

Love Letter from OSCAR MUNOZ

THREE YEARS AFTER STEPPING DOWN AS CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz has published *Turnaround Time*, a chronicle of his five-year leadership of the company. No disrespect to the many other executives who have written leadership books, but this CEO memoir stands apart, a fact that is clear even without opening the book. Its cover bears a quote—a positive quote—from a union leader. “Oscar Munoz saved United Airlines,” says Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants.

It is tempting here to plug the memoir on grounds that it is dramatic, recounting as it does the turnaround of one of America’s largest airlines and most iconic brands. But notwithstanding Nelson’s praise, Munoz insists that while he authored the book, the turnaround of United was written by its workforce. His 240-page book, he says, is “the longest love letter to aviation employees ever, the longest love letter in the history of business.”

His turn as United CEO shows that surprising—indeed, historic—turns can come at every stage of one’s career. Over the decades, Munoz held senior executive positions at telecoms Qwest and AT&T, consumer brands Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, and freight transporter CSX. Among other directorships, he took a seat on the board of United. A decade into that role, amid a management crisis at United, Munoz was suddenly asked to serve as CEO. The rest is chronicled in *Turnaround Time*. Munoz discussed his book and career with Brunswick Senior Partner Jayne Rosefield, Founder and Head of the firm’s Chicago office, and Head of its Global Consumer Industries practice.

A new book by the former United Airlines CEO pays tribute to the carrier’s workforce.

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What inspired you to write the book?

I had always waved off the idea of writing a book; it didn't seem like "me." But when I was flying during the last few months of 2021, with travel returning from the pandemic, just before I retired as executive chair of the board, I found myself sitting next to a passenger who leaned in and said to me, "Oscar! Isn't it great to be back, flying again?" An innocent comment. But I felt the urgent need to remind him, "Well, you and I are only back in the skies because the United family never left them."

When the world went home for lockdown, our people were marching in the other direction.

They kept us flying. I know because I was on those flights, ones where crew members outnumbered passengers. We are infinitely thankful for the support of taxpayers who stood behind the aviation industry, for sure. But I felt it was important to remind the world how vitally important aviation professionals are; "essential" doesn't even begin to describe it.

We are about to enter perhaps the busiest and most challenging summer travel season, ever.

As that happens, I wanted to write a story that would lead a global audience to understand, respect, admire and—yes, even love—the people (our colleagues) who connect us to the moments that matter most.

This book is a primer on the airline business. A high-stakes corporate legal thriller. A gripping medical tale about surviving a heart transplant. It's part family memoir, part lessons in business leadership. But above all, it's the longest love letter to aviation employees ever. It's the longest love letter in the history of business. And it's my way of giving back to all our colleagues who've given so much to me. This is their story; I'm just privileged to tell it.

Just 37 days into your role as United Airlines CEO, you suffered a heart attack, followed by a heart transplant. How did that medical emergency impact your outlook on life and leadership?

As Walter Isaacson, my friend and UA board member, writes in the foreword to the book, there are a lot of parallels between my own deathbed recovery and heart transplant, and the revival of United. Not only did both stories occur in tandem, but I also believe that—in the strange way that life unfolds sometimes—both stories could not have happened separately.

When I took the job in 2015, I arrived to find a United that was significantly divided between the two sides of the company. Mistrust ran rife between the former UA employees and former Continental

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employees; and enmity had grown between management and our union-represented frontline workforce.

On the day of my heart attack, I had just returned from a lengthy listening tour, beginning to understand just how difficult it would be to unite this fractured culture. In fact, that same day, we were scheduled to have the first United Labor Summit, bringing together all our major union heads in one place to hammer out our disagreements. Lengthy, tortured contract negotiations meant that former UA and former Continental employees couldn't crew the same aircraft, or work together on "common metal," in airline parlance.

When I woke from a seven-day medically induced coma, I was amazed at what happened next. During my absence, employees spoke out in my defense to skeptics who didn't believe I had the airline experience to make this company work, with my health crisis only adding to concerns.

Thousands of letters, care packages, notes and texts arrived at the hospital and my house. Every morning my kids would sit around my hospital bed reading these messages—Mailbag Time, we called it. The people who wrote to me wished me to get better not only out of a sense of kindness; they wanted me to finish what I had begun, to fulfill the promises I made on that listening tour.

For a company that had not been "flying together" as a team in a long while, this unanimous show of support made me believe that uniting this airline might just be possible after all.

Business leaders today face no shortage of challenges. What advice do you have that might help leaders think about how best to prioritize their time and energy?

