

“It’s in the DNA”

Infusing Organizational Values at Southwest

John Lubans Jr.

Since writing my first Southwest Airlines (SWA) column—“Southwest: The Un-stodgy Airline”—I’ve flown on SWA several times a year.¹ Doing so, I’ve gotten up close to the SWA culture in practice: how they treat people, how they deliver their services, and how they deal with crises. I continue to marvel at how SWA stays ahead of its competition, how it keeps fares affordable and still makes a profit, how most of their flight attendants respond to full planes with good cheer and obvious interest in passengers. Whenever I read “Colleen’s Corner,” Colleen Barrett’s in-flight magazine presidential column, I am impressed by her uncluttered, undefensive style, and Employee focus. Yes, the word is capitalized at SWA.

Just as with my “Un-stodgy Airline” column, some readers may be wondering, why bother to read about an airline’s values in a library management magazine? Fair enough. For me there is much to gain in getting a close look at how any organization effectively infuses values so that staff members translate them into action and the highest levels of customer service. Southwest happens to be one of the few that walks the talk about its values. A look at the concrete steps SWA employs to maintain the SWA Spirit might offer up insights for our libraries. If not, at least the reader will have a better understanding of what infusing values is all about. It is more than professing—in this presidential election year—what we think the people want to hear.

Business experts told Southwest’s cofounder, Herb Kelleher, that the airline could not continue its unique culture beyond a work force of one thousand. Above that number, the airline would need to become like the larger airlines; in other words, to survive, SWA would need to get stodgy. Now at thirty-four thousand and growing, the airline still is the maverick of the industry, making money,

innovating, and providing the best customer service among the surviving airlines—seemingly always a step ahead of the competition. Other businesses, including airlines, have sought to emulate the SWA model, but a successful replication of the SWA way remains elusive. Why not simply hand out Southwest’s core values and, voila, there you have it? Or is it more complicated than that? One clue is that for Southwest’s top leadership, the SWA way is “a matter of the heart” rather than something formulaic. Herb tells of an executive who wanted to adopt the SWA way for his company, but discovered to his dismay that his new open-door policy had a downside. He told Herb, “People were tracking mud on my carpet!” For him, emulating SWA was “Too big a burden; he had more important things to do.”²

We’ve all been encouraged to enumerate our library values, to produce a library mission statement that tells everyone who we are, what we do and why we do it, and, to plan strategically for the future. Many of us have done all three. But, if those iterations inspire greater creativity, productivity, and staff morale, I have yet to see or read about it. The values and mission statements I’ve helped develop appear, in hindsight, more obligatory than essential to our work. We did them because if we didn’t do them, we’d be labeled bad managers. What does it take for an organization’s core values to drive how an organization behaves? Somehow, SWA inspires a great many people to go beyond their job descriptions—and to apply stated organizational values. How does SWA keep fresh and relevant what in other industries quickly become clichés and triggers for cynicism and suspicion? How does a core value like having a “Servant’s Heart” or a “Warrior Spirit” retain meaning for SWA’s thirty-four thousand employees?

Is SWA’s success mainly due to the charismatic Herb Kelleher and Colleen Barrett leading the way? When I asked them about what would happen to the SWA way after they stepped down this year, Herb was not worried. “It’s in the DNA,” he said.



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Organizational Culture

In my library school management class I use a self scoring test to identify the types of organizational culture in which students want to work.³ The quiz defines three types of workplace culture: systematized, supportive, and innovative and each has distinct values that sustain the culture. Organizations usually have one dominant style with touches of the other two. In my experience, most libraries are a blend of the systematized (hierarchical/bureaucratic) and the supportive. A supportive culture allows people to feel welcome at work and fairly confident in getting their fair share of whatever benefits the workplace may offer: salary, furniture, space, and so on. Competition is not encouraged and decision-making is by compromise and consensus. The hierarchical culture is largely self-explanatory, top-down, with rules and regulations in place. Work is done systematically; everyone, for the most part, knows his or her role and that role rarely changes. One day is like another. The innovative culture is fluid, quick paced, loosely structured, and offers the highest risks and the most rewards. It's entrepreneurial with lots of ambiguity and a scarcity of routine decision making. Each of the three has a downside.

Excessive rigidity can be found in the systematized culture along with a stifling reliance on methods, techniques, and procedures over soft human skills like coaching and inspiring. Limiting variation in processes appears central to the systematized culture. For example, someone once contacted me, in desperation, about helping their library streamline workflow because their institution was mandating staff reductions. When I explained my success in this area came from involving staff in idea generation and decision-making, they lost interest. Rather than a way of treating and trusting people to engage in problem solving, I suspect they were looking for a quick fix, maybe a time and motion study with productivity quotas. The supportive culture has its own problems. Ineffective employees—even entire ineffective departments—may find sanctuary in the supportive culture. I have worked with very good librarians who shied at telling an underachiever to improve or leave. They avoided; signing off on satisfactory performance appraisals when the employee deserved a “fails to meet expectations” ranking. Often these supervisors rationalized that they were doing the problem employee a favor—“Emily needs the job to support her family”—but really what they did was self serving. It was easier to see no problem than to confront the employee. Indeed in the supportive culture one might earn the enmity of one's peers by challenging poor performance.

