



Episode 10: Mandeep Grewal, head of customer experience for United Airlines, on enhancing the customer journey

Transcript

Mike Kearney: So I think by now everybody knows that I am a consultant. Although I don't talk about it that much. But what that means is that I fly every single week, for the most part. Although my family's not happy about that. But it's my job.

And what I find is that a great flight ultimately comes down to the experience—the experience on the flight, with the flight attendant, at the gate, going through TSA. And sometimes experiences that don't look so good actually turn out really good because of one interaction—somebody that made it incredible.

And today I'm really excited to be talking with Mandeep Grewal, who leads customer experience for United. And as we've talked about before, brand, representation, and customer experience is one of the biggest opportunities or risks to an organization.

And we're going to talk about a lot of different things. How United manages its customer experience, how they manage social media. And one thing I'm really excited to do is talk about the story of how Mandeep actually got into aviation. You're going to hear an incredible story about how her mom was one of the pioneers in India, nonetheless, in the '50s being one of the first women pilots.

Mandeep Grewal: If you have the best product and terrible service, that's not going to work. Both are important, but if you had to say one thing that truly, truly matters, it's service. Because even if you have older equipment but you have phenomenal service, people will remember that.

Mike Kearney:

Welcome to *Resilient*, where we hear stories from leaders on risk crisis and disruption. My name is Mike Kearney, and I lead Deloitte's Strategic Risk practice.

If you've been listening to the podcast, this is not just about risk, crisis, and disruption. This is about what makes great leaders great. And today you're going to hear this great conversation live from the arrivals lounge at San Francisco Airport in the United terminal.

Mike Kearney:

So, you know what, I want to start with your personal story because it's so compelling. And I remember when we had dinner you told me—and I just remember to this day—how you caught the bug of flying early. And it really starts with your mom and her role in aviation in India.

Can you share that story? Just go back to that time. What was your mom's role? What did she do?

Mandeep Grewal:

Absolutely. So my mom was 18 years old when she first started flying. This was a bug that she got and something that she actually had never dreamt about or thought about until she started college in Delhi, India back in the '50s. She was at a speech being given by one of the members of the flying club in Delhi, who kind of talked at the end of his speech, apparently, about how they dreamt that women would one day become pilots too.

And that, I think, really inspired my mom right away to think, “Why did it have to be one day, why couldn't it be now?”

Mike Kearney:

Right.

Mandeep Grewal:

And so she went and signed up and became one of the first women pilots of India. And in an era that, you can imagine, where women in India barely went to college and never really left their homes as much, to go into a field that was absolutely dominated by men at that time and started to really take on this very big task of—talk about breaking a glass ceiling. She shattered it, I think, and created a path for many, many women to follow.

Mike Kearney:

And so she was one of the very first women pilots in India. What do you think some of the character—like, what were her characteristics that drove her to do that? Because that sounds pretty easy nowadays, 2016. We're in the US.

But going back, like you said, to the '50s in India. First of all, aviation was still fairly nascent at that time, too. And now she jumps into it. What were her characteristics? Why do you think she got into it in the first place?

Mandeep Grewal: I think, if you talk about her characteristics of what drove her, it's very different from the time or the environment that she grew up in because my grandparents were extremely traditional. She grew up in a small village and went to local schools.

But I think her dreams and aspirations were much bigger than that. And hearing those gentlemen speak from the Delhi flying club, I think that opened those doors and gave her an opportunity to really dream above and beyond what she had ever imagined.

So she wasn't the first woman pilot. There were a couple prior to her. But she did get a lot of publicity because she was often observed by Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the first prime minister of India. He had come and seen her fly.

And she did win several championships against the men that she flew against at the Delhi flying club back then. She made a name for yourself. And I think, again, she created a path for other women to follow. She inspired many people. And, of course, she inspired me in every aspect.

Mike Kearney: Absolutely.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: So how did your mom's story influence you to get into aviation? Because most of your career has been either with Continental or United.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. I think from the early stages of my life, that I can remember, I grew up on airplanes. And that wasn't just due to my mom being a pilot.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: My parents actually, when I was just a few months old, had moved to Africa. So my early childhood was in Zambia.

And we pretty much—if I reflect back on the first 18 years of my life, my brother and I spent it on planes between Africa, Europe, and India. We ended up going to boarding school in India and my parents continued to live in Africa. And we flew all over the place.

