

# *how*<sup>TM</sup>

## Southwest Airlines

Engagement scores among U.S. and many global workers have tumbled in recent years. I think that's because we've been spending too much time engaging workers with carrots and sticks, and not nearly enough time inspiring them with values and missions worthy of their commitment.

Leaders and companies need to rethink engagement as a by-product of inspiration. And some are. For example, I recently watched *how* an inspired Southwest Airlines flight attendant connected with an entire planeload of passengers en route to Las Vegas. As we were getting ready to disembark, the attendant came on the speaker and cheerfully announced: "It's a well-known fact that if you fold your seatbelts over your seat when you leave the plane, your luck will improve at the casino tables." Everyone laughed, and then we all did as she suggested. But here's the beautiful part: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations require seatbelts to be folded on the seats before new passengers can board. She could have taken the time and effort to fold every seatbelt herself. She certainly was not required by her company policy manual nor was she incented by her company compensation program to get us to help her do her job. Instead she was inspired to innovate in her behavior. (When this inspired attendant arrives in Los Angeles, she will likely innovate again in telling her same joke by swapping the number of celebrity sightings for dollars won at the tables). Through *how* the attendant connected with and enlisted us, she helped her company comply with a regulation, gain an operational advantage in

turning the plane around faster (because it would have taken her six minutes to fold the seatbelts by herself), and keep its brand promise of getting us to where we were going with "no frills, fun, safely, and on time."

This kind of creative behavior can't be commanded by a manager or codified in a rule book. It needs to be inspired. You can probably think of several inspirational leaders in your own life and work, but that flight attendant really sums it up for me. She got her point across by connecting with us, not by telling us what to do. She used behavior strategically, not defensively. She wasn't the CEO, an executive, or even a midlevel manager, and yet she exhibited inspirational leadership. To thrive, our companies need to burst with daily demonstrations of inspirational leadership by every employee, regardless of his or her position.

Examples like this one help us rethink leadership. Human qualities like creativity, helpfulness, and hope can't be commanded; they can only be inspired *in people*. You can't order somebody to have a great idea. You can't mandate rich, creative collaborations. You can't command a doctor or nurse to be more humane and show compassion at a patient's bedside. You can't coerce a teacher to be more hopeful and create a sense of possibility in the classroom. You can't sufficiently motivate a sales representative to engender trust in every interaction. The lucky ones figure it out early on their own, but others need to be inspired to bring out these qualities. ■