I called the book *Turnaround Time*, not only as a nod to the many "turns" that an aircraft makes every day upon takeoff and landing. But because we turned around our airline itself.

Today, as I travel, I see us doing our best work, our brightest days ahead of us. People are noticing and appreciate it, believe me. And leaders of the biggest organizations want to know how we did it.

I explain to them that there are a lot of differences between what it takes to turn around our aircraft, hundreds of times per day, and what it took to turnaround our airline, beginning in 2015. But both require a united team to perform it well.

By coming together, taking care of one another, buying into a shared purpose and shared values, we began turning those aircraft around on time. And

with each flight, we got better. Ultimately, we turned ourselves around.

But I had the advantage of learning lessons from less successful corporate turnarounds. I've seen many leaders walk into an organization thinking they have all the answers. Though I'd served on the board, my prior experience was largely outside the aviation industry. That allowed me the freedom to ask pretty basic questions. This gave permission for people to open up and tell me what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear.

Asking basic questions, in turn, allowed our people to reexamine the fundamental assumptions that perhaps needed to be tested and revised. That openness allowed all of us to reset, restart with a clean blackboard and build this airline back up from scratch. My listening tour was crucial, though it was cut short by my heart attack. So my lesson is simple: Listen first, learn ... and only then can you lead.

Why is it so important for leaders to embrace an employee-first culture? And how do leaders go about that when they have a dispersed workforce?

Airlines were hybrid and remote long before the



A Wall Street Journal bestseller, Oscar Munoz's memoir details his time as United Airlines CEO from 2015 to 2020.



PHOTOGRAPH: SAVERIO TRUGLIA/REDUX

pandemic, so we have a unique and long experience with communicating culture, values and a shared purpose to a dispersed global workforce that spans time zones, countries and languages.

I don't believe there is a one-size-fits-all approach to hybrid work, and I expect a lot of trial and error. I serve on boards across industries, and the model that is right for a cloud giant like Salesforce will be different from the best model for an engineering and aerospace firm like Archer Aviation.

But whether you have a single factory floor or office space, or not, culture is the cornerstone of a thriving company.

The best way to communicate the kind of culture you want to build to your employees depends less on what you say and everything to do with how you make them feel through your actions. In my first days, I made a list of The Top Ten Dumbest Things We Do, the kinds of policies and stingy restrictions that communicated to our employees that management didn't care, and which seemed designed to make the performance of their jobs harder.

"Be the Brand"—that was the slogan used in our employee communications in those days. It rightfully became a target of mockery. Not because it

was a bad slogan, *per se*, but it implied that all the responsibility for serving customers rested solely on the shoulders of our frontline employees, not shared by management. As if our employees' attitudes were all that stood in the way of winning customers back to United. Not the cost-cutting, rule-obsessed, disciplinary-heavy culture that had come to ill define what it meant to "Fly the Friendly Skies" during those difficult years. Every time employees learned that another perk had been rescinded or another onerous rule had been imposed upon them or their customers, they would see those posters and shake their heads: "Hey management, practice what you preach." They weren't looking for an excuse not to do their jobs. They were looking for me and the top brass to do ours—that is, to create an environment where hearing "thank you" becomes the expectation for frontline employees, not the rare exception.

We began making tangible, meaningful changes to the most onerous sticking points. Sometimes it was as simple as providing a better quality of coffee onboard, which made employees proud of what they served. Later, it would be big things like finally concluding labor contracts that reflected the importance of our people. Small or large, every action needs to communicate respect and pride in what we do. Employees felt that and they began to reclaim the pride and sense of shared mission that had been lacking for so long.

You talk a lot about how critical it is for leaders to communicate effectively. Should they speak out on social issues?

It's about authenticity. Over my tenure, we felt it necessary to speak out more frequently and take stands on urgent issues that were highly relevant to United; it was a sign of the times.

I am cautious not to be seen as speaking for my employees. I didn't want to force my politics or my perspective on anyone or on my employees. We are diverse. We hold diverse views, like any big family.

But we do share certain values, otherwise we wouldn't be "United." You wouldn't be here if you didn't believe in the values of "Connecting People and Uniting the World."

I don't go chasing social issues; but when they come knocking on your door you have to answer the call. There are times, however, when silence becomes a vise, when a company has no choice but to speak out because it finds its values and reputation suddenly on the line.

That was the case in the fall of 2017, when I chose to speak out in defense of the Dreamers. As a

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Mexican immigrant who immigrated to the US as a young child, and lived undocumented for a time, I felt compelled to do so. As a CEO of a company dedicated to serving others with care, I felt an even greater sense of obligation.