Mike Kearney: You were flying back and forth and all over the place, yep.

Mandeep Grewal: So I cannot ever remember a time when we weren't on a plane. And it's been in my blood as a result of obviously my mom and as a result of what we experienced as kids.

So from the very onset, I—to be honest—never considered another industry. I knew that this was the industry I was going to go into.

Mike Kearney: And you've obviously moved up within Continental, then United. Did how your mom go about it to influence your perspective on roles that women could play in aviation?

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. Even until today, even though my parents have passed away, I often reflect on some of the things that they taught me and the barriers that they had to overcome, especially my mom. And it does. On a regular basis, I still think about the avenues that my mom followed and what I needed to do to succeed.

Mike Kearney: Great. Any other early experiences that really shaped you as a person? And we're going to get into your education and what you do at United. But any other early experiences? Such a compelling story. But anything else you would like to share?

Mandeep Grewal: I think, for me, it's the exposure we got by traveling around the world and meeting so many people from different cultures and with different backgrounds. I think that shaped, and has shaped, who I am today because I have seen a lot in my life so far.

And by that, I mean seeing and being exposed to different cultures, different countries, different people. It taught me tolerance very early in my life.

Mike Kearney: You graduated with a degree in economics. You went to school in New Delhi. And then you came to the US and you got a degree in finance from the University of Houston. Do I have my facts right?

Mandeep Grewal: Yes.

Mike Kearney: Okay, good. Talk about how your education kind of shaped you. The journey that you went on, both going to school in India but then also in the US.

Mandeep Grewal: So, of course, my journey's been an interesting one and quite different from many people that I meet here. I think, for me, it's not just what I learned during the course of my education, but it's more the values that were instilled in me from the onset.

So when I think about my early education through high school, I still practice—I think—a lot of what my teachers taught me. And it's a very simple thing. Like, "Try, try, try again. Try until you succeed." But I cannot tell you how often I still reflect on that simple statement.

And so, when you talk about education, I think beyond my degrees. I really actually think more about what I was taught and how to follow through in life.

Mike Kearney: So let's talk about your time at Continental and then United. You joined Continental in 1992?

Mandeep Grewal: Yes.

Mike Kearney: Can you explain your journey? And then we'll get to kind of the role that you have today. But you don't see—I joined Deloitte in 1994. So we have something in common. We've been at our organizations quite some time.

Mandeep Grewal: For a while.

Mike Kearney: Which, to me, has served me extremely well. But I would love to hear about your journey, kind of where you started and now where you are within United today.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. So when I was graduating, as I mentioned earlier, I always knew that the airline industry is where I wanted to go and spend my career.

Unfortunately, when I graduated back in '91, Continental was in bankruptcy. At that time, the airline industry wasn't in the best state. And I didn't have an opportunity to go straight into an airline. So I worked for a hotel management company.

But then for a one-month window, Continental Airlines had opened the hiring freeze and I managed to get my resume. I got hired into the financial planning department and the rest is, to be honest, history.

Mike Kearney: It's history.

Mandeep Grewal: It was one of the most incredible calls I remember getting, telling me that I was hired. That said, as much as I loved studying finance, when I got into the practice of it, as interesting as it was initially, I realized that what I was really craving for was going into an area where I could directly see the impact of what—

Mike Kearney: Of your efforts, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: Of my efforts.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: And at that time, I learned about this group called revenue management. And it required having an economic statistical background, and so on and so forth, which I did. And I explored that. And I was fortunate to get an opportunity to move into that group.

And to be honest, that's where I spent—and I have spent the bulk of my career so far. I had the good fortune of moving up in that organization over the course of time.

And loved the aspect that, even as an analyst in that group, as you did forecasting, you could see the results of your forecast immediately. When the flight left the gate and it took off from the airport, you knew kind of the revenue on the flight, right?

Mike Kearney: Interesting.

Mandeep Grewal: And so it was, to me, so interesting that as an analyst relatively new out of college that you could drive that kind of impact. So for me, it's always been being in an area where I can see the impact and make a difference. That has always been my mantra, like, "Where can I make a difference?"

Mike Kearney: I think there's a lot of people in corporate America that if you're to ask them, "What is your purpose?" like deeper purpose, not just that you go to work 9:00 to 5:00, they would have a challenge answering that. And I think when you find people that actually really understand what they're there to do, the job satisfaction goes up exponentially.

