

ADMIN
AWARDS + **Uber**
for Business presents

The Administrator's Impact on Employee Morale and Company Culture

An exploration of four key ways in which Administrative Professionals enhance the workplace environment



- **Cynthia Young, moderator: Culture Builder and former Senior Director, Labor & Employee Relations, Southwest Airlines**
- **Nan Barry: Managing Director, Southwest Airlines**
- **Robin Guido: Executive Assistant, Salesforce**
- **Erica Young: Executive Assistant, Whiting-Turner Contracting Company**
- **Jillian Hufnagel: Head of Culture, Slim.AI**
- **Nancy Nordberg: Former Executive Assistant, Maxim Integrated**
- **Rene Garcia: Executive Assistant, Janus Capital Group**

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1 | How Administrative Professionals lead by being brave, especially when leadership is the source of bad culture



Administrative Professionals are the heart of any company, acting as a listening ear for colleagues, a sounding board for leadership, and a morale thermometer for the office. Admins hold a LOT of power — the problem is, they don't always believe that to be true. For Admins committed to shaping company culture, the key is to recognize your power and believe in your voice. Remember: You already have the ear of your leadership by being their Admin or EA, and you understand what changes need to be made based on daily conversations or feedback from your colleagues. Leadership wants help ... even if they don't know it yet! They want to know what's going on and what they can do to make the company or office environment better. They don't know what they don't know. So be bold and be brave — you have the power to be a true changemaker.



BE A TRANSLATOR. Many employees are fearful of sharing concerns with an executive, but they don't mind telling an Admin. And many leaders may not see those concerns as true issues until you break it down for them. It's important that you use your voice to advocate for the company, leader, or policy when you're speaking to employees, and for the employees when you're speaking to your leader. Only you can speak to both sides of the house in a truly effective way. It's also important to remember to lead by example — you set the tone for the office, so if employees see you as calm and in charge, they're less likely to be anxious about whatever is happening around them.

PROVIDE SOLUTIONS. Come to the table with solutions to identifiable issues. "When you go to leadership with concerns, don't just say, 'Here's the issue — what are you going to do about it?'," says Nancy Nordberg, former Executive Assistant at Maxim Integrated. "It's much more effective to say, 'This is the issue, here is the data that shows it is an issue, and here's what I suggest we might be able to do to correct this.'" Admins create value when they are honest, comfortable with getting uncomfortable, and offer multiple potential solutions. Your leader will thank you for it.



KNOW WHEN YOU SHOULD STAY — AND BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO ACKNOWLEDGE WHEN IT'S TIME TO LEAVE.

If low morale is making you consider exiting your company, ask yourself this: *Have I done anything to make the situation better?* Talk to your leader about how you and your fellow employees are feeling and look for ways to solve it together. However, if you're not comfortable with the strategic direction in which the company is headed, be willing to leave. "It's not as rare as folks think that EAs are aware of illegal or immoral activities that they are asked to either directly support or turn a blind eye, like I was at a former company," says Jillian Hufnagel, Head of Culture at Slim.AI. "If there is truly no internal way to influence change from the EA seat, leaving can be a very powerful way to preserve oneself." Admins are often the culture carrier for that team, she adds, and a hurried departure can signal to others that something is very wrong.

"Colleen Barrett represented employees to Herb [Kelleher, co-founder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines] and the board, and represented Herb and the board to employees. She was a conduit. None of that stopped when she became president." — Cynthia Young





CASE STUDY

Cynthia Young, Culture Builder and former Senior Director, Labor & Employee Relations, Southwest Airlines



Herb called me his 'smoke jumper' — he'd say, 'So and so's city is on fire, something's wrong. Go put the fire out and tell me what you did.' There was a manager on ramp, and all of his metrics were off: His turnover was high, people were calling in sick, he was having to cover overtime. Morale was low and costs were high.

What I found was that the manager was barking at people, he was running the place like a marine drill sergeant, and it was out of alignment with the way things were typically expected to be run at Southwest. There's a certain level of respect required, and that wasn't happening. The manager had been asked to participate in some leadership training opportunities, and he passed on those — he thought they were stupid. The approach that I used with him was this: I asked, 'What is your life looking like right now? You're getting paged in the middle of the night with issues or after your shift with issues, you're having to answer all kinds of questions about these metrics, you're having to hire people and interview people — it can't be fun. I'm wondering how it might look if you learned some new procedures — some new tactics or strategies, new ways to deal with people.'

