Southwest

The Unstodgy Airline

John Lubans Jr.

In an industry where many falter and fail, how does an organization stay profitable and resilient?

One company appears to do this better than most: Southwest Airlines. What's the secret? Is it some locked-up algorithm of ticket price, available seat miles, and inventory allocations? Sure, Southwest's inventory is parked less than other airlines, but fully booked flights take more than that. Visionary leaders? They help, yet those same leaders disavow any top-down, cause-and-effect relationship for success. How, after thirty-four years and a work force of more than thirty-two thousand, does Southwest make money and avoid enfeeblement, even while reeling from the economic body slam of September 11, 2001?

In search of an answer, I sampled a slice of life at Southwest: the ramp agent team—a group not dissimilar from the folks who work in our library circulation departments. During several days at the Raleigh Durham airport (RDU), I glimpsed some of the attributes that make Southwest a consistent winner (see sidebar). Those attributes offer clues for improving any business, including libraries.

Ramp agents are Southwest's muscle. Southwest's president, Colleen Barrett, sums up what ramp agents do:

> They touch every aspect of your flight, from the time you check your bags until you leave the baggage claims area. Ramp agents collect and sort your outbound luggage . . . and transport these items to the aircraft. They marshal the inbound flight into the gate, chock the tires, service the lavatories, and in some cities, provision the aircraft. . . . After the aircraft is closed up, ramp agents push the aircraft off the gate, disconnect the tow bar, and confirm with the pilots that the flight is ready to taxi.[1]

Doing all that in twenty minutes or less gets as intense as NASCAR's pit lane, where crews make or break a run for the checkered flag. Ramp agents, far from the limelight, have their own race to run—the industry's monthly and annual Triple Crown: baggage handling, on-time performance, and customer complaints. Each point on the crown depends on how well ramp agents do their jobs; lost bags and slow turns are guaranteed to trigger customer complaints and late arrivals and departures.

Letting Go

Southwest has little difficulty with letting go of the command-and-control functions (the holding on) observable in companies and libraries, large and small. Gary Barron, the former executive vice president of operations, said, "I suspect that if you left our people to their own devices, it would run pretty smoothly out there, without us messing with it. Maybe it runs *despite* us messing with it. . . . Maybe it would run *better* without us messing with it."[2]

A vulnerable admission? Not for Southwest, where a healthy self-deprecation is encouraged and practiced. That humility produces an empowering climate for the many who thrive where there is mutual support and respect.

There's a risk—letting go can be seen as weakness, especially in command-and-control, stodginess-prone organizations. Well, the letting go I saw at Southwest did *not* mean leaders abandoning responsibility or becoming superfluous. Nor did it mean workers getting to pick and choose what they do.

When Executive Chairman Herb Kelleher asserts his job is to liberate people, he means the people get to use all their skills and talents without fear of punishment for doing whatever it takes to get the job done.[3] It's known and practiced throughout the organization that if you make a mistake leaning toward the customer, you'll be forgiven.

Tricia Smith, field support representative for the southeast region, explains with an organizational maxim: "It's easier to seek forgiveness than to ask for permission [at Southwest]." She's encouraging staff to be proactive, to do what is right. If you err, you'll be supported.

John Lubans Jr. is Visiting Professor at North Carolina Central University, School of Library and Information Sciences. Reach him at Lubans1@aol.com.

Letting go strengthens the relationship between follower and leader: many decisions are best made in consultation, rather than in isolation in an executive suite, and many decisions can be made by the front-line worker—within guidelines—without asking permission. Letting go is akin to Mary Parker Follett's classic term "integration," in which leaders and followers both "take orders" from the situation, rather than expecting the leader to make all decisions.[4]

While "legacy"—a word we've heard applied to libraries—airlines may deploy four or six ramp agents for each incoming plane, Southwest generally works with two or three. Supervisors often are on the front line doing "real work," besides observing and monitoring performance data. Supervisors, including the station manager, may be unloading carts they've hauled to the baggage claim area—a quarter mile away from the gates—or on hands and knees in one of the four bins unloading crammed-in bags.