In the high-risk innovative culture people can burn out and fail. After a span of eighty-plus hour weeks, eating at your desk, and maybe even sleeping in the office, being “pumped” about your cool job might start to fizzle out. And, the innovative culture's loose-knit organization may rush shoddy work to market. Also, without time for reflec-

tion or coaching to help a struggling coworker along, that coworker might get run over. Most of my library school students want to work in the supportive culture with an equal dose of the systematized. While my outstanding students also desire a supportive workplace, they differ in that they want the opportunity to innovate on the job and to have freedom in how they do their jobs. There is a higher risk tolerance. Their choice of workplace culture puts supportive first, followed by innovative, and just enough of the systematized to give the day-to-day work its structure. I tell the students who want more of the innovative culture that some libraries do offer what they want—often in departments, rarely in the library at large—and it will take some looking to find what they want. For all the talk about enlightened leaders, staff empowerment, learning organizations and teamwork, libraries (or is it librarians?) tend more toward the systematized and supportive cultures and steer clear of the innovative.

What about Southwest's culture? SWA functions in a highly regulated (systematized) industry. The record 10.2-million-dollar FAA fine in 2008 for SWA's failing to make mandatory fuselage inspections suggests just how regulated the industry can be. Yet, Southwest demonstrates a remarkably supportive culture and expects everyone to be resourceful and willing to innovate. More importantly, Southwest achieves what it sets out to do. It is supportive. It is innovative. It is systematized. The balance of the three has not gotten in the way of their success. If anything, it is this balance that gives them their success.

Steps for Infusing Values

First, you need to have positive values worth infusing. It appears to me that many of SWA's values were in place thirty years ago at its founding. Since then, new values have been added and others refined. All have been tested and have a basis in the tradition of the company; they appear again and again in the company's folklore. No value, as far as I can tell, is there because it's merely good for the corporate image. I looked up a few library values statements and these are notable because the values are more about the library institution than about the people working in the library. One proclaims “truth” and “universal accessibility.” Another, “communication” and “diversity.” And often we mention the Library Bill of Rights as the foundation for our values. While “civility” is expected in our interactions, there is not much guidance on what it means to behave in a civil way. “Collaboration/teamwork” claims one library as a value. Another holds forth that a “positive attitude” is expected of all employees.

A major step for infusing values is hiring people comfortable with your culture, who embrace your values. SWA invests heavily in selection and training of staff—did you know SWA does group interviews? This is quite deliberate to observe how candidates get along with other people. Up

front, SWA is clear about the qualities it desires in new staff. In short, they hire for attitude, less for certification. They know they can improve technical knowledge through training; it is far more difficult, perhaps impossible, to change personality. Also, their consistent “promote from within” practice helps retain good people and keeps the SWA message on point. Once a new hire is on board, there is continual reference to the SWA way, the SWA spirit, and its importance in the airline’s success. All orientation and leadership classes at the University of People–Southwest’s training and development academy—discuss the Southwest way and that discussion, among peers, broadens understanding of the culture. That said, SWA is aware that they have to constantly fight to stop regression. With year after year of success, it’s easy to fall into a rut. I’ve experienced it on a rare occasion, from unhelpful counter staff to flight attendants who’ve lost their customer focus. However, because these service lapses are unusual, I give SWA the benefit of the doubt.

SWA lists five basic principles for how staff is to work. The five summarize and help organize the values. The principles are listed below along with examples of actions that illuminate each application. The “core values,” listed in the appendix, flow from these principles.

- 1. Focus on the situation, issue, or behavior, not on the person.** One example enabling this principle is an “Admit Your Bloopers” exercise during leadership classes, in which trainees talk about errors they have made. By being unafraid to talk about what normally would be embarrassing for managers or staff in other organizations, SWA moves from blaming others to openly talking about how things could be done better. Colleen views her role is to empower staff to think. After some mistake, “I may call you in and suggest ways to handle a situation differently. I won’t be upset with you if you used judgment, and were leaning to the customer.”
- 2. Maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others.** SWA regularly recognizes individual, team, and corporate accomplishments. To get to the brick-fronted University of People at the back of the headquarters building, I went down a hall, 150 yards long and Texas-wide, lined with framed memorabilia, from floor to ceiling—photographs, T-shirts, programs, objects, proclamations, declarations, and celebrations. It’s palpable: We’re Southwest Airlines and we’re proud. Having FUN is a core value—right along with working hard—and the photographs along the wall show thousands of people doing just that. SWA leaders are convinced that if you treat your staff in a compassionate and caring way with generous amounts of humor, then that good feeling will extend to the customer in all their contacts with the airline.
- 3. Maintain constructive relationships with customers and coworkers.** Yes, you can be fired at SWA. If it turns

out you are incompatible with the SWA values, then there will be a parting of ways. However, if you are asked to leave, you will not be surprised. Performance appraisals are respectful, very frank, and face to face. Tough love is the generic phrase for how SWA supervises. Following September 11, when other airlines declined to refund tickets for people afraid to fly, Southwest never hesitated. When a customer asked for a refund, they got it. Some sent the refund checks back to SWA to help them get past the downturn in business.⁴