Then, in 2018, the administration requested that US airlines assist with its horrific policy to separate children and send them, alone, back to their countries of origin. At that point, there was no question about United's moral obligations or my own. We publicly condemned the policy and refused to have anything to do with it. In fact, I credit our employees. Our corporate responsibility teams rapidly forged a partnership with FWD.us, an outstanding nonpartisan organization, to help operate "Flights for Families," which reconnected immigrant children with suitable next of kin in the US.

From our leadership on sustainability, to diversity and inclusion, we take these stands because not doing so would be inconsistent with our values, and contrary to our business interest as well.

How did you go about building a relationship of trust with union leadership?

Early in my tenure, Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), called for a worldwide protest against United. "Enough is enough," said Sara. "Flight attendants have given a lot to United Airlines, and we deserve a fair contract in return."

Fast forward to an episode in the book, as we worked to defuse a potential proxy battle launched by Brad Gerstner, CEO of Altimeter, those same unions picketed outside Altimeter's offices with signs that read: "Let Oscar do his job."

The other unions did the same and that united front of support was key to a successful resolution of the proxy fight. During negotiations around the CARES Act, my fellow airline CEOs knew that our hands were phenomenally strengthened because the legislators on the other side of the table knew that our unions were with us, and tens of thousands of their members were too. That's a source of power.

My fellow business leaders often ask my view of how companies should manage labor relations. I don't have a broad political theory. To be sure, there's a renewed vigor in America's labor movement and I think that is an important development. But I am very practical. The problem I had to solve at United was winning back the engagement of our employees as the first and necessary step in improving our service and our strategic plan to return to profitability. That couldn't be done without rebuilding a



United Airlines' then-CEO and staff celebrated Team USA as 85 US athletes boarded their flight to Rio for the 2016 Olympic Games.

constructive relationship with our unions. Other leaders and other companies have to deal with their own circumstances, and I don't presume to have a dogmatic prescription. But we could use more pragmatism and fewer polemics.

By the time you retired, United's board of directors had become one of the most diverse in the industry. What advice do you have for boards and CEOs looking to make their own boards more representative?

As a leader, your decisions are only as good as the advice you have. The more wide-ranging set of experiences and backgrounds that you can gather around your leadership team, the smarter decisions you will make.

Brett Hart, who was then our general counsel and now holds the distinction of being the first Black president of a major US carrier, proved to be the ultimate consigliere to me, because he was the person in our C-suite with a breadth of professional experience to help me frame issues in all the variety of contexts in which United operates—legal, political, cultural, reputational.

I often say that had he been present during our initial discussions about how to respond to what would become our greatest PR crisis of my tenure, his instincts would have moved us to a much wiser and more constructive first response.

PHOTOGRAPH: RICK KERN/GETTY IMAGES FOR UNITED AIRLINES

But, in order to build that level of diversity into your top leadership, you have to begin with building pathways that reach to the entry level and have stations along the way for people to advance their skills. That takes time and it takes a concerted effort on diversity and inclusion. It's not just a matter of conscientiousness but of competitiveness.

Since the pandemic, airlines have returned to a position of strength, with profits rising, but so are prices and tensions among employees and customers. What advice do you have for today's aviation leaders—and leaders in other industries—to ease the pressures?

Develop tools for employees that allow them to solve problems in the moment. Speak to them in terms of the ultimate outcomes that you want them to achieve and then allow them the freedom to use their best judgment to get there. Don't overload them on policies and procedures, one where they are more afraid of a reprimand from a supervisor than they are ambitious to please the customer. Build a culture where employees are used to getting a pat on the back rather than always having to look over their shoulders.

In turn, I ask the flying public to remember that even when tensions rise, when delays and cancellations and crowds become frustrating, that these employees are working hard to pull off this immensely complicated global dance that airlines do every day. It's almost a miracle that it happens.

I wrote this book to help the flying public better understand what these heroic professionals do every day and to come to hold them in the highest regard, as I do. And, as I write in the book, "If this story leads all of us to reset our relationships with that cadre of fellow human beings whom we've come to refer to as 'essential workers,' whatever industry they work in, well, that would be a pretty welcome result, also."

Final lessons?

To be a great leader, first listen, learn. Seek to understand others before demanding they understand you. Lead with empathy and authenticity. Follow the maxim, "Proof matters, not promise."

The greatest lesson I learned from this extraordinary journey is that it's more than possible for a company to be both profitable and principled. In fact, the best companies are profitable because they are principled. ♦

JAYNE ROSEFIELD, Senior Partner, leads Brunswick's Global Consumer Industries practice. She is the Founding Partner and Head of Brunswick's Chicago office.