Finally, he said, 'Fine.' And he made some improvements that made a difference. You get all kinds of things from people who feel engaged and respected. **In your role, you can help people understand what's in it for them if they adopt something or if they take certain training.** I would see a leader from one division talking to an Admin from another division about how best to deal with that person's leader. 'I have this big project, he's not letting me on his calendar, how can I remedy that?' That's how I see culture and morale and engagement, and the Admin's role in all of that."

2 | How Administrative Professionals drive and influence culture rituals that create connection in any work environment, including remote



Administrative Professionals are key to creating connections and communicating with employees across their company — and that responsibility is crucial, even in a remote environment. "One of the most critical roles you can tackle is helping your colleagues understand the "why" in the workplace — why should they participate, why should they execute on a plan, why should they get on board with company policies and activities?" Nordberg says. "If you want a culture that collaborates and works well together, everybody has to know why they're there." Of course, that's much easier said than done, but there are a number of strategies you can employ in your Admin role to help guide people to their "why" — and greatly improve company culture in the process.

INVOLVE EVERYONE. You aren't solely responsible for influencing culture — sometimes the best way to steer your company toward better morale is to let everyone in the driver's seat. Take, for example, Janus Capital Group's "**Quarinteam Connect**," a weekly email that began by asking employees to share answers to simple, fun questions like, "What's your favorite color," and has led to the disclosure of other quirky tidbits and stories (employees have even felt safe enough to share embarrassing moments, notes Rene Garcia, an EA at Janus who shared his own).



Or there's RGT Wealth Advisors' creation of "Chief Morale Officer for a Day," which was created during the early days of COVID and was intended to unite and connect remote employees during uncertain times. In brief, each employee was assigned a day to serve as Chief Morale Officer and help boost the morale of coworkers — from the CEO to interns. Employees were asked to share a personal story or something meaningful to them that would serve to inspire one another through an encouraging email to the entire firm. "There's really no way to explain how far this exceeded our expectations," says Colleen Affeldt, Managing Director of RGT. "Every day seemed to start with, 'Have you read the Chief Morale Officer entry today?'" An unexpected byproduct was RGT turning the entries into a book that serves as a marketing piece. "When people ask us, 'Why you instead of your competitor?' we tell them our people are the strategic differentiator, and you should get to know them," Affeldt says. "And we give them the book."

GATHER THE DATA. You may sense something's off with company culture, but your gut isn't always enough. Instead, use tools such as surveys to compile objective, honest data about what employees are thinking. Then, keep personal feelings out of hard conversations by negotiating from the point of the data. For example, Nordberg says, you can go to your leader and say, "This is the data, and it's not that great" or "Our survey shows 60% of our employees would not seek your counsel with problem solving." Using that data point, you can follow up with, "How can we drive that number downward?" or "How can we best support you as we work on this?"



"At Southwest, there were three major pillars we were expected to live up to: Exhibiting a servant's heart, demonstrating a warrior's spirit, and having a fun-loving attitude. Colleen Barrett embodied all of that. She created relationships based on total honesty. She was compassionate. She wrote notes to people all the time and sent cards. She created these processes that really integrated what she saw as a healthy, loving culture into the company." — Cynthia Young

2 | How Administrative Professionals drive and influence culture rituals that create connection in any work environment, including remote (*continued*)



FIND A MENTOR. All of us have questions, and none of us are experts in everything. Seek out mentors and experts, whether they be managers, people in your HR office, employees in your Learning and Development office, or other Admins. Ask them: "How have you established good morale in your groups and how do you sustain that? What hasn't worked and why didn't it work?" In order to be a successful change agent, you have to identify people who can support you — an employee with some authority who will advocate with you. That level of support makes the team feel safe and allows them to see that they can solve issues.

