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An interview with Porter Airlines' Robert J. Deluce



PORTER AIRLINES, President and CEO, Robert J. Deluce, credits exceptional customer service through a dedicated team as critical to being one of Canada's great success stories. With a vision to bring back features from the golden age of air travel, Robert's mission was to enhance the traveller's experience in every aspect. Game changers in their own right, Porter now leads an initiative to bridge the diversity gap in the industry. Boyden's Kevin Gormely, sat down with Robert to talk leadership, diversity, talent, and how Porter is expanding as a global player.

BOYDEN: Porter recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary. Over that period, Porter has become known as one of the most innovative airlines in the industry. What was your vision and how has it been realized?

ROBERT: 10 years has gone by very quickly. We set out to change the way airlines were regarded and how aviation was viewed. To some extent, we wanted to bring it back to a point where passengers looked forward to travelling. It has taken a lot of attention to detail and it's been a lot of fun.

We now have 1,400 team members and everyone has played a role. As CEO, you have to be mindful of all aspects of business and detail, but it is not something you can do

by yourself. It requires everyone's involvement as a team.

BOYDEN: How would you define the differentiators that have contributed to success?

ROBERT: We built the airline with the idea of speed, convenience, and service, but today more than anything the service aspect of the business is what really defines us. Everything we do is designed to enhance the travel experience. The lounges and amenities on board are a throwback to earlier times, while also using technology to further enhance the passenger experience.

Certainly all of these things, including our unique location at Billy Bishop Airport, work in tandem to give passengers a sense of value.

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“Being good to your word and following through is fundamental to success.”

BOYDEN: How does this translate into your leadership style?

ROBERT: I like to get out on aircraft and go to airports. I like to meet and greet passengers and our own team members. We established some core values here that we all live by: everybody being valued as a person. Having a passion for it as well. What makes you get up, stay late and follow-up? At the end of day, you really shouldn't be in anything you're not passionate about.

BOYDEN: This is a tough competitive business. Political challenges, regulatory hurdles, talent management. What do you think drives your team?

ROBERT: You come to realize no matter what happens you have to have a really good team on board. You need everyone to have a clear understanding of how they positively contribute. Today is a sunny day, but a day of heavy snow or some other irregularity will happen. We are remembered for how we treat people when they miss a flight or their journey is disrupted by some other issue.

Ensuring your team is empowered to do what has to be done is critical – treating people with respect and dignity is key to our culture and our success. We are essentially a customer service organization and if you don't have happy satisfied customers you don't have much going for you.

BOYDEN: What is unique in the Canadian market for leadership diversity within transportation/aviation?

ROBERT: The aviation industry in general lags behind others. It is an industry that has been male dominated, particularly in certain segments. While this has changed over time, it was pretty much accepted in the past that pilots were male and flight attendants were female.

We have put a lot of attention toward making sure that we make progress. Our “Women Soar at Porter” program was established to bridge that gap in all aspects – pilots, aviation engineers, senior management, and the board of directors. Do we have more work to do? Absolutely. The key is ensuring you get right back to grass-roots, bringing awareness of the industry, and its value as a career option.

BOYDEN: What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

ROBERT: My father always said: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you apply that in customer service, there isn't any situation you find yourself in that can't be dealt with using this core principle. Another would be building credibility, as a corporation and as an individual. Being good to your word and following through. That is pretty fundamental to success.

BOYDEN: Porter recently announced a new partnership with Emirates. Looking ahead, what can we anticipate to hear more about from Porter?

ROBERT: Yes, we have select key partnerships with companies that share our culture and core values and expand options for our customers. We are also working on concepts such as U.S. customs pre-clearance at Billy Bishop Airport. All this will enable us to offer more to our customers.

We feel honoured to be in the top 10 international airlines for Condé Nast *Traveller* and *Travel + Leisure*, but it's humbling at the same time because hard work got us here and we need to continue working at it.

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About the series:

Talent Talks with WXN & Boyden is a feature series highlighting leadership, talent, and diversity discussions with top leaders of today. The series focuses on topics and themes with a purpose to inspire women and our diverse community to lead. Talent Talks also appears on WXN website.

Women's Executive Network (WXN) is a leading organization dedicated to advancement and recognition of women in management, executive, professional, and board roles. For more information about WXN, please visit their website: www.wxnetwork.com

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Author:



Kevin Gormely

Managing Partner

Boyden

kgormely@boyden.com

[@kgormley](https://twitter.com/kgormley) 