

NEGOTIATING ORDER IN THE WORKPLACE: THE CASE OF THE AIR HOSTESS

Geraldine O'Brien*

The purpose of this article is to present for discussion some findings of research into the occupation of air hostess. Specifically, it deals with the negotiated order of the workplace, that is, the way in which air hostesses develop strategies to control aspects of their organisation environment. In their work, *"The Hospital and Its Negotiated Order"*, Anselm Strauss et al define 'negotiation' as the processes of give-and-take, of diplomacy, of bargaining which characterises organisational life". Their discussion is based on a study of psychiatric hospitals where ambiguities and bargains may be more manifest than in most business concerns. The 'negotiated order' notion is used here as a means of analysing a particular form of organisation. The goals and rules of all organisations are ambiguous though the nature of the ambiguity and the manner of its resolution might be expected to vary between types of organisation.

Methodology

The research reported here is based on a case study of a single airline, one of the smaller international carriers. In 1980 the airline employed 6842 people, with air hostesses representing just over 10% of the staff. The research incorporated several distinct approaches, and included participant observation and surveys. Questionnaires were submitted to air hostess applicants, active air hostesses and airline management. In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with a random sample of 45 air hostesses who already had wide experience of the job of air hostess. The qualitative data obtained through these procedures are now discussed.

The Work Setting

The settings and contexts in which men and women work are many and varied. Hospitals, factories, farms, schools and construction sites re-

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present settings that define and constrain work activities in different ways and to different degrees. The work activity of an international airline is spread over a wide area in units of varying size and complexity. By its very nature, flying at a height of several thousand feet, an aircraft is physically and socially isolated from other units. The distinctive features of the air hostess' work setting have an important impact on her perceptions of work and her relations with the organisation. The air hostesses' and pilots' work situation within the airline differs greatly from that of other units, such as administrative staff in head office, in that they are constantly moving through airports, the permanent location of ground staff. Most workers have an individual work station which 'belongs' to its occupant whether it is a desk or a welding booth, and the importance which individuals assign to place and things in their work environment may simply be interpreted as signifying that the person does literally have a place in the organisation. By contrast hostesses and pilots do not possess a position of their own within the physical architecture of the organisation. They are very much on the periphery, socially and physically isolated from the life of the organisation.

The variability of the hostess' workplace has far-reaching consequences for her relationship with the organisation, that is, for her attitudes and behaviour toward the employing organisation and also for her integration into the organisation as a whole. Of particular note is the relative absence of direct contact between the hostess and those in control. The extensive reliance on written communication, rather than on individual face-to-face contact, has served to emphasize the social and physical distance between the hostess and those in authority. There is ample evidence to indicate that the management is conscious of the problems surrounding the integration of hostesses. The channels of communication are equally inadequate for them. Management can never be sure that a message has, in fact, been received, understood or accepted by all the hostesses. In many cases it is only through a failure at a later date that they find that a miscommunication has occurred. Similarly it is difficult for them to be appraised of the hostesses' opinions and views.

In addition to the crucial two-way vertical communication difficulty between hostesses and management, lateral communication to and from the hostess is clearly of extreme importance and can be studied at a number of levels. One must bear in mind the heterogeneity of the organisational environment. Complex organisations consist of multiple groupings of persons and involve a high measure of both interpersonal cooperation and conflict. In some occupations the most crucial relations are those with one's fellow workers-- "It is they who can do most to

make life sweet or sour". (Hughes, 1951). Within the organisation there is one particular work area which has a considerable impact on the hostess not only in a work context but, more importantly from her point of view, in relation to her non-work life space. This is the Roster Planning and Control Unit. The problems the hostess encounters in her dealings with this area demonstrate the wide scope and pervasiveness of the organisation over her.

The Roster

Before discussing in detail the relationship between hostesses and the Roster Control Section, it is necessary to point out the importance of the roster to the air hostess. Incumbency of the hostess role has implications for the individual's self-identity and social relationships. Several restrictive factors associated with the job have consequences for her non-work life. The most significant is the work schedule. This represents an extreme form of shiftwork, suffering from a combination of features not normally found in any one occupation. The most striking of these are.

