

How To Fix United Airlines' Culture Problem

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Denise Lee Yohn, Contributor I write about brand leadership. Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

United Airlines employees seem utterly incompetent. The recent dog death incident is only the latest in a string of situations in which United employees have screwed up. But the incidents don't reflect a competence deficit at the airline; they reveal a culture problem -- and United's leaders must take specific actions to fix it.



United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz must take specific actions to fix the culture problem at his company. (Photo by Jim Young/Getty Images)

The Problem

When Dr. David Dao refused to give up his seat on a plane last year, United employees called

airport security who ended up dragging him off the plane. Weeks later, a United gate agent refused to allow two young girls to board a plane because their leggings didn't adhere to the airline's dress code for "pass travelers." And just last week a flight attendant insisted on putting a dog in an overhead bin because its carrier wouldn't fit under the seat and assured the dog's owner that it would be fine up there. The dog was found dead upon arrival at the destination.

These employee actions are deplorable and quite a disconnect from the company's brand slogan "Fly the Friendly Skies." The employees seem completely opposite from those featured in the company's recent Olympics advertisements which aimed to show that their superhero-like qualities enabled them to ensure the safe, smooth, and fun passage of Olympic athletes as well as everyday customers. The contrast between the company's brand aspirations and its actual operations couldn't be sharper.

The Diagnosis

Although United's employees seem to be at fault, the underlying cause is the company's lack of culture leadership. CEO Oscar Munoz and his fellow leaders are responsible for the huge gap between the company's brand identity and organizational culture. They have failed to engage, train, and motivate employees adequately and appropriately.

Munoz is credited with stabilizing the airline's workforce after the poorly executed merger of United Airlines and Continental Airlines in 2010 resulted in a widespread lack of trust between the airline's management and its workers. He also has boosted United's position in monthly on-time performance rankings of U.S. airlines from near the bottom to middle of the pack or better.

But he and other United executives have not been effective in cultivating the culture at the company. In fact, they have contributed to an unhealthy and poor-performing corporate culture by:

Making vapid promises and setting vague values. After the disaster with Dr. Dao, the airline rewrote its overbooking policies and promised to empower employees to act in the moment to put customers first. Munoz pledged that "every customer deserves to be treated with the highest levels of service and the deepest sense of dignity and respect." The company initiated a new employee training program called "core4" to emphasize the company's four core values: caring, safe, dependable, and efficient.

Clearly the recent dog death, along with several other incidents in the past year involving pets being delivered to incorrect destinations and/or dying while under United's care and the fact that the airline remains among the highest of U.S. airlines for complaints, indicate that whatever changes the leaders have implemented have not delivered on their promises. The training has not been effective and its values are at best aspirational and more likely inconsequential.

Prioritizing operational performance over employees. United's on-time and financial performance gains seem to have been achieved on the backs of its employees. On online forums, flight attendants routinely complain about what they view as deliberate understaffing. This, combined with the increase in quick turns due to more aggressive flight scheduling, means that attendants have too much to do in too short of a time during the boarding process. They aren't paid until the aircraft pushes back from the gate and they're held accountable for departures delayed by lack of in-cabin readiness. It's easy to see why they often rush through procedures and indiscriminately follow procedures.

Not respecting or listening to employees. United recently announced that it would discontinue quarterly bonus payments to most employees and would replace them with a lottery-based system in which those who qualified for the lottery through participation in the core4 program could win prizes.

When employees responded in an uproar, Munoz explained that the program's intent was "to spice up the process a little bit." His comments suggest that leaders view employee compensation as something needing an injection of fun instead of understanding its role in meaningfully engaging employees and contributing to their livelihood. Also his statement, "We'll be working over the next couple weeks to make sure we get input from people at all levels," suggests that employees were not adequately consulted during the conception of the change.

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- Employees can and will only deliver an experience to customers that they experience themselves

The Solution

If United's leaders want to stop the flow of employee mistakes that lead to public relations crises and to ensure that their workers live up to the company's brand ideals, they need to lead a substantive culture change. Cultural leadership of this nature includes:

- **Setting prescriptive values.** Since it's not possible to anticipate every possible customer scenario and to dictate the appropriate employee response, setting policies and procedures is not enough. Employees must be guided by clear and prescriptive values that help them determine how to handle unforeseen or difficult situations. Vague values such as "caring" don't provide the specificity that employees need to help them make the right in-the-moment decisions. But if United's leaders were to articulate and abide by values such as "listen carefully and respond respectfully," they would increase the likelihood that customers would be treated appropriately.
- **Empowering and equipping employees.** Core4 training and other programs like it are ineffective if they're not supported by policies and procedures that empower and equip employees do the right thing. While it's important for employees to develop emotional intelligence and learn effective communication skills, their hands shouldn't be tied by restrictive policies that dictate certain customer handling and they shouldn't face serious consequences for improvising when the situation calls for it. Leaders should respect employees enough to use their discretion -- and empower them to do so.
- **Aligning employee experience and customer experience.** Employees can and will only deliver an experience to customers that they experience themselves , so leaders must engage employees the way they want employees to engage customers. If managers only follow procedures and don't take the time to understand what their

employees need, employees are going to operate by the book regardless of what customers might really need. If employees are treated as if their well-being is less important than airline performance, they will care less about customers' well-being and more about on-time departures and efficient operations. But if leaders listen to, value, and demonstrate they trust employees, employees are likely to listen to, value, and trust customers.

Last year around this time, Munoz penned a letter "to the world we serve" to introduce the company's new shared purpose and values. He wrote, "United Airlines is such an iconic brand." He and his team need to lead the organization and cultivate a culture that lives up to that status.

Denise Lee Yohn is a brand expert, speaker, and author of What Great Brands Do and FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies.