

# Southwest airlines and employee engagement strategy management essay

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



The company's operating strategy mainly emphasizes point-to-point service, instead of hub and spoke services employed by major American Airlines. Point-to-point service enables direct nonstop routing through lessening connections, delays and total trip time. Consequently 78 percent of Southwest's customers fly non-stop. As of December 2008, the company's average aircraft trip stage length was 636 miles with an average duration of around 1.8 hours (Datamonitor: Southwest Airlines, 2009).

This strategy also allows the firm to give their market with frequent conveniently time flights and low fares. The firm also provides services like Dallas Love Field to Houston Hobby 30 weekday roundtrips; Phoenix to Las Vegas, 17 weekday roundtrips and Los Angeles International to Oakland, 18 weekday roundtrips. This service also complements high frequency short haul routes with long haul continuous service between destinations including Phoenix and Tampa Bay, Las Vegas and Orlando, San Diego and Baltimore and Nashville and Oakland. Furthermore, Southwest serves downtown airport that consists of the following Houston Hobby, Chicago Midway, Baltimore-Washington International, Dallas Love Field, Long Island Islip, Oakland, Burbank, San Jose, Manchester, Providence and Ft. Lauderdale/Hollywood. These airports are less crowded than other airlines' hub airports (Datamonitor: Southwest Airlines 2009).

As U. S. Department of Transportation stated, Southwest Airlines is the biggest air carriers in the United States in terms of figures of originating passengers boarded and the number of scheduled domestic departures. The company's operating strategy allows them to attain high asset utilization and

consistent on-time performance. It also increase company revenues and tap lucrative markets (Datamonitor: Southwest Airlines 2009).

The company operates using a low cost structure that is created to enable them to charge low fees to their clients. The firm has lower unit costs on average compared to major carriers. The firm's low costs structure is supported by Company's reliance upon single aircraft type, their operationally efficient point-to-point structure and its highly productive workforce. The use of single aircraft type allows the company to simplify scheduling, flight operations, maintenance and training activities (Southwest Airlines Co. 2009).

## **Employee Engagement Plan**

Employee Engagement Plan of the company has four levels due to the fact that employee engagement involves considering two principles. The first principle is that the company can acquire the biggest payoff by the engaged employees who can incorporate more value to the firm or those who can achieve the strong job motivation. The second principle is that no single engagement strategy can be considered as effective in all employees, therefore it would be advisable to experiment first before implementing the strategy (McCrimmon 2009).

The first level is the basis level of engage that employs motivational factors that are very much familiar to the corporate world for years including effective supervision, unambiguous direction, career/professional development, employee empowerment, open communication, recognition

and establishing a great work environment. These strategies involving doing something for staff but most of them are paternalistic in nature. While this basic level of engagement is clearly essential, using it alone (without employing higher levels of employee engagement) offers minimal chances of achieving successful results (McCrimmon 2009). For instance, when employees complaint about poor working conditions (basis level of engagement), they are actually complaining the feeling of being undervalued, disengaged, powerlessness and low sense of self worth. Since they prefer to blame something not related to their social need, poor working conditions serves as their scapegoat (McCrimmon 2009).

Therefore, fixing these elements encourages employees to search for something else to blame. In great places to work, poor working conditions do not exist. However, ownership still focuses on managerial ranks, therefore, nothing has changed fundamentally. Employees often resign or claim early retirement with a sense of frustration often stating slow career progress. However, the sense of powerlessness and being undervalued is really the main reason for leaving the organization (McCrimmon 2009).

The second level involves considering employees as suppliers of services. However, acquiring this level requires a corporate culture that encourages personnel to consider themselves as handling their own businesses, being suppliers of services. Being paternalistic in nature, majority of organizational cultures acquire so much responsibility in developing their people (McCrimmon 2009).

The third level of employee engagement is engaging leadership that necessitates culture change since it requires managers to change their perspectives concerning their roles. This is beyond second level engagement since this requires encouraging managers to become more proactive in searching input from employees though it also places more pressure to perform more thinking and should not become satisfied of simply following directions (McCrimmon 2009).

Employees who prefer this level of engagement should learn more about business strategy in order to reach and engage higher level discussions regarding fundamental business direction. This is more difficult to attain since this deprives management of some of the authority they use to achieve their career success. They should be rewarded for team success and not only for their great ideas and decisions (McCrimmon 2009).

The fourth level of engagement consists of higher level of culture change. Rather than consider employee ideas as suggestions, their ideas are employed in bottom-up leadership. Higher confidence is thus necessary for employees in order to challenge their bosses while managers should develop the sense of receptivity when challenged (McCrimmon 2009). For instance, flight stewardess have closer connections with their clients, therefore, they are more aware with the needs of their clients. Flight stewardess' suggestions should be valued by managers and must be considered in improving services provided by the airlines. They should also have representatives that could challenge business strategies of the company especially if these strategies are contrary to the clients' needs.

