

ON EXPOUNDING THE EMPLOYEE-ORIENTED POLICIES OF SOUTHWEST AIRLINES WITH REFERENCE TO THE UDAN SCHEME

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Abstract

An attempt is made in this paper to deduce the employee-oriented perspectives of Southwest Airlines that would enable to augment the effectiveness of the UDAN Scheme. The need arises due to the fact that the UDAN Scheme, recently put into operation, may encounter typical 'teething' problems associated with the airline business and the crux of the problem may revolve around employee-productivity, which would reflect in the UDAN Scheme's effectiveness. We approach the perspectives of Southwest Airlines primarily because of the fact that like the airlines associated under the UDAN Scheme, Southwest Airlines is also a low-cost, short-distance and regional connectivity airlines.

Key words:-UDAN Scheme, Southwest Airlines, Employee-oriented Policies, Profitability, Community Culture.

At the outset, let us state that by 'employee-oriented policies', we refer to the policies adopted by an organization to effectively address the aspirations of the employees. The policies may be channelized in the form of salary, perks, empowerment, work ethic, environment, recognition, etc.

The paper is divided into four main sections. Section-I provides a brief overview of the UDAN Scheme. Section-II presents the importance of employee-oriented values. Section-III presents a brief sketch on Southwest Airlines and expounds its employee-oriented business plans, its HRM practices and its employee and organizational outcomes. Section-IV presents the deduced perspectives of Southwest Airlines that enable to enrich the effective functioning of the UDAN Scheme.

SECTION-I

Let us now proceed to understand the main features of the UDAN Scheme that would provide reason for expounding the employee-oriented policies of Southwest Airlines.

1.1 THE UDAN SCHEME¹

UDAN- *UdeDeshKaAamNaagrik/ Let The Common Man Fly*, a scheme put in to operation on 26/04/2017, is a regional air connectivity scheme aimed at reviving dormant airstrips in the country and helping passengers/common man in Tier-II and Tier-III cities fly by air. At the heart of the UDAN Scheme is the government's decision to facilitate low cost and short-distance flight aimed at attracting the common man to fly.

1.1.1. UDAN SCHEME OPERATION

As per the UDAN Scheme, airfare for a one-hour journey (covering approximately 500 Km) is capped at Rs. 2,500 per seat. Airfares would range from Rs. 1,420 to Rs. 3,500 for flights covering a distance of 150 to 800 Kms. To ensure that they are able to retain business, airlines (that participates in the UDAN Scheme) will get exclusive rights to fly on a regional route for the first three years. Routes are awarded through a reverse bidding auction, so that the airline that asks for the least subsidy support gets the exclusive right to fly.

1.1.2. UDAN SCHEME SUBSIDY

The airlines will be provided subsidy for three years in the range of Rs. 2,470 to Rs.5,100 per flight depending on the type of aircraft and distance covered. The centre will provide subsidy to fund the losses, if any, incurred by airlines through a regional connectivity fund.

Regional Connectivity Fund

The centre has set-up a regional connectivity fund which is financed by levying a uniform cess of Rs. 5,000 on each departing domestic flight on major national routes as each passenger flying on a domestic route (apart from those in the Northeast) will be charged an additional amount of Rs. 30 as cess. Thus, 80% of the fund will be financed by the levy imposed on air tickets. The remaining 20% of the fund will flow from the respective state governments.

1.2. ESTIMATE

A little reflection on the structure of the UDAN Scheme enables us to understand that coordination among the central government, various airlines and state governments is vital for the effective functioning of the UDAN Scheme. It may be proposed that operational efficiency is the vital factor that would cement the coordination of primary players, resulting in enhancing the effectiveness of the UDAN Scheme. Moreover, central to the operational efficiency lie the performance of an important stakeholder- the employees.

In sum, we may state that the satisfaction of the employees affect their operational efficiency which in turn, determine the effectiveness of the UDAN Scheme. Thus, the key to the effectiveness of the UDAN Scheme rests with employee-satisfaction.

Now, let us focus our attention on employee-oriented values.

