



The Southwest Airlines Way

Jody Hoffer Gittel

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"If you look at Southwest Airlines, and I admire what they do, they've been the most successful airline in the industry."

--Gerard Arpey, CEO, American Airlines

"Through extensive research Jody Hoffer Gittel gets to the bottom of what has sustained Southwest Airlines' positive employee relations and high performance through good and bad times."

--Thomas A. Kochan, professor, MIT Sloan School of Management, MIT Global Airline Industry Program

In an industry with losses in the billions, Southwest Airlines has an unbroken string of 31 consecutive years of profitability. *The Southwest Airlines Way* examines how the company uses high-performance relationships to create enormous competitive advantage in motivation, teamwork, and coordination among employees. It then goes further to show how any company can foster these powerful cooperative relationships and explains how to:

- Lead with credibility and caring
- Invest in frontline leaders
- Hire and train for relational competence
- Use conflicts to build relationships
- Make unions its partners, not its adversaries
- Build relationships with its suppliers

The Southwest Airlines Way Details

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From Reader Review The Southwest Airlines Way for online ebook

Yi-hsin Lin says

This book should have been edited down to about 1/3 its length. The author describes ten fundamental principles of Southwest Airlines and how that has allowed them to be very productive and profitable. However, the discussions of each are very similar. A lot of the phrasing was very repetitive.

Much of it seemed very obvious- for example, that if you want to get people to work together efficiently, they need to understand each others' roles and how they fit together- but since the other airlines do not do this nearly as well as Southwest, it apparently isn't that obvious. Or rather, as the book tries to explain, it is very hard to achieve.

I have never flown Southwest Airlines, so I cannot attest as to whether the family spirit shows through to passengers (Gittel claims it does). The book did make me never want to fly American Airlines again though.

Lukasz Nalepa says

It's nice to see that industries other than IT also came to a conclusion, that the relations are the fundament to a good prospering company. Too bad, that this book repeats this all over again in every tense ;) The book is poorly written I think, bored me a few times, so not particularly good lecture, although it was also time not wasted

Nicolette says

3 stars for the book, 5 stars for the content.

Jim Duncan says

All about the culture and key decisions made at the top of the organization. Great stories about how Southwest has empowered its employees to go above and beyond. The story about the couple getting married and flight cabin crew handing out napkins for everyone to write down advice and collect them. Pure gold

Mckinley says

What makes Southwest Airlines a company to watch? This book reads like a fan letter to Southwest.

Jacob says

Great book. I've heard the Southwest was great but not the exact things they did differently. This book

provides a guide to anyone who wants to take on their processes and procedures that make them stand apart. From pilots to baggage personnel, attitudes, disagreements, unions, checkin and employee welfare, this book covers it all.

Jackie says

As an aviation management major in college, I ate this book up. Southwest is a company who really has their act together and it is always fascinating to read about their success. If you're an MBA candidate looking for uses of complex business models, you won't find any here as Southwest's claim to fame boils down to one simple fact: be good to your employees and they will be good to your customers. The difference between Southwest and other companies is that they actually put this theory into action and it has turned them (an airline, no less) into a national success story.

Omar Halabieh says

Below are key excerpts from the book that I found particularly insightful:

1- "How did this remarkable transformation occur? How did Southwest grow from an idiosyncratic Texas airline to an organization that managers all over the world are seeking to emulate?

Efficiency...Quality...Controlled Growth Demand for Reliable Low-Fare Travel...Competitive Threats...Success Factors—Leadership, Culture, Strategy, and Coordination."

2- "However, leadership is not confined to the CEO. Leadership is better understood as a process that can take place at any level of an organization.^ Indeed, leadership is needed in today's organizations to motivate, support, and enable employees to work together in support of a set of shared goals."

3- "In their classic book on organizations, James March and Herbert Simon' describe the potentially disintegrative effects when employees in an organization pursue their own functional goals without reference to the over-arching goals of the larger work process. Shared goals play an especially important role when different functions are involved in delivering the same service."

4- "The three conditions that increase the need for relational coordination—reciprocal interdependence, uncertainty, and time constraints— are increasingly common in the service economy of today. As advanced economies have shifted from a manufacturing to a service focus, work settings that require relational coordination have become increasingly common. Many service operations are characterized by reciprocal interdependence, requiring iterative interactions among service providers rather than the sequential handoffs performed by workers on production lines. Many service operations also have high levels of uncertainty relative to manufacturing due to the difficulty of buffering service operations from the external environment and from differences in customers themselves. Finally, most service settings are highly time-constrained; they are designed to provide a service to customers, real time, simultaneous with the demand, without imposing excessive waiting times on customers."

5- "Not every leader of a successful organization must be charismatic. What successful organizations do need from each of their leaders, however, is credibility— the ability to inspire trust; and caring—the ability to inspire a belief by employees that their leaders care deeply about their well-being."

6- "Leadership is better understood as a process that can take place at any level of the organization."^ Indeed,

leadership at the front line can play a critical role in organizational success. Rather than undermining coordination among frontline employees, supervisors play a valuable role in strengthening coordination through day-to-day coaching and counseling."

