

How Southwest Employees are Finding Joy on the Job

This article is by [Matt Crossman](#) and originally ran in the fourth quarter 2019 issue of LUVLines, Southwest's Employee magazine. Interested in working at Southwest? [Check out our career site!](#)



Houston Customer Service Agent Janice Maddux flashes a smile while dishing out Southwest's legendary Hospitality. Nobody wants to spend a third of their waking life around miserable people doing miserable things for miserable reasons. Southwest's Herb Kelleher and Colleen Barrett understood that well when they were growing Southwest Airlines from an upstart regional airline into the largest carrier in the country (based on number of passengers carried). They wanted work to be fun, and they set about making it so.

They confounded HR gurus when they said they hired based on sense of humor and attitude and would teach people who had those attributes the skills necessary to do whatever job opening they filled. Herb and Colleen further baffled business experts when they proclaimed that the most important people were the Employees, not the Customers. They declared that if they treated Employees well, the Employees would then treat the Customers well.

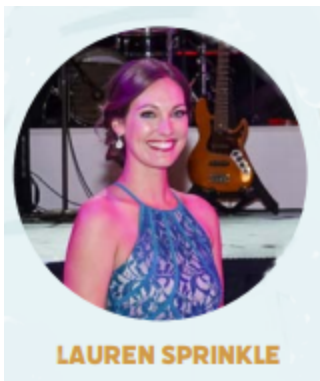
Forty years later, that approach is alive and well. One of the most important results of the famed Southwest Culture is the joy in the workplace that it creates.

In “Joy At Work: A Revolutionary Approach to Fun on the Job,” author Dennis W. Bakke, co-founder and CEO emeritus of the AES Corporation, echoes many of the principles Southwest values.

“The primary factor in determining whether people experience joy or drudgery in the workplace is the degree to which they can control their work,” Bakke writes. “By ‘control,’ I mean making decisions and taking responsibility for them.”

That’s one of the parts of her job that Lauren Sprinkle enjoys the most.

The Joy of Owning your Work



Lauren joined Southwest in 2016 after working in a variety of roles in the event industry. Her job as an Culture Services Event Specialist at Southwest is to plan Employee-facing events—Rallies, Heroes of the Heart, Winning Spirit presentations, President’s Awards Luncheon, the Anniversary Banquet, the 10-year Gala, and the Chili Cook-off.

Each of those events is different, but they are all sources of joy for the People who take part in them. “I chose the events industry because I love making memories. I love celebrating special moments with people,” she said. “When the comments that we get are, I’ll remember this event for the rest of my life, you feel the impact. You really know that you’re touching People.”

The President’s Awards Luncheon, as one example, creates joy for Lauren on several levels. First, the planning takes months, even years. No detail is left to chance. Lauren and her Teammates decide everything from the fonts and colors on the graphics to the color and placement of napkins. She “owns” every decision she makes, even if the reaction isn’t favorable. She learns from it and moves to the next one.

“The reason I like to plan is that I can be strategic; I can visualize an event and what the purpose is around the event,” she said. “That’s what energizes me—I love planning and organizing.”

During the President’s Award Luncheon, she sits with the winners—the top one percent of the Company’s Employees. By definition, their stories are success stories. She gets joy from planning the event, joy from attending it, and joy from the joy the event provides the participants. “It fills your bucket to be able to sit down and listen to what that day means to them,” she said.

Lauren's job needs exactly the temperament she has, another component of fostering joy in the workplace. "Building good teams depends on hiring the right kind of people," Bakke writes. And that doesn't mean only hiring the person with the most impressive resume. "Skills and talent were important, but they took a back seat to the way a person reacted to the company's values, including our particular definition of fun."

Sometimes, that means a person is plugged right into a job they love and want to stay in, like Lauren. Other times a person moves to a few jobs until they find the right fit, like Michelle Jordan.