SECTION-II

2.1. IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYEE-ORIENTED VALUES

It is a general perception in management science that employee-oriented policies would lead to employee-satisfaction that culminates in to employee- productivity and organizational effectiveness. There is also a divergent view that no doubt employee-oriented policies (being value-oriented) would lead to employee-satisfaction but may not be compatible with profit-making and thereby, organizational effectiveness.

Let us subscribe to the view, with ample citations given below, that employee-oriented policies lead to employee- productivity and organizational effectiveness.

Neck, C. and Milliman, J.(1994)² offers a number of insights into the nature of values in organizations and how employees can gain greater values and purpose in their work. Specifically, they propose that a recent leadership theory, though self-leadership, can assist employees in influencing or leading themselves towards experiencing more values in their organizational life.

In sum, Neck, C. and Milliman, J., through their elaborate arguments and evidences, clearly justify that a strong set of deeply-held values regarding employees have a positive impact on organizational performance.

Brown. E. (1999)³ in his study, points out that positive psychological state of the employees influences the positive exchange between the employee and employer. This exchange is positively related to employee's feelings of perceived organizational support and affective commitment to the organization and reciprocation in the form of higher levels of tasks and contextual performance behaviors.

In sum, according to Brown, E., emotionally engaged employees leads to high level of employee-motivation and loyalty-ultimately higher organizational performance.

Citing empirical references, **Grant, L. (1998)⁴** states that satisfied employees are happy to come to work and willing to go the extra mile for their employers because the employees love their jobs and want to advance the company's mission. Employee satisfaction translates into tangible effects that inevitably lead to a company's increased profitability and success.

In sum, Grant, L. rightly point out that employee-satisfaction is transferred in to productivity as workers see a connection between their jobs and the company's mission.

Citing empirical studies, **Channon, J. (1992)⁵** point out that mission statements are formal declaration of employee-oriented values. The employees enact the mission in the programmes and services they provide. As a result, they are critical in upholding the organization's public image and in accomplishing its purpose.

In sum, Channon, J., argues that the higher purpose of an organization is reflected in its employee-oriented values which directly influences the organizational mission, goals and objectives.

According to **Brown, J. (1992)** ⁶, feeling part of a community and sharing a common purpose are two dimensions that have been frequently associated with work place employee-oriented values. A sense of connection and inter-connectedness to something larger than oneself has also been considered an important part of spirit at work. A good sense of community and connectedness becomes the foundation for corporate policies that suggests shared values and shared sense of purpose, that turns a company into a community where daily work takes on a deeper meaning and inner satisfaction.

In sum, Brown, J., states that employee-oriented business values ultimately provide the foundation for corporate practices and the context in to which employees think, act and make decisions.

Collins, J., and Porras, J. (1994) ⁷ focus their research towards 18 bonafide, “visionary” companies and analyze them in accordance with guidelines they have set on what makes a good company. The study suggests that values arrangement and a workman like culture that keep an eye out for tomorrow and the long run.

In sum, providing compelling evidences, Collins, J., and Porras, J., proclaim that visionary companies, having non-profit and employee-oriented objectives, have posted exceptional long-term financial performances.

According to **Blanchard, K. and O’Connor, M. (1997)** ⁸no longer is value-based organizational behavior an interesting philosophical choice- it is a requisite for survival. Once an organization has a clear picture of its values and mission, it has a strong basis for evaluating its management practices and bringing them into alignment with the articulated mission and values. Their journeys have been all about managing by those values. They

continue their success stories in the area of performance, satisfaction and return on investment.

In sum, according to Blanchard, K. and O'Connor, M., employee-oriented values are the 'Soul' of the organization and clearly reflect its sense of purpose.

Block, P. (1993) ⁹ perceives 'stewardship' as an umbrella term that encapsulates the means towards the achievement of fundamental change in the manner in which one govern institution. His conceptualization of 'service' refers to both the 'language of service' and 'the experience of service'. He believes service is only truly realized when it is 'authentic' with the following characteristics, namely, there is a balance of power, the primary commitment is to the larger community and there is a balanced and equitable distribution of reward.

In sum, providing empirical evidences, Block, P., clearly points out that employee-oriented values, other than profit-maximization, are more important for an organization in the long-run.