THE LITTLE THINGS COUNT, TOO. Showing employees that you care doesn't have to be expensive. When Southwest Airlines' traffic fell 90% during the COVID-19 pandemic, the company couldn't afford to send gifts for major milestones in their employees' lives. Instead, they reached out via phone calls, emails, and texts. "We've been blown away by the impact a phone call makes to somebody," says Nan Barry, Managing Director of Southwest. "It doesn't take a department to do that — Admins across the workforce can do it. You can't underestimate the impact those little things can have."



CREATE INTENT-BASED CONNECTION. No more fake or forced social gatherings around the ping pong table. During the pandemic, employees really got to know each other as humans. EAs spent the pandemic architecting safe and authentic ways to bring teams together through activities like virtual coffees, team building with breakout rooms to really learn about one's peers, Slack channels to share what's going on in everyone's personal lives — and so much more. For example, Hufnagel notes her team shares what they are grateful for weekly and takes time to call out teammates who have been essential in removing friction.



Looking for more great ideas on how to influence company culture or just want to connect with other Admins? Then make sure to subscribe to Backbone, a blog all about the modern Admin. Created by the Admin Awards, Backbone's mission is to level up and inspire Admins to do their very best work. It's also about overcoming outdated stereotypes about the profession and those who serve in it. The blog tells the stories of innovators, change agents, thought leaders, and pioneers who are making a phenomenal impact in their organizations and inspire others in the process. After all, the best ideas and insights come from Administrative Professionals themselves — and that's what you'll find here.

3 | How Administrative Professionals can inspire culture by being their authentic selves



When Robin Guido — an Executive Assistant at Salesforce who is a three-time cancer survivor — first learned of her diagnosis, she was transparent about her medical journey from day one. And that impulse to be authentic has not only allowed her to make amazing connections and relationships with other cancer survivors in her company, but also inspired Salesforce's global Breast Cancer Awareness campaign every October. "Being transparent about something personal has been a real blessing," Guido says. "For those who do not feel comfortable being that open, you can always be an ally to others who do!" That, of course, is the goal in any successful office — inspiring people to come together for the best outcomes. And often, that's as easy as being honest about who you are and what you're trying to accomplish.



BEWARE OF FALSE NICETIES. Creating psychological safety for everyone to be their authentic selves does not necessarily mean always biting your tongue. Being "nice" at the expense of being honest can often result in negative outcomes. There's nothing wrong with healthy conflict, and Admins have an important role to play in helping people feel safe to have a healthy, open dialogue.

BE AN ACTIVE OBSERVER. In meetings, focus on body language or look for conversations where there are one or two loud voices and the rest of the room is silent. You might notice that most participants are not coming forward to engage in an active dialogue or you might see someone whose arms are crossed. These observations are opportunities to influence. You could say, "Before we move on, I want to make sure everyone's had a chance to weigh in." Or you can speak to people afterward and ask if they feel there's a missed opportunity to truly understand each other. You can start to influence cultural rituals by putting healthy conflict on the table.



ACKNOWLEDGE AUTHENTICITY — AND YOUR OWN STRUGGLES WHEN THEY OCCUR. When people are being authentic and honest, don't take for granted how simple it can be to acknowledge them. You can really lean in to gestures like sending cards, writing notes, or giving spoken encouragement. Those small kindnesses can make a huge impact. And remember: When you are struggling, ask for support. Being authentic means being real. EAs are *not* superhuman — and should not burn out pretending they are.

"Colleen and Herb just did what they did, and they hired people who did the same kinds of things. Herb used to say, 'Anyone can fly airplanes – it's how you're treated, it's the people.' When you treat people with the feeling of 'We're in this together,' that's a culture that's hard to compete with. You get the best out of the people you work with." — Cynthia Young



4 | How Administrative Professionals drive business outcomes by influencing teams around company values



Ultimately, your company exists to execute its mission, and most of the time, that mission centers around revenue generation. As an Admin, it's important to strike a balance between understanding the business metrics and influencing behaviors to support those outcomes. "It's not just the soft skills that are important," Hufnagel says. Additionally, if your company is value driven or promotes initiatives such as volunteering and employee resource groups — get involved. "It's a great way to have a voice and bring others along with you," Guido says.

