1-2004

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John M. Palladino
Eastern Michigan University, john.palladino@emich.edu

Palladino, John M., "Review of The Southwest Airlines Way: Using the Power of relationships to Achieve High Performance by J. H. Gittell." (2004). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 109.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/109

Book Review

John M. Palladino

THE SOUTHWEST AIRLINES WAY: USING THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS TO ACHIEVE HIGH PERFORMANCE. J. H. Gittell. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

In *The Southwest Airlines Way: Using the Power of Relations to Achieve High Performance*, Gittell, an assistant professor of management at Brandeis University and a member of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Global Airline Industry Program, provides a template of female leadership.

Gittell described Southwest Airlines as a gemstone in the industry. After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, Southwest did not lay off employees; yet, the airline showed profit each year. Southwest's 2002 $9 billion total market value was greater than all other major airlines combined (Gittell, 2003, p. 3). *Fortune* magazine called Southwest "the most successful airline in history," praise that coincided with the magazine's affirmation that Southwest is one of "100 best companies to work for in America" (p. 3).

Southwest's success permeates the United States. Success in new market areas has led the United States Department of Transportation to dub the Dallas, Texas-based company as "the dominant airline in the United States" (p. 7). Thirty days after Southwest began service between Chicago and Louisville, the Louisville market tripled. The same "Southwest effect" occurred in Manchester, NH where, after the first year of Southwest's services, air traffic increased 75% over previous estimates (p. 184). Gittell reported that by the end of 2002, Southwest "was the third largest airline in the United States, and the largest in terms of the number of flights per day" (p. 5).

At the core of Southwest's success is its ability to sustain the presidential leadership that Herb Kelleher initiated. Kelleher knew it was important to step aside and let new leaders assume the roles of CEO and President. One chief pilot summarized the sentiment of employees: "He picks sharp people. There will never be another Herb Kelleher, but the spirit will carry on" (p. 68). Gittell reported that Kelleher demonstrated to his employees and the airline industry that he could identify an ideal leader to become Southwest's

About the Author

John M. Palladino is an assistant professor of special education at Eastern Michigan University, specializing in the areas of emotional impairments and foster care collaboration. He is a former elementary school principal, special education administrator, and middle school teacher. His experiences include working with immigrant youth and families and children residing in foster care.

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second President. His choice was Colleen Barrett, "the first top woman executive in the United States airline industry" (p. 69). Barrett commented:

> First of all, the airline industry really isn't known for its women. That is a fact. But the glass ceiling has never been an issue for me at Southwest Airlines, so I've never particularly thought of that. But I have heard really big-dog people saying how great it is. It makes me feel great for women. It's kind of humbling. And I wish my mother was alive, because she'd love it. (p. 69)

Barrett and Southwest's Best Practices

Gittell dedicated a chapter to each of Barrett's unique practices. "Other organizations can adopt Southwest's powerful organizational practices without attempting to recreate its culture" (p. 197). A summary of Barrett's practices and the implications for school leaders is provided.

Lead with Credibility and Caring

Gittell noted that "not every leader of a successful organization must be charismatic . . . however, what successful organizations do need from each of their leaders is credibility and caring" (p. 72). In describing their new president, one employee said Barrett "is up there with Jesus Christ, in our eyes" (p. 58) because of her credibility, honesty, and ability to gain employee trust.

Similarly, school administrators strive to gain the trust of teachers, students, and community members. Reiss and Hoy (1998) reported "little scholarly attention has been paid to either faculty loyalty in schools or loyalty as a multidimensional construct" (p. 4). Reiss and Hoy administered the Rutgers School Loyalty Questionnaire (RSLQ) to 120 New Jersey teachers. They affirmed their hypothesis that the "greater the

degree of openness in the managerial level, the greater the degree of loyalty to the principal" (p. 10). Likewise, Gittell concluded that Barrett gains trust by maintaining open lines of communication. A Southwest pilot commented: "They [Barrett and her assistants] communicate with customers and employees on every little issue. Their philosophy is to take care of the small problems" (p. 59).