## **Steps of the Change Program you would implement to embed Employee Engagement**

Engagement is defined as the positive two way relationship between employees and their organization. These two are both aware of their own and other's needs and they have their respective ways of to satisfy those needs. Employees and organizations who are engaged will work an extra mile since they see the benefit of doing so (Armstrong, 2007, p. 272).

### **Level One**

The first step in embedding in Employee Engagement is starting with the basics-level one Employee Engagement. This involves effective management, unambiguous direction, career or professional development, employee empowerment, open communication, employee recognition and establishing a good work environment. Managers should implement strategies that promote aforementioned elements. The first one is to encourage open communications (McCrimmon 2009).

Open Communications can be defined as a climate that encourage workforce to participate in decision making. Employees should also feel that the organization trusts them in order to sustain the integrity of communication channels. Since not every employee is capable of making specific executive decisions, in some way, employee can participate in decision making whether through ideas suggested during staff meeting or a simple suggestion box (Open Communication: How Important Is It Really? N. d.)

If employees feel they have a share in improving company operations, they sense confidence to the organization's future. They will eventually

demonstrate the best work ethics within the company. However, implementing this strategy can be difficult since this might earn oppositions from other executives (Open Communication: How Important Is It Really? N. d.). While the CEO has the right to implement this strategy despite the opposition, the success of open communication also necessitates initiatives of other executives and managers. In this sense, CEO should first learn to encourage dissents of open communications so that they would be able to participate effectively.

Good work environment also serve as the fundamental part of employee engagement. Good work environment involves prevention of accidents and work occupation injuries that represent economic burden for employees, employers and to the society as a whole. Within the airline perspectives, this requires ensuring that the aircrafts are in good condition. Facilities and equipment inside the aircraft should also be maintained properly. If the employees feel that they are safe, they become more productive and provide services of higher quality (Why is a good working environment good for business? 2008). Good work environment could also involve sufficient space for employees to move freely when they perform their work.

Another important component of level 1 employee engagement is the Employee Empowerment that pertains to a process the allows or authorizes every person to think, act, behavior and control decision making and work in autonomous fashion. It can also be defined as a state of feeling self-empowered to take control of their respective destinies. Managers often have the power to provide that empowerment on the people under him

(Heathfield 2010). As a result, these people often wait for bestowment of their empowerment and the manager would then ask why his/her subordinates do not act in empowered ways. This often results to negative concept of empowerment. In this sense, managers should initiate bestowing empowerment and the organization must establish a work environment that fosters skills and desire of their employees to perform in an empowered manner. The company has the responsibility to eliminate the barriers that restrict the ability of their employees to perform in empowered fashion (Heathfield 2010).

Career development pertains to organized planning process employed to align the needs of a business with employees' career goals. Creating a career development plan can support employees in performing their work more efficiently. Furthermore, these plans can be more beneficial for employees who might want to transfer in a company or search for other jobs in the future. Managers and human resources personnel often have direct responsibility in implementing career development process. HR professionals could create a compensation structure that satisfies both the business needs that enables career growth (Faria, 2003).

For example, improvements in their performance might result to higher compensation or bonuses such as all expense paid travel. The executives and managers of the airline should elicit their support in career development programs like these. Otherwise, such compensation structure will not be implemented in the first place. Employees should feel that the organization encourages them to become more mature professionally.



Clear direction involves clear communications of organizations' expectations towards their employees. Organization should ensure that their expectations are clearly communicated to their employees since this serve as contributing factor to employee satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Communicating clear performance expectation often begins with strategic planning process of executives (Heathfield 2010). The way they convey such plans and goals to their employees is necessary to develop an organization wherein all components are linked and reaching the same direction. Executive leaders should clearly communicate their expectations for the team's performance and anticipated outcomes to match each area of the organization with their mission and vision. They must also define the organization's culture of teamwork preferred by the company (Heathfield 2010).

## **Level Two**

Employees must learn to consider their leaders (e. g. executives and managers) as customers and be trained on marketing and developing their businesses themselves. Business development will encourage being proactive to become more updated with the needs of internal customers and promote creative thinking regarding additional ways for adding value to the services provided (McCrimmon 2009).

If employee performs extra responsibilities for additional pay, they could sense some ownership that small business owners also sense. Consequently, employee might demonstrate higher level of initiative to enhance performance of the firm. Career development, restructured as business development would be based on employee initiatives (McCrimmon 2009).