So maybe guidance to kids coming out of college today: figure out what your purpose is.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. And the thing I always tell people is you must have fun—

Mike Kearney: Doing what you're doing, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: —doing what you're doing. And I actually said this at—I was asked to speak at one of the universities. And they asked me, "What guidance would you give to the graduating students?" And I said, "Make sure you go into a line or a path that really inspires you and you enjoy doing, because that's the only time you know you'll really succeed." I said, "The day you stop having fun, quit."

Mike Kearney: Absolutely.

Mandeep Grewal: Right.

Mike Kearney: You spend a lot of time at work, right? You might as well enjoy it.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah. It's like, why do something that doesn't drive you?

Mike Kearney: So you're in revenue management. And now you're in customer experience. You're the managing director of it. Can you explain—I think intuitively we kind of get what that means. But what does a day in the life of Mandeep Grewal look like? What are you responsible for?

Mandeep Grewal: So my responsibility now is, as you mentioned, customer experience at United. And this is a very interesting group and area and something I'm truly, truly passionate about. Because this role really entails creating collaboration and cooperative focus across various organizations within our company.

So, particularly, my team and I don't own a line of business, right?

Mike Kearney: Customer experience, yep. Right.

Mandeep Grewal: But what we have responsibility for is ensuring that we enhance customer experience across the company. So that means from the time someone's coming into the airport until the time that they leave an airport—which includes the experience at the airport, at the clubs, onboard, and when they land in their destinations at the baggage areas. It encompasses the entire aspect of their customer journey.

So if you think about the various stakeholders we have to work with to make this a reality, it is quite large. But yet we don't have ownership of any individual area. So it really is about how well can you collaborate and work with the various groups to ensure that we all agree that we do share a common purpose.

Mike Kearney: So I'm gonna move into a passion of yours, which is diversity in aviation.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: And there's two areas that I know that you're very active in: Women in Aviation Association and then the ulmpact, which I'm really excited to talk to you about, because you've got some cool stories there. But can you maybe share where your passion comes from and then maybe a little bit about these two organizations?

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. So my passion comes from, again, my own experiences, as well as my mother's in her time in aviation. But one of the things early on that I remember, if I think about starting off my career, I do remember some folks telling me that it would be very hard for a woman to succeed. And especially if you're a woman of color.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mandeep Grewal: Right. In corporate America. Well, there were two ways to handle that. One, you could just accept it and not do anything about it. Or you could work hard and prove that that is not the case. And I obviously chose the latter.

Mike Kearney: I was gonna say, I'm not surprised by that, knowing you a bit.

Mandeep Grewal: That said, I will say that, over the course of my career, I actually felt that I got a lot of support through various avenues as well as through my own leaders, my coworkers. Everyone was really supportive. I did not feel that there were barriers that were put in front of me. At the same time, I did work very hard, just like many others have.

And where my passion has come from in terms of working with this organization and leading ulmpact at United is, if I reflect back on my career, what I feel that was missing was probably a bit more guidance.

Mike Kearney: Hmm.

Mandeep Grewal: I worked hard. I achieved many things that I'm really happy about. However, if there was better guidance and opportunities presented to me, or more education about the avenues I could have followed, I probably may have taken different paths.

So what we're trying to do with the organization, which we have named ulmpact at United, is really help and mentor the younger generation entering our world of aviation—and definitely entering United Airlines—to help them better network, which is one thing I think we see all the time is women are not very good at networking.

Mike Kearney: So what does that look like? If I'm a woman and I've been in United for a few years, how do I feel the impact of ulmpact?

Mandeep Grewal: So it's interesting. It's not just about someone coming in brand new.

Mike Kearney: Okay. It's about women that have been in the organization. Yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: Women who have been in the organization. So I'll give you an example. We've had some women in probably one department at United for many, many years. And they've just kind of stayed there. And wouldn't go very far. That was me, too.

Mike Kearney: That was you, right.

Mandeep Grewal: That was me, right? I spent a long time in revenue management and pricing.

And what happens is, if you don't know of other areas and opportunities and you don't network enough, you don't realize that you may have the potential or the ability to actually go explore other areas. And what we have done is actually created this forced networking, which has opened up everyone's eyes to say, "You know what, if I've been in marketing all my life, maybe I can go explore something else. And I can go talk to someone and figure out if my skill set would fit out here."

