

Culture within organizations: southwest airlines

[Business](#), [Organization](#)



A culture is a set of values that are adopted by people who co-habit any place. It consists of shared traits and lifestyles. Within an organization, culture refers to values and norms that are prevalent throughout the workplace and amongst the employees. This includes their mannerisms, attitudes, and work ethic. Culture within an organization exerts control over the behavior of people. Growth and success of a company depends largely on the type of culture which is prevalent within an organization. Many different types of culture exist in businesses today.

Certain cultures encourage employees to work and grow together as a family—thereby creating unity. Others may place emphasis on higher ranking employees, which leaves those at the bottom of the hierarchy bitter or resentful, creating a workplace which may not be friendly or comfortable. Some companies may opt to stick to what they know, thereby stifling creativity and growth by eliminating experimentation. On the other hand, a company may be overly innovative and always looking for new ideas and taking new risks.

Although this sounds good in theory, it may lead to an unstable work environment. Culture can either make or break an organization. Culture is not a tangible object. It is the result of management's beliefs and values and employees' implementation of those beliefs and values. It exists within all organizations and can be determined, for example, by looking at the dress code within the workplace. It can also be seen by observing employee interaction and behavior. One can also get an idea of an organization's culture by taking note of its dealings with those outside of the company (i.e., customer service). Culture makes up the personality of an organization. It is

crucial that a positive organizational culture is created, taught and adhered to. It can be used to improve the efficiency and work ethic of employees in an organization. It also has a powerful influence over the behavior of individuals and drives performance of the workforce. A strong personality adds character to an individual. Likewise, organizational culture gives a business its own special identity. It creates unity among employees and embeds in them the spirit of teamwork.

An example of an organization which has a strong culture that has helped it thrive in the aviation industry is Southwest Airlines. Southwest Airlines (SWA) was founded by Rollin King, M. Lamar Muse and Herb Kelleher in 1966. They began servicing Dallas, Houston and San Antonio in 1971, after winning a legal battle fought in the U. S. Supreme Court. The airline started off by offering six daily roundtrip flights between Dallas and San Antonio, and 12 daily roundtrip flights between Dallas and Houston.

They began with one simple notion: “ If you get your passengers to their destinations when they want to get there, on time, at the lowest possible fares, and make darn sure they have a good time doing it, people will fly your airline” ([www. southwest. com](http://www.southwest.com)). This notion has led to a very unique culture at SWA—one that puts customer service at its center. This can be seen through their mission statement, as per their website: “ dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit”.

Their exemplary form of customer service comes as a direct result of how employees at SWA are treated. “ We are committed to provide our Employees a stable work environment with equal opportunity for learning
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and personal growth. Creativity and innovation are encouraged for improving the effectiveness of Southwest Airlines. Above all, Employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer” (Freiberg and Freiberg).

SWA management has created a culture where employees are treated as the company’s number one asset. There is limited emphasis on formal organizational structure and the work environment combines humor with responsibility. Their happy workforce creates maximum productivity—willingly. Trust and respect between the workers and management is an integral part of the company’s success. SWA has exemplified that culture starts from within. Passion shown on the inside will reflect outwards and customers will see it. SWA has been able to do this consistently.

Customers see the passion exerted by SWA employees and it makes them want to travel with them. The uplifting, spirited personalities of employees keep customers coming back for more. This can be seen in the fact that SWA has consecutively recorded profits for the last 40 years (www. southwest.com). The positive attitudes exerted by SWA employees are contagious and trickle down to its customers. As reported on the company website, “Southwest Airlines has consistently received the lowest ratio of complaints per passengers boarded of all Major U. S. carriers that have been reporting statistics to the Department of Transportation since September 1987. ” The spirit that exists throughout SWA empowers its employees to believe in themselves, the service they are providing, the business as a whole, and the customers that they serve. The unique culture keeps employee morale high.

All employees, including flight attendants, customer service reps, and baggage handlers, are encouraged to take whatever action they deem necessary to meet customer needs or help fellow workers (Milliman). This has led to both employee and customer loyalty.

