

Korean Air: Surviving COVID-19 by Pivoting to Cargo

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Abstract. It was 2019 and COVID-19, the pandemic, had paralyzed the global airline industry. Airports stood deserted, international borders slammed shut, and passenger flights, the lifeblood of Korean Air, came to a screeching halt. Overnight, most flights were grounded, turning bustling runways into vast parking lots of idle planes. For the airline industry, it was a financial freefall. That's when Walter Cho, CEO of Korean Air and his team turned their eyes to cargo. Korean Air had a fleet of 23 dedicated freighters that were running to capacity. With passenger flights globally curtailed, unfulfilled cargo demand was increasing. The decision for Korean Air to strategically, start using its idle passenger aircraft for cargo-only flights is the subject of the case. But how many? And where: loading into the belly holds, the overhead bins, cargo seat bags or converting passenger planes into 'freighters' by removing all seats. And all the risks involved.

Keywords: airline industry, Covid pandemic, crisis management, innovative decisions, leadership

Current Situation

Walter Cho closed the door to his hotel room and set down his bag and laptop. This small room would be home for the next two weeks - a precaution to protect his family after returning from Wuhan. Knowing he couldn't afford to pause work during quarantine, he had packed everything he needed to lead the airline remotely. His body ached with exhaustion, but beneath the fatigue, there was pride (see **Exhibit 1** next page). Bringing fellow Koreans home had been the right thing to do (see **Exhibit 2** next page). And more than anything, Walter felt deeply grateful to the crew members who had volunteered to stand beside him.

Just weeks earlier, fear had swept across the globe. As this unknown disease spread beyond China, countries began closing their borders, and South Koreans living in Wuhan grew desperate to return home. Requests for evacuation poured in from the Korean embassy and consulates in China, and soon, the Korean government formally reached out to Walter, asking Korean Air to provide aircraft for emergency repatriation flights.

As the CEO of South Korea's flag carrier, Walter didn't hesitate. His answer was yes. But saying yes was the easy part. The real challenge lay ahead would any pilots or cabin crew actually volunteer to fly straight into the epicenter of the outbreak?

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Walter braced for resistance. These flights meant direct contact with Wuhan residents, at a time when no one fully understood the virus or how it spread. But to his surprise, and deep gratitude, volunteers stepped forward almost immediately. Senior leaders from Korean Air's labor unions led the way, saying they would personally crew the flights. Their experience would be essential if unexpected situations arose mid-mission. In the end, more than ten senior union members stepped up, showing remarkable courage and solidarity.

Exhibit 1: Walter Cho Briefed on Safety Measures Aboard Wuhan Charter Flight



Source: Korean Airline

Exhibit 2: South Korean Officials and Passengers Disembark



Source: Agence France-Presse (AFP)