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?

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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 that “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 and the MBTI® Assessment Creating a Corporate Culture That Soars

A Case Study of Southwest Airlines

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Elizabeth Bryant, Director of University for People, Southwest Airlines

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, its 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.

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES’ UNIVERSITY FOR PEOPLE: DEVELOPING LEADERS, MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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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 coworkers.

**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 Katharine 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 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 ‘aha!’ 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.
About CPP, Inc.

At CPP, our only job is to help you be a better HR professional and, in turn, help every employee flourish. While we’re best known for our products, like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® assessment, CPP is also a group of people who can offer you the information, guidance, and support you need.

We offer solutions to help you improve organizational performance and address whatever challenges you face—from team building, leadership and coaching, and conflict management to career development, selection, and retention. Perhaps that’s why millions of people in more than 100 countries use our products each year. They include individuals at Fortune 500 companies and businesses of all sizes, as well as educators, government agencies, and training and development consultants.

Since its founding in 1956, CPP, Inc., has been a leading publisher and provider of innovative products and services for individual and organizational development. Available in more than 20 languages, the company’s hundreds of products help people and organizations grow and develop by improving performance and increasing understanding. Among CPP’s world-renowned brands and services are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, Strong Interest Inventory®, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), FIRO®, CPI 260®, and California Psychological Inventory™ (CPI™) assessments, and CPP Professional Services.

Let’s make a difference together.
Talk to us today to see how.

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