Southwest ramp agents don't stand around waiting to be told what to do; they make decisions and anticipate next moves while getting their immediate job done. Anyone claiming "It's not my job" gets an earful from his team mates. Southwest's policy of trusting staff to make decisions, improvise, and help out, makes their ramp agents contenders for every Triple Crown.

"We Compete Against Ourselves."

Who is Southwest's closest competitor? Bart Dockins, operations supervisor, knows: "We compete against ourselves."

Southwest has a tradition of getting better, of making the next turn better than the last. That may explain why this airline, according to the *Fortune* 2005 listing, is the number one most-admired company in the industry, and gets top scores in employee talent, use of corporate assets, long-term investment, and innovation.[5]

John Voyles, station manager at Orlando, echoes Bart: "We focus on being on time, and on local performance." Voyles, who served in the Air Force, likens each day's work to a military mission—there's "a specific target in mind."

Southwest is not aloof to the competition. They have a healthy respect for competitors, but they are less reactive to what the competition does than they are motivated to get better. Southwest's dedication to getting better keeps it out of the obituary pages.

A Desirable Future

The job ad for a ramp agent is a challenge: "Must be strong and agile, with ability to climb, bend, kneel, crawl, and work out-of-doors in hot and cold weather." Handling hundreds of seventy-poung bags and clambering in and out of luggage bins is distinctly unglamorous, yet essential.

"This work wears you out," is how Lori Fletcher, a five-foot-two member of the RDU team, candidly put it. She hopes to qualify as a flight attendant. Hers is not a vain hope. Southwest promotes from within—a policy confirmed to me numerous times by the Southwest people I met. Many enter as ramp agents and then move on to other work, from flight attendant, to operations, to head of station. Along the way, you can count on your colleagues to help you pursue your dream. A RDU ramp agent was helped by co-workers in his quest for a new job at Southwest—his team mates swapped shifts so he could go to school to qualify for that job.

Voyles, a former operations agent in Oakland, now station manger at Orlando, commented on how Southwest was different from other airlines: there is a "sense of pride, an enjoyment of the job. It's a career, not just a job."

Scott Noseworthy, a ramp agent in his first week at RDU, told me he likes how everyone helps with his training—he even enjoys the good-natured kidding he gets: "It's a family." I agree with his assessment. By my third visit to the RDU station, I was getting friendly punches in the arm and being asked, "Are you ready to join up?"

New and old staff train extensively—often for weeks at RDU and at Love Field in Dallas. The training emphasis reflects Southwest's patent approach of "hire attitude, train for skills." Training is anchored in Southwest's tradition and purpose, with heavy doses of aggressive customer service. The opportunity to learn on the job, in combination with the promote-from-within policy, helps Southwest people realize what most workers want: a desirable future.

There is a downside. The combination of the grueling, repetitive nature of ramp agent work and the potential for good pay (the hourly rate tops out at $23, plus overtime and very good benefits) can result in disgruntled employees—"lifers" is what they're called in some libraries. A few (5 percent was one estimate) ramp agents want to do something else but cannot qualify. Quitting is undesirable because it probably means a radically slimmer wallet. So, even if you are well-paid, but your job is boring, "It is easy to find things wrong," as Glen English, RDU's station manager, told me. There is no easy way out of this dilemma, even at Southwest.

Southwest does offer opportunities for frank discussion between staff and top leadership, particularly during the national programs, Leaders on Location and the Message to the Field. The Message to the Field is held six times a year, usually at the larger airports. The meeting draws as many as three thousand employees from all over the country to hear candid assessments by leadership, to get straight from the hip answers to tough questions, and—this is Southwest—to party.

Leaders on Location is an annual event with vice presidents and directors from Love Field visiting sixty-one locations. Each leader goes to two or three airports and spends time with front-line staff, and then hosts a lunch for station managers and supervisors to talk about the industry.

Recognition and respect can be as simple as RDU shop steward Will Engleman's all-you-can eat barbecue for the

staff working the July 4 holiday. English explains: Some of the "BBQs are to raise money for charity, but many are 'just because.'"