- * the short advance notice given of the two-week roster — it is released only 48 hours before it becomes operational;
- * the unpredictability of the published roster — any number of factors (e.g. aircraft delays, absenteeism amongst hostesses, bad weather) can disrupt the roster. The effect of any changes are often cumulative and affect future roster duties;
- * the lack of a set work pattern, eg, afternoon shifts,
- * uncertainty about the actual number of hours that will be worked in any one day;
- * the effects of reserve duties — a hostess may be on reserve at the airport or at home;
- * the requirements that some rest periods be spent in places away from home, often without advance warning.

The only criteria used to allocate flights are the scheduling rules agreed with the trade union, and should a hostess have a request for a special day or time off she is required to give up to two weeks notice before the roster is issued and even then the number of requests allowed is limited and may not be honoured if she is scheduled to be abroad at that time. Where it is permitted for air hostesses to swop amongst themselves, the elaborate set of scheduling rules may make it extremely difficult to locate another hostess who has a roster suitable for swopping.

The Roster Planning and Control Unit

Within the Roster Planning and Control Unit, the Planning Section's

function, is to draw up the roster for hostesses. Once the roster is published it becomes the working document from which the Control Section operates for the following two weeks and the Planning Section is no longer involved. The Control Section's prime responsibility is to ensure that the full crew complement is on board the aircraft at the required time. They are responsible for implementing changes to the roster where required because of changes in the operation or because of the absences of crew members. For example, this may entail transferring hostesses from one duty to another, assigning duties to those hostesses on reserve duty, or notifying a hostess to report for duty earlier/later than indicated on her roster.

The hostesses' predominant concern about the Roster Control Section is the power and influence that it can exert over their lives either through making inroads into free time by rostering them for flights, changing duties, retaining them on reserve duty, failing to notify them of delays and cancellations, or by the type of flight that they could roster them for. The function of assigning duties to particular hostesses—often at very short notice—is seen to grant Roster Control a significant amount of power. Hostesses are afraid of the important informal ('illegitimate') authority that Roster Control is in a position to exercise and feel that the staff are not responsible for their actions to any higher authority. The hostesses themselves are reluctant to remonstrate against their actions because of fear of repercussions.

The hostess' working conditions are subject to biannual negotiation between the Hostess Union Committee and the airline. These working conditions are very complex and the agreement runs to forty-five pages. From the hostess' point of view the agreement is full of 'ifs' and 'buts' and as soon as she has found the applicable passage that is in her favour, Roster Control confront her with a 'special' condition on another page. The hostesses feel at a distinct disadvantage if they do not know their agreement thoroughly. Where they are not sure, they feel compelled to give Roster Control's interpretation the benefit of the doubt and have to postpone clarification until they have operated the disputed duty, at which stage it is too late to do anything about it if Roster Control was wrong in the first place.

The perception that Roster Control takes advantage of the hostess' lack of knowledge as to her rights is probably the main factor giving rise to the conflict and distrust apparent between the two parties. The hostesses' chief demand is that Roster Control should recognise that there is an agreement in existence and that they, too, as agents for the company, should adhere to it and notify the hostesses when they are out of hours,

etc, instead of pressurising them into working over and above the agreement. Typical of the responses from the sample of hostesses were the following statements:

"There used to be a great sense of loyalty among the crews, towards the company. That is very much on the decline because it's very one-sided. The company expects us to break rules and regulations to facilitate them—but ask a favour in return, NO WAY. Out comes the rule book and it's a case of 'it can't be done' and 'it would be setting a precedent'. No wonder everyone is becoming more militant and union-minded."

"I think the whole system is completely wrong in that they take advantage of you, of the people who let them and then if you cause any hassle, it's on you for the rest of your time, they just 'stick' you (roster you) and 'stick' you."

("...proven fact or just a feeling?")

No, it's a proven fact. I have heard so many things and new girls definitely they take advantage of. They even told a girl to come in on her day off because they hadn't 'stuck' her on her reserve the day before. They 'stuck' me on a flight last week which was 'illegal' and I honestly didn't even bother to go over and say it because I knew it would rebound on me. They took it out on me before."