The Joy of Making the World a Better Place



MICHELLE JORDAN Michelle joined the Southwest Family 29 years ago in Finance, but she learned the math didn't add up, so to speak. She eventually landed in Labor Relations and her current position, Senior Director.

One of the benefits of Southwest's focus on attitude is that it creates an environment People want to be in. Those who enjoy the environment tend to stay for years and years, in large part because of the way they are treated. It's a circle: They treat others the way they want to be treated—the most important "rule" Herb and Colleen championed—and so does everybody else.

"It's something as simple as saying 'good morning', 'hey, how was your evening?' or if it's Monday, 'how was your weekend?' 'How was your child, you said they were sick?'" Michelle said. "It's the little nuances of personal touch. It's not a cold, sterile environment. When we need to put our heads down and get the work done, trust me, it happens. But we don't ever lose sight of that personal

touch. Just to make sure People know, we care about you. We hope you're doing well. It's really that simple."

When that personal touch is mixed with a work environment that emphasizes responsibility, joy grows. "A joy-filled workplace gives people the freedom to use their talents and skills for the benefit of society, without being crushed or controlled by autocratic supervisors," Bakke wrote.

"I try to instill that to my Team," Michelle said. "It's an open-door policy. My door's always open. They know that."

That open-door policy has created two-way bonds of trust. She trusts her Team Members, and they trust her. "My immediate joy is my Team," Michelle said. "I'm surrounded by a wonderful group of individuals. They're all unique in their own way. They're hard workers. They are the epitome of Teamwork. There's not an obstacle, a problem, a situation that they can't resolve. They treat each other very, very well. The icing on the cake is that every one of them has their own sense of humor."

Sometimes, that humor is directed at Michelle.

"You hire people to do the job and if you don't let them do it, what's the point? I try to step back and let them do what they do best. I'm here for them if they need guidance," she said. "Sometimes I may step a little too close, and I get the look. I've worked with them long enough to know what it looks like and what it means: Michelle, we've got this, back away. So I do."

All of that is communicated with just a look, a sign that Michelle is creating as much joy as she's receiving. "I tell people all the time: I just step back and let the magic happen."

The Joy of Growth



“Let the magic happen.” That’s a good way to describe how Southwest’s Culture creates joy. In an environment that nurtures, promotes, and rewards creativity and a sense of humor, joy is the logical outcome.

Sam Leyendecker’s mom worked at Southwest when he was a boy. She retired seven days before he landed an internship in the Culture Department. He jokes that he has had flight benefits for his entire life, except for one week in early 2008.

He met Herb, Colleen, and Gary on his first day as an Intern and needed all of 10 minutes to decide Southwest was where he wanted to work. The internship turned into a full-time job a few months later. On paper, it looks like he dropped out of Oklahoma University for a job in the mailroom. But his Leader had made him a deal: He could take that job only if he promised to finish his degree. He kept his promise and graduated from the University of Texas-Arlington.

He worked in the mailroom for a year before moving to a job in Culture, where he has steadily progressed into his current position, Culture Services Manager. One source of joy for him is simply the work he does.

The Culture Services Team is responsible for creating, celebrating, and promoting the famous Southwest Culture. That might mean sharing news of an ugly driver’s license contest sponsored by Customer Service Agents of a delayed flight, inspiring or encouraging a rapping Flight Attendant, or otherwise drawing attention to Employees who are having fun and working at the same time.

“So many of our Employees have that passion and pride working at Southwest. Our department is really responsible for creating those memorable moments that continue to ignite that passion,” he said.

“The joke around here is that we’re a little bit of a cult, but everybody is OK with that,” he said. “We like being ourselves. We always say, you can’t have Culture without the cult. We want People to be themselves.”

Sam’s sources of joy have changed over the years. When he started at Southwest, he was 22, unmarried, and went to every party Southwest threw. “I was having beers with my friends, interacting, just going wild. It was amazing. I thought, ‘I’m going to be doing this forever. I love this place.’”

