

## ***United Airlines: Grounded***

In 2017, United Airlines forcibly removed passenger David Dao from Flight 3411. The airline decided to bump four passengers from the flight in order to fly four United staff members to a connection point. The airline offered passengers \$800 compensation and a seat on a flight the following afternoon. But no one took the offer. Four passengers were then selected by the airline to leave without choice. The fourth passenger selected, Dao, refused to leave the plane, explaining that he was a doctor and had patients to see the next morning. United employees summoned airport security officers who then forcibly removed Dao from his seat. Dao's face slammed into an armrest, and he was dragged off the plane, bleeding. Other passengers captured the scene on their phones and shared the videos online, sparking widespread outrage at United.

Legally, airlines can remove paying customers. When purchasing an airline ticket, customers agree to the rules and conditions of the airline's services. United's boarding priority regulation, for example, states, "If a flight is Oversold, no one may be denied boarding against his/her will until UA or other carrier personnel first ask for volunteers who will give up their reservations willingly in exchange for compensation as determined by UA. If there are not enough volunteers, other Passengers may be denied boarding involuntarily in accordance with UA's boarding priority." Involuntary removal from a flight, however, is rare. In the late 1990s, the share of passengers denied boarding was approximately 1 in 500. In 2016, that decreased to approximately 1 in 1,000; the share of passengers *involuntarily* denied boarding was approximately 6 per 100,000.

Employees on Flight 3411 followed protocol. They explained the circumstances to Dao prior to his removal and, according to Department of Transportation procedures, called airport security. One passenger on the flight noted that two security officers spoke calmly to Dao before a third officer approached aggressively.

After Dao was removed, the four United employees took the vacated seats. Passenger Tyler Bridges reported that the employees were met with jeers, "People were saying you should be ashamed to work for this company." In the following days, some United customers cut up their United credit cards and posted images of their cards online. Company share prices slid on the news of the violent removal, plummeting \$1 billion in market value. At least two of the security officers were fired.



In an internal memo to employees following the incident, United CEO Oscar Munoz stated, “Our employees followed established procedures for dealing with situations like this,” adding, “I want to commend you for continuing to go above and beyond to ensure we fly right. ...I do, however, believe there are lessons we can learn from this experience, and we are taking a close look at the circumstances surrounding this incident.” Munoz promised review of company policies.

Andrew Gilman, chief executive of communications firm CommCore Consulting Group, reflected on the damage this incident can have to both employees and passengers. For employees, “It’s a hard enough job — high stress, tense people, delays — and now you have people who are suspicious of you.” For passengers, “[United] unfortunately disrupted a number of certainties that people tend to rely upon, ...it’s a big trust thing.”

**Concepts:** Legal Rights and Ethical Responsibilities, and Obedience to Authority

**Ethical Insight:**

For both ethical and practical reasons, having the legal right to do something does not necessarily make it ethically appropriate. Legal and ethical rights largely overlap, but not completely. United Airlines may have had the legal right to remove passengers from its planes under certain circumstances. However, having that right did not necessarily make such an action ethically permissible in the case of passenger David Dao.

In addition, while United employees and airport security may have been following protocol, their obedience to authority resulted in physical harm done to Dao as he was forcibly removed. They relinquished their independent ethical judgment in favor of following orders. Their actions caused a backlash against the company, damaged public relations for United, and prompted debate over the legal and ethical treatment of airline passengers.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Does it appear that United Airlines employees acted consistently with the company’s legal rights? Why or why not?
2. Even if United Airlines employees acted within the company’s legal rights, did they act ethically? Why or why not?
3. According to the terms and conditions of the airline’s services, United could legally remove a passenger from a flight, but Dao did not comply with the flight crew’s request before airport security was called in to remove him. Do you think it was ethically permissible for Dao to refuse to follow the flight crew’s request for removal? Why or why not?

4. How did obedience to authority affect each of the parties involved in this situation? Explain from the perspective of the United flight crew, airport security officers, and David Dao.
5. How might the various parties have exercised their own independent ethical judgement and stood up to authority in this situation? What do you think the consequences of doing so would be for each party? Explain from the perspective of the United flight crew, the four crew members taking the seats, and airport security officers.
6. What biases, pressures, or other factors may have affected how the United flight crew and airport security officers engaged with Dao in the way they did? Why do you think this situation escalated?
7. Does it appear that the primary fault lay with United Airlines or with the airport's security officers? If the latter, does that exonerate United Airlines? Do you think the airline was unfairly maligned? Why or why not? What might United have done to avoid, prevent, or ameliorate the security officers' errors?
8. According to Oscar Munoz, United employees "followed established procedures." Does an employee's position in a company hierarchy affect his or her moral responsibility? Why or why not?
9. How might flight crews and airport security officers in situations such as this uphold their duties while treating passengers fairly and without harm? Explain.

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