

Introduction

Most people have a passion for success and creative self expression somewhere deep inside them. They want to be part of something meaningful, to make a contribution, and to find fulfillment in what they do. Sadly, these yearnings are often managed out of people in the unrelenting quest for predictable mediocrity that most organizations pursue. People are seldom encouraged to be themselves, have fun, or seek fulfillment in their jobs. Instead, they are pushed to just do their jobs, meet their quotas, and not make waves. Think outside the box? Proceed at your own peril.

A lot of companies say their employees are their most important asset, but they don't really mean it. The truth is, they treat employees as depreciable assets, to be used up and then discarded. This is the root cause of the culture of conflict that infects many major corporations today.

You can see the results in any customer service business. When you ask for help at the drug store or hardware store, does the person you ask groan because you

interrupted his other duties, or does he cheerfully walk you over to the proper aisle and start telling you about the products you could choose? When the cable guy shows up at your house, does he really care about your business, or does he spend most of his time telling you how lousy the cable company is and that you ought to get satellite?

The truth is that employees who love their jobs will cause customers to love their company. Employees who hate their jobs will make customers hate the company. Quite simply, people who enjoy their work do a better job than people who don't. And it doesn't necessarily relate to how much they are paid. From the shop floor to the executive suite, it can fairly be said that the most highly paid people in their professions often do the worst jobs.

The ultimate success of any organization requires consistently excellent performance at every level. Vibrant and successful organizations are not built on a feeling of detachment by employees. Rather, they are built on a culture of engagement, in which employees believe in the mission they are trying to accomplish and know that they are contributing to its success. People who are given the room to succeed usually will.

For 25 years, I had the opportunity to be associated with such a vibrant and successful organization, as outside counsel, then as General Counsel, and finally for three years as CEO of Southwest Airlines. To be sure, I was always thrilled to accept the many honors that were bestowed on our company—Airline of the Year, one of the three most admired companies in America, co-CEO of the year, one of the world's most socially responsible

companies, and so forth. But I never deluded myself into thinking that I had much to do with it. I knew the honors really belonged to our people, who showed their dedication and spirit every day. In fact, in our written communications at Southwest Airlines, we always capitalized the *E* in *Employees*, the *C* in *Customers*, and the *S* in *Shareholders*, to help us remember why we were in business. As the guardian of our corporate culture, President Colleen Barrett was certain to correct anybody who did not show the proper respect for any of these three constituencies in their writing or otherwise.

To those who are looking for a definitive history of Southwest Airlines; or a critical commentary on the brilliant leadership of the company's legendary cofounder, Herb Kelleher; or what the airline's business strategy should be from here, this is not your book. Of course, no book that touches on Southwest Airlines can avoid some of the rich stories from its colorful past, or some mention of Herb, but this book is not really about Southwest Airlines. Rather, it is about some of the lessons I learned from working with the people of Southwest Airlines for more than 25 years—mostly frontline workers and employees, whose deeds truly defined the culture for which Southwest Airlines became famous.

The overriding lesson I learned doesn't involve a lot of management guru buzzwords and acronyms. It is the simplest of principles, which we learned from childhood: When in doubt, just do the right thing. It is still a pretty good rule for doing business, dealing with people, and building successful organizations.