Gittell described Barrett's behavior in leading a meeting with Southwest's department managers. Barrett said, "Title means very little here" (p. 71). Gittell provided other examples of how Barrett set the tone of collaboration by presenting herself as part of the managerial team. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1997) described principal loyalty: "Trust in the principal is determined primarily by the behavior of the principal . . . the principal controls his or her own destiny by acting in ways that engender trust or distrust" (p. 348).

Invest in Frontline Leadership

Under Barrett's administration, Southwest maintained the highest number of supervisors per frontline employee in the airline industry, a 1 to 10 ratio. Barrett's justification for the high ratio is to ensure that supervisors have the means to identify and develop the talents of each employee. In turn, the supervisors step aside and allow employees to assume leadership responsibility and gain self-esteem. A supervisor for the Chicago Midway Airport station justified Barrett's vision: "We learn that not everyone is the same as you or each other. You develop your best qualities and treat everyone as a human being" (p. 76).

Borelli (1997) offered a similar example. She demonstrated how the role of school leaders may change when administrators empower teachers to assume leadership positions. She inherited a "gang school" riddled with discipline problems. Her quest was to depart from the school's traditional method of addressing discipline problems. Her primary goal was to treat teachers as professionals, affording them the authority and support to use a variety of progressive disciplinary actions.

Hire and Train for Relational Competence

Southwest Airlines, when hiring a new employee, considers job experience secondary to relational skills. "We've turned away people with 15-16 years of airline experience in favor of people with none" (p. 87). Southwest affirms that their success is a result of employees able to perform, or at the very least, respect the functions of other employees. "Through programs called 'A Day in the Field' or 'Walk a Mile,'

Southwest employees periodically spend a day working in another department to become familiar with other aspects of the work process related to their own jobs" (p. 89). For Barrett, positive employee relations are the required springboard for expansion into new markets:

> The naysayers said we could never fly to the Northeast [e.g., Providence, RI and Manchester, NH) because we wouldn't be able to find employees there who were nice. But we can do it, and we do. Someday, we may go international. And even internationally, *we can maintain our culture if we go after people's hearts and grow our community* [author's emphasis]. (p. 91)

Like Barrett, Yasumato, Kazuaki, and Bidwell (2001) suggest teacher relations affect a school's mission. They suggested that increased collegiality, similar to what Barrett has accomplished at Southwest, should result in four outcomes. The outcomes include: (a) elimination of instructional problems, (b) consistent use of successful teaching practices, (c) reduction in pedagogical interference among faculty, and (d) trust among members of the group.

Use Conflicts to Build Relationships

At Southwest, employees reported that when a breakdown in collegiality occurs, a "whodunit" witch-hunt does not occur (p. 103). Rather, managers will bring the parties at conflict together to resolve the problem. Employees nickname these conflict resolution sessions as "'Come to Jesus meetings,' suggesting that conflicting parties were expected to bare their souls if necessary to achieve reconciliation" (p. 102).

Barrett acknowledged that her supervisors sometimes encounter employees who do not want to participate in the resolution of their voiced grievances. In response, Barrett added a final question to the company's grievance documentation form: "If it [the grievance] involves a Southwest employee, have you discussed it with him or her?" (p. 111). Barrett commented, "If we get a form where the answer was 'no,' we would call and say, 'Why don't you all have a little chat?'" (p. 111). She is willing to fly a flight attendant and a pilot to a mutual location.

Henkin, Cistone, and Dee (1999) address the topic of conflict resolution as it relates to principals and teachers of site-based schools. Their study of 300 principals in a large, urban school district in the southeastern United States found that principals preferred collaborative problem solving. They concluded, "inclinations toward solution-oriented

conflict management strategies in self-managed schools appear to be associated with higher levels of constituent group involvement" (p. 153).

