

RANK	NAME   TITLE	COMPANY	TYPE OF BUSINESS	REVENUE	EMPLOYEES	
					FT	PT
45	MARNIE WALKER PRESIDENT	Student Express Ltd. Richmond Hill, Ont. studentexpress.org	Provides student transportation	9,740,796	21	250

**STUDENT EXPRESS LTD.**  
Richmond Hill, Ont.  
What it does: Student transportation  
Revenue: \$9.7 million  
President: Marnie Walker

**PROBLEM:** As your company grows, its customer service levels decline

**SOLUTION:** Create an employee task force to identify weaknesses and remedies

"There's zero tolerance for error in our industry," says Marnie Walker, president of Student Express (No. 45), a provider of student transportation. "If a bus is a half-hour late, that's not good enough."

Walker learned this the

hard way. In May 2001, Student Express was struggling to keep up with the volume of calls coming into its charter department, which had grown by 45% in 2000. Employees were stressed out and working too much overtime, and Walker began to receive complaints about declining service levels, particularly late buses.

Before tackling the problem, she surveyed her customers. "In the fall, we were identifying our deficiencies; by December, I knew the issues," she says. The charter department, a team of two front-line order-takers who book day trips, wasn't responding to customers quickly enough and was making too many errors.

Initially, Walker tried changing procedures only within the charter department. When that wasn't enough, she assembled an employee taskforce charged with fixing the problem. The nine-member team, which included drivers, order-takers, dispatchers and even payroll and billing staff, met every two weeks, assessing each step of an order.

It wasn't easy at first. "Everyone was defensive," recalls Walker, despite her repeated assurances that no single person was at fault. She invited each department to treat the others as if they were customers, not co-workers – a strategy she says helped put a new perspective on the interactions.

It took nine months, but the result was changes in process and technology. Walker realigned certain staff responsibilities. For example, the charter department used to take calls from customers who were changing an order; now, if the trip is scheduled within 24 hours of that call, the requests are transferred to dispatch, who have direct contact with drivers. The team also decided it was necessary to expand their order-taking software, for which Walker hired a consultant.

Walker quickly noticed a difference in the volume the company could handle, and when it surveyed customers again, "we were getting a totally different story," she raves. "Customers were delighted."