According to **Anderson, C. (1997)** ¹⁰, management grounded in value choices for the organization that build compatibility between the individual and the organization is fundamental to decision-making. Values-based management lays the foundation for the development of mission and subsequent corporate and individual plans and goals by enabling managers to address and resolve unavoidable dilemmas. Values-based management serves an essential first step towards building a high growth organization in which individual performance improves and heightened individual achievement drives economic success.

In sum, Anderson, C. provides a value-based management model which focuses on the impact of employee-oriented values on top management strategies.

According to **Schuler, R. and Jackson, S. (1987)** ¹¹, firms are pursuing competitive strategies aimed at cost reduction, quality improvement and innovations. For those attempting to do so, the experiences of other firms suggest that effectiveness can be increased by systematically melding human resource practices with the selected competitive strategy, that may result in highly positive organizational strategy.

In sum, Schuler, R. and Jackson, S., develops a strategic human resource management framework which concentrates on the successful implementation of employee-oriented organizational strategy.

Ray, M. (1992) ¹² states that employee-oriented values develops certain and relevant dynamic capabilities in employees that hold the potential for a sustained competitive advantage, especially in uncertain environment. It enables to build the best team, fair and open communication system and the vital trust –based relationships between employees and management.

In sum, providing empirical evidences and lengthy theoretical arguments, Ray, M. clearly proclaim that deep-rooted employee-oriented values are great differentiators of a modern business enterprise.

CONCLUSION

From the above review, we may be able to understand the importance of employee-oriented policies and its positive impact on not only employee-satisfaction, but also on employee-productivity and organizational effectiveness.

SECTION-III

This section present an overview of Southwest Airlines and expound its (a) employee-oriented business plans, (b) HRM practices, and (c) employee and organizational outcomes.

3.1. SOUTHWEST AIRLINES ¹³

Southwest Airlines is a major US airline, the world's largest low-cost and short-distance carrier, headquartered in Dallas, Texas.

The airline was established in 1967 by Herb Kelleher as Air Southwest and then adopted its current name, Southwest Airlines, in 1971 when it began operating as an intrastate airline wholly within the state of Texas. The expansion of flights started in 1975, to cities throughout Texas, and in 1978 Southwest began flying to neighboring states. Service to the East and the Southeast started in the 1990s. As of December 2016, Southwest Airlines had scheduled services to 101 destinations in the US and eight additional countries.

The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of customer service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride and company spirit.

The purpose is to connect people to what's important in their lives through friendly, reliable and low-cost air travel.

The current slogan is "Low fares. Nothing to hide". The airline has more than 53, 000 employees as of October 2016 and operates more than 3,900 departures a day during peak travel season.

All employees are generally encouraged to be members of a Union. The airline pilots are with the Airline Pilots Association (APA), the maintenance technicians with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), flight dispatchers, flight attendants, ramp agents and operations agents are with the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

Since its inception Southwest Airlines has almost exclusively operated Boeing 737 aircraft. Newer Boeing 737 variants are retrofitted with electronic flight decks, extended overhead bins and blended winglets to reduce operational costs.

Southwest Airlines is the world's largest operator of the Boeing 737 with a present fleet size of 727 aircrafts.

Southwest has been a major inspiration to other low-cost carriers and its business model has been repeated many times around the world. Examples may be seen in Easy Jet and Ryanair in Europe, Air Asia in Malaysia, Jet Star in Australia and Nok Air in Thailand.

3.2. EMPLOYEE-ORIENTED BUSINESS POLICIES OF SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

Southwest Airlines is widely viewed as having a very strong set of employee-oriented values which shapes its corporate culture. Some of the important employee-oriented business policies are as under.

3.2.1. IMPORTANCE TO EMPLOYEES AND COMMUNITY CULTURE

Even though Southwest Airlines places a strong emphasis on customers, it states that its employees are equally important and at times they come first (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993)¹⁴.

