

Challenge accepted:

Strategies to ace corporate travel innovation

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Before beginning our exploration, it's important to address a common concern of the modern corporate travel manager: that there always seems to be a new term to memorise, a new concept to master, or a new strategy to implement. Some days it may feel like you're spinning a roulette board, unsure of what new trend or buzzword you'll land on that day.

You don't need this guide to tell you that the role of the travel manager is evolving, that the necessary skillset to succeed needs to adapt to all the changes happening across the industry. In other words - you don't need it to tell you how to do your job. But what this guide can provide you with is perspective on how to face the newest changes and innovations in corporate travel, all while helping you achieve your goals and look good while doing it.

Welcome, challenger.
Let's get started.



What is a challenger mindset?

Much like many leaps made in corporate travel, a challenger mindset is a concept taken from the brand to consumer (B2C) handbook. Let's first take a look at how enterprise brand strategists are positioning it:



“A challenger brand is a brand that dares to make changes that other brands cannot or will not make. A challenger brand takes on seemingly impossible obstacles. A challenger brand is provocative in its purpose and promise. A challenger brand disputes current beliefs. A challenger brand opposes the existing states of affairs, the marketplace, landscape, or business category in which a brand operates. A challenger brand is competitive, aggressive, confident, and exciting.”

SOURCE: BRANDING STRATEGY INSIDER

It's easy to acknowledge that to travel managers, most of this doesn't sound relevant...at least at face value.

But let's break it down line-by-line.

01 A challenger dares to make changes that others cannot or will not make.
Corporate travel translation:
You don't need to manage your travel policy a certain way just because "that's the way it's always been done."

02 A challenger takes on seemingly impossible obstacles.
Corporate travel translation:
It's easy to keep your travel policy status quo, but you'll struggle to make positive change or improvements that way.

03 A challenger is provocative in its purpose and promise. A challenger disputes current beliefs.
Corporate travel translation:
You know the kind of program you want to run. Lean into these goals (or aspirations) to aid in reimagining your program's true potential.

04 A challenger opposes the existing states of affairs, the marketplace, landscape, or business category in which a brand operates.
Corporate travel translation:
You have the power to take your travel program to new places via policies and procedures that leave antiquated models and expectations in the past.

05 A challenger is competitive, aggressive, confident, and exciting.
Corporate travel translation:
In many ways, your travel program is your legacy. Make your mark by trying new things and influencing change for years to come.



When you correctly adopt a challenger mindset, you can make a lasting impact on your overall travel program operations and performance, impressing both your stakeholders and travellers alike.

Here are some benefits:



Build travel program resilience

Create a policy that can rise to the occasion, no matter what the world throws at it, and no matter how the corporate travel industry changes.



Create happy travellers

A happy corporate traveller feels empowered with their decision making and satisfied that their employer is making investments toward their wellness.



Enable ROI

Travel managers that reimagine their approach to program operations and traveller experience usually find it easier to communicate value.



Establish transparent reporting

Taking a fresh look at your program will lead you to finding new ways to crunch the numbers, and in turn get a clearer picture of your program's impact.



Improve supplier relations

Elevate your supplier negotiations from simply transaction to mutually beneficial partnerships, unlocking innovation and savings.



Build trust

Take your travel program from being seen as a line item on your organization's budget to an irreplaceable part of your company's operations.

If you need more context for how a challenger mindset positively impacts corporate travel, think of groundbreaking changes across the industry, from corporates and TMCs to airlines and accommodations. Would things like a consumer-grade shopping experience via NDC have made an appearance, or the strides toward a more sustainable industry if everyone had just been satisfied with “**how things are**”?

We all know that answer.

Now let's look further at how we can get your travel program, and all the relevant stakeholders, onboard with your new challenger mindset.

Taking the next steps toward a challenger mindset

Some things in corporate travel may feel impossible to change – but thinking back on the original definition of a challenger mindset, reflect on how companies have changed the world forever by taking a step into the unknown, or challenging “how it’s always been.” Would the iPod exist if Apple worried how the CD industry would react? Would Tesla have made electric cars mainstream if they were preoccupied with the oil industry? Oftentimes, making positive change means challenging closely held beliefs or status quos.

So let's prep for your challenger mindset by reviewing your first few key steps:

Step 1

Identify your “stretch” goals for your travel program

Think of the things you'd place on your wish list that may seem out of reach. Now imagine that you could pitch them to stakeholders. For example, if you want to make an argument for increased business class fare allowances within your policy, you could pitch how the cost will be offset by traveller happiness, which will lead to increased retention.



