I used to be that I would get to an airport 15 minutes before a flight to catch my plane. Sitting around airports was not my idea of making the best use of my time. But with the airlines the way they are today, one had better get there early.

A couple of weeks ago, I was in New York on my way home. I got to the airport an hour early. I was tired and hungry and just wanted to get home that evening. But my plane was supposedly bound for Los Angeles, sat at the gate for an hour-and-a-half after the scheduled departure. There was a mechanical problem. I watched as another plane took off for San Francisco. We all started to lose our cool. Temper began to flare. I felt sorry for the agents at the gate, taking criticism for something over which they had no control. I told some of them I was flown in by United Airlines from their home office in Chicago just to placate them—others I told something else.

But in the end, the passengers realized that I was just another passenger, wanting to get home. All of a sudden they realized that the only way to get home was to work with the agents to solve our plane problems. The agents realized that the passengers were as stuck as they were. Now it was three hours after our scheduled departure. It was like being stuck in an elevator. We couldn’t move until the mechanics fixed the problem. Getting madder and madder didn’t help a bit. Gradually, everyone cooled down. Everyone was given a meal voucher. We ate and returned to the gate hopeful of a solution. It took another couple of hours before we were on our way. We touched down at 2 a.m., waited for our bags for another 30 minutes, and I pulled into my driveway at 3 a.m. Talk about exhausted!

The experience taught me that people are capable of spending a few hours waiting for a flight, but that they will do so only if they are made to feel welcome. It was a good lesson. I learned that people will not blame others for their predicament. You can’t blame people who are caught in the middle, with little power to come up with a solution. Once you realize that only the group can see the problem, you start to make progress.

Many parks and municipalities in this country are stuck with mechanical problems and limited resources. Fields and sports facilities sit in poor condition because the only action being taken is complaining, not rational discussion. The parks and sports complexes were built for the citizens of that city or town. If that municipality has not allowed enough in its budget for upkeep, and the citizens gripe about it to one another but not to the city officials, they have no one to blame but themselves. On the other hand, if we allow the city officials to do their thing, then just look at the condition of our parks. If we don’t let our city officials know that we are unhappy about the condition of our parks, they will continue to let them slip. The old adage, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” holds true here.

I am constantly amazed at how much use our parks and recreational areas get. It seems that every night the various sport fields are used for softball leagues, soccer leagues, T-ball and football. Park and recreational personnel are caught in the middle. Their hands are tied. They have limited budgets to get the park in condition, yet the citizens (for whom the park was built) see their children play under poor turf conditions. Maybe if the city managers or the city council, they could devise a way that would work to everyone’s benefit. You never know until you try. Complaints turn into positive suggestions and the public can relate better to the problems of public officials when they are more aware of them. Then progress begins. We can always come up with solutions—maybe not to everyone’s satisfaction, but a solution can be found. Working together is what this world is all about.