Blau maintains that the power to command compliance is equivalent to credit, which a man can draw on in the future to obtain various benefits at the disposal of those obliged to him. The unilateral supply of important services establishes this kind of credit and is, therefore, a source of power—a person on whom others are dependent for vital benefit has the power to enforce his demands. He has the option of making demands that the other considers fair or he may lack such restraint and make demands that appear excessive to them thereby arousing feelings of exploitation for having had to render more compliance than the rewards received justify. Social norms define the expectations of subordinates and their evaluations of the superiors' demands. The fair exercise of power gives rise to approval whereas unfair exploitation promotes disapproval [Blau, 1964]. There can be little doubt that the majority of hostesses feel that Roster Control abuse their power and are thereby exploiting the hostesses.

Despite the extent of Roster Control's power over the hostesses, the latter, in their turn, are not without a certain amount of negotiating power. The concept of 'negotiation' recognises that individuals are often placed in situations where rules are not clearly evident, stated or binding and that the rules, at best, serve as general outlines for, rather

than predictors of, actual conduct. As Crozier (1964) points out, rules are an element in the constant conflict between members of organisations. This conflict is characterised by subordinate members attempting to increase or retain their areas of discretion, and hence their organisational power, and by senior members' attempts to reduce the uncertainty caused by this discretion through the creation and imposition of rules. However, the social order of, e.g. the workplace, is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment brought about by either the ultimate threat of force, deprivation, or a postulated harmony of interests, but is something which is subject to continuous negotiation. There may be negotiation about the rules themselves, about the circumstances under which the rules may be said to apply or be stretched or about whether the rules are in fact open to negotiation in the first place.

According to Crozier (*ibid.* p. 192) . . . "it is impossible, whatever the effort, to eliminate all sources of uncertainty within an organisation by multiplying impersonal rules and developing centralisation". Clearly, the uncertainties of delays and bad weather provide the hostess with a peculiarly valuable resource for improving her position because of the bureaucratic routinisation of other organisational features. The very rules that had appeared petty and restrictive can lead to resentment on the part of the hostesses and to, what Gouldner (1964) has labelled, 'bureaucratic sabotage', i.e. "deliberate apathy fused with resentment, in which by the very act of conforming to the letter of the rule, its intention is conscientiously violated". The autonomy of the hostess and the dependence of the airline centres around delays—her power stems from her ability to control uncertainty and to turn the rules to her own advantage. From the hostesses' point of view, they use the rules not so much to determine their behaviour but to achieve their particular priorities or to obstruct Roster Control or management, as shown in the following extract:

"When there are disruptions, the hostess has a certain amount of power, she can refuse or she can go. She does have a choice. It's the one time she has a choice. Most times she doesn't have a choice in what she wants to do, she is totally powerless. But occasionally she does get the opportunity and some girls like the idea of being able to....get an immense kick out of saying 'stuff it, I'm not going to do it'. Sometimes, it might suit them better to go, for example, to New York but it would give them a greater charge to see (the manager) getting into a frenzy. It's about the one and only chance you get to say 'well, this is the time I say 'NO'."

In the context of political conflict, it is the knowledge of the possible moves and their resultant pay-offs which can turn original positions of weakness, or low status and power into ones of greater power of con-

venience. When the hostess achieves a gain in her negotiations (e.g. an extra day off at a later stage if she stays with a delayed flight), or when, through her thorough knowledge of the working conditions, she wins an argument with Roster Control, she sees herself as triumphing over an adversary. Although most of the time the hostess sees herself as just a number, easily replaced by any other, it is in cases of disruptions that her power resides in being 'irreplaceable'. As one hostess related, quite emphatically:

"I think everyone might like to think that they do try and understand everyone's problems or predicaments. Like, we hear about it all the time 'well, look I can't do anything about it. I'm only here doing my job and we have no girls for the flight...' but you do sometimes, okay, see them stuck and you are probably their last resort and your better nature might dictate what you do in that situation but more often than not, you'll just see your predicament and they are asking you to do something you are not legally bound to do and you don't care really if they're up the walls in there. That sort of element has definitely crept in because we have had such a lack of cooperation, if you'd like to call it that, from the company side and such a lack of understanding of the nature of the job."

By becoming an expert on the rostering rules, the hostess is able to define for herself a specific area of proficiency which reduces the threat from Roster Control. With her expertise she gains status vis-a-vis Roster Control and by rigidly following the rules she should be able to remain safe from criticism by her superiors.