"If the Plane Sits, It's Not Making Money."

Ramp agents are impressively aware of the corporate big picture—maybe not at the detailed level of a station manager, who is conversant with revenue passenger miles and available seat miles—but they firmly grasp the connect between what they do and the airline's profitability.

The efficiency tracking sheets posted at RDU were behind by a month when I was there, but there was no shortage of understanding about performance and profit. Lori Fletcher tells it the way it is: "If the plane sits, it's not making money."

The Unstodgy Airline

Many frequent flyers can recite from memory the impersonalized verbal drill used by flight attendants to greet and inform passengers: "pull on the plastic tubing until fully extended . . ." or the ominous "or wherever your *final* destination may be" farewell.

Cabin crews at Southwest follow the FAA safety rules but in ways uniquely Southwest. On my flight to Orlando, the attendant joked during the welcome message: "If you press the attendant call button, you get to stay and clean up." There's more, "We are lowering the lights, so you get real sleepy and we don't have to do anything . . ."

Now that's different. And what may surprise the rule abiders amongst us, a sense of humor does not mean you are a slacker. This same attendant helped, more than once, an elderly passenger who had difficulty walking and seemed disoriented at times. The plane was full—with many claims on both attendants—yet she persisted in asking him about his needs, making sure he understood he could have something to drink whenever he wanted.

Southwest encourages each staff member to "feel free to be yourself." This lack of pretense contributes to mutually beneficial relationships. An example is Voyles' regarding the Orlando union shop stewards as *leadership* positions, and his meeting monthly with them to discuss issues.

Irreverence is OK at Southwest; it has a purpose in sustaining humility, in pricking inflated egos. In the ramp agent break room, I noticed a poster announcing the next Message to the Field event. At the top was the headline: I AM SOUTHWEST, I AM . . . with a blank space for the inventive to write in their attributes. At RDU, the ramp agents had scribbled in "hungry, tired, horny . . ." Glen saw the graffiti, remarked on it, but had no intention of whitewashing it.

The prevalent humility seems to reduce workplace conflict. One book tells us: "You will rarely find SW employees engaged in the kind of backbiting gossip that puts people down. It's as though there were an unwritten rule or cultural norm in the company that says, 'We don't talk bad about family member and teammates.'"[6]

While "seldom is heard a discouraging word," at Southwest, love is an often-heard word. LUV is not just Southwest's clever stock listing abbreviation. Glen English, e-mailing me that Gary Barron is no longer with Southwest, spontaneously added "He is, of course, still very respected and LUVed."

"You got to love what you do or you're not livin' life!" is how Tricia Smith sums up her on-the-job philosophy. "If you are happy and love what you do, then you will be able to deliver the customer service people deserve . . ."

In a Southwest recruiting film, an operations agent states what he likes most about working at Southwest: "The love I get from all my co-workers . . ."

Love does not mean a lack of discipline or accommodating bad performance. Quite the opposite—if you care about people, you confront issues; not doing so is a lack of concern, a lack of respect. It is unloving to avoid giving constructive criticism or termination when an employee repeatedly fails to measure up.

"Help Each Other Out."

Southwest is resourceful. Ramp agents know to plan ahead, to anticipate. Doing that ensures that equipment is where it should be. And if there is a shortage of equipment—for example, when all four gates are taken at RDU, there are not enough belt loaders to go around—that means adapting rather than delaying the process while waiting for equipment to become free. "Our turnaround time is not the result of tricks," Kelleher says, "but the result of our dedicated employees, who have the willpower and pride to do whatever it takes."[7] On an occasion, pilots have helped empty luggage bins.

In Orlando, while waiting for my connecting flight, I timed a competitor's turn. Thirty long minutes after passengers exited into the terminal, their offloaded bags were sitting in trucks on the tarmac. Finally a tractor appeared to haul off the luggage. During that thirty minutes, I saw six staff in and around the plane. Two were unloading luggage. The four who were not helping never made eye contact with the two luggage handlers. No wonder the last few bags came flying out of the bins to crash, most emphatically, on the tarmac.