Step 2

Prepare for potential roadblocks

Are the roadblocks due to operational issues, supplier limitations, or stakeholder pressure? How could you quantify each one and formulate a mitigation plan? Some things to consider: the current state of your contracts, budget limitations, and internal resourcing.



Step 3

Figure out what needs to change

Have you put in the work to remove your personal blinders that may be preventing you from seeing certain issues? Consider creating focus groups of travellers and/or travel program employees to expand on their pain points and then build a change plan from there.



Step 4

Think future-state

Remember, a challenger doesn't just focus on the here-and-now. They strive for an operational efficiency that withstands and evolves. A heavier lift upfront may pave the way for a more agile set-up in the future. Make sure you're being realistic about your goals and separating them into stages so that short-term wins are balanced with long-term benefits.



Step 5

Secure stakeholder buy-in

Challengers need support in the mission to make change. Taking a persona-based approach to your stakeholders is key here – map out each person you need on your side, and then identify what their motivators are. Make sure to support your goals with qualitative and quantitative data to satisfy both logos and pathos-minded personas. Lay out your plans for both the short and long term so decision makers can feel confident in your vision.





Generating *stakeholder enthusiasm*

Whenever you plan on proposing a significant change to your travel program, you'll need to walk into the room prepared with a list of who you need on board. When convincing people to buy-in to your challenger mindset reset, approach them with the following:

- The skills and experience they have that are essential to your travel program goals.
- The ways they can personally affect your travel program and travellers.
- The specific tasks and projects within your goals that need their support.

All of the above feed into the concept of “what’s in it for me?” At the end of the day, people become motivated to support something by identifying how it will individually benefit them.

The last card you can play is always evidence-based support for your goals. Citing and sharing case studies or stories of organizations of similar size or goals can be strong motivators for stakeholders to sign off, or colleagues to throw in their support.

Now that you know how to shift into a challenger mindset and get others to buy in as well, let’s talk about how to take your newly minted challenger mindset to your corporate travel partnerships.



Identifying likeminded travel suppliers

Once you take on a challenger mindset, you need partners that support your new vision and goals. This will take a fresh analysis of your supplier mix and may have you rethink where you place your investments and energy.

To make it simple, here are the five things you need to look for when identifying a fellow corporate travel challenger:

01 They know who they are and what they stand for.

Now more than ever, it's important for businesses to have a clear set of values that drive everything they do. Make sure to ask your potential supplier for both their mission statement and employee value proposition, and then verify what steps they've taken to support both.

02 They're obsessed with the "why" as much as the "how".

Challengers are focused on purposeful results. They want to know the motivation behind any change or evolution, and not just focus on the endgame. They thoroughly investigate why change should take place before implementing anything new. Inquire about a recent large-scale change they've undertaken, either internally or for a client. How did they plan? What were their goals, and how do they plan to iterate?

03 They're not afraid to question the status quo and challenge "how it's always been done".

This is the backbone of a challenger mindset. Are they open to new and exciting ideas? Are they willing to push the envelope and challenge what's possible? This can open new inroads for partnership based on your program's goals. Think of all the hottest topics in corporate travel: NDC, sustainability, and AI, and ask them how they are approaching these new challenges. Do they have unique ideas, or are they not taking a stance?

04 They view obstacles as an opportunity for creativity and innovation.

Challengers are focused on A true challenger capitalises on moments of crisis to create new opportunities. Ask them to be transparent and describe a recent difficult situation, or even a failure, that they've experienced, for example, how they managed the pandemic. Their handling of these problems will give you insight into how they'd manage your problems as well.

05 They value the human connection in business.

It's often said that you must take emotion out of business, and there are situations where this is true. However, when it comes to driving positive change and making an impact, your partners should be especially aware of, and factor in, the human side of business. Corporate travel is about people, after all.

Keep these traits in mind when crafting RFP questions and prompts or reentering supplier negotiations, and make sure to request relevant evidence and information that support their answers during the bidding process.

The intersection between the challenger mindset and corporate travel technology

The biggest benefit the challenger mindset has brought to corporate travel tech is the implementation of tools and features that for so long have been landlocked as consumer-only. This has led to corporate travel technology becoming consumer-grade: sleeker UIs, streamlined communications, browser extensions, live chat, chatbots, and more.

One of the biggest identifiers of a travel tech provider with a challenger mindset is if they use an agile methodology to drive their development cycle. Agile methodology also prioritises customer feedback into their feature development process, basing their roadmap directly on how it solves their customer's challenges.

These are all things you can uncover in a live demo. If you need an idea of what kind of questions to ask to get the conversation moving, here are a few suggestions:

How does your technology solve my existing problem(s)? If my problem(s) are not being solved, how can we address that together?