However, underlying any action on the part of the hostess is her mistrust of Roster Control and the feeling that they may "make her pay at a later date". Furthermore, although she has power, it is not legitimate power. She is equally insecure in her power position due to threat from others such as the trade union. The trade union is an intervening variable that seeks to regulate this 'power struggle' by acting as the medium through which 'proper relations' are maintained. The trade union committee's insistence that the hostesses adhere strictly to the agreement--or otherwise face disciplinary action--does tend to result in much of the negotiation being carried on 'behind closed doors'. As one hostess pointed out:

"I don't think there is one hostess who can honestly say that she hasn't, at some stage, done something to suit herself, either doing something extra or asking for something and I don't blame them. The trade union gets so annoyed with the girls but because we work such peculiar hours and because we don't get what we want, it's the only way and I have done it."

One of the consequences of the 'informal' negotiation between hos-

resses and Roster Control is that it operates as a disintegrating force amongst the hostesses themselves and results in intra-group conflict. The following quotation illustrates one of the dominant suspicions held by hostesses, that it, that there is an active trading system in operation with backhanders being given, such as, duty free liquor, in return for favourable flight duties.

"I would love to know the extent of the racket with Roster Control. I feel that there must be a fair amount. I've never been one who has brought in half bottles for anyone and I know it goes on and I really feel that is unfair and I think the girls must benefit as a result. They must; they are obviously friends with Roster Control. They have done me favours through normal channels and I have often wondered should I send in a half bottle but I don't want to feel I'm getting involved in that racket. I would feel like doing it as a form of thanks but at the same time you shouldn't really have to be rewarding them."

As Blau points out, the performance of many duties in formal organisations entails indirect exchange. Supervisors and other personnel have the duty of providing assistance to employees in return for which they are compensated by the organisation rather than by these employees. These personnel are expected to refrain from engaging in exchange transactions directly with the employee—"they must, of course, not accept bribes or graft and neither must they reward clients with more favourable treatment for expressions of gratitude and appreciation lest impartial service to all clients in conformity with official procedures suffer...The absence of exchange transactions with clients is a prerequisite of bureaucratic or professional detachment toward them" (Blau, *op.cit.* P.330). The very fact that there are suspicions that staff in Roster Control receive gifts from hostesses, of course, affects the hostesses' perception of the whole operation of the rostering system and degree of impartiality involved in the designating of crew to cover flights. Irrespective of its position in the hierarchy, Roster Control is seen as the 'servant of the people' administering what the hostesses consider to be their right. However, Roster Control are seen to introduce what are considered to be inappropriate attitudes and relationships and the hostesses feel powerless in that they feel they are unable to turn to other agencies.

Discussion

The main weakness in the relationship between the hostess and the organisation may reside in the fact that ideally, because of the unstructured nature of her work situation, the hostess' job is one that calls for a high-trust relationship between the hostess and management whereas the reality would indicate the existence of a low-trust relationship because of the informal control exercised by organisation members, in

particular, Roster Control. Fox (1971) maintains that a high-trust relationship is characterised as one in which the participants share certain ends or values, bear toward each other a diffuse sense of long-term obligations, offer each other spontaneous support without narrowly calculating the cost or anticipating any equivalent short-term reciprocation, communicate freely and honestly, and are ready to repose their fortunes in each other's hands and give each other the benefit of any doubt that may arise with respect to goodwill or motivation. On the other hand, a low-trust relationship is one in which the participants have divergent ends or values, entertain specific expectations which have to be reciprocated through a precisely balanced exchange in the short term, calculate carefully the costs and anticipated benefits of any concession, restrict and screen communications in their own separate interest and seek to minimize dependence on each other's discretion and are quick to suspect and invoke sanctions against illwill or default on obligations. Fox goes on to point out that the low-trust syndrome imposes limitations on human collaboration, the severity of these will vary with the task, technology and aspirations of the participants, but no system of interdependence can be other than impeded in some measure by these wary arm's length relations between superordinates and subordinates.

