

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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Ann McGee-Cooper
Duane Trammell
Gary Looper

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BOOK EXCERPT 9.1

The Power of LUV: An Inside Peek at the Innovative Culture Committee of Southwest Airlines

Seven years ago, Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. invited nine Dallas organizations to form a learning community to share the successes and challenges in creating servant-led organizations. In this excerpt from *Being the Change*, which profiles many of those organizations, the authors focus on the role of servant leadership in the success of Southwest Airlines.



Ann McGee-Cooper



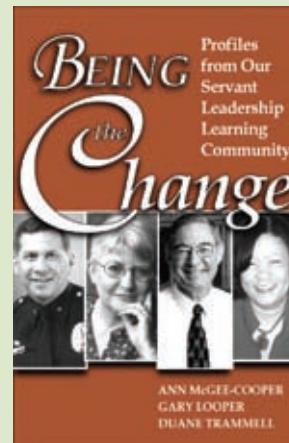
Duane Trammell



Gary Looper

Southwest Airlines (SWA) has long been known for setting and achieving incredible records of performance in their industry. Recognized as #1 and #2 by *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work for in America," Southwest has been consistently profitable every quarter for 34 years. The Company's net income for 2006 was \$499 million, with 96.4 million Customers and over 32,000 Employees. Southwest is the only airline to win the Triple Crown (#1 in most on-time flights, least lost baggage, and fewest Customer complaints) for five years in a row. How is Southwest able to sustain its unmatched record? Southwest would tell you it's the magic of its People. "If the greatness of a Company is measured by the hearts and souls of its People, then we are

indeed the richest Company in the world," says Colleen Barrett, President of SWA. Colleen's own servant leadership can clearly be seen inside the amazing Culture Committee of Southwest Airlines, one of her many innovations that nurtures hearts and minds and keeps SOUTHWEST SPIRIT thriving.



Being the Change: Profiles from Our Servant Leadership Learning Community

Ann McGee-Cooper,
Gary Looper, Duane Trammell
AMCA Books, 2007

So what is the secret, the DNA, of this legendary company so well-known for Positively Outrageous Service, the industry's best record of profitability, and ranked by its Employees as one of the best places to work in America? Many would credit its culture, which the Company defines as:

- Warrior Spirit
- Leading with a Servant's Heart
- and a Fun-LUVing Attitude!

These are the hallmarks SWA works hard to keep alive in the hearts, minds, and daily actions of every Employee.

But there's more to the story. Herb Kelleher, the chairman of the board, and Colleen Barrett, president, are both important catalysts. Yet with 32,000 people, the culture has to go beyond two Leaders, and they would be the first to insist that it does. Indeed, there are countless noteworthy contributors, but one – the Culture Committee – is the foundation from which so much originates.

The Queen of Culture

You can't really understand the Culture Committee without understanding Colleen Barrett, often referred to as "Corporate Mom." Colleen inspires the vision, empowers Employees at every level to become a family, models the way of servant leadership, and gives abundant recognition to others, encouraging the hearts of 32,000 Southwest Employees.



Colleen joined Herb as his legal secretary in 1967. She discovered that Herb worked out of two offices, one to meet with clients and the other a room piled high with papers. Herb went on vacation shortly after hiring Colleen, and she went to work organizing all his loose papers into labeled folders. A Senior Partner in Herb's law firm walked by the office as she worked and was aghast. "Who are you and what are you doing?" he asked with alarm. "I'm Herb's new secretary and I'm organizing his papers," Colleen replied. "You can't do that! He won't be able to find a thing. Why, he'll fire you!" he exclaimed. "He can't if he wants to be able to find things!" she replied confidently. And she was right. Herb took Colleen everywhere after that and she has been his partner and understudy ever since.

Colleen earned a two-year associate's degree and then demonstrated the capacity to keep learning from all those around her, integrating their knowledge with her own remarkable qualities. First, she always looks for

what needs to be done and takes ownership. But she also brings humility and a big heart to her work. Early in the history of SWA when the Company was struggling to stay alive financially, Colleen brought up the future of the People, and Herb gave her responsibility for the People Department and Customers. She has contributed remarkable vision, innovation and servant leadership to both.

One hallmark of Colleen's genius is finding creative ways to honor People on a very sparse budget. Colleen is known internally for her "Bible," a growing list of words, terms, and writing guidelines approved by Colleen for internal and external documents. This includes correct spelling, punctuation, and words to capitalize, such as People, Employee, Customer, Leader, and Company when referring to SWA. She discovered this was a great way to show respect while not costing a penny.

As the Company kept doubling in size, Colleen, then Executive VP of Customers, formed the Culture Committee. At first, it was made up of approximately 38 opinion leaders from all levels and departments of SWA, each of whom was handpicked as exemplifying



Southwest Airlines' Halloween Celebration

SOUTHWEST SPIRIT. I (Ann) was lucky enough to be invited to join this group, the result of a letter I wrote suggesting ways to improve Southwest's image from a Customer's perspective. I asked to come inside the Company to learn all I could about what makes it so unique. Today, the Culture Committee is a vibrant team of 120 dedicated Employees – the lifeblood and heart-beat of the Spirit of Southwest Airlines.

