

Own your problems

Harry S. Truman

- **“The Buck Stops Here”**
- **Challenges**
 - **The threat of communism**
 - **Restoring the economy after the war**
 - **Worker strikes**



Last summer, I boarded a flight from Dallas/Ft. Worth to Seattle. I had priority boarding so I was among the first passengers on the plane. Normally this is a good thing but not in this instance because the plane was stifflingly hot.

I asked a flight attendant, “It’s very hot inside the plane; has the air conditioning been turned on?” (I have been on flights where the answer to this question was “no”; so I thought I’d start with the obvious.) The attendant basically ignored me.

Five minutes later, I crawled upstream to the front of the airplane (passengers were still boarding), when another flight attendant stopped me. Our conversation went something like this:

- She said, “Sir, may I help you?”
- I said, “It’s very hot inside the plane; has the captain turned on the air conditioning?”
- She said, “The air conditioning is not working 100%.”
- I said, “Ma’m, the air conditioning is not working 20%.”
- She said, “Yes, it is warm.”
- I said, “Why is that?”
- She said, “The supplemental ground AC unit is not working. When possible, we’ll start the engines and start the AC.”
- I said, “Well, that explains that. Does the captain know all of this?”

- She said, "I'll make sure he does."

Five minutes later, the captain, in what sounded to me like a cheerful but rather flippant and patronizing tone of voice said over the intercom, "Well good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for joining us on this flight to Seattle. This is captain Snotnose (not his real name). Sorry about the temperature, yeah...we're having some issues, should be okay once we're in the air. Thanks for your patience."

I understand that mechanical things break. I wasn't upset at that. But it bothered me that no one took ownership of the problem, and only after someone (me) complained was an explanation given.

Here's my advice:

1. When something goes wrong on your watch, don't ignore it, hide it, or minimize it—own it. (The AC is not working 100%?)
2. Don't blame someone else even though someone else may be complicit. (The ground crew may have forgotten to service the supplemental AC unit, but I'm on *your* plane.)
3. Don't use the phrase, "Thank you for your patience." (I was not patient about this issue. That comment is presumptuous and dismissive and it makes things worse.)
4. As soon as there's a problem, acknowledge it to those affected. Don't wait until they complain. (We were all perspiring; the problem was evident.)
5. Explain why the problem is happening; a good explanation won't fix the problem but it will lessen frustration.
6. When possible, offer some type of compensation, even if it is token. (The stewardess did offer me a cup of ice but I declined; because everyone was suffering from the heat, everyone should be offered a reprieve.)
7. Be empathetic. During the plane incident, a simple, "Sir, I'm very sorry about the temperature issue; I know it's very discomforting." would have helped ameliorate the tension.
8. Don't hesitate to apologize.

U.S. President Harry S. Truman had a sign on his desk that said, *The buck stops here*. He didn't coin the phrase, but he did popularize it.

The saying is derived from the expression *passing the buck*, common in poker gameplay. It came to mean "passing blame" or absolving oneself of responsibility or concern by denying authority or jurisdiction over a given matter.

The phrase means that no excuses will be made. The speaker is taking full responsibility for what is happening rather than passing on the responsibility.

In life and leadership, we must own our problems. The buck stops with us.