Moreover, not only are employees encouraged to be part of the company, but so are their families who are often invited to participate in company activities and celebrations (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996)¹⁵

Southwest Airlines has a strong emphasis on community (Godsey, 1996)¹⁶. Team work, serving others and acting in the best interest of the company are central aspects of this community value at Southwest Airlines (Caudron, 1997; Tyler, 1998)¹⁷.

3.2.2. EMPOWERMENT OF EMPLOYEES

Southwest Airlines employees are all encouraged to take whatever action they deem necessary to meet customer needs or help fellow workers-even if it means breaking company policies (Noe *et al*, 1997)¹⁸. Employees and Unions are strongly encouraged to give suggestions to create continuous improvement of the company (Sunoo, 1995)¹⁹.

3.2.3. EMPHASIS NOT ONLY ON INTELLECTUAL BUT ALSO EMOTIONAL AND HUMOR ASPECTS

Another core value of Southwest Airlines is an emphasis not only on the intellectual and skill-based aspects of work, but also on emotional and humor aspects. A portion of Southwest Airline's mission statement states that its customer service will be "..... delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride and company spirit" (Southwest Airlines, 1988)²⁰.

The intent of Southwest Airlines is to have personal, outgoing employees who display their spirit in humor, energizing emotion, celebration and sheer fun while they work (Rosen, 1992; Bracey *et al*, 1993)²¹.

3.2.4. STRONG WORK ETHIC

Employees at Southwest Airlines are expected to work hard and be flexible so that they can reduce staffing requirements below their competitors (**Levering and Moskowitz, 1993**)²². Employees are expected to perform multiple job functions (**Godsey, 1996; Tyler, 1998**)²³.

3.3. HRM PRACTICES OF SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

A major reason for Southwest Airline's longer-term success is its HRM practices which are carefully designed to implement the company's core values and strategy. Some of the important HRM practices are as under.

3.3.1. SELECTION AND INDUCTION PROCESS

Southwest Airlines places the highest importance in its selection process on employee attitudes and values. This philosophy includes all employees, including pilots (**Caudron, 1997**)²⁴. The interview process includes group interviews where applicants tell jokes and role-play a variety of situations to demonstrate teamwork, a sense of humor and the capacity to act spontaneously. Frequent flyers and peer employees participate in interviewing candidates to provide a deeper perspective and to further emphasize teamwork (**Noe et al, 1997; Sunoo, 1995**)²⁵.

Once employees are hired, they are immediately given a celebration greeting in to the company (**Tyler, 1998**)²⁶. Customers are brought in to provide their perspective to new employees and senior employees are assigned as mentors. Training includes humorous videos and skits to teach employees about the company's culture of team work and fun. Southwest Airline's casual dress policy and its allowance of employees to wear costumes to work are intended to reinforce its fun, relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere (**Levering and Moskowitz, 1993**)²⁷

3.3.2. FINANCIAL AND NON-FINANCIAL REWARDS

Southwest Airlines has a strong policy allowing lateral transfers and promoting from within (**Joinson, 1997**)²⁸. They offer profit sharing (**McNerney, 1998**)²⁹, bonus, retirement savings policies and stock option plans (**Levering and Moskowitz, 1993**)³⁰.

Southwest Airlines also offers many non-pay rewards including merchandise, travel and celebrations (Gruner, 1998)³¹. Deal and Key (1998)³² proclaims that Southwest Airlines is a model company in providing both frequent spontaneous praise on current behaviours as well as having formal recognition programmes which reward past behaviours.

3.4. OUTCOMES OF EMPLOYEE-ORIENTED POLICIES OF SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

Southwest Airline's employee- oriented values and its implementation of those values through its various HRM practices appear to generate positive and strong employee and organizational outcomes. Some of the important outcomes are as under.

3.4.1. EMPLOYEE-SATISFACTION

Southwest Airlines has consistently been named number one company to work for in the USA (Levering and Moskowitz, 1998)³³. As a result of this high employee satisfaction, Southwest Airlines employees have one of the lowest turnover rates (6%) in the airline industry (Lederer, 1995)³⁴.

Employees are also actively involved in community-based service projects. In addition, they demonstrated their support for each other by setting up a catastrophe fund to support employees during personal crises (Noe *at al*, 1997)³⁵.