HELP YOUR LEADERS CELEBRATE TEAMS THAT EMBODY COMPANY VALUES. Some effective examples include: Space on your intranet or blog to call out outstanding teams and individuals; sharing in an "all hands" or town hall to shine a light on teams living the values; provide opportunities for teams to share with the organization how they are living the values through their teamwork; and allow customers to share how the values enhance engagement and relationships.



"Southwest didn't set out to build a culture per se, they set out to build a profitable company that would democratize flying. Before Southwest, not many people flew, but their low fares allowed people to make it to graduations and babies' births, and things they could have never done before. In the process of doing that, Southwest built this iconic culture because it's who they were." — Cynthia Young

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Advice from Southwest Airlines — the company that "wrote the book" on corporate culture

Nan Barry, Managing Director of Southwest Airlines, has extensive knowledge as to how Administrative Professionals can best support and bolster morale in the workplace. But like any great leader, she doesn't rely solely on her own experience — Barry solicited thoughts from top EAs at Southwest. Here's their collective advice.

HOW ADMINS LEAD BY BEING BRAVE, ESPECIALLY WHEN LEADERSHIP IS THE SOURCE OF BAD CULTURE

We are fortunate at Southwest to have rich company values. Using "Me, We, and Southwest" as the guide, we encourage all employees to be true to their authentic self, even if it means not agreeing with a leader. One of our values under "Me" is "don't be a jerk." The language has helped many to have honest conversations. It's easy to agree — but it's brave to disagree, stick to your morals, promote positive behavior, and be a role model for others.



HOW ADMINS DRIVE AND INFLUENCE CULTURE RITUALS THAT CREATE CONNECTION IN ANY WORK ENVIRONMENT, INCLUDING REMOTE.

Admins are the glue of the company — they connect teams and departments daily. The role is instrumental to company culture because Admins are the eyes and ears of "the floor." They typically know what people want, what they're saying, and what they find lacking. A unique advantage of the Admin role is the opportunity to develop relationships and trust with both department leadership and individual contributors. They act as a crucial bridge to cultivate relationships and build trust between the two groups.



For example, Admins are in a unique position to create culture rituals by understanding the needs of department leadership and the needs of the individual contributor members. A substantial part of their job is to use that information to help create an environment through culture where people stay connected, enjoy their jobs, and are excited to come to work. They're also in a unique position to hear ideas from someone else in the department (picnic, themed happy hour, etc.) and run the idea by leadership for approval. They're an essential component in influencing culture rituals because they can ensure the needs/interests of the team are communicated to department leadership; in turn, Admins can be a representation of department leadership to ensure all details are accounted for.

HOW ADMINS DRIVE BUSINESS OUTCOMES BY INFLUENCING TEAMS AROUND COMPANY VALUES.

When our Admins conduct themselves in a manner that embodies our Southwest values of "Me, We, and Southwest," it encourages others to give 100%. Working for a company with values like ours generates positive business outcomes because people care more about the Southwest Family as a whole than themselves individually. We show up for each other and succeed together.





Advice from Southwest Airlines — the company that "wrote the book" on corporate culture (continued)

HOW ADMINS CAN INSPIRE CULTURE BY BEING THEIR AUTHENTIC SELVES.

Leading by example, being one's authentic self, and using the Southwest values as a guidepost will inspire others to do the same. Practicing hospitality, living by the Golden Rule, and not taking yourself too seriously will stimulate a great working environment.

For an Admin, it's critical to exude humanity and authenticity. To be authentic is to be willing to show your cards — even the ones with bent corners. A couple years ago, one of our EAs scheduled a group to meet with her leader. When she passed by the conference room, the group was all sitting there but the leader was not ... he was headed to another meeting. Why? She forgot to include HIM in the meeting! She apologized to the group and sent them cookies to celebrate being human and shared how much she appreciated the grace. It was a great example of having a fun-loving attitude while owning a mistake and reminding everyone that we all makes mistakes. Examples like this are relatable and validates that we are all in this together.



Upcoming Uber for Business Roundtables

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Thursday, July 22, 2021; 12 – 1:15 p.m. CST

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Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021; 12 – 1:15 p.m. CST

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