

FWPMI Book Review by: **Greg Hutson**

“The Southwest Airlines Way”

by **Jody Hoffer Gittel**

Publisher:	McGraw-Hill
Date of Publication:	2005 (paperback)
Number of pages:	336
Book Club rating:	4.8



Plot Summary:

Jody Hoffer Gittel describes in easy to read language, the concept of relational coordination and how it drives; both internally and externally, the culture at Southwest Airlines. From the CEO to the frontline employee to vendors and suppliers, relationship is threaded throughout the organization. Strategic to relationship is communication. Communication of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect is vital.

Over time, Southwest has developed ten practices for building high performance relationships. They are; 1) Lead with credibility and caring, 2) Invest in frontline leadership, 3) Hire and train for relational competence, 4) Use conflicts to build relationships, 5) Bridge the work/family divide, 6)

Create boundary spanners, 7) Measure performance broadly, 8) Keep jobs flexible at the boundaries, 9) Make unions your partners, and 10) Build relationships with suppliers.

Other airlines have tried to implement one or more of these practices with measured success. The impact of many of these practices were studied and analyzed against other airlines in the industry. In all cases, where these practices were implemented, results showed significant improvement at each airline. To capitalize on the successes of Southwest, the author makes the case that these practices taken as a whole should be implemented. The reader will understand that these practices are necessarily inter-dependent and can be duplicated in other industries such as health care. Even with the emphasis on Efficiency, Quality, and Controlled Growth, Southwest’s success is attributable to and summed up in one word and that is Relationship. This book is a great read and should be in the library of anyone interested in organizational strategic planning.

Book Club Meeting Discussion:

It was interesting to note from the outset, that Southwest did not view their competition as being the other airlines. Southwest viewed their competition as the car and bus. Shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect from the top to the bottom of the organization and outwards reinforced relational coordination. Frequent, timely, and problem-solving communications are crucial to relational coordination. Each of the ten organizational practices at Southwest was discussed with examples cited from each. One practice example of “Lead with credibility and caring” is Colleen Barrett,

President and Chief Operating Officer who donated approximately \$1,800 to an employee who was going through a divorce and did not have the money for legal fees. Another practice, “Invest in frontline leadership” is evidenced by the number of supervisors per frontline employee. Southwest’s number of 12 supervisors per employee is the highest in the airline industry. The practice “Hire and train for relational competence” is evidenced by the amount of training each employee receives at Southwest. It is the highest in the airline industry. The practice “Measure performance broadly” is evidenced by Southwest’s focus on organizational identity and processes over functional identity. This practice dovetails with the other practice “Keep jobs flexible at the boundaries” whereby employees receive cross-training and regularly assist other employees in different functions. The last practice, “Build relationships with suppliers” is evidenced by their relationship with airports such as Manchester Airport in New Hampshire and their relationship with air traffic controllers. We noted that Southwest has the highest number of unionized employees and the practice “Make unions your partners” contributes to Southwest’s success. The other practices, “Use conflicts to build relationships”, “Bridge the work/family divide”, and Create boundary spanners were briefly discussed as well.

Personal Comments:

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. It was a refreshing look into the way an organization should be run. It’s ashamed that the majority of organizations are not, to my knowledge and my own experience. For project managers this book provides solid principles for overseeing any project. For that matter, many principles found in this book are universal or at least should be. Who can argue against mutual respect of individuals? Shared goals and shared knowledge are keys to project delivery on time and within budget. Recognizing life events in the lives of individual members of your project team are consistent with bridging the work/family divide. At the core of everything about this book is relationship coordination. The lessons and principles in this book are apropos to the project manager and team. Lessons such as frequent, timely, and problem-solving communications are integral to any project. Substituting “stakeholders” with “suppliers” will get you the practice “Build relationships with stakeholders”. One highlight for me in this book was Southwest’s view of its competition. I would have thought the other airlines would be viewed as their competition. Instead, the car and bus were viewed at Southwest’s competition. This was a paradigm shift for me in my own thinking about strategic planning.