And then life got better than that, even. “Fast forward 11 years. I’m now married and have three young boys. And I find joy in a very different way. I’m now able to share all this fun Southwest stuff with my boys. When they see a Southwest plane, they say, ‘That’s daddy’s plane.’ Being able to share my family with my Coworkers is a source of joy.”

He leans on those who are ahead of him in life stage for both personal and professional advice. “I’m able to ask them questions. ‘What’s it like having an older kid?’ ‘Your kid is now going to come work for Southwest, what’s that like?’ Being able to see how you can be happy and successful through many phases of your career is really cool.”

The Joy of Thinking Outside the Box



EMILY BENDORF

Southwest's ability to recognize phases in careers is another facet of joy. One principle Bakke returns to repeatedly in his book is fairness. Some people say fairness means everyone should be treated the same. Bakke says the opposite is true: Everybody should be treated differently. A new hire should not be treated like a long-time employee. A long-time employee should not be treated like a new hire.

"Everyone is unique and deserves to be treated as an individual. Everyone should be given special treatment," he writes. "This concept often gets confused with that of equality. Keep in mind that equality and fairness are not synonyms. The logic of equality assumes that everyone is the same, but we know that everyone is not the same. Rather, we are unique, and therefore should be treated accordingly, especially at work."

Much has been made about the Millennial generation and its approach to work. Whatever you think of Millennials it makes little sense for businesses to try to treat them exactly like they treated Baby Boomers. With the changing nature of work hours and the fluidity afforded by 24/7 connectivity, sometimes joy comes from not always plopping behind a desk early in the morning and staying there until dinner time.

"We have a different work style," said Emily Bendorf, a Millennial who works on the Southwest Business Team. "That holds true for myself. I'm a very hard worker. But because of my family, my hobbies, and my passions, that doesn't always fit in a 9 to 5 schedule. I'm really grateful that I work on a Team that give me the flexibility to be a hard worker but let that fit into my lifestyle."

Emily's first role at Southwest was on the Culture Services Team. Now, she works as a Sales Enablement Manager as part of a Team that has seen explosive growth over the last few years. She finds joy in the excitement of being on a growing Team that is creating something new.

"I don't get a lot of joy just checking a box or completing a task that's already been clearly defined. I do get a lot of joy in problem-solving, thinking outside the box, and challenging myself and my Team to take things to the next level," Emily said. "I get a lot of excitement and I'm passionate about building something new."

For now, she's doing that for Southwest's Business Sales Team. Later, it could be in a different department. Perhaps the two will share nothing in common except creating joy for her.

The Joy of Being Authentic



Chris Dagger had a career in the casino and coffee worlds before landing a job as a ramp agent in Boston six years ago. He works as an Assistant Station Manager in Dallas now, and in between he had a stint in Hartford as well as stops as a Ramp Supervisor, Ramp Manager, Customer Service Manager (twice) and Command Center Manager.

At each job, his source of joy has been the same: Providing the best possible service to the Customer. He has traveled much in his life, and his trips are always important. So whether he's working to resolve a Customer complaint, hustling to get a bag on a plane, or supporting staff in his current role, he always keeps in mind that each seat on each plane is filled by an individual.

It would be easy, tempting, even, to see each plane as a widget and his job as making sure to move that widget on time. But he doesn't, won't, can't, see his job that way. It's far too important to be viewed so drily. "They're traveling for a wedding, a funeral, a job interview, a vacation or business meeting," he says. "That travel day for them is probably the most important day of the year for them."

He didn't intend to move around to so many different jobs, but it suits him. "We're very fortunate to work for one of the most admired Companies in the world," he said. "One of the things that really inspires me is we're encouraged to bring our authentic selves to work every day. It's important that we encourage everyone else to be their authentic selves, too. That's how you get the best out of People."

And it's how they find joy, too.