The heightened activity of the Union Committee in recent time, together with the hostesses' reluctance to work outside the terms of her agreement, are all perceived by management as evidence of a new militancy amongst hostesses, as demonstrated in the following responses by senior managers:

"Yes, the hostesses do constitute a problem within the company. They are generally now seen to be overly conscious of their rights by virtue of union contracts etc. They seem extremely reluctant to give that extra effort which I believe at one time would have been willingly offered. Many of them seem to look for opportunities to be difficult such as stacking for the flimsiest of excuses, claiming rights which have subsequently been proven to be non-existent. This creates a problem in a number of ways but especially at airports where staff frequently go without meal breaks and work many hours over the normal time just to get the job done. It is discouraging for them to become aware that hostesses are prepared to create enormous inconvenience for passengers and costs to the company—sometimes for trivial reasons."

"Hostesses now appear to rely solely on the terms of their union contract rather than on the needs of the passengers to get to their destinations. All delays are now fraught with the danger that the hostesses may pull 'crew hours'"

However, as the hostesses see it, their increased reliance on the 'rule book' is partly a reaction by them to what they consider to be an abuse of privilege by those in power positions. The unstructured nature of the hostess' work and the wide scope and pervasiveness of the organisation means that the hostess is very dependent on various units within the airline. There is continual conflict in society and in organisations over what resources can be legitimately used in which way and for what. Compliance with power is not only a matter of being dependent and having little choice but is also affected by whether that power is felt to be rightfully exercised. In the hostess' case there is a widespread belief that the organisation departments which have power over her do not operate within legitimate bounds and, in an effort to overcome such abuses, hostesses are demanding that relationships should be placed within a bureaucratic context.

In general terms, the hostesses, as a group, are oriented toward secondary norms of impersonality when it comes to roster allocations, annual leave, special flights and so on. The exercise of power based on personal whims and preferences causes resentment whereas the exercise of authority based on the application of a set of rules or procedures which applies to all has a semblance of fairness and equity which is more acceptable. Any failure to conform to these norms arouses antagonism from those hostesses who have identified themselves with the legitimacy of these rules. Hence, the substitution of personal for impersonal treatment within the structure is met with widespread disapproval and is characterised by such epithets as 'favouritism'. However, this is not to deny the fact that the hostesses who are convinced of the 'special features' of their own problems often object to such categorical treatment. Thus, in relations between the hostess and her role set, one structural source of conflict is the pressure for formal and impersonal treatment when individual personalised consideration may be desired by the individual hostess. Such a situation contributes in an important way to a sense of powerlessness— "the idea that 'you can't beat the system' expresses the impotence of people confronted by a rationalized and impersonal system of social control" [Beynon and Blackburn, 1971]. While it is frequently presumed that a shift from a hierarchically structured or 'mechanistic' type of work organisation to one portraying characteristics of 'organic' systems will lead to increased employee satisfaction, it should be remembered that there are a number of problems inherent in such a work organisation and, in the case of the hostesses, we have a situation where the workers themselves are seeking the introduction of bureaucratic elements into a system that has tended toward non-bureaucratic principles [Burns and Stalker, 1961].

Conclusions

By noting above the ways in which actual events and actions might differ from the official formal prescriptions and rules, we are drawing attention to the importance of informal factors and sub-cultural norms. However, it should not be presumed that the official rules and prescriptions are irrelevant and insignificant. Clearly, they are not. In conclusion, it must be pointed out that, in relative terms, the hostess' power is slight when compared with the overall power exercised by Roster Control over their lives, and, therefore, the official rules and procedures cannot be overlooked. We must not forget the rational side of the organisation and the series of social controls that prevent people from taking too much advantage of their own strategic situation. No organisation could survive if it was run solely by individual and clique backdoor deals. Roster Control's influence over the hostess' life results in a situation where they literally represent the company for her. In the normal course of events the hostess has little interaction with the different areas of the organisation and her perception of the organisation can be affected by the treatment she receives from Roster Control. Her overall view of the 'company' could aptly be described in Sofer's words--

Insofar as the company is a non-personal object, what is it like? One impression is that it is an impersonal, cold, financial calculating machine. More commonly it is represented as an object difficult to move or impinge on; it does not respond to the pressure one tries to exert on it. It is a more or less immovable object, rigid, fixed, intractable. It lacks feelings; does not listen to reason, does not keep to promises, behaves inconsistently, giving and taking according to its own laws...(Sofer, 1970).

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