7- "Increasingly, jobs require not only functional expertise but also relational competence—the ability to interact with others to accomplish common goals. Indeed, people who perform jobs that require high levels of functional expertise also tend to need high levels of relational competence to integrate their work with the work of fellow employees. Organizations like Southwest Airlines that recognize the importance of relational competence, look diligently for employees who have it, then develop it to even higher levels through training, will have a distinct performance advantage over organizations that do not."

8- "Organizations should proactively seek out conflicts rather than allowing them to fester. Then managers should bring the parties together to better understand each other's perspective. If organizations do not identify and resolve cross-functional conflicts, those conflicts will weaken critical relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. When managers treat cross-functional conflict as an occasion for learning, they strengthen relationships between employees and boost performance of the work processes in which those employees are engaged."

9- "The energy and learning that employees gain from building strong family and community ties can be brought into the workplace and leveraged to achieve stronger working relationships and better organizational performance. Organizations should therefore be vigilant to ensure that relationships at work do not overwhelm and undermine the family and community relationships that are needed to sustain strong working relationships."

10- "Though information technology can be a facilitator, it is not expected to be an effective substitute. When a job is mediated largely through a computer or a telephone, an important element of social interaction is lost. The loss of social interaction weakens relationships, and weakens critical performance parameters. These limitations on the effective use of information technology exist because coordination is not simply about the transfer of information. Instead, coordination requires the construction of shared meaning in order to facilitate collective action. As we see at Southwest Airlines, boundary spanners can play this role, building relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect across functional boundaries."

11- "Traditional measurement systems are flawed because they orient employee attention toward functional rather than cross-functional outcomes and because they provide inadequate information for learning.' To orient employees toward cross-functional outcomes and to provide more useful feedback about what to do, cross-functional performance measures should be used to supplement traditional functional measurement systems."

12- "We have seen in this chapter the importance of flexible jobs for building strong relationships and high performance."

13- "At Southwest Airlines, respectful relationships between company management and the unions chosen by frontline employees appear to set the tone for respectful relationships throughout the company. As Southwest's leaders pointed out on several occasions, however, positive labor/management relations are not achieved once and for all. Rather they have to be reproduced every day."

14- "Southwest's partnership approach is radically different from the traditional approach to supplier relations. In the old model, organizations were independent parties who transacted with each other at arm's-length through formal contracts, keeping information close to the chest. Cooperation occurred only within organizations, while careful arm's-length negotiation with minimal information sharing was the normal mode for dealing with parties external to the organization.^ But when there is more uncertainty in the environment, there is much more that organizations can learn from one another. Because of the benefits of learning, both

parties have more to gain than to lose from the sharing of information. Although there may be doubt and mistrust at the outset, "nee the cooperative exploration of ambiguity begins, the returns to the partners from further joint discoveries are so great that it pays to keep cooperating." Ultimately, this ability to partner is an acquired skill like any other, and one with potentially significant effects on organizational success".

Josh Steimle says

Short, but not short on detail. The book effectively gives away the "secrets" of how Southwest has managed to grow every year, be profitable every year, and pretty much lead the entire industry for 30 years without much serious competition. In a nutshell, it's not certain things they do, it's everything they do. The funny part is that after all these years they still appear to be misunderstood by their competitors and others (i.e. they point out how a major union leader said their competitive advantage was not being unionized, when in fact Southwest is the most heavily unionized airline--they just know how to manage union relations better than other airlines).

A good, quick read, and the lessons are certainly applicable to other businesses. Some good stuff in here for those of you into lean startup methodology too.

Cathy says

Union section helpful

pg 181 182 Union representation can also provide an avenue for employee voice in the organization, potentially creating a greater sense of shared goals with their employer, so long as employees are not forced to choose between loyalty to their union and loyalty to their employer.

also pg 168-176

Brian Cuban says

There are about 3 unique principals in this book that are good across industries. The rest is airline specific stats and such and first year management theories.....

Martti says

It's a very dry management book, probably for a super dry MBA course. Also it sounded very outdated and very industry specific. Maybe specifically for airline industry, maybe transferable to a some other service industry. But there are probably way better case studies to take as an example.

Andraz Stalec says

There are some good concepts introduced in this book, but some of the chapters are repeating. Could be much shorter. I especially liked Part 2.

Raghie says

Reading this book I felt like I was reading about a cult, everyone was so....so happy. A great place to work, everyone gets along and if you don't it is suggested that you leave. Aside from that I thought the book had some great points about the ultimate goals of any business: to have a happy customers and the bottomline. While I thought some of there ideas were a bit much, I thought about the outcome and in that environment it works. Not a bad read but sometimes she droned on and was repetative.

June Ding says

I'm interested in the book because I am in airlines. I wish there are more books that are up to date. The secret to Southwest's success seems simple: based on shared goal, shared knowledge and mutual trust. It is basically build high performance relationship with the employees and suppliers. To make it happen consistently though is not easy. The book explained 10 Southwest organisational practices that make it possible, which can be applied to any organisations. Many resonate very well from my own personal view and experience. E.g Leadership need to lead with credibility and caring; invest in frontline leadership: engage in active coaching and feedback rather than simply monitoring for non compliance; Hire and train for relational competence; create boundary spanners; measure performance broadly: design a performance measurement system that focuses on process outcomes rather than functional outcomes.
