprise, and yet, it instilled a little bit of confidence and hope for the future. In paper, at least, the new ownership would be better aligned and resourced to take the company, in smaller size, to a new direction in which sooner rather than later it would claim again its rightful place as a high quality, high performance business.

For me the experience of dealing with all the negotiations, the restructuring, the communications, and not the least the accident, had taken its toll in a major way. My personal life was a mess: My girlfriend back then, who I had hoped 'was the one', had broken up with me; I had not visited and spent quality time with my family and close friends for years, I had all sorts of stress-related health problems (including a patch of hair loss, the size of a fist, in the back of my head!). Overall I felt I was already burned out.

With the new ownership structure came a new leadership team. Amongst them, a highly energized and determined CEO who, on his first day at work, called me to his office and said: "I am planning to fire all the senior executives, except you. I need you to stay on and support me because, unfortunately, this business is in worse shape than I expected". We needed to make more cuts and negotiate all the agreements, all over again.

I had already thought of leaving the company shortly after the accident and as soon as we had formalized what became the first round of layoffs and benefit cuts. Back in 2000, when I arrived in Mallorca, I had a sort of vision that by age 45 I wanted to have a different career path. I built on that vision over the years and by that age I wanted to work as a consultant, combining projects with teaching or lecturing, and taking good chunks of time off. By my calculations, from 1993 all the way to 2004, I had never taken any real vacation (except for the odd long weekend, or the holidays in whatever country I was working in). I took a semi-sabbatical in 2004 to focus on teaching, as a small University recruited me to do some courses and lectures. But by the end of that experience, very enriching and empowering, I once again defaulted to working non-stop without any proper time off.

So with that idea on my head I proposed to the CEO a deal. I would work for a full year or until we had secured the new round of cuts and contract agreements, and in exchange I would be able to leave with a previously negotiated exit package, hopefully in good terms

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

so that I could even consult from time to time with the new team. This I did, both parties in good faith fulfilled the agreement, and to this day I am still in good terms with most of that team.

I left in June 2010, with the following priorities: take six months off. Reconnect in a deep way with my family and friends with long, relaxing and overdue trips back home. Get back in shape, physically and mentally, and plan a future with a whole different attitude towards, work, life, and all the components in between.

Part IV – The “New” Me: After taking those six months off, refusing to even think about what to do professionally, I started 2011 with a mindset of becoming a highly sought after consultant. With the experience I had accumulated over the years, in so many countries, in so many interesting projects, not the least my previous four years as head of HR, Labor Relations, Corporate Communications and Crisis Manager, who wouldn't hire me?

Of course I knew the economy was bad, but every crisis brings opportunity they say! I worked diligently to network, communicate amongst my key contacts and their contacts my availability as a consultant, always with an aim to remain rooted in Mallorca, but with enough flexibility to travel and take temporary projects away from my home.

Towards the fall of that year I started to really worry. I had done some 'consulting' for my previous employers, but nothing that materialized into a real project. I wasn't too thrilled to continue my involvement with those issues anyway: after my last contribution as the lead negotiator of the second round of cuts and layoffs the business struggled even more.

In addition to all the structural problems it had tried to remedy, the competitive landscape was more brutal and unforgiving than ever. Add to that the Icelandic Volcano, a shutdown of the ATC system in Spain during the holiday season and more effects of the sluggish economy. In early 2012 the company was unable to generate sufficient revenue and it ceased to operate. More than 3.000 employees lost their jobs directly and thousands more indirectly. Another casualty of the cutthroat airline business, and of the new world order in which we live.

With no job or consulting prospects other than a half dozen calls or correspondence 'to gain interest on a potential opportunity', I was closing 2011 as a year in which only on a personal side I had gained a lot: in terms of quality relationships with family, friends, a healthier lifestyle, with abundant time to catch up on reading, movies, and a few pleasure trips to cities I have always loved or discovered for the first time.

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

A call came around November with the prospects of an exciting opportunity where my experience and skills were matched perfectly to the project, and I was eventually offered the dual role of Interim HR Director and Turnaround Project support for an amazing enterprise whose mission is “to save lives and protect the environment”. As a bonus the head office was located in Spain, a 40-minute flight away from home, and part of the compensation included a nice beachfront apartment.

I started 2012 with an incredible amount of energy, motivation, excitement and feeling that the wait had been more than rewarded. I took over my new team, project responsibilities and work with a passion that I had thought wouldn't come back to me. The scope of the turnaround was immense, complex and it would require lots of work but the upside was that this company did not want to lay off people or negotiate contracts to reduce compensation. They wanted to integrate many smaller businesses into a single, powerful and rich brand that took the best of all the entities, aligned its front line staff to the company's growth and leading market provider role, and spent time and energy developing its managers into more inspiring and exemplary leaders.

But, I as learned, even the ‘perfect job’ is bound to go sour unless you figure out the true dynamics and the agenda of the people involved. And, unless the principal leaders are the first ones to change before they implement any ‘change management’ initiatives. A few months later after grueling 12-14 hour days, having to play a careful balancing act to address all the egos and politics, including a management team from different countries and cultures, the mounting pressure of a 24/7 complex operation, and badly designed project, the stress and the feeling of ‘this is not what I signed up for’ started to show in a major way.

In spite of working with wonderful, passionate and committed people, but whose positive contributions got tangled and lost in the middle of a very troubled and misguided leadership team, I dreaded going to the office. Sure, the pay was great, the title was flashy, the benefits were top notch, but all the creative energy and the original passion simply diluted themselves away. This turned out to be yet another troubled company, whose leadership was not in tune with the organization, where the key messages and the priorities were frequently misunderstood and confused, and nothing of substance was simply getting done. Except: the ‘blame-game’, the escalating tension and conflicts, and the realization that a major crisis event could take place unless something big and dramatic changed in the way of leading this business.

