

American Airlines Empowers Leaders With Transformational Leadership Development Programs From Assess Systems



One of the largest airlines in the world, American Airlines has more than 900 aircraft in the American Airlines, American Eagle® and AmericanConnection® combined fleets. American Airlines offers more than 3,600 flights each day, serving 250 cities across 50 countries. The company also works toward global collaboration among airlines as a founding member of oneworld® Alliance.

American Airlines' progressive stance is not only reflected in its cooperative efforts with other airlines, but also in its leadership approach. Without strong, motivational leaders, American cannot deliver the high-quality customer experience that passengers expect. Therefore, American Airlines has placed a high priority on leadership development.

Need for the Identification and Development of Upcoming, Capable Leaders

American Airlines had employed an informal leadership development model since 2001, but by 2007 it was clear that a more intentional approach was required. Two related issues had emerged: many leaders would retire in the next decade, and quick action was needed to develop capable leaders to step in.

"It was a huge concern," said William Mitchell, managing director of Leadership Planning and Performance, who took his role as head of American Airlines' leader development and talent management group in 2007. "Most of our managing directors have been with the company 15 to 25 years. Groups such as the Airport Services organization were concerned about building a suitable bench to fill director roles as well as manager roles below director. Likewise, those managers needed to develop frontline people with leadership potential who would be ready to fill front-manager and supervisor roles."

Solution: Leadership Development Starting With Managing Directors

Assess Systems had been chosen earlier to provide employee selection assessments, so American Airlines had already outlined its job competencies and gained a license for leadership content. The airline evaluated **Assess Systems'** two-day Leading Leaders workshop. "I've seen leadership development programs that were so complicated, complex and involved, I thought, 'We can't do that.' When I saw **Assess Systems'** curriculum, I thought, 'This is it. This is what we need right now,'" William said.

Due to their role, the managing directors — about 200 in all — were first in line for development. **Assess Systems** tailored the workshop to provide new and compelling material that fit American Airlines' philosophy, used the company language and addressed industry challenges.

"We brought in some folks for a beta class. They loved it," said William. "**Assess Systems** adjusted the workshop to meet our needs and also selected coaches who would have a good understanding of our people and could easily relate to them. We appreciated the customization."

The managing directors were so pleased that 100 percent indicated they would recommend the workshop to others. “The directors asked two questions,” William said. “‘When can my managers go through this?’ and, ‘When can my boss go through this?’”

The LIFT Program: Workshops for 1,000 Leaders in Four Months

The workshop’s success soon led American Airlines to address the Airport Services group’s dilemma. Airport frontline customer service managers, who oversee ticket agents, baggage clerks and so on, had learned to perform job functions, not lead. “We had so severely cut leadership development in difficult financial times that leaders were unprepared,” said Cheryl Harris, Ph.D., organization development consulting manager for Airport Services and a member of William’s group. “Without investing in these leaders, there was no way to turn it around.”

After talking with William’s group, airport services executive leadership — fully engaged and committed to the effort — made a significant investment during austere times. The leaders chose a cascading solution by giving the workshop first to the airports’ general managers, then to the frontline managers reporting to them. Partnering effectively with Cheryl’s team, **Assess Systems** created a two-day assessment-based leadership workshop called Leadership: Improving the Future Together (LIFT). It was similar to the managing directors’ program — but to effect rapid organizational change, this workshop would be administered to more than 1,000 leaders across six cities in four months!

“When you look at the sheer numbers and the timeframe, we couldn’t have done it in-house. We wanted one-on-one coaching and quality, so we weren’t going to go to just any training organization. **Assess Systems** had the expertise and we trusted their people, so we felt good putting them in front of our managers,” Cheryl said. “Often other consultants try to just sell me what they’re doing, but the people at **Assess Systems** have always worked with me. It’s not been, ‘Let me sell you this. I know what I’m doing and you don’t.’ It is very much a partnership mentality — a collaboration mentality.”

High Engagement and Dramatic Success

Assess Systems provided 25 coaches and 8 facilitators for LIFT. An American Airlines vice president or managing director opened and closed each workshop. After the general managers finished the sessions, high-potentials were selected as keynote speakers for the remaining 800-plus frontline manager workshops. “We combined leadership development and engagement so it became more sustainable,” said Cheryl. “A side benefit was that those leaders got coaching on how to talk in front of groups.”