- What's the difference between your technology and my other options?
- How do you decide what features to implement?
- Why did you decide to create this technology?
- What is your mission statement?
- If there's one thing you could add to the tech, what would it be?
- Is there a pipeline for evolution of this tech?
- What strategic investments have you made to improve the user experience and/or technology's efficacy?
- What do change rollouts look like and how much information do you solicit from users?

At this point, you now have the knowledge to identify fellow challengers.

Let's look at how you collaborate on a new travel policy.



Collaborating on a challenger travel policy

Once you have your partnerships in place, it's time to make the challenger magic happen. It's important to remember that as the travel manager, the leader of your travel program, the ball is in your court. You can make things happen. Lean into that confidence and challenge your partners to do the same.

If you're looking for some ways to kickstart your challenger travel policy, here are some strategies to explore (with real-life examples!)

SOURCING



How long has it been since you've reviewed or renegotiated your supplier contracts? Should you still be negotiating your supplier contracts, or should you be leaning into your TMC's partnerships?

We know that every supplier manages discounts, kickbacks, and perks differently. After reviewing your supplier mix, maybe you'll realize the hotel chain you've designated as your preferred supplier for a decade isn't actually the best bang for your buck; or, perhaps a different airline has the ability to support NDC fares in a way that would benefit your realise. When you adopt a challenger mindset, and prioritise partnerships who do the same, it opens up the opportunities to ask these questions.

In one instance, FCM supported a client with a full-blown overhaul of their airline contracts, including cost impacts of their current contracts versus new proposals, replacing certain airlines, or stacking new contracts into their program. All of this was done with benchmarking software and detailed negotiations to aptly predict and quantify which airlines delivered the best return on investment.

TRAVELLER MANAGEMENT



Ask yourself: What can I do to improve the end-to-end traveller experience? The answer? **Plenty!**

- Explore unifying your tech stack so travellers have access to the same UI, the same experience, and the same content, wherever they are in the world. Optimizing the communication flow also improves the traveller experience by getting them just-in-time information.

- There's always an opportunity to negotiate more perks into your supplier agreements – think about how much the traveller experience would be improved if all travellers had access to things like free breakfast, Wi-Fi, and discounted public transportation. Even better, incentivise suppliers to prioritise your travellers by including them into the suppliers' leisure pipeline via exclusive discounts and vacation packages.

- Gamifying the booking process is a great way to engage your travellers and increase policy compliance. Reward travellers with different incentives after completing certain actions, like booking a designated number of sustainable trips, or booking a designated number of trips with preferred suppliers.

In a real-life example, an FCM client had negotiated a preferred airline for a specific route. The client implemented targeted messaging in their OBT, along with providing status matches to travellers, and agent training to motivate travellers to book the airline on this specific route. The client eventually took this airline's market share from 25% to 54% with these traveller-first methods.

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Collaborating on a challenger travel policy



There are many ways you can challenge your travel policy and suppliers to support your sustainability efforts. It just takes a bit of encouragement and the right tools.

- Empower travellers and incentivize them to look at non-carbon elements of their trips, specifically the elements directly in their control.

[Click to see full infographic on sustainability considerations when booking trips.](#)

- Auditing your supply chains for their carbon footprint is always a key step. Once you know who your “greenest” travel partners and suppliers are, you can prioritise the ones who can make the necessary carbon cuts and provide travellers with more non-carbon sustainability options.

- Implementing decision support software provides point-of-booking guidance, giving travellers the information they need to make educated booking decisions.

This way, you can inform travellers of your sustainability policy during relevant tasks and provide options they can take to make their own personal impact. You can also provide alternative options to their unsustainable trips and give real-life contextual examples so they can understand why sustainable choices matter.

In one particular sustainability success story, an FCM client needed to include carbon offsetting into their program – the solution was to add a “carbon tax” at the traveller level to encourage more sustainable bookings. FCM was able to build custom programming to implement this fee with our partner, Southpole, and built custom reporting so the client could see the impact.

Challenge accepted: *What's next?*

No matter what you call it, whether it's adopting, embracing, or transforming into a challenger mindset, it will take time and effort on behalf of your stakeholders and partners to get the ball rolling. But the most important takeaway from this is that the central driver is you, the travel manager. The challenger spirit starts with your goals, so never lose sight of the impact you can have on your travel program today, tomorrow, and for years to come.

And if you don't know yet, FCM is a TMC that prides itself on being an industry challenger. So if you find the information in this guide useful, let's talk further about how we can make these changes a reality for you, together.

Remember:
Never stop *innovating*.
(We won't.)

