

Consumer-Centric Leadership

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As a senior leader in your company, you will speak to relatively few customers. Leading an organization with a customer-centric approach therefore requires you to focus first on the people in your company who are at the front line of customer interaction.

Listen to them. Connect with them as partners. Lead them from a base of trust and transparency.

Listen to the frontline

In a turnaround situation, you need to find the first place to build from. That requires listening to the people that deal with customer service.

Get a thorough understanding of what frontline workers are seeing and hearing from customers and merge that with the insight collected from data, consultants, and the analyst community. Pay attention to their emotional experience with the customer as that dictates the attitude workers may have towards them. Identify tactical quick-win solutions that can make a big difference to the customer or employee experience.

Build trust

A customer-centric approach requires a foundation of trust among your employees. Only then can you layer on the tools, training, and strategy needed to change the customer experience. This is especially pertinent in businesses where frontline workers must deal with complaints from customers but have little control over the product.

“Putting the customer at the center required getting the frontline workers motivated, integrated, and engaged in both heart and mind to act on a discretionary effort to actually take care of customers.”

- Oscar Munoz

CASE STUDY

Personal connection

While in the CEO role, Oscar made a deliberate effort to talk to individuals in their workplace.

In a quick conversation, a flight attendant said, "Two things you need to fix, Oscar: coffee, and contracts." The subpar taste of the coffee left a disproportionate negative impression on customers relative to the value that other United Airlines services offered. It was a high-impact problem with a simple solution.

As were the union contracts; they hadn't been updated years after the merger. The lack of attention from top leadership was demotivating frontline workers and eroding their trust in the organization.

Another flight attendant told Oscar that she was, "Tired of saying sorry". It was the basis of Oscar's move to regain the trust of United Airlines' employees before rolling out the transformation strategy.

To engage with the human element of your employees, show your humanity. Find common ground with every person you speak to. Once you're engaged with them, don't move. Rather keep people waiting than rush through personal conversations.

Don't rely on surveys and consultants to do the research for you. Find a style that you are comfortable with and make your connection to people personal.

"Leaders must seek to understand others before they can ever expect, or deserve, to be understood themselves by employees and customers they serve."

- Oscar Munoz

It is better to create individual, meaningful connections with a few people in a group than to broadcast a superficial message to everyone. People are good at projecting the experience of others upon themselves, but to do so, they need to see examples of you valuing others like them.

"When people go out and do this or try to do this, it always breaks because it's not a numbers game. Going to see 74 people and visit 25 locations becomes a thing. And there is no one that sees that as disingenuous more than the person you're trying to involve."

- Oscar Munoz

Set expectations

Not everything everyone tells you is right, and they may be missing crucial facts or context. Yet, their perceptions are always valid. Avoid disagreeing with them and rather seek to understand how and why their perceptions were formed.

Reassure them that you understand their point of view. Never promise that something will be fixed. Explain that their insight forms part of a big picture of feedback and that you are working on a blanket solution to cover all concerns. Your transparency encourages their flexibility.

“We give people a lot of leeway when we know who they are, when we know their intent.”

- Oscar Munoz

Personalize communication

While you can broadcast your message through speeches and town halls, corporate communication spreads primarily through the back rooms. Every worker you meet and have a personal conversation with becomes a broadcast tower for your trust and goodwill. Leaving a good impression on them turns them into voices that will oppose the spread of pernicious rumors and perceptions related to you or your strategy.

“Nothing carries further inside a large corporation from a cultural perspective than actual friends and humans talking to each other.”

- Oscar Munoz

CASE STUDY

Personal action

The CFO of United Airlines went to a small airport in Delaware and asked the team what their needs were. Their primary request was a small refrigerator.

The CFO left the airport, bought the refrigerator at his own expense, and delivered it personally before ending his visit.

Memos and notes work best when people can link your voice to the message within them. Actively broadcasting your connection with people will likely come across as disingenuous but you should seek opportunities to assist the speed of organic communication. For example, if you feel comfortable doing so, allow people to take selfies. They are a simple tool that is easily shared.

Invest time upfront

Invest in building trust intensely and frequently at the beginning of your tenure. Once you reach a tipping point where the organization trusts you, you can start to taper off your efforts and focus on other priorities. When people trust that you are involved and engaged each interaction you do have with your employees will carry your reputation for longer periods of absence.

“Leadership is never about you, what you think you did or said. It's how the people that work for you feel you are part of their equation.”

- Oscar Munoz

Make the top team comfortable with probing

By getting out in the field you may discover shortfalls in the leadership or execution of your top team. Structure your observations in a way that is not offensive or confrontational to retain their support of you getting out to the frontlines.

Approach problems with questions. Regarding an observation ask, “Why do we do things this way?” and let the answer rather than the problem lead the conversation.

Make people understand that your investigations are to help them reach their objectives better and faster and not an effort to interrogate their work. The best leaders will notice when things start working better and it will be increasingly easier to garner support.

“Our operations were getting better with zero investment other than time, and I call that proof, not promise.”

- Oscar Munoz

Test for latent values of leaders

When recruiting top leaders, anyone who has reached the interview likely has the technical talent for the job. Use the time to understand whether they have the values required for a consumer-centric organization. Ask them about themselves and the formative years of their lives. If they cannot open up authentically to you then it is unlikely that they will be able to lead with empathy and strong listening acumen.

“Who are you? What are you about?

And what do you want to live?

What legacy do you want to leave beyond this?”

- Oscar Munoz



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