

The Importance of Culture



Twenty years ago, most companies and business schools didn't talk about culture. In fact, most folks thought culture had to do with Beethoven or fine French wine. Well, 20 years ago at Southwest Airlines, Culture was as key an issue as it is today, and we respect it so much that we even capitalize the word. Colleen Barrett, Southwest's President Emeritus, established a systemwide Culture Committee, which comprises representatives from each major work location. They meet quarterly to share ideas on how to keep our

Culture vibrant and strong.

We knew we had a great business plan, great Employees, and a great tradition, but so did many other airlines as the '90s rolled around. The biggest difference between Southwest and the rest was the attention to Culture. Your business plan is what you are, but Culture is who you are. Unlike Southwest, some of those other carriers abandoned their culture as they struggled to adapt to the turbulent '90s. They lost sight of the fact that a strong Culture is the responsibility of every Employee, no

matter his or her work title. Culture needs support from Leadership and the Frontline Employee. Without both, it will surely wither.

One of the things that so impressed me when we began looking to acquire AirTran was their Culture. Any time you join two large entities—especially airlines—together, similar cultures are critical to success. And I see similarities in the way AirTran Employees treat Customers and in the way they treat each other. At Southwest, three qualities define Living the Southwest Way: Warrior Spirit, Servant's Heart, and Fun-LUUVing Attitude. AirTran folks possess all three of these traits, even if they may be called by different terms. Faced with early difficulties, AirTran Employees had to work hard, be courageous, and persevere, all of which define and strengthen the Warrior Spirit. The Servant's Heart is evidenced by treating others with respect and putting others first; and a Fun-LUUVing Attitude comes through celebrating successes, having FUN, and being passionate about what you do. I'm happy to say that we've already observed and experienced those qualities in our new AirTran Family.

Change is the order of the day over the upcoming months as we become one airline. Southwest's history will expand when AirTran's accomplishments are added to it. However, our Culture will grow only stronger as the AirTran folks join us because they reinforce the same principles that we have held for the past 40 years.

Operation: Kick Tail

A Customer wrote us to tell of her travel experience over the Easter holiday. Her fiancé recently deployed to Afghanistan, and she now carries a "deployment bear" on her travels. The little teddy bear wears army fatigues, and she photographs him at places where she wishes her fiancé could accompany her. While she was waiting for her flight to board at Dallas Love Field (DAL), she asked two of our Employees to let her photograph them with the bear. "Their enthusiasm and kindness were unmatched," she writes. "They made cute comments such as 'We love the bear,' and 'We love our troops.' This kind gesture brought tears to my eyes." She adds, "These outstanding women made my day!"

Gary Kelly
Chairman, President, and CEO
Southwest Airlines