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New approach offers a cure for ailing airline industry, according to Brandeis expert.

The war with Iraq and the September 11th tragedy has forced airlines to grapple with the most serious financial crisis in its history. But airline industry expert Jody Hoffer Gittel believes a new approach could offer a way out. "In a time of tremendous crisis for the airline industry we need a constructive new approach to resolve problems that go much deeper than the current security threats," said Gittel, assistant professor of management at The Heller School for Social Policy and Management. "If you look at Southwest Airlines, it has been profitable for 30 consecutive years since its founding, overcoming the problems that have sent its competitors into bankruptcy. "Gittel's book, *The Southwest Airlines Way: Using the Power of Relationships to Achieve High Performance* (2003), examines Southwest's unique strategy, in particular its low fares and focus on short flights.

In a market that seems doomed, the ability to work with shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect has enabled Southwest to thrive. Developing a common culture in a highly specialized industry where distinct work groups are divided by pay and training is rare. Yet Southwest has achieved this by revamping traditional management practices - hiring, training, performance measurement, supervision, job boundaries and conflict resolution - with an eye toward building high performance relationships throughout the company. In *The Southwest Airlines Way*, Gittel examines each of these management practices, contrasting Southwest's approach to that of American, Continental and United. Gittel adds that Southwest prides itself on outstanding relationships with its unions. Even with the highest percentage of unionized employees in the industry, Southwest has experienced only one strike and a handful of disputes that have required mediation by the National Mediation Board, proving that unionization need not be a barrier to high performance. "If other players in the industry can learn from Southwest's strategies, they can improve their bottom lines and ward off more bankruptcies, for the benefit of shareholders, employees and customers alike," said Gittel. Jody Hoffer Gittel is an assistant professor of management at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management and a faculty member of the MIT Global Airline Industry Program. Gittel's expertise includes eight years of field research examining the policies, strategies and techniques that foster success within the airline industry. She investigates current trends in the industry, including the decrease in demand after the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the war on Iraq, and the longer-term decline in customer willingness to pay. She has also examined United, Continental, American and JetBlue Airways, and has published a Harvard Business School teaching case called *JetBlue Airways: Starting from Scratch*.

Gittel's research and teaching focus on human resources and service operations management. Specifically, she analyzes how companies can use "high performance relationships" - shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect among employees, managers, unions and suppliers - to create a competitive advantage.