Mike Kearney: Well, and it's not only, "Will my skill set fit?" but I also think often times if you come from a different group, you add so much more value because—

Mandeep Grewal: More value, absolutely. Because there's—

Mike Kearney: —you give a different perspective.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely, a different perspective. And what we have going on at ulmpact, which has been an extremely effective way for us to create this networking, we host various events during the course of the year. And we try to do something every month.

When we host these, whether it be speakers coming to talk or we just host like a mini conference, we do what we call the fish bowl. And anyone entering the room at that time, we have a fish bowl put out there. People throw their business cards in it. As you leave, you have to pick up a business card. And you are then required to reach out to that individual and schedule either coffee or lunch with them.

And I cannot tell you how effective that simple way of promoting networking has worked for us because invariably, now when I go to the Starbucks in our building in Chicago, you always see like two women sitting out there. They're having a cup of coffee. And they'll tell me, "Hey, Mandeep, thank you. This is due to the ulmpact event we went to. I met so and so and I'm having coffee with them," or, "I'm having lunch with them."

And not only is this about having coffee, but there are many that have actually reached out, explored job opportunities. Some have been successful and some are still exploring.

Mike Kearney: It's almost an informal mentoring program.

Mandeep Grewal: Exactly.

Mike Kearney: And it could be even a reverse mentoring program to a certain degree as well.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah. And it also makes you realize that, again, there's so many departments, there's so many fields within our world of aviation that you can look into, right? So if you entered one area, you don't have to just stay there.

Mike Kearney: You know what I love about it—and I'm sure you see this all the time as well—is that you potentially would have a very senior woman at United then interacting with maybe somebody who's at a very junior level. And the randomness of that is kind of cool and interesting and creates these great new relationships.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. And, in fact, we couldn't do what we are doing without the support of our leadership. For our ulmpact organization, we do have executive sponsors who are the officers of our company.

And the one thing I'm very, very proud to say is that at United, there's a tremendous focus on diversity. And it's not just talking about it. It's actually doing it.

Mike Kearney: Doing it.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: So let me ask you a question. If ulmpact—so there's a lot of organizations, people that are listening.

Mandeep Grewal: Mm-hmm.

Mike Kearney: What advice would you have for those women that are out there that don't have an equivalent of ulmpact? And you even said, "Gosh, maybe I could have done things differently." What advice would you give to Mandeep 10 or 15 or 20 years ago, if this ulmpact didn't exist? Which it obviously didn't when you were younger in your career.

Mandeep Grewal: If it did not exist?

Mike Kearney: If it did not exist. Yeah, because obviously you're given the benefit of ulmpact.

Mandeep Grewal: Right.

Mike Kearney: So it's helping. But a lot of organizations don't have that luxury.

Mandeep Grewal: Right. To be honest, no matter how big or small your company, what I would say is you must create some kind of a networking mechanism within your own company because that's the only way that you're going to be able to reach out. Because what we are guilty of, as women, is we tend to more often than not—and a larger population of us more than others—tend to sit in our cubes, heads down, do the job, work 9:00 to 5:00 or whatever—

Mike Kearney: Whatever it is.

Mandeep Grewal: —70 hours you're working a week, and go home, right? And whether it be personality differences or whether it be family obligations, whatever outside of the work hours, often we don't have the opportunities to go do the networking that, to be honest, many of the men can.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: And if you don't have an organization like ulmpact in your company, then you need to find mechanisms to still reach out and seek mentors to help guide you as to what you can do. And the mentors don't have to be women. It could be men, right? In fact, I would say a couple of the mentors that have really guided me through my career are men.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: And my biggest supporters have often been the men.

Mike Kearney: Been the men. And my guess is they've probably been very open to it.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. And so I think we—to answer your question too about giving advice to people that don't have these kind of organizations in their company, reach out then. If you can't create the organization, learn and learn more about your company's objectives. But learn about your leaders. Reach out to them. And, like you said, men are actually very open to mentoring, too.

Mike Kearney: Yeah. You—

Mandeep Grewal: You have to break those barriers though.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: Exactly.

Mike Kearney: Let's talk about the story. I love the story about the all-woman flight. I think it was from Seattle when you took a new plane, is that right, to Chicago?

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: Can you share that story?

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. So as you probably know, every now and then we take delivery of new aircraft.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: And when we do, it's actually a big celebration. It's like if you think about buying a new car and how excited everyone gets. So when you take a delivery of a new plane, there's a lot of celebrations around that.