Employees feel needed which results in a devotion to the company. In turn, customers experience exceptional service where they truly are put first, creating a sense of belonging. Much of SWA's success is due to the willingness of its leadership to be innovative. Founder Herb Kelleher studied California-based Pacific Southwest Airlines extensively and used many of the airline's ideas to form the corporate culture at Southwest. Early on, they adopted the "Long Legs and Short Nights" theme for stewardesses on board typical Southwest Airlines flights.

They selected beautiful flight attendants with unique personalities and dressed them in hot pants and go-go boots to ensure a fun and one-of-a-kind traveler's experience (<http://avstop.com>). Operating out of Love Field, "love" became their promotional theme. Flight attendants would serve "love potions" and "love bites" (otherwise known as drinks and peanuts) to the company's clientele of mostly male business fliers (Pederson). Many decisions made by Kelleher have produced positive outcomes for SWA. For example, since its inception, SWA chose to buy its commercial airplanes from one manufacturer.

This decision has allowed them to decrease operational expenses, as well as reduce maintenance and repair costs for their large fleet. By choosing a single supplier, the need for customer support, maintenance, monitoring, training, etc. has been reduced, thereby reducing costs for the company.

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They have also trimmed the time it takes to perform ground duties, once their airplanes land. This has led to a quicker turnaround time for the next flight to take off, thereby leading to profits for the company.

Another move by SWA which keeps competitors at bay is their reservation system. Reservations are taken only through the internet, thereby reducing costs of using ticket counter employees. This method saves both the customer and the airline time and money. Kelleher's paradigm for success starts with the core of the company—its employees. Hiring motivated people and allowing them to incorporate their creativity in day-to-day activities is key. By giving employees decision making abilities, they are made to feel important.

A sense of pride takes root within each employee, which positively impacts the customers that they deal with. This is reflected in their work output and creates greater efficiency, which leads to profitability for the company. Additionally, happier employees are able to provide better customer service, in turn making the experience an all around positive one. As Amy Marhoffer, Culture Communications and Planning specialist at SWA puts it, " Happy Employees= Happy Customers= Increased Business/Profits= Happy Shareholders. Although compensation is often viewed as the number one motivator, Kelleher understands the importance that employee morale plays. A little bit of fun can translate into a lot of productivity. Bailey explains how positive morale can produce more efficiency: " SWA, after pay cuts at other airlines, has the industry's highest wages. But because of efficient work habits, measured in how much it spends to fly a passenger a given distance, its costs are the lowest among big airlines" (Bailey).

It is important to note that the success of SWA is due not only to the culture but also its ability to adapt to the industry's needs. The airline industry in particular, is one that is heavily dependent on customer service; the happier customers are, the more positive their experience will be. Unfortunately, there is plenty of untapped productivity among corporations stuck in the old ways of oppression and tyranny. Kelleher's approach shows that he understands people; he allows them to be themselves, which creates a positive work environment and a desire to be the best.

He has successfully created a culture that has the properties of fun, entertainment and genuine care at its core. When Southwest started in 1971 they were just a small regional carrier flying from Houston to Dallas. Over the course of the last 40+ years, they have successfully expanded into a major airline carrier. SWA is now America's largest low-fare carrier, serving more customers domestically than any other airline. They are comprised of nearly 46, 000 employees and serve more than 100 million customers each year.

SWA operates more than 3, 000 flights a day, with its subsidiary AirTran operating an additional 520 flights a day ([www. southwest. com](http://www.southwest.com)). They would not be where they are today without the innovative thinking of its leaders and the strong culture they created. Although corporate culture is not a tangible object, the results of a successful culture will produce tangible success. SWA has positioned itself for competitive advantage by creating a work environment which permits people to be their best selves and consistently outperform their competitors.

It has been able to create and sustain a strong, positive culture which attracts not only the best talent, but a loyal customer base as well. The tremendous growth and profit of SWA brings to light how corporate culture, employee morale and customer service can play an integral part in the overall success of a corporation. These intangible elements are what make SWA an excellent example of a successful corporate culture. Works Cited

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