

Report on Business: Globe Careers
Relationships keep Southwest flying
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The Southwest Airlines Way

By Jody Hoffer Gittel

McGraw-Hill, 319 pages, \$39.95

By now, most of us figure we know the formula for success at Dallas-based Southwest Airlines, although we might disagree on which is the key element.

But clearly it's connected to the zany antics of the staff, from chief executive officer to flight attendant; the penny-pinching ways, that allow for a low-cost airline; the decision to use only one type of airplane, which provides for quick turnarounds; and the fact the Cinderella airline is non-unionized.

Wrong.

While all those are contributors (other than non-unionization, because Southwest is in fact the most highly unionized airline in the United States), the secret ingredient lies elsewhere. After an extensive study of Southwest and some competing airlines, Jody Hoffer Gittel, a professor of management at Brandeis University, says in *The Southwest Airlines Way* that success stems from the ability to build and sustain strong relationships among everyone involved in the airline, notably employees and managers, but also unions and suppliers.

At most airlines, for example, a pilot is the highly trained and somewhat aloof specialist in charge of getting everyone to their destination safely. Southwest Airlines pilots, by contrast, are enthusiastic members of a team rather than apart from or above their fellow staff. If pillows need to be fluffed to get a flight away on time or garbage picked up in the cabin, pilots pitch in and help (while still maintaining an enviable flight safety record).

Indeed, the job description for everyone at the company notes that in addition to specific functional responsibilities they do whatever needs to be done to enhance the overall operation. Prof. Gittel calls it keeping jobs flexible at the boundaries, ensuring that employees in different roles work together easily. It's a way of life -- even in a unionized context -- because Southwest employees know to retain their jobs they must keep costs low and turn those flights around lickety-split, and co-operation is the way to do it.

While other airlines cut back on frontline supervisors, Southwest has been adding them. That allows greater contact with staff and more coaching. The supervisors' work goes beyond a focus on measuring performance and disciplining the "bad apples," as at other airlines. Southwest supervisors are "player coaches," who pitch in when necessary to cover for people on breaks or to help out when they are short-staffed.

Southwest has also invested in operations agents, who are the centre of communications between all the different groups involved in unloading, servicing and reloading a flight. Since the mid-1980s, most airlines have been cutting back on this boundary-spanning function, having each operation agent supervise as many as 15 flights at a time, from a remote location. But Southwest increased operations agent staffing to even higher levels than the other airlines had traditionally used, allowing them to play a greater role in the flight departure process.

Each individual flight has its own dedicated operations agent, who is in face-to-face contact with the team before, during and after the turnaround of the flight. "It is not co-ordination from a distance, conducted primarily through a computer interface, as other airlines have tried to achieve," Prof. Gittell notes. "It is co-ordination with a human face."

Southwest hires employees based on their relational competence, seeking individuals who can work effectively with others, and then strengthens that ability in training. "The easiest way to get in trouble at Southwest is to offend another employee," says one ramp manager.

At the same time, the airline realizes conflicts are inevitable. It puts great emphasis on getting tensions out in the open and having staff work together on solutions. These gatherings are informally called "Come To Jesus" meetings, because everyone is supposed to bare their souls if necessary to achieve reconciliation. That may not be enough, however: Recently, tension has surfaced during contract negotiations, with flight attendants complaining about long hours, no breaks and lack of chance to grab a hot meal.

Prof. Gittell highlights 10 elements that work together to build high performance relationships at Southwest, and how other airlines in her study falter in each instance. It's certainly instructive reading as we ponder Air Canada's problems. More broadly, the book helps managers understand that you can achieve low-cost, effective operations in many service industries by investing in high-quality relationships and high productivity.