

## Bad People or a Bad Process?

Recently, I encountered an amazing scene at London's Heathrow Airport. While checking in for my flight on a Monday morning, I found myself in a nightmare line stretching around the corner from the check-in counter and far down the hall.

After standing in the line for about 45 minutes, I finally advanced to the corner just in time to see passengers ahead of me taking out their frustration. There were six check-in counters but only one agent was on duty to perform check-ins. So several passengers jumped over the counter and started handing out the empty agent chairs to the passengers standing in line so they could sit down while waiting. The single agent on duty immediately stopped checking in passengers to prevent this irregular action. A tug-of-war ensued over one of the chairs and, after losing the battle, the agent retreated to his desk to call the police. To complete the scene, imagine loud shouting in many languages as a group of heavily armed security guards approached.

I know a “terminal” mess when I see one and broke ranks at that point to search for the “I’m going to miss my plane” alternative check-in path that seems to exist in all airports these days. (Think of this as simply another form of rework.)

When I found it—in a far corner of the terminal—and talked with the agents, I discovered that scenes of this sort happen every Monday morning and Friday evening—the periods of highest travel volume—when “some passengers just go crazy.” In their minds it was a clear case of “bad passengers.”

As I reflected on this experience, I realized that we encounter situations of this sort in life all of the time. Every day we are involved in a series of processes—getting our computers and software to work, taking our cars in for repair, going to the doctor, getting our work done at an office or in a production facility—whose steps must be performed properly in the proper sequence to get the results we seek. For example, at the airport, staff scheduling and flight departures must be carefully synchronized with the pattern of passenger demand to create a smooth check-in process. Otherwise some variant of the scene I witnessed is pretty much inevitable.

What I find fascinating is that when good people (that’s you and me) are put in a bad process, we often become “bad” like the process—mean-spirited, foul-mouthed, and even violent. Ask everyone involved what the problem is, and they are very likely to blame everyone else—in this case, the crazy passengers, the petty bureaucrat check-in agent, the authoritarian security force, the tight-fisted airline—rather than step back and think about the process itself and how it could be improved.

The widespread existence of bad processes in every area of life is actually a great opportunity for lean thinkers. We should be leading the way in showing how to rethink every process producing “bad” people along with poor results. I’m truly excited by the prospect for the Lean Community to move ahead rapidly down this path, going far beyond our starting point in the factory to introduce rigorous process thinking across society.

In the meantime, I hope you will encounter good processes full of good people. Failing that, I hope you will step back (probably while waiting in a queue), seize the opportunity to sharpen your lean thinking, and envision ways to improve any bad processes along your path.

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If bad processes create bad employees (and crazy customers, too), it turns out that a bad process for process improvement can create more fault-finding and bad employees of a different sort. The next essay explores why this happens far more frequently than many lean thinkers seem to realize, and proposes a way to resolve the problem.