Without a doubt, Southwest Airline’s phenomenal culture has become the envy of most of American CEOs. The Dallas-based airline’s unprecedented success, its ability to survive where others fail and its continued tradition of service excellence has garnered awards from every possible corner of a highly-competitive industry.

The question is, how did it happen?

After her retirement, Lorraine Grubbs-West – a former Southwest Airlines executive – took a look back at her 15-year tenure with Southwest Airlines. In her book, Lessons in Loyalty, she highlights some of the unique and successful business strategies that moved the company from an upstart start-up in a well-established field to more than 30 years of profitability and the recognized leader in today’s passenger aviation industry.

In Lessons in Loyalty, she writes, “shows how innovative people-centered principles, strategies, and tactics were applied but it’s also my own story about what it was like to live and work alongside those irreverent, wacky, lovable, dedicated, hardworking, and magnificent employees as I experienced the joy of living, learning and ‘luving’ the Southwest Airlines way.”

But just how “wacky” is the Southwest culture?

Grubbs-West calls it “disciplined simplicity” but in a heartbeat, Southwest Airlines executives – starting with Herb Kelleher, himself – will tell you Southwest’s people perpetuate the culture. The solidarity among employees is astounding. Their commitment to the company is unparalleled and their productivity and customer service are legendary.

“Wacky?” Maybe – if you count Kelleher’s now-legendary arrival at corporate meetings, dressed as Elvis Presley or costumed employees on Halloween flights. Some may even consider the continuing calendar employee celebrations, awards and recognitions as out-of-the-box, but the continuing strand Grubbs-West weaves into her post-retirement analysis of Southwest’s success is that any corporation – using the same techniques – can create a successful work-oriented, employee-centered performance standard.
The Lessons she incorporates include:

- Realizing companies are in the people business rather than the manufacturing business, or the insurance business, or the airline business
- Creating such an amazing corporate culture that people who “fit” will clamor to be a part of your company
- Building a culture around celebrating team victories and individual accomplishments
- Becoming the best in customer service and staying on top because you have trusted, loved, and laughed with your employees and have empowered them to do the same with your customers.
- Understanding that building good relationships with employees has little to do with whether or not the company is unionized (over 80% of Southwest Airlines’ employees are unionized)

Unlike previous books that have focused solely on Southwest’s chronological development and top leadership, Grubbs-West takes readers inside the process to the heart of how the airline succeeded in making employee loyalty its hallmark. In one example, she details how Southwest’s Human Resources team was invited to sit down with the U.S. Marine Corps to compare loyalty-building strategies. In another, she describes how providing employees the leeway to personalize customer service led to Southwest’s reputation and popularity among U.S. consumers, not to mention the recognition it brought employees.

But, Lessons in Loyalty is far from the “luv-fest” outlined by other books about the airline. Instead, Grubbs-West gives step-by-step guidance on how any company – no matter the size or the industry – can incorporate Southwest’s business strategies into their own operations.

In today’s warp-speed business climate, where employee loyalty is minimal at best, many companies hire top talents and then are confronted by the challenge to retain these hard-won employees. Why? Because many of these key employees are being deluged with offers from competing firms.

These conditions make it even more important to develop policies that not only build loyalty but create an ongoing incentive for these very employees to remain “captivated” by the challenges of their jobs and the companies they work for.

Author and thought leader Noel Tichy sees Lessons in Loyalty as a good starting point to achieve both of these goals, calling it “an insider’s clear, concise, and energizing teachable point-of-view on how to build a winning team.”

In view of the challenges that continue to confront American business today, this book may be – as they say – just what the doctor ordered. It’s brevity, easy-to-read format and straight-forward approach makes Lessons in Loyalty a primer for any firm wanting to build a loyal workforce capable of making the right things happen. But Grubbs-West makes her book an interesting journey of indelible wisdom, as well, designed especially for the busy business leader.

For more information, call Lessons in Loyalty 218-813-0305.

The book is available at CornerStone Leadership.com, Amazon.com or your local bookstore.