

Southwest Airlines and the MBTI® assessment creating a corporate culture that soars

How do you grow a major airline with a long track record of sustained growth and whose revenues reach into the billions?

You could cut payroll and employee benefits so you can offer lower fares. But Southwest has a reputation for on-time flights, low number of customer complaints, top-notch safety record, and meticulous baggage handling. Do you achieve this by keeping a tight rein on employees performing with robot-like efficiency?

The answer is surprisingly hopeful in a corporate world in which job satisfaction, security, and employment seem to be at odds with profit maximization.

Southwest's secret is that it encourages employees to be innovative; to communicate, understand, and care; to be individuals—mavericks even. Southwest is not afraid to use the “p” words: people, personal, personalities. Even the place in which employees are hired shares this spirit in its name. Southwest doesn't have a Human Resource Department—it has a People and Leadership Development Department!

Business Challenges

- Continuing the growth of a successful airline
- Maintaining high levels of customer service

Company Profile

Founded in 1967 (as Air Southwest), Southwest Airlines is one of the largest airlines in the United States. With headquarters in Dallas, Texas, it flies to 100 destinations, has a fleet size of around 750 and has more than 58,000 employees.

Southwest Airlines

Solution

Southwest is turning around long-held corporate beliefs by acting on the conviction that a business is not an entity— it's people. Herb Kelleher, co-founder of Southwest Airlines, stated emphatically that "competitors have tried and failed to copy us because they cannot copy our people." The airline, described as an "American icon" by a survey conducted to determine the top 10 role model companies in America, believes the best way to succeed is to treat employees with respect and give them the latitude and encouragement they need to do their jobs better than anyone thought possible.

So how does an airline that provides 2,300 flights per day and employs more than 31,000 people support individuality, innovation, and fun without creating chaos and anarchy?

University for People: developing leaders, making a difference

In large part, its success is due to employee education, much of which takes place in Southwest Airlines' festive learning center: The University for People. University director Elizabeth Bryant explains that Southwest sees learning as a never-ending process. Individual employees become "intentional learners" who look to learn in everyday experiences rather than occasional classes.

University for People trainers, known as facilitators, build a foundation for this ongoing learning environment using two basic tools. One is a supervisory leadership class called "Leadership Southwest Style," which utilizes the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) assessment for self-discovery, as well as for helping supervisors understand differences with their co-workers.

Solution

- Focus on the P words: people, personal, personalities
- Embed a company culture that encourages people to be innovative
- Use MBTI tool as part of this people-oriented culture

“ In these classes we saw a lot of 'aha!' moments. Behaviors that might have once caused misunderstanding and frustration were now viewed through a different filter. ”

Elizabeth Bryant,
Director of University for People,
Southwest Airlines

Southwest Airlines

Results

The Myers-Briggs® assessment has been used with great success at Southwest in team-building, conflict resolution, and leadership programs. Because most problem areas center around communication, Southwest uses the assessment as a diagnostic tool to help employees identify how obstacles, stress, and potential conflict may arise.

Southwest also uses the MBTI assessment as a tool for intact work teams. According to Bryant, “This learning forms the foundation for many team-building classes at Southwest Airlines. The MBTI assessment helps leaders and teams by providing them with communication tools, helping them to recognize and celebrate their differences. The teams then use this knowledge to achieve better results.”

The MBTI assessment can also provide the foundation for building trust within developing teams. A recent example of this involved one department whose leaders were so new they hadn’t developed a strong sense of trust.

Southwest employed the MBTI tool as a method for understanding each other’s differences, enabling the leaders to understand how their co-workers could approach the same challenge from a completely different perspective. The MBTI tool helped these leaders understand the “why” behind their co-workers’ behaviors, which helped in building trust and empathy within the department. “In these classes we saw a lot of ‘aha!’ moments,” said Bryant. “Behaviors that might have once caused misunderstanding and frustration were now viewed through a different filter.”

In an industry compelled by competition and rapid-fire change, an intelligent and motivated workforce is imperative. The MBTI tool helps Southwest Airlines’ University for People provide the added knowledge and understanding employees need to solve problems on the fly.

Results

- Improved ability to identify obstacles, stress triggers and potential conflict situations
- Greater appreciation of differences within intact teams
- Higher levels of trust in developing teams



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