All 1,000-plus managers took LIFT in March through June of 2010. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The average rating was 4.7 on scale of 1 to 5, and 100 percent said they’d recommend the workshop to others. “People were so grateful the company invested in them,” Cheryl said.

Personal Coaches, Action Plans and Other Workshop Highlights

The 20 to 25 people in each workshop sit four to six at a table. Each table has a personal coach selected from **Assess Systems**’ broad network of coaches and psychologists, so the coach-to-individual ratio is excellent. The coaches guide conversations, encourage interactions and discussions, challenge participants on certain topics, help explain assessment results and facilitate peer coaching. Before the workshop, each participant takes a personality assessment based on the airline’s specified job competencies as well as **Assess 360**, the 360^o evaluation designed by **Assess Systems**.

The first day focuses on the leaders, leadership principles and feedback on the assessments and 360s. “**Assess Systems** made a lot of wise choices,” William commented. “The worst thing you can do with people who’ve done a 360 and personality assessment is just give them their report. **Assess Systems** did a good job of leading people to the point where they could accept their feedback and then explaining what was in the report.” Participants also receive a one-on-one, 45-minute coaching session. According to Cheryl, “Integrating the 360 and personality

assessment has a synergistic effect. When you add the coach to help participants understand things in terms of their development, it's a really nice combination. We had consistent feedback from the airport services managers that every single coach was really good."

The second day centers around the leader's team, covering how to engage, motivate and coach direct reports and provide feedback appropriately. When the day ends, each participant has a written action philosophy.

Effective Follow-up and Built-in Sustainability

"The LIFT participants' take-away was, 'There are lots of good things I see in myself and others see in me, but here are a few things I need to address.' That to me is worth its weight in gold," William said.

The workshop doesn't end with day two, because follow-up coaching occurs a few weeks later. "We're about building in sustainability," said Cheryl. "Senior leaders continued communications, both in writing and in meetings." The airline also created LIFT II, a one-day class led by in-house leaders.

Open Classes and a Third-Party Study Revealing a 631-Percent ROI

American Airlines initiated a monthly open class called Leading Others for managers immediately below the managing director level. In a co-coaching arrangement, **Assess Systems** facilitates and provides most of the coaches, and American Airlines supplies an internal coach. The open classes gave rise to the airline's participation in the Return on Leadership Development (ROLD) study, which estimates the return on investment (ROI) for a company's leadership programs and benchmarks it against other organizations.

The ROLD results arrived in June 2011. "Our leadership program ROI was 631 percent. It was a big ROI, but all I wanted to see in the ROI was that we were getting our money's worth — and the ROLD report validated that," William stated. "We'll be in a position soon of hiring new people and replacing people who are retiring. The leadership workshops fit nicely into that framework."

Impressive Long-Term Partnership

American Airlines, a forward-thinking organization that knows the value of investing in its people, and **Assess Systems**, a trusted partner committed to the airline's success, is clearly a winning combination. "We have people who've been leaders for 20 or 25 years. Having worked with **Assess Systems**, it's more likely these leaders will have a better eye to develop people under them and to hire good people — good leaders who will be effective in the role," said William. "Several years ago we had bonus-sharing for employees but didn't give the bonus to directors and officers. During a leadership workshop, one director said, 'William, I would rather have this investment in me than that \$800 check.' That was really gratifying."

Assess Systems completed a class for 200 Flight Services Department managers in 2011, and there is more on the horizon. "I've always admired **Assess Systems**," said Cheryl. "I'm very selective when assembling a team, especially when I have to make a case for spending money on an outside group. We couldn't have done LIFT without a trusted partner, and that's what **Assess Systems** was for us. I really like collaborating with the people. I'm a bit of a cheerleader for them."

William plans to continue the partnership. "They're not trainers and coaches with a lot of rah-rah. They just bring a good, caring attitude and concern for the leaders," he said. "They're great people and good at what they do. They proved their metal in the early classes, and we've re-upped with them every year."

