

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

DEVELOPING LEADERS AT SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

In the highly turbulent airline industry, Southwest Airlines (SWA) is one of the healthiest companies, continuing growth and profit in a climate that is threatening the survival of other airlines. Marketing strategist Micah Solomon believes the company's culture is the key to its success: "A consciously developed customer-centered culture is a business advantage that will serve you for years—and inoculate you against competitive inroads" (Solomon, 2012). SWA's special culture emphasizes individuality, taking care of people, and fun. "Learn from your mistakes; take the initiative; and listen to your heart" (The power of persistence, 2002) are simple and powerful words from Colleen Barrett, the former CEO of Southwest Airlines, who was with the airlines much of her career and as is the case with other members of the leadership team, including founder Herb Kelleher and current CEO Gary Kelly. David Ridley, the recently retired vice president of marketing and sales, talks with pride about Southwest's "warrior spirit," which focuses on caring, emotions, and putting employees first (Warrior Spirit, 2006). While Colleen Barrett headed the company, she also had the title of Queen of Hearts for sustaining a culture that is "fun, spirited, zesty, hard-working, and filled with love. Love is a word that isn't used too often in corporate America, but we've used it at Southwest from the beginning" (Shinn, 2004: 18).

In addition to a supportive culture, for which Kelleher and Barrett can take much credit, Southwest is deliberate about developing leaders and leadership. Talking about the company's HR practices, Barrett describes, "We are very, very disciplined about hiring and we're very, very disciplined about mentoring and coaching.... We're a very forgiving company in terms of good honest mistakes, but we're not forgiving about attitude and behavior and demeanor" (Fisher, 2007: 18). Barrett suggests that developing employees and maintaining the culture starts with the hiring process by carefully selecting people and being very clear about expectations and company culture (Sekula, 2007). Programs to develop leaders range from formal leadership training for everyone, including frontline employees, to presentation by outside consultants, leadership briefings, and communication about leadership in company bulletins. Managers and company leaders also make a point to include the topic of leadership in their regular interactions and strive to demonstrate the principles the company embraces (Shin, 2003). They also provide credible role models for others. For example, Kelleher works from a small windowless office and treats all employees regardless of their rank with care and respect (Warrior Spirit, 2006). The goal of training and development at Southwest is to perpetuate a culture and a leadership style that have been effective. Barrett says that they are not shy about closely monitoring their employees, getting rid of people who do not fit in, promoting those who represent the spirit of the company, and holding their leaders and managers accountable (Sekula, 2007). They are also not shy about standing up for employees who do their jobs well, even when customers complain (Warrior Spirit, 2006).

The concept of fit between the person and the company is central to Southwest's success. Through careful hiring and training, the company makes sure that those who do not fit well do not get hired or do not stay long. Caring about others, authenticity, and maybe most important, a sense of humor, are prerequisites for being successful at Southwest. Ridley says: "Our leaders have a genuine love for people. We don't want you in leadership if you don't. If it's all about