Bridge the Work and Family Divide

Barrett empowers employees to build a healthy bridge between work and personal life. Passengers notice the family-like behavior of Southwest employees:

> Hugs were observed to be a common form of greeting [between employees], whether in the original Southwest station at Love Field [Dallas, TX], or at Southwest's big East Coast station in Baltimore. Indeed, family was more than a metaphor at Southwest: many employees reported family ties with other Southwest employees, something the company encourages so long as those involved were not also in a reporting relationship. (p. 115)

In the early 1990s, Barrett initiated the first "Culture Committee." She flew interested employees to her headquarters to discuss sustaining and enhancing the Southwest family culture. Each Southwest airport station has its own Culture Committee to "accommodate the needs of families, so as not to burn out this important source of employee commitment" (p. 121). Gittell praised Southwest's efforts to "look for synergies between family and work relationships and ties to avoid trading off one for the other" (p. 122).

The demands associated with the job of school administration permeate principals' personal lives. Bruckner (1998) conducted a survey of 575 spouses of school administrators in Nebraska. Her findings painted a bleak picture of how school administration places a toll on spousal and family relations:

- He [principal] is so drained from his job, he has nothing to give when he's home. (p. 25)
- It has been a real strain in our marriage. He has a tendency to take out his frustrations at home, not in an aggressive manner, (but he's) short with us. His mind is occupied with other things. The public gets his best side. (p. 25)

Create Boundary Spanners

Gittell compares the function of operation agents (OA) at Southwest with other airlines. In the airline industry, an OA is an essential leader, coordinating data and personnel prior to and during a plane's arrival at a

terminal's gate. The coordination is the basis for employee functions. The goal is spending the least amount of time at a gate in preparation for the next takeoff.

Southwest assigns one OA per flight. Other airlines assign one OA for as many as fifteen flights. The other airlines rely on technology and two-way circuit televisions to process and communicate data. Southwest refuses to over-automate the OA position: "It is coordination with a human face" (p. 127).

Barrett suggested that success is achieved, not by streamlining measures, but from employing adequate human resources. As aspiring administrators enter the field, they encounter a shortage of teachers in certain fields, such as special education and mathematics (e.g., Buchanan, 2002; Prince, 2002). The decisions they make may succeed if they are able to gain the confidence of their constituents, a phenomenon Gittell observed at Southwest:

> Almost all the passengers were smiling, though it was not apparent why. There was a general feeling of speed and efficiency rather than the usual feeling of 'hurry up and wait' that one gets when boarding an airplane. These passengers seemed to feel confident that they were in good hands and that their hurrying would pay off. They seemed not to mind being hurried. (p. 135)

Avoid Finger Pointing

I equate Gittell's description of the heartache that is associated with flight delays in the airline industry with administering a school that failed its state's high stakes testing. In the airline industry an on-time flight departure is *the* item of assessment. Southwest is concerned about resolving patterns of flight delays. Barrett's "team delay" report allows all employees associated with a flight's departure to process the conditions that prevented an on-time departure. The report has the fewest categories of any similar reporting form in the airline industry.

Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2002) concluded that Florida's accountability measures "have taken a toll on teachers in high poverty, low-performing schools" (p. 335). They reported qualified teachers abandon jobs in low socioeconomic communities because they do not want to assume full responsibility for low test scores. One principal described the destruction of morale:

> And then you have teachers who first of all have been branded an 'F,' so they are not feeling good about themselves to begin with and you are

coming along and telling them they are not doing the right thing so we are going to change everything you are doing and do it this way. It wrecks their self-concept unless you are doing a lot to build it up as you are doing these things. (p. 340)

Conclusion

Barrett, Southwest's first female administrator, is a people mover. Southwest's statistics validate the millions of people flying on her company's airplanes. Gittell's portrait depicts Barrett as a dynamic, humble and loyal leader. She is a woman who has gained the respect of her constituents. Her tenacity to maintain the "humanness" of her organization and its employees is a model for aspiring and practicing school administrators.

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