



PRESENTED TO

GIOVANNI BISIGNANI



via Billington/ahlytop.com

Bisignani in full flow at a press conference during the association's annual meeting



PAST WINNERS

- 2007**
NORM MINETA, FORMER US TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY
- 2006**
DR ASSAD KOTAITE, ICAO
- 2005**
HERB KELLEHER, SOUTHWEST AIRLINES
- 2004**
MAURICE FLANAGAN, EMIRATES
- 2003**
JÜRGEN WEBER, LUFTHANSA
- 2002**
PIERRE JEANNIOT, IATA

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The man recognised by *Airline Business* for its 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award has the unusual distinction of being able to say some rather rude and direct things to people but in the nicest possible way. As the head of the airline industry's main lobby group, IATA, it is of course his job to be demanding. His challenged member carriers insist on nothing less, so Bisignani's trademark slogan of "shouting politely" at suppliers and politicians alike will not be silenced any time soon.

While it is Bisignani's huge impact leading IATA that has thrust him further into the global spotlight than any previous role, his career path has furnished him with a unique skill set since studying for his law degree in Rome and then at the Harvard Business School in the USA. After graduating, his first job took him into banking with Citibank in New York before returning to Europe and into a series of high-level positions at Italian energy company ENI and industrial conglomerate the IRI Group. The learning he gained in Italy's state-influenced industrial sector established a finely tuned sense of how to balance politics and business which has served him well ever since.

After a five-year spell at IRI, latterly as corporate executive vice-president and head of foreign affairs, the call came in 1989 from the government to work with Alitalia president Carlo Verri as its managing director and chief executive to revive the troubled flag carrier. But Verri was tragically killed in an automobile accident later that year. That meant Bisignani, then 42, took over. He was one of the industry's youngest airline CEOs.

During his five years at Alitalia, Bisignani took a loss-making carrier with a poor service reputation and fractious labour relations through the crisis of the first Gulf War and into profit. It was a radical and aggressive business transformation that drew upon many of the skills he had learned in the USA and Italy. Over that time Bisignani firmly established himself as a popular figure both amongst his airline peers and in the air transport community. The energetic and charismatic Italian served on IATA's executive committee and was the chairman of the Association of European Airlines in 1992.

In 1994 his career diverted into another transport sector when he served as president

of Tirrenia di Navigazione, the largest Italian ferry company. In 1998 he became chief executive of SM Logistics, a group of logistics and freight forwarding companies partially owned by GE Capital. It was another defining career move for Bisignani as it brought him into direct contact with GE's legendary boss Jack Welch, who he remains friendly with to this day. Bisignani was particularly struck by Welch's insistence that his businesses should set themselves targets and he has taken this appreciation into his work with IATA such as with the e-ticketing and IATA Operational Safety Audit targets.

"He has become a true leader in air transport"

Bisignani's experience in air transport widened further in 1993/94 with his role as chairman of global distribution system Galileo. In addition, his time on the European Advisory Board of Pratt & Whitney from 1998-2001 means he understands the manufacturing sector as well. Today he remains a board member of UK air traffic services provider NATS.

Bisignani was lured closer to the airline business again in 2001 to found Opodo, the online travel portal established by Europe's flag carriers. And in 2002 the call came from his airline colleagues to help them lead their "trusted, but dusty" association into something that could represent them robustly on the global stage.

Nobody doubted that he would pour all his spirit and energy into the task to make IATA relevant again, that was taken as a given. What has been remarkable is the speed of the transformation and the level of international respect the revived IATA has gained in just a few years under his leadership. Bisignani will not of course claim the accolades for himself, and he will justifiably give credit to the airline leaders that gave him the power to totally transform IATA and the team he has built around him. But he has become a true leader in air transport and an airline talisman that even those on the receiving end of one of his famous tirades genuinely respect.

MARK PILLING