I asked if "whatever it takes" was indeed widely practiced at Southwest? Bart's answer: "Some people help so much they miss their lunch."

Bill McCray, the training coordinator at RDU, strives to make sure that every ramp agent has the working knowledge "to think ahead, to anticipate, what needs doing." It's common sense to "help each other out," he told me. "Not helping is rare; you know if you are helped, you help in return."

"It's the people."

James MacGregor Burns defines leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations . . . of both leaders and followers."[8]

Paraphrasing Burns, Southwest's organizational genius is found in the ways smart leaders engage followers in an enterprise that builds on their own and their followers' values and motivations.

Bart Dockins told me about a competing airline's spying on Southwest. They were at a distant gate, using binoculars, no doubt looking for Southwest's secrets to its world-famous quick turns.

Bart phoned the other airline and told them to put away their binoculars and to come on over—there's no secret, "It's nothing we do, it's how we do it." Most of all, "It's the people."

References and Notes

1. Colleen Barrett, "Corner on Customer Service: Southwest Airlines' 'Muscle,'" *Southwest Airlines Spirit* (June 2000): 12.
2. Kevin Freiberg and Jackie Freiberg, *Nuts! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 232.
3. Interview with Glen English, Feb. 3, 2005, This and several other quotations in the text come from interviews with Southwest people during the first half of 2005. Unless otherwise noted, the quote is from the person named in the segment.
4. Mary Parker Follett, "Coordination," in *Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s,* ed. Pauline Graham (Boston: Harvard Business School Pr., 1996), 188.
5. Jerry Useem, "America's Most Admired Companies," *Fortune* 151 (Mar. 7, 2005): 66–70.
6. Freiberg and Freiberg, *Nuts!* 220.
7. Ibid., 57.
8. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 100.

A Day on the Tarmac

Glen English, station manager at RDU, is more upbeat than usual. It's the first day of spring break for the Raleigh-Durham–Chapel Hill schools and colleges: full planes, long boarding lines, and mega luggage loads. After a post holiday lull, today's the kickoff for what looks like a record setting spring and summer travel season.

"An ibuprofen kind of day," is how Bart Dockins, operations supervisor, sees it. I'm tagging along with Bart.

We start out in the break room, an open space for viewing videos and TV, hanging out, and eating at a communal lunch table flanked by wall lockers. Operations agents, pilots, flow through this space, often stopping to visit.

"*Flight 132 is in range*" breaks in on the idle chatter, an announcement giving advance notice to the ramp agents. They hear it and go back to their nachos and watching the ACC basketball finals—the Wolfpack is on.

Next comes, "*Flight 132 is on the ground,*" the all-hands-on-deck signal, the call to get to the tarmac. On the tarmac's edge, the ramp agents circle up under the covered walkway. The marshaller is already out there, upright on top of the tow tractor, greeting and guiding flight 132 into gate 26. The weather has turned raw and wet, alternating from misty showers to drenching downpours. I question my wisdom of wearing only the top of the full set of rain gear considerately provided by Glen. A lashing of wet, cold wind convinces me to yank on the yellow rain slicker pants, put on an extra sweater and clamp on my hat. Some ramp agents wear the yellow rain gear, most prefer their own mix of hooded sweatshirts or hats and wind breakers. Kneepads and bright orange earplugs are *de rigueur*.

The terrain around Southwest's four gates is a confused obstacle course of glistening puddles, uncoiled hoses, power, communication and static lines, all potential hazards to the newbie.

The incoming plane, marshaled through the wind and drizzle, looks like a ship slipping into a fogged harbor. Chocked in place and connected to the jet way, the ship rests, its skin glistening under the gate lights.

Above, the portholes give me glimpses of arriving passengers—enviably dry and warm—slowly exiting, seemingly unaware of what's happening beneath their feet: the ramp agents unlatch the holds and pull themselves in. The luggage is held in place with cargo netting, separating the crammed-to-the-rafters luggage on each side of the bin door—a full load.