And so it did: in May a major personal difference between the main leaders resulted in the appointment of an interim CEO, and his decision to do away with all my projects and

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My Journey: From Check-In Agent to Leadership Coach

contributions in one swift action. All for the best, as far as I was concerned, because the new 'direction' and the way of doing things was radically different from what I felt were reflected in my values and principles when taking ownership of an organization and its destination.

I left the company in June, also in good terms and amicably, and once again I started to ponder what to do with a big chunk of time I had not planned in my calendar! One of the last things I did in my previous role was to hire an Executive Coach for one of the company's Leaders. The process intrigued me and I asked the Coach to have lunch with me. After I had left the business we met and talked. I got lots of interesting information about Coaching: what it is, what it isn't, and a personal reflection from the Coach about how fulfilled and gratified his new professional and personal life looked like after making the decision to do this on a full-time basis. I was encouraged by him to look within myself, to see if this could be a direction for me, and we promised to stay in touch.

A few days after that I 'stumbled' upon a former colleague with whom I had worked with more than 20 years ago. He had also quit a successful corporate career, trained, and recently had been certified as a Coach. I asked him for a Skype chat and he filled me in with the details. After researching the topic a bit further, and the school in which my colleague had graduated, I decided to invest the summer of 2012 to train and become the best possible Leadership Coach I could be.

Why Leadership Coaching? The experiences I encountered in my entire professional life, but especially those in the past 5-6 years, formed in me very strong and long-lasting beliefs about what Leadership should be about. What makes people great Leaders? Why do most Leaders fail to deliver? Why do we always complain about our Leaders, in every aspect of our lives? Is Leadership something that one can develop or is it a gift destined for a privileged few?

More recently, after the rollercoaster I endured in my last assignment as an Interim HR Manager, many questions were left open on why most Change Management initiatives fall flat before they even get started. And the role that very specific individuals, appointed and empowered in the senior-most leadership positions, play into those outcomes.

When I reflected about the times and places where I had most enjoyed, and modestly speaking, executed quite well the role of a Leader, I concluded some or most of the following conditions applied:

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- I was in charge of a team removed from the direct influence of power from the 'corporate' level
- The team and I had a clear mission and jobs to do, and we knew how to measure the failure or success of those jobs
- The communication was usually open, honest, direct, if not all the time, almost always
- Conflict between individuals had to be resolved quickly; there was no space for it, because the job and the results had to be delivered on a constant basis
- There was little or no room to play politics
- I had a mentor or coach. A strong but open minded leader who guided my development as another leader, not by imposing views and actions, but by allowing my own style to surface naturally, trusting my gut

By contrast if I thought about the roles and situations where my Leadership had not been effective or was compromised:

- The role was very senior, reporting to the highest authority
- The agenda was unclear: the communication wasn't direct, open or transparent, most of the time
- The amount of conflict between individuals became almost a daily occurrence: bruised egos, personal insecurities, and the lack of accountability were prevalent amongst the players
- The role of a mentor, for an executive team, be it the CEO or members of the Board, was diffuse, scarce, weak, or it played by a different set of rules
- Amazingly, even though we knew we had a responsibility that was larger than ourselves, to serve an organization and its stakeholders, most of the time and energy spent was on personal agendas

Through my journey of becoming a Leadership Coach, I found that the training offered by the International Coaching Academy (ICA) delivered far more than I expected. Over the past 10 years I stayed away from further education, seminars, workshops. I preferred to gain knowledge and information on my own terms and finding my own sources. When I decided to train as a Coach I had some underlying beliefs fighting within me: the thought of 'going back to school', to sit in a place surrounded by other students, to listen to teachers for hours, taking homework. C'mon I'm in my mid-40s now, I don't need this kind of learning! I paid my dues a long time ago.

To my pleasant surprise ICA had a whole different proposition:

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- Adult, self-directed learning is the framework of the course
- You design and execute your own lesson plan, as intense or light as you choose, whenever you want to take a class
- You are surrounded by other adults, yes... but who in spite of coming from different countries, backgrounds and expectations, all share the passion and desire to become Coaches, to serve others
- It's a global, supportive, and rich community in terms of sharing. You are acknowledged and encouraged all the way, all the time
- The curriculum is well structured, adapted to the realities of our world, with plenty of resources to add and build upon the required content, at your leisure

This new, empowered and very satisfying way of learning has also 'transferred' some of the benefits of Coaching to my own personal and professional life: I have developed acute self-awareness, I have learned to listen much better, I have learned to ask questions and guide a conversation with my own judgment and opinions 'suspended', I am open to looking at more positive sides of things, I encourage others to look at what they have achieved or what they can accomplish, vs. the problem or the obstacle that brings negative feelings or a state of being stuck.

And when I recognize that as a senior manager, executive, consultant or even as a teacher, my 'impact' on others has been more limited than I had hoped for, a thought materialized:

What if I could remove myself from the environment that disempowers people in organizations? If instead of being part of the senior executive structure or being a consultant who needs to spend so much time to deliver the perfect pitch, drowning in corporate politics and selfish agendas, I could work one-on-one with individuals who have the greatest potential to influence, inspire, mobilize and enthuse an entire organization? And if through that process I could support, energize, and encourage Leaders to become more effective and more in tune with the concept of Leadership as a service to others, to a goal and a mission which is greater than self?

Part V and Final: Here, today, and with that aim is where I start my journey as a Leadership Coach.

With gratitude and recognition to all my peers, colleagues, supervisors and friends who have been part of, and will join me, in this journey.

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