

First Class Frustration: A Lesson in Leadership (and Airline Shenanigans)

An Unexpected Upgrade (and a Mix-Up)

Leadership often reveals itself in life's unexpected moments—like when you think you're scoring extra legroom but end up in an existential debate at baggage claim.

Carla and I were on a flight from Atlanta to New York, seated separately—her in 10C, me in 12D. Just as we were settling in, the man next to her leaned over with an offer: “Would you like to sit together?”

“That'd be great,” I replied, grateful. We swapped, with Carla taking the middle seat and me the aisle. Moments later, a flight attendant appeared, eyes twinkling like she was about to grant a wish. “Ma'am, you've been upgraded to first class.”

Carla glanced at me. “Should I?”

I gave the classic husband response: “Go for it.” She scooped up her things and disappeared into the land of warm towels and legroom, texting me a breezy, *See you at baggage claim.*

Halfway through the flight, the same flight attendant returned, now looking a little less fairy godmother, a little more ‘I messed up.’ She leaned in. “I need to apologize. That first-class seat was actually meant for you.” Then, as if to soften the blow, she handed me a double gin and tonic. “This is on us.”

Confrontation at Baggage Claim

When we landed, I was ready to let it go—until we got to baggage claim. That's when I spotted the man who had

graciously switched seats with us. He was heading straight for Carla, his expression the human equivalent of a storm cloud.

“There’s a special place in hell for people like you,” he seethed.

Well. That escalated quickly.

Carla gripped my arm. “Ignore him,” she whispered. “Let’s just go.”

We walked a few steps, but the words gnawed at me. His anger wasn’t just about a seat—he felt wronged. I turned back.

“Sir, I’d like to clear something up,” I said, keeping my tone calm. “That upgrade was offered to my wife by the flight attendant. She didn’t know it was meant for someone else. If anyone is at fault, it’s the airline.”

His glare didn’t budge. “I was number one on the list,” he muttered. “That seat was mine.”

And there it was—the missing piece. By offering to switch seats, he had unknowingly lost his upgrade. No wonder he was fuming.

“Then you should have spoken up,” I said gently. “No one would have argued with you. But carrying this anger won’t fix it. Let it go.”

He stared at me, emotions flickering between indignation and something softer. Then, with a curt nod, he turned and walked away.

Back at Carla’s side, I felt relief, frustration, and a lingering sense of irony. A simple act of kindness had turned into an unintended life lesson—one I won’t soon forget.

Leadership Takeaways:

- **Protect What Matters.** Leadership often means standing up for others, even when it's awkward or uncomfortable. Carla didn't deserve that heat, and I wasn't about to let it slide.
- **Empathy Defuses Anger.** The man's frustration wasn't really about Carla—it was about feeling overlooked. Acknowledging that helped shift the tone.
- **How > What.** Having good soft skills or human relations skills doesn't mean you let people run over you, but it takes wisdom to discern when to speak up and when to let it go. I easily get caught up in the moment and let my emotions run wild. But that's not exercising good self-control. How I approached the man mattered more than what I said to him. I wanted to get my point across but ensure that the situation didn't escalate. Responding with calmness and clarity can turn a tense moment into a teaching one (preferably without gin being involved).

Life has a way of throwing pop quizzes at us when we least expect it. The key is to show up with poise, perspective, and—when possible—an extra first-class seat.

Keep Leading,

Preston