The ramp agent in the bin sends the first bags down the belt loader—as the bin empties the scraped and bruised metal walls of the hold are exposed. Soon the bin swallows up the ramp agent as he works further into the bin. At the bottom of the belt loader, the ramp agent is steadily filling up the empty luggage trucks, ones he's pulled nearby.

One by one, each bag is scrutinized for its destination. The tag signals where it goes on the luggage cart—catching a misdirected bag is one more satisfied customer.

Nearby stand several top-heavy tarp covered baggage carts—the outgoing luggage and freight. The outgoing bags were sorted at the transfer-point, or T-point, a vast warehouse space behind where the ticket agent checks in your luggage.

On the side of the plane, Bart spots an off-loaded child's car seat—or, an *assistive device* in airport talk. It's not necessarily *his* job, but without hesitation he scoops it up and hurries it up the outside stairwell into the jet way for the exiting passenger to pick up. A job like that is on everyone's to-do list. If you're inbetween tasks, do it.

Southwest ramp agents ready for rain: (from L to R) Lori Fletcher, Will Engleman, Trent Williams, James Witherspoon, and Jason Wiggins.

Marshalling in an arriving plane.

I sense a mood of "let's get on with it" among the ramp agents. The rain, wind, and a couple late arriving planes make the ramp agents all the more resolute to make up minutes, doing whatever it takes to empty each plane, gas it up, clean it, fill it with luggage and passengers and send it on its way in under twenty minutes. The challenge is real—there are now four planes on the ground, all four gates full. The ramp agents work methodically and steadily, anticipating and helping each other out. Rushing about would only raise the risk level.

The four planes, the gas truck, the tractors, luggage carts, and jet ways, make the scene seem more traffic pile-up than something choreographed. The ramp agents do triage on available resources. I glimpse Glen through the rain, in a fleece sweater and jeans, wearing earplugs, as he hops up into a hold to pass out luggage—there are not enough belt loaders to go around, so the ramp agent pulls the luggage cart up to the bin and with Glen handing down luggage, they fill up the cart.

Where else but Southwest? I glance up at the cockpit windows: there's a pilot waving at me—a nice gesture for my camera? He's waving something out of his bag of tricks— a dismembered hand left over from Halloween!

For a few minutes the plane sits empty, a peaceful eddy in the tidal flow of passengers. The tide turns and new passengers come on board, looking for seats and space in the overhead bins. Simultaneously down below, the empty holds are refilled. The ramp agent pulls the bags off the staged trucks and tosses them on the belt loader, sending them up to the ramp agent in the bin. Both scan the tags to make sure the luggage and bin match their destination. Helping out, Will Engleman, the provisioner, his job done for the moment, works a belt loader sending up luggage into one of the bins.

Bart and I roar off in an open tractor with a full load, two hundred bags, probably over a ton of luggage on each truck. Leaving the gate lights, we snake our way out of the congestion into the dark, heading for luggage claim. Once thru the locked chain link gate—a sign requires the driver to wait until the gate closes before driving on—we pull up at the backside of the claim area. The flapped door through which the outside conveyor belt passes, gives me glimpses of passengers waiting for their luggage.

In a matter of minutes, Bart smoothly lifts and tosses all four trucks' worth of bags onto the conveyor belt. Trucks empty, we circle around and bump along to the security gate, back to the gates to stage the empty trucks and tractor for the next flight.

An outgoing plane, doors closed, passengers peering out of the portholes, is ready to go. The jet bridge moves away. A tow truck, connected with a bar to the front wheel and a line to the communication box, pushes back the plane, out into the open runway. Alongside, a wingman walks the plane out while the tractor driver talks with the pilot. Away from the congestion of the gates, all by itself at the top of the runway, the plane is a thing of symmetrical beauty, burgundy and sand in the reflected light. Telling the pilot, "You're good to go," the marshaller hand signals to the wing walker to unlock the tow bar and disconnect the communication link.

The plane, free of its tethering harness, like a mythological winged creature gathers speed, surges into the dark.

Back in the break room we hear: *Flight 455 is in range.*