- 4. Take the initiative to make things better.** The company encourages people to think like mavericks—to think service before adherence to rules. When the events of September 11 forced all airlines to stop flying, one of the SWA planes was forced to land at Grand Rapids, an airport not served by Southwest. Grand Rapids told the pilot that he would have to wait on the tarmac four hours for a gate. Spotting an idle belt luggage loader, the crew improvised. They pulled it up and led the passengers off the plane down the belt carrier. From there, they bussed them to Amtrak and paid for their tickets.⁵
- 5. Lead by example.** To quote the sage, Herb Kelleher: “Most things in life are easy to envision. It’s easy to conceptualize something. The really difficult part is executing it. I mean, we can sit around and talk about [infusing values] and both of us walk out of this room and never do another thing . . . and we would enjoy, perhaps, a stimulating conversation, but the point is that when you leave the room you have to go do it!”⁶ Obviously, Kelleher’s and Barrett’s personal values have indelibly defined the Southwest culture. Herb’s personal philosophy is that, “Since we are all going to die [someday] . . .” instead of seeing who can lie or steal the most, “it is important in all of our dealings to exhibit good ethical values, to demonstrate the importance of the well being of other people, including the customer.” Values are not something you acquire out of thin air or from a library workshop handout. Values that produce desired outcomes are ones you believe. They guide you, instinctively and intuitively, on how to relate to staff and to library users. Barrett, known affectionately as the Queen of Heart, told me three short stories of how her values were formed.

When she was a legal secretary, she recalled how in one law office a long-term secretary was let go without explanation. The boss was not satisfied with her performance but never spoke to her about what he wanted. Colleen vowed that no employee would be surprised about where they stood in her organization. If there are problems, they have to be talked through and resolved. If problems continue you may need to move on, but you will know full well why. And, that is how SWA works.

When Colleen was Herb’s legal secretary prior to SWA’s founding, she noted how he was always wanting

to help new clients and then having to delay on promises made to existing clients. This was not good for Herb or for the law office. Her advice to Herb gave rise to the underlying customer service philosophy at SWA: under promise, over deliver!

What influenced Colleen's way of leading? As a young girl in Vermont she realized: "I was born to serve." She explained her servant leader attitude "comes from wanting to please and being an overachiever." Finally, another contrarian story explains why windows are scarce at SWA's headquarters. There are plenty of windows in the public areas, a vast lobby and a roof top cafeteria, just not in offices, including those for the executive staff. The windowless philosophy, as told at the University of People, is all Herb at his quintessentially egalitarian best. It is his stand against the infighting for the corner office and the rug on the floor, and other so called "perks of position" that get in the way of real work.

If you have time and interest, I would enjoy hearing a story or two—the folklore—that highlight and infuse your library's values.

References and Notes

1. John Lubans Jr., "Southwest: The Un-stodgy Airline" *LA&M* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 142-46.
2. I interviewed SWA's Herb Kelleher (cofounder and chairman of the board) and Colleen Barrett (president) on January 28, 2008, at Love Field in Dallas. And, I attended two leadership classes at SWA's University of People on January 29, 2008. Unless otherwise noted, quoted items, including the Core Values, are from my two-day visit.
3. George H. Litwin and Robert A. Stringer, *Motivation*

and *Organizational Climate* (Boston: Harvard Bus. School Pr., 1968).

4. *Southwest Airlines 9/11: Lessons in Leadership (Freedom Isn't Free)*. DVD. Dallas, 2008.
5. Ibid.
6. Herb Kelleher, *The Art of Coaching in Business*. DVD. Greylock Associates, Baltimore, 1995.

Appendix. Core Values at Southwest

Warrior Spirit

- Work hard
- Desire to be the best
- Be courageous
- Display a sense of urgency
- Persevere
- Innovate

Servant's Heart

- Follow the Golden Rule
- Adhere to the Basic Principles
- Treat others with respect
- Put others first
- Be egalitarian
- Demonstrate proactive customer service
- Embrace the SWA family

Fun-LUVing Attitude

- Have FUN
- Don't take yourself too seriously
- Maintain perspective (balance)
- Celebrate successes
- Enjoy your work
- Be a passionate team player