3.4.2. PRODUCTIVITY AND PROFITABILITY

Southwest Airlines consistently has one of the lowest labour cost per miles flown of any major airline (Lederer, 1995)³⁶. Its employees are credited with being primarily responsible for Southwest Airline's quality awards (Laabs, 1998)³⁷.

Many researchers assert that this high employee satisfaction and productivity plays major role in Southwest Airline's profitability (Freiberg and Frieberg, 1996; Nirenberg, 1997; Steward, 1998)³⁸.

Southwest Airlines has been profitable every year except one since it began in 1971 (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993)³⁹. In the 1990's, it was the only major US airline to make a profit. It had also been able to accomplish this while maintaining strong growth, despite the high volatility of the airline industry (Sunoo, 1995)⁴⁰.

For two decades, Southwest Airlines is the only company named on the top ten list of most admired companies (Stewart, 1998; Branch, 1999; Brown, 1999)⁴¹.

SECTION-IV

From the exploration of the employee-oriented-ness of Southwest Airlines with reference to its business plans, its HRM practices and its final outcomes, one may deduce significant perspectives that may be presented as under.

4.1. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Southwest Airlines has explicitly shown that employee-oriented policies have positive impact not only on employee-satisfaction but also on employee-productivity and organizational profitability.

Southwest Airline's Philosophy is to make flying "cheap, fast and fun". Low cost is achieved as Southwest Airlines uses only one type of aircraft (ie., Boeing 737) to reduce maintenance, inventory and training cost. Fastness is achieved as Southwest Airlines has flights of short distance with frequent service between destinations, no advance seating and no baggage or ticket exchange with other airlines. Fun is achieved through highly personable, friendly and humorous service.

Closely connected with the above deduction is the perception that Southwest Airlines employees feel that they are part of a 'cause'. They feel that Southwest Airlines seeks to give an opportunity to fly to people who ordinarily could not afford it.

Southwest Airlines shows the importance of empowering employees through community culture and unions.

It is found that importance is given to not only a strong work ethic, but also emotional and humor aspects of employees.

It may be pointed out that employee contribution has become a critical business issue because in trying to produce more output with less employee input, companies have no choice but to try and engage not only the body but the mind and soul of every employee

Southwest Airlines has proved that selection and induction programmed need not be evaluated exclusively with traditional methods/parameters. Modern methods in tune with the business plans are as effective.

It may be pointed out that Southwest Airlines had never had a layoff. Moreover, it has recently announced that it has officially adopted a no-layoff policy.

Southwest Airlines has demonstrated that both financial and non-financial rewards are channelized for employee-satisfaction, thereby leading to employee-productivity and organizational effectiveness.

4.2. PRESENTATION OF SUGGESTIONS

The deduced perspectives of Southwest Airlines that are compatible and may enhance the functioning of the UDAN Scheme are presented in the form of suggestions, as under.

The managers of UDAN Scheme may be given to understand the fact that a highly satisfied workforce would make a positive impact of productivity and profitability.

The UDAN Scheme may help its cause by empowering the employees through encouraging unions, community culture, providing financial and non-financial rewards and effective participation of employees in the decision-making process.

It may be noted that there need not be a trade-off between strong work ethic (hardworking) and having humor and fun, in the work place. In fact, both the mental and emotional aspects of employees may be taped to achieve effectiveness of the UDAN Scheme.

CONCLUSION

The exposition on the employee-oriented policies of Southwest Airlines enables us to understand that productivity and profitability depends upon employee-satisfaction. This understanding is vital for the UDAN Scheme as profitability determine the subsidy allocated, especially in the background of a strict financial discipline advocated by the central government.

Another important understanding is that strong work ethic along with culture of community and enthusiastic humor, which forms an integral part of Southwest Airlines, would have a direct impact on the structure of the UDAN Scheme in which effective functioning depends upon the coordination among the central government, various airlines and state governments.

In sum, it may be concluded that the expounding of the employee-oriented policies of Southwest Airlines has put forth certain important perspectives that may enable to enrich the effective functioning of the UDAN Scheme.

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