

# Southwest Airlines and the MBTI® Assessment Creating a Corporate Culture That Soars

## A Case Study of Southwest Airlines



How do you grow a major airline whose revenues exceeded \$7.6 billion in 2005, and whose year-end results marked its 33rd consecutive year of profitability and record profits?

Do you scrimp on payroll and employee benefits so you can offer lower fares? Do you achieve Southwest's enviable reputation for on-time flights, low number of customer complaints, top-notch safety record, and meticulous baggage handling by keeping a tight rein on an army of brainwashed clones 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 the bottom line.

Southwest's secret: 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!

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, chairman of the board and one of Southwest Airlines' founders, states emphatically “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.

### **SOUTHWEST AIRLINES' UNIVERSITY FOR PEOPLE: DEVELOPING LEADERS, MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

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? In large part, 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.

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— Elizabeth Bryant,  
Director of University of the People,  
Southwest Airlines

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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.

### **WHAT IS THE MYERS-BRIGGS® ASSESSMENT AND HOW IS IT USED AT SOUTHWEST AIRLINES?**

The Myers-Briggs® assessment is a personality inventory designed to give people information about their psychological preferences. Originally developed in the early 1940s by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine Cook Briggs, the Myers-Briggs assessment was developed to make Carl Jung's theory of human personality understandable and useful in everyday life. Today the MBTI tool has become the most widely-used personality assessment in the world, and is recognized as a gold-standard assessment.

The goal of the MBTI tool is not to label people, not to assign good and bad characteristics, but to create an atmosphere of understanding and better communication. A four-letter type indicates an individual's preferences for 1) Extraversion or Introversion, 2) Sensing or Intuition, 3) Thinking or Feeling, and 4) Judging or Perceiving. Though many factors combine to influence an individual's behaviors, values, and attitudes, the MBTI description summarizes underlying patterns common to most people of that type.

The MBTI tool 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. "As one of their tools for ongoing learning, the University for People uses the Myers-Briggs assessment," according to Bryant. "This useful 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."

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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 coworkers could approach the same challenge from a completely different perspective. The MBTI tool helped these leaders understand the "why" behind their coworkers' behaviors, which helped in building trust and empathy within the department. "In these classes we saw a lot of 'a-ha!' 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—for a corporation that's definitely going somewhere.