And typically at United, they have tried to focus these deliveries by rewarding employees and basically making an event out of it. So an idea that we had is, "Wouldn't it be great if we used an opportunity like an aircraft delivery to recognize the contributions of so many women at United across the globe?"

And the idea came from, to be honest, as I traveled around and I talked to so many women. Even I did not realize, for example, how many women we had in certain areas of our company. Be it engineering, be it working on the ramp, and so on and so forth.

So the thought was that, "You know what, what if we did that and focused something that really acknowledged the various roles that women are playing in our company, and then reach out and thank them for that?" And I will say, when we went and proposed this idea to our leadership, they absolutely jumped at it and said, "What a wonderful idea. Do it."

And very successfully we managed to collaborate with Boeing and coordinate

this event. We invited 100 women from across United and had everyone fly up to Seattle for two days. And it was a phenomenal event.

We had not obviously just the 100 women from United, but our pilots, our crew were women. And everyone that worked on the ramp to pull our plane in when we landed in Chicago were women.

Mike Kearney: Was a woman, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: And it truly was the first all-woman aircraft delivery that had been done.

And prior to us actually taking the delivery of the airplane, getting the keys—which is symbolic—we had a lot of women from Boeing leadership there who joined in the celebrations. And they told us this was the very first time that that had ever happened. And we were the first airline—

Mike Kearney: So they were excited to join in on it with you, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: Oh my God, yes. It was very well covered by the media across, you know, in Seattle and in Chicago. And more importantly, more than anything, I think what it did is really help draw attention to the fact that, at United Airlines, we are very focused on promoting diversity.

Mike Kearney: I would imagine also the pride that every woman on that flight had for being an employee of United was through the roof.

Mandeep Grewal: It was unbelievable. And when we left from the Boeing airfield and we took off, and as the plane takes off, they do a ceremonial wave as a goodbye. Apparently, that's done by the aircraft.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: And so our pilot did that. There was not a dry eye, I would say, on that aircraft that day. It was just a moment of great pride and, to be honest, a way to just thank all the women at United for everything that they do.

Mike Kearney: What an incredible experience.

Mandeep Grewal: And we've had women, for example—we're sitting in San Francisco—at our maintenance base out here we have many women engineers and ramp coworkers. Just to be able to say thank you to so many of them and to acknowledge the work that they're doing in various areas of our company was amazing.

Mike Kearney: Let's pivot to your role as leading customer experience. I really want to understand how you guys think about customer experience. And, obviously, I would say that customer experience—if it's not one of the top issues for United, it has to be in the top, I don't know, two or three because it's the life blood of the organization.

But when I think of customer experience, there's also this notion about safety. Which, as a flyer, I think sometimes people take that for granted. Like they think, "Oh, this isn't a great experience because there's a safety element like weather," or whatever. And it potentially impacts the customer experience. But they go hand in hand.

Can you just talk about how you think about customer experience? Like help people understand the way a large airline thinks about customer end to end.

Mandeep Grewal: Sure. From a customer standpoint, the most important thing, needless to say, is a customer wants to ensure that you're going get them to their destination on time, safely, with all their belongings.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: That's a huge focus of ours, undoubtedly, right? Without reliability, without a good operational performance, the customers would not be happy.

And that's why we have been keenly focused on delivering on that. We're very proud to say that, in the first six months of this year, we have had unbelievable on-time performance and we are on a very good path of delivering on that.

So operational performance, reliability, is the number-one key.

Mike Kearney: Number one, yep.

Mandeep Grewal: Beyond that, what it really becomes is how do you create an experience such that you build loyalty amongst your customers? Because that obviously drives many things, such as longer-term revenue benefits.

Mike Kearney: Right, repeat business, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: Repeat business. That is extremely important. I mean, it is extremely important for your long-term business survival.

So, from our standpoint, our customer experience has really been about how we understand what the pain points are for customers, how we alleviate them, how we work with our various coworkers across the customer journey and ensure that we are basically delivering at every touchpoint. And if there are cases where at one touchpoint something goes wrong, how do you recover at the next touchpoint? And what can we do to get everyone on the same page to ensure this happens?

The good news, I will say, is as we talk to the various folks out there that touch our customers through the customer journey, everyone is really, really focused on ensuring that we create that smooth journey for every customer. We've had our share of frustrations in the past few years due to various issues related to

our merger. But I think everyone's at the point that everyone's sick and tired of all those things and we're ready to move forward.

There's great unlocked potential, I would say, with a lot of our employees. And what we're trying to do—and I will say, this is really driven with Oscar's vision—

Mike Kearney: Right, your CEO, yep.

Mandeep Grewal: —and his inspiration. Right, Oscar Munoz, our CEO.

Mike Kearney: Your new CEO. About a year, right, a year and a half now?

Mandeep Grewal: It'll be a year in August.

Mike Kearney: Wow, okay.

Mandeep Grewal: Right. Late August. He has come in and really created and inspired so many people across our company to share this common purpose. And what he talks about—like the north star, right—is for all of us to understand what our north star is and our common purpose. He has been very successful in rallying the troops, for lack of a better phrase, to join in and kind of help us move forward.

And we talked about data. Our data is showing that that momentum is building. As we look at our customer satisfaction scores since the fourth quarter of last year, we are seeing such a good momentum building that it's now—as employees see those results, right, it inspires people to then move—

Mike Kearney: To do more, right.

Mandeep Grewal: To do more, to do more. It's like positive reinforcement, right? You get great customer feedback and you forward that on. And it gets people excited.

Mike Kearney: Do you guys talk about—as part of your customer experience journey, do you talk about the little things sometimes? Because I've got a—I don't know if I've shared this story with you. But it was one of those instances where you talked about, "How do we improve when something happened that didn't contribute to a great customer experience?"

And so I had an example, or an experience, where it had nothing to do with United. But there was a weather delay.

Mandeep Grewal: Mm-hmm.

Mike Kearney: And you get on the plane and it's like, "Oh, we're going to be delayed two and a half hours." You're like, "Oh. Now I'm going to be getting home at midnight." Everything goes through your mind.

And I remember the pilot—and actually the pilot did this before the weather delay. And I've only seen this a few times. But he came up in the front of the

plane and he explained all of the details, like the flight time, where there were going to potentially be some bumps, the things that they're going to do to make sure that we're on time. It was just a—

Mandeep Grewal: Phenomenal, yep.

Mike Kearney: —wonderful description of the flight.

And if anybody had a fear of flying, he probably alleviated it all. He would say, "When you hear this sound, this is what it is."

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: So then when we heard about the delay, he then came right back up and explained, "Here's exactly what we are doing. Here's what I will tell you when."

I got home and I remember telling my wife, I said, "You know what, I'm three hours late, but that was one of the best trips I've ever had." And it was such a little gesture. And obviously, it's probably a lot because of the personality of the pilot. But sometimes—and I'm curious if you guys think about this—sometimes it's the really little things that make all the difference in the world.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. Absolutely. You said it absolutely right, Mike. It's not, you know, we can sit and tell people, "Well, this is how we want you to interact with the customer. This is what we want you to say or do."

But, ultimately, it comes down to whether we are able to make that subtle connection with our customers and whether they see how genuine we are in our outreach to them and how genuinely we care about them in the times like when you described when you have delays and things like that that are out of our control.

What you described is very interesting because we have been seeing more and more stories like that come our way.

In fact, I think just last week I got another email where a customer was absolutely praising this pilot and just talked about how he had observed one of our pilots in the gate area going around and seeking out children and giving them extra wings and talking to them. And not only that, then he helped one of our elderly customers actually onto the plane and settle her down.

And this customer's observing this. And he thought it was just absolutely phenomenal.

We're very proud to say, more and more, we are hearing about these stories. And they're just absolutely incredible. Those things, those small things, are very big things.

Mike Kearney: Right, right.

Mandeep Grewal: They are the ones that make all the difference in how our customers perceive us. And they see that we're not just a company that's just running a business. We're a company that actually cares.

Mike Kearney: Well, and I think this notion of—and I never thought about it before—but recovery. Because there are times when things are going to go wrong, but that doesn't mean that you can't recover.

Mandeep Grewal: Right.

Mike Kearney: And there are things that you can do that can improve the experience and have a great feeling at the end of the trip, such as that.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah, oh, absolutely. For us, it's also about—like when you talk about customer experience, our big focus is we want to change the people who are indifferent to actually leaving. When they leave the airport and have flown on United, to actually leave with those impressions like you did, saying—

Mike Kearney: With a smile on your face, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: With a smile on your face and saying, "You know what, that was a pretty good flight." And regardless of what may have happened, if you leave with that positive emotion, that is what builds loyalty to a company, right?