The Culture Committee's Mission

To help create the SOUTHWEST SPIRIT and Culture where needed; to enrich it and make it better where it already exists; and to liven it up in places where it might be floundering. In short, this group's goal is to do "WHATEVER IT TAKES" to create, enhance, and enrich the special SOUTHWEST SPIRIT and Culture that has made this such a wonderful Company/Family.

Each member who serves on the Culture Committee does so as a volunteer. We all commit to four all-day meetings once a quarter. For most, this also includes the time required to travel to and from the Dallas Headquarters, so it is no small effort. In addition, we commit to participate in at least three Spirit events each year, and most members pitch in to help with many more. From the beginning, I was tremendously impressed that attendance was 100 percent, and everyone delivered on their promises. I had never served on a committee with such high accountability.

I soon learned that holding people accountable is another of Colleen's unique traits. A member who fails to attend without a valid reason is politely replaced, no hard feelings. When the first members rotated off after three years of service, they collectively declared themselves Alumni Members and stayed active in support of Culture Committee initiatives. This has been the tradition ever since. I find this extraordinary, and yet this is the fabric that keeps SWA so strong – another example of leading with a servant's heart!



A few Fun-LUVing 2006 Culture Committee Members

None of these initiatives came from MBA graduates or other traditional sources. An important aspect of SWA is that it grew out of the instincts of its Leaders, approximately 40 percent female and 30 percent minority. Below are some of the qualities Colleen has woven into the Culture Committee that have produced incredible results. Note that all of these qualities are also characteristics of servant leadership.

Qualities of SWA Culture

Leading with a servant's heart. Colleen, known as the mother of Southwest, works passionately to lift up others and grow their skills. She holds herself and others accountable, and she's there in the hour of need. In short, Colleen has always strived to model the selfless spirit of service that she believes so fervently grows a strong, unmatched culture of service. She encourages all others to care for their station or department Employees with the same loving spirit.

Be the change you want to see in others. Colleen cites the Golden Rule, "Treat others as you want to be treated." "It is so simple," she says. From the beginning, Herb and Colleen knew that for Employees to deliver what they describe as Positively Outrageous Customer Service, Employees had to experience this same loving spirit and generous support from their leaders and their colleagues.

Customers come second. From the beginning, this principle has been an important part of the uniqueness of SWA. Herb and Colleen were clear that Employees could only serve their Customers with exemplary and memorable Customer service if Employees were confident they were supported in the same way. They reasoned that the Customer is not always right. In some cases, a Customer can be abusive. In those situations, Leaders have politely but firmly stood behind their Employees, asking abusive Customers to take their business elsewhere. Colleen sees this as applying the Golden Rule. If Employees know they will be supported if they err and are leaning toward the Customer, they are more likely to make on-the-spot creative decisions to solve problems and delight their Customers.

Case in point: A Gate Agent told the story of a Customer breaking her leg when she slipped on the ramp while boarding a flight. It was late at night and the Gate Agent leased a private plane to fly the Customer to emergency medical care. This Employee was supported and honored by her Leaders for exemplary Customer service!

Another inspiring example is the story of the Customer Service Agent in Baltimore/Washington who was still in her probationary period. When a late flight from BWI to Long Island, New York, was cancelled due to weather, the agent hired three buses to get her Customers safely to their destination that evening. She was commended by her Leaders.

These examples illustrate the trust Leaders have in their Employees to do the right thing, and the authority they give Employees to act. This is a hallmark of servant leadership in action.

Deep listening with no agenda. When I asked Joyce Rogge, retired Senior VP of Marketing, why Colleen and the Culture Committee have been so successful, she cited Colleen's unique gift to listen very intently with

no agenda. So much of each Culture Committee meeting is about listening to the members (now grown to 120 People, plus many alumni). "What problems do we need to address this year?" Might be an opening topic. With representatives from all 63 stations and all parts of the airline present, Colleen can quickly take the pulse of the business. Top Leaders always participate, so this has been an extremely effective way to identify challenges early and get at them proactively before they gain momentum.

Follow up. Don't ask if you are not going to act on what you learn. Joyce Rogge shared another observation about her mentor, Colleen. Colleen has earned huge trust from being reliably consistent in her follow-through. She can be surprisingly generous in her support for what may seem like small ideas. Equally, she can be tenacious, listening to get to the root of complex problems. Recently Southwest conducted a thorough Employee Satisfaction Survey. With support from her leadership team, Colleen formed cross-functional teams to address and report back on each issue. The results of the survey are shared monthly in LUV LINES, the internal Company newsletter, with Colleen addressing each major issue, point by point. Her bottom-up strategy is to address every concern with such integrity that when the next survey comes along in two years, the percentage of responses will be even higher. More Employees will trust that this is a safe way to provide honest feedback and all will know if the solutions are working. Colleen is endeavoring to ensure it is safe to be 100 percent open and honest when responding to the Employee Survey. She believes that trust must be earned on a daily basis. This is another tenet of Southwest Culture and Leadership.

Seeing things whole. Gathering people on all sides of an issue to explore solutions. Some years ago, Flight Attendants, Pilots, and Crew Schedulers were polarized. It's not fun to be the person calling others back to work when someone is ill and needs a substitute.



This Southwest Airlines jet
Is dedicated on Valentine's Day 2007 to
Colleen C. Barrett,
There from the Beginning:
Corporate Secretary 1978 – Present,
Vice President Administration 1986 – 1990
Executive Vice President Customers 1990 – 2001,
First Woman President 2001 – Present
Member Board of Directors,
Member Executive Planning Committee,
And
Our Heroine of the Heart Forever

Nor is it welcomed to have your personal plans suddenly interrupted if you are crew. Rancor was brewing. Colleen quickly formed a team of people on all sides and charged them with coming up with solutions. A big part of the team's solution was to bring empathy and appreciation to each other's positions by changing places. With some creative education and leading with a servant's heart, this problem became an opportunity to go the extra mile for a colleague needing help!

Constantly teaching the complexities of the business. There is no better champion of this than Tonda Montague, Senior Director, Employee Communications, whose team creates LUV LINES, the award-winning internal newsletter. Tonda and her team create games, charts, and endless ways to draw readers into understanding the complex facts of their business. This

TAKE AWAYS TO PONDER

1. Who might you pull together in your organization to begin to define, model, and nurture the spirit of servant leadership?
2. Where and how can you practice "seeing things whole" by gathering People from all sides of a concern to listen respectfully to each other and generate win/win solutions?
3. How can you bring a spirit of fun and appreciation to your work and to those you work with?
4. How can you create fun ways to teach the complexities of your business so that every Employee can learn to think and act like an owner?
5. Southwest created the Triple Crown Challenge, to make it a spirited game to become first in three important metrics in their industry: most on-time flights, least lost baggage, and fewest Customer complaints. How could you create a similar challenge to focus your Employees on critical business goals in a way that highlights fun and teamwork?
6. Southwest looks for ways to make holidays special for their Employees and Customers. Who could help you brainstorm ideas for transforming holidays into creative Employee- or Customer-appreciation events?

includes a mock scandal sheet called "Plane Tales," and "Coloring Outside the Lines," a fun directory of Leaders pictured as little kids, providing lots of fun, personal facts such as nicknames in grade school. Some years ago they worked to raise awareness of how small acts contribute to very large results. For example, they showed the interior of one of Southwest's planes filled with bags of peanuts, with the caption, "We could buy

2.2 million bags of peanuts with what we pay for one day of health care. The plane fact: health care costs are attacking Southwest.” That same year they changed their policy to trust their Employee’s word when he or she took sick days rather than requiring a doctor’s note. This simple decision has saved huge amounts of money each year since.

On Valentine’s Day 2007, Southwest celebrated their 16th annual Heroes of the Heart event. Yet another innovation from the Culture Committee, this is a time each year when a group of unsung heroes, those who work hard behind the scenes, are surprised and honored as the Heroes of our Heart. This year, the Internal Customer Care Department was chosen, a group of seven women who make sure that every special event in the lives of 32,000 Employees is appropriately honored and recognized. Among other things, this group has sent special care packages to all those in the military serving our country abroad. The Customer Care Department name flies on a special SWA plane for one year in the group’s honor.

This year Herb Kelleher made a surprise tribute naming Colleen Heroine of the Heart, with her special insignia painted on a Southwest Airlines jet to fly in her honor for a year. The tribute reads:

Over the years many skeptics have doubted that Southwest Airlines could keep such a warm, big-hearted, personal culture alive while the Company blossomed like a Texas bluebonnet in springtime, doubling in size again and again. But Colleen and Herb teamed with everyone to make every challenge an opportunity for a new creative solution. Not long after the Culture Committee began, the members expanded this idea to each location and started 63 local Culture Committees built on the same concepts. So now there is a vibrant network teaming to keep work fun, identify and solve emerging problems, ask for help, offer support, and keep alive that unmatched spirit that sets Southwest Airlines apart.

Servant leadership is about developing and encouraging others to lead. Colleen Barrett has an enormous task to keep a Company of 32,000 Employees motivated and 96.4 million Customers happy. How does she do it? She grows, inspires, and supports others to become the Warrior Spirit, lead with a Servant’s Heart, and do all of this with a Fun-LUVing Attitude. That’s servant leadership in action. That’s the Spirit of Southwest! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D., is a founding partner of Ann McGee-Cooper & Associates (AMCA), a team of futurists and consultants. She is an international leader in researching and applying servant-leadership in the workplace, having served on the Culture Committee of Southwest Airlines since 1990 and with TDIndustries since 1976. She has counseled national business leaders, governmental officials and college presidents on servant-leadership, team-building, life/work balance, time management and creative problem solving and is author of several AMCA books including *You Don't Have To Go Home From Work Exhausted* and *The Essentials of Servant-Leadership: Principles in Practice*. ann@amca.com

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