However, the engagement of this level requires managers to treat their subordinates as supplier partners and promote a sense of ownership over the business. To become successful suppliers of services, employee requires training and support to provide more solution and become less dependent on managers rather than spoon feeding them (McCrimmon 2009).

### **Level Three and Level Four of Employee Engagement**

This level of engagement necessitates changing from valiant, transformational leadership towards a more engaging style, where leaders shift from being solution generating players to facilitators, coaches and catalysts (to be discussed further in section C).

### **Role that the Leadership Team should take in the implementation of that plan and the preferred Leadership Team that must be practiced.**

The leadership style within the airlines should be incorporated with humility. As suggested by Jim Collins in Level 5 leaders, incorporating humility among leaders have a good reason: the industry is too complicated and fast changing, therefore it would be hard for one person to realize them all (McCrimmon 2009). Executive leaders and managers who often base their confidence on their capability of developing solutions can face difficulties at times when they seem confident. It would be easier to base their confidence on their capability to ask some facilitative questions. If compared to sports, business is all about playing coach instead of sitting on the bench simply coaching (McCrimmon 2009).

Leaders who are solution generators often ask factual questions to realize issues so that they could create their own solutions. Unlike solution generators, engaging leaders often acquire ideas instead of facts through asking either of the following questions (McCrimmon 2009):

What do you think is the major issue?

What are the options you consider in addressing this problem?

What is your chosen option and why?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the preferred option?

Who are the people that must be involved in the implementation?

What will it take and how long to implement this plan? (McCrimmon 2009)

Engaging questions should not be limited to brainstorming sessions or quality circle meetings. Leaders can ask these questions whenever their subordinates come to them with the issue. Managers should restructure their role from authoritative manager and solution generator to being catalyst, coach and facilitator. Attaining the third level of engagement requires managers to eliminate some of their most loved responsibilities such as being so much involved in significant business problems and providing solutions for the most challenging strategic issues. It would be insufficient to ask employees how they could solve their work-related issues (McCrimmon 2009).

One advantage of changing leadership style is this is simple to implement compared to cultural change. The latter is often time consuming and expensive but with minimal effort, it would be easier to encourage managers to become more engaging. Managers must reposition their roles as facilitators, catalysts to prevent violating employee expectations that managers should be answer givers. Managers might selective persuade some of their subordinates, specifically those receptive ones, to consider themselves as self employed service providers. Managers could establish processes that can confirm the productivity gains of such processes (McCrimmon 2009).

Furthermore, as airlines shift across the four levels of employee engagement, the organizational gradually minimize the gap between employee empowerment and dependency. A transformational leadership that can be heroic in nature focuses on psychological perception of ownership and increases dependency. Considering that leadership should be demonstrated as bottom-up is valuable processes in equalizing this power balance, therefore this could develop more shared ownership and solid group effort is supporting organization to become more prosperous. The last three levels of employee engagement have a common characteristic: they involve employees' minds and stimulate them to perform more thinking for themselves and for the company's future (McCrimmon 2009).

The fifth level leadership consists of strategies that involve employees by making providing them a stronger sense of giving direction to the firm or at least, some parts of it. People are inherently passionate of their ideas and

when employee promotes new products and process improvements to their managers, they usually demonstrate much more passion than they do for their regular work (McCrimmon 2009).

The complex concept of leadership that might involve challenging the status quo has a strand. Leadership is linked to a romantic notion- particularly people would like to view themselves as leaders for the same objectives they want to imitate their idols in sports, movies or music. However, unlike leaders, subordinates are often encouraged to become more engaged using bottom-up thought leadership. One good example is the Sony employee who created Playstation and influenced his senior management to create it. Similarly, staff of ticketing department could share their ideas on how to accelerate and improve ticketing process. They could also share their ideas on how to minimize losses associated with ticket cancellation, for instance, imposing cancellation fees to discourage passengers from cancelling their tickets. Nevertheless, the main important feature of this leadership is the courage to share their ideas despite of potential risks associated with it (McCrimmon 2009).

In addition, the culture change necessary to implement the fifth level of employee engagement completely involves considering that much of executive activity is actually management that is suitable for fostering and supporting a coaching function. In this case, executive must only demonstrate leadership if they could promote a better fashion (McCrimmon 2009).

When executives perform in a facilitative fashion, employing an engaging question, they are actually employing a managerial technique, instead of demonstrating leadership. Therefore, engaging leadership as mentioned in level 3 engagement is actually an engaging management. If they want to attain a passionate degree of employee engagement, it is to remove their monopoly on leadership. They must incorporate humility and emotional intelligence to change their identity to an executive that demonstrates an engaging leadership. Implementing such a major mind shift necessitates executives to disregard their pride and ego needs and view the potential of employees' engagement through sharing their leadership tasks (McCrimmon 2009).