

The heavy price of failure

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ALL modes of transport are vulnerable to disruption caused by bad weather, human error, or circumstances beyond the control of the operator concerned. But what marks out a good operator from a bad one, is the ability to deal with problems swiftly and efficiently to mitigate the effects of the disruption, to communicate effectively with both staff and customers, and to get the passengers or goods to their final destination safely and with as little delay as possible. According to the independent report into the failure of five Eurostar trains in the Channel Tunnel on December 18-19, Eurostar failed on all counts.

The findings of the report raise some key issues concerning how to avoid disruption in the first place and how to deal with it when it occurs. Our analysis of the report explains what went wrong and what steps need to be taken to prevent a similar occurrence in the future.

More than 2000 passengers were trapped on the failed trains for several hours in very unpleasant conditions and many more were severely delayed on following trains. Only four trains out of the scheduled 45 services ran on December 19. About 90,000 passengers were affected by the ensuing cancellation of Eurostar services on December 20 and 21. The scale of the incident was big enough to attract the attention of both the British and French governments, who instigated the independent inquiry; itself a highly unusual step.

The inquiry highlights that the preparation of the Eurostar fleet for winter was woefully inadequate in terms of the measures undertaken, with some trains not being treated at all. Even more worrying, the report says that routine maintenance was insufficient.

The fact that Eurostar has only one type of train at its disposal should spur it to make every effort to ensure a high level of reliability. Was Eurostar trying to save money by not carrying out adequate winterisation of its trains or has it become complacent? There is always a danger of complacency or even arrogance when you become the dominant player in the market - Eurostar has more than 65% of the London - Paris/Brussels air-rail market.

If Eurostar was trying to save money by only carrying out cursory winterisation measures, then the plan has backfired spectacularly. Eurostar has had to pay out £10 million in compensation to passengers affected by the disruption, and has agreed to spend another £18 million to put things right. This is in addition to the £12 million it had already committed prior to the incident to improve communications.

Eurostar only recently reported encouraging traffic figures for 2009 which showed growth on both routes despite the recession. But this growth could now be jeopardised through the highly-public failure of its services. Many people will now think twice before choosing Eurostar, and some will probably never set foot on a Eurostar train again. Eurostar faces a tough battle to improve its image and restore trust in its reputation.

Eurostar has recorded excellent levels of punctuality since the opening of High Speed One between London and the Channel Tunnel which makes this all the more regrettable. It takes a long time to build up a reputation as good as that enjoyed by Eurostar before December, but only moments to destroy it.

All large public transport operators find it difficult to react quickly when things go wrong because of the scale of the operation both in terms of size and geographical spread and the difficulty in communicating quickly with staff on the ground. This is why it is vital to have well-thought-through and well-rehearsed contingency plans which can swing into

action at a moment's notice. But in order for such plans to succeed, staff must be well trained. It appears that Eurostar lacks any form of contingency planning and it has failed to train staff sufficiently to deal with a serious disruption.

While Eurostar did try to arrange some alternative transport by bus or air, the majority of passengers were left to their own devices.

It is totally unacceptable for an operator with such a dominant position in the market to simply shut up shop when things get tough and leave passengers to make alternative travel arrangements for several days, especially in the run up to the busy Christmas holiday period when Eurostar was due to carry about 30,000 passengers a day. All operators have a duty to get their customers to their final destination whenever possible.

Eurostar needs to develop much closer relationships with other operators, such as parallel railways like Southeastern, which is now operating on High Speed One between London, Ashford and the Channel ports, ferry and bus companies, and even airlines, so that it can call on their assistance in the event of major disruption to its own services. This can be a reciprocal arrangement whereby Eurostar will provide assistance to these operators when their services are disrupted.

Eurostar also needs to become a far more flexible operation with a can-do attitude to dealing with disruption. This means not only developing a closer working relationship with other parts of the railway industry, such as Eurotunnel, track authorities and operators, but also with agencies such as the police and immigration authorities, so that everyone is aware of the need to be flexible in times of disruption with the objective of helping rather than hindering the recovery. The report highlights instances of where other organisations exacerbated the delay to Eurostar passengers by heavy-handed and unthinking treatment of them.

Eurostar will finally become a stand-alone company next month. This is an excellent opportunity for it to reassess its maintenance, operating, and planning procedures. Or is it now time for a competitor to enter the cross-Channel rail market so that passengers are not dependent on one operator and have a real choice?