

FEATURE ARTICLE

Where Were You on the Morning of September 11th?

Written by By James Lee, Executive Editor
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"Is there anything else we should be doing, boss?"

"Yeah, hug your kids."

John Selevitch, Contributing Editor, LP Magazine

I was living in Los Angeles working as the divisional director of LP for Staples, so we were three hours behind the rest of the country that morning. Then, as now, I am a creature of habit. I would wake up at 5:30 a.m., make a pot of coffee, walk the dog, turn on the local news, jump in the shower, get dressed, and fight my way through LA traffic to my office in Santa Ana. I remember thinking as the TV came on around 6:00, seeing Katie Couric and Matt Lauer instead of my local news people, "This can't be good."

After that got my attention, I listened to Katie and Matt speculate how a "small plane" could have hit the north tower about 15 minutes earlier. Watching live video of the smoldering tower, I watched in absolute horror, as no doubt millions of others would, while what would later be identified as United Airlines flight 175, slammed into the south tower. The rest of that day is a blur of phone calls, emails, news accounts, shock, and sadness.

From a work perspective, our first priority was to account for all traveling field personnel. After my own team, we went through other functions, including HR, regional vice presidents, district managers, and others. A process that should have taken 15 minutes max, took an agonizing three hours. Never again. Every position I have held since then always has a process in place to know who's traveling and where.

From my own perspective, I have always felt thankful. The Staples corporate headquarters is located outside of Boston, and American flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles, the first plane to hit the tower, was my flight of choice each time I headed home. It usually left late, as it did that morning, but it was seldom full, so I usually got upgraded. Thinking about that always leads me to remember one of the last instructions I gave that day. One of my regionals asked, "Is there anything else we should be doing, boss?" I said, "Yeah, hug your kids."

More Alert and with a "What If" Attitude

Gene Smith, President, Loss Prevention Foundation

On the morning of September 11th, I was in my office at Downing & Downing in Mentor, Ohio, talking on the phone as usual. I do not recall who I was talking to, but that person told me that they just heard that a plane had crashed into one of the twin towers. I hung up the phone, walked into the conference room, and turned on the television only to then watch in awe as the second plane hit. Just before the second plane arrived, the rest of the staff and I were discussing that we hoped the first plane was an accident. When the second plane hit, we knew instantly it was no accident. I distinctly remember getting the feeling that what I was watching was something that was going to lead to something much larger than just two planes hitting the towers. I remember wondering if the towers could survive such a direct hit and subsequent fire. I had flashbacks of having taken a dozen or more trips to the top to show visitors the observation deck. I remembered how tall they really were and how my young son had taken a picture looking straight up of the tower front. At the time I thought that was a wasted photo, but now I cherish that picture more than ever. I also recalled how I had dinner once in the Windows of the World with my ADT national account reps, Bill Morris and Tony DeSefano. It was cloudy that day and we were above the clouds. I also remembered watching a helicopter fly by below us...then in absolute disbelief, I was brought back to reality when the first tower fell. We were stunned! Then all we could say was "Oh my god!" It is one of those times you really don't want to believe is real. Similar to watching the news reports about President Kennedy's assassination—shock and disbelief. I started thinking about how many people were on those planes and how many people were still in the tower, and then before my eyes the second one went down. All you could do was think of the thousands of families and how they were watching in horror as their loved ones were perishing before their eyes.

Since 9/11, I personally have become much more cautious when flying or when I am around large groups of people like at sporting events. I spend more time trying to be more alert and with a "what if" attitude. Every time I travel I think about how much more of a hassle it is now than before 9/11. I am always monitoring my surroundings and trying to be aware of suspicious people. Who thought it would ever have happened? It could happen again. I feel my personal freedom has been restricted. Going across the border to Canada and returning was like driving to another state. Now I feel instead of going to a good neighbor, I am truly going to a foreign country. Corporate America has become much more focused on the potential of a crisis or business interruption due to a terrorist attack. I remember doing bomb-threat planning in my days in retail loss prevention, but it was not near the extent that is done today. It has clearly become more important to every company in America. It even became a major part of our LP certification program.