Mike Kearney: So I was going to ask the question, "How do you promote great collaboration?" But I'm actually more curious of what gets in the way of great collaboration.

Mandeep Grewal: That's an interesting question. I think what gets in the way is if there's no clear vision in terms of what you're looking to achieve. What helps people around a table and join hands is when everyone knows that we have a shared purpose and there's a goal that we're looking to achieve, right?

If it's foggy, then no one really knows what is it that we're trying to achieve or where we are going. That's what creates, I think, confusion. And then people start backing off of that because they don't know—

Mike Kearney: Like, "Why am I spending my time if there's no clear vision?" Yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: "Why am I spending all this time? And why am I doing this?" But I think a lack of vision would definitely create a roadblock in building collaboration.

Mike Kearney: I would imagine—well, my experience, and you can tell me if you see this as well—especially in your role, probably the superpower is listening, like authentically listening.

Because every one of those groups that comes together, as you're trying to figure out how you really up the customer experience, probably has a perspective that is unique to themselves. And if they don't feel like they're being

listened to and acknowledged, then they're probably not going to join the party. Have you experienced that as well? Meaning the importance of listening when you're starting to pull groups together.

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely. You can't do anything without listening, right? I think the first thing, as we brought groups together, is about therapy sessions as we call them. You pull the—well, what did you call them? Superpowers or—

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: —the super groups together. It really is to first understand what it is that they are feeling or experiencing in terms of roadblocks.

I will say, as we've brought various groups together, the biggest insights have come from our own employees who are dealing with the customers every day. We can sit in Chicago and come up with solutions. And quickly they will tell us, "This is not going to work. And here is reason one, two, three."

So anything that we do or any proposals that we put forth, we are vetting them with our employees out in the field because they will tell us what will work or what doesn't work because they have the most experience in guiding that.

Mike Kearney: So let's move to social media. We live in a very different world. And it almost seems like customer experience is negotiated, or amplified, through social media. Like you could get a pulse on it almost every day. And I think sometimes in social media people say and do things that are very unsavory.

I'd be curious to know how you guys at United look at social media. How you monitor it, how you sift through really valid customer feedback versus noise. Any thoughts on that?

Mandeep Grewal: So, undoubtedly, social media has become—and is becoming—a growing component of customer feedback. More and more people are taking to social media, good and bad. At United, we actually do now have a social media team, which has been growing. And the focus of that group is primarily to understand what's being said out there and track that.

As you mentioned, anything that's said on social media is amplified.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: From a customer feedback perspective, we are monitoring what's happening out there. We absolutely want to know what's happening. And thankfully, in the market now, there are various firms that have very good text analytics tools out there. So we're using that to kind of pull a lot of this information to get a sense of what's being said and also measure the sentiment.

In fact, as we are building better reporting mechanisms at United, we are going to be tracking. We want to know, for example, not just from the direct customer feedback that we get through our surveys, but what are people saying as they're flying through San Francisco.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: And we want to provide that visibility to our leadership out here. Not everything would be actioned on in terms of what's being said on social media. But our focus is on having awareness of what's being said.

And, of course, not everything out there is true. It's also separating and taking the noise out of it to really understand what is of value and how do we then accordingly follow up or action things that need to be actioned.

Mike Kearney: It's so tricky. And the reason why I say that is, say if you're running through the airport and you've got an issue. It's so much easier to pick up your phone, go to Twitter, and lodge a complaint out into Twitterland, versus going up to an agent.

Mandeep Grewal: Right.

Mike Kearney: And so it's just changing the dynamics.

Mandeep Grewal: It is.

Mike Kearney: It's interesting. I know that your people in your social media group will actually engage with some of those customers, right?

Mandeep Grewal: Mm-hmm.

Mike Kearney: How do you do it in a way that's, for lack of a better word, authentic? Meaning that it's not just transactional.

Mandeep Grewal: And I think that's the reason why the team has grown, because there's a bit more focus on personalization.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mandeep Grewal: So it's not like a canned response. And a lot of that is driven by the group that is analyzing a lot of the data that's coming through. The reality is, whether it's today or in the future, a lot of what we're going to need is the technology to help sift through all—

Mike Kearney: Sift through the noise to get to the—

Mandeep Grewal: —sift through the noise to really understand and know, to be honest, who the influencers are in social media. Because you can identify who the original influencers are and then how it gets amplified through the various channels.

Mike Kearney: Right, right. So what's interesting as well in my mind is the fact that you don't own your entire customer experience journey.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: You've got that thing called the TSA that sits in between when I check in and when I go in.

Mandeep Grewal: Mm-hmm.

Mike Kearney: And this is not to criticize or even really talk about the TSA. But how do you manage the customer experience when you have touchpoints that you're not even responsible for?

Even, I would imagine, different venues within an airport that you don't necessarily have control over. But it may reflect on United's brand. How do you deal with that?

Mandeep Grewal: Our focus is whatever the experience or interaction may be for the customers, be it at the security checkpoints or be it with vendors at the airports, is really about having strong collaboration.

Mike Kearney: Mm-hmm.

Mandeep Grewal: And our various airport leadership works very, very closely with, whether it be TSA or whether it be different vendors or different airports, to help figure out how we can improve this for our customers.

Because, you're right, customers will go through an airport, and what happens is, regardless of what frustrations they may have had, when they come onto the plane or come to our gate, they may be exhausted by then.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mandeep Grewal: What we are trying to do, though, is at the same time see that regardless of what their experience has been until the point they come into contact with us, is how do we basically improve upon their day, improve upon their experience, right?

So necessarily their frustrations may have been even before they got to the airport. I don't know. Maybe they were stuck in traffic or something else happened during the course of their journey to the airport. But that frustration carries on.

I will say again, based on feedback we've seen from our customers, some of the great feedback has been about how they've had a terrible day at work, then they come to the airport and go through security, and so on and so forth. They finally end up on the plane, and they're just so sick and tired. But then they've had this amazing interaction with some of your flight attendants. And how just

through the caring flight attendants, for example, some of them about, "Your flight attendant seemed to have noticed that I was having a bad day and just came by and said, 'Hey, is there anything I can do to help you?'"

Those little things again, like you mentioned earlier, those little things do tremendous big things in the long-term, right, in driving that.

Mike Kearney: So I was in Portugal a couple of months ago. I think I may have even—that's when we were emailing each other. I didn't get this benefit, but my wife flew on one of the new Dreamliners from San Francisco to London.

Mandeep Grewal: Mm-hmm.

Mike Kearney: Which was an incredible experience. And I'm curious, when you start to think about new equipment, because obviously United is making significant investments in new equipment, and then you look at customer experience, what do you think has a bigger impact on the customer? Is it equipment or is it experience or both?

Mandeep Grewal: I would say it actually is both, right? Product and service both matter. On the same token though, if you have the best product and terrible service, that's not going to work.

So service, in many aspects—both are important. But if you had to say one thing that truly, truly matters, service does matter. Because even if you have older equipment but you have phenomenal service, people will remember that.

Mike Kearney: Absolutely.

Mandeep Grewal: Right?

Mike Kearney: Absolutely.

Mandeep Grewal: People will never forget some incredible service that they got. You will never forget that.

Mike Kearney: Although, the Dreamliner's pretty cool.

Mandeep Grewal: The Dream—no, no.

Mandeep Grewal: So absolutely.

Mike Kearney: I know what you're saying.

Mandeep Grewal: Not to say that product isn't important. But in terms of leaving lasting impressions, right, people leave lasting impressions on people.

Mike Kearney: Well, that's exactly right. It's that human connection. Which actually is one of the reasons why I don't think aviation is going to—not die, but in this virtual world we live in, you cannot replace human connection.

Mandeep Grewal: You cannot.

Mike Kearney: And that's why I fly every single week. I can do it on video conference or web conference or whatever. But you've got to see the people.

Mandeep Grewal: You're absolutely right. Because people make an impression on people. And that direct interaction is important. And, yeah, our business thrives on that.

Mike Kearney: Right. What about—and you've touched on this a little bit. Can you share the importance of mentorship to you throughout your career and maybe a couple of mentors that you've had?

Mandeep Grewal: So mentorship, I think, is extremely important. I think often what happens, as I reflect back and as I even see some newer folks coming into corporate America, people often have this arrogance that, "Hey, I know what I want to do. And I know how to do it. I know how to get it done."

And I think they're often misguided. Mentorship is really important because you have to have someone to bounce your ideas off of, bounce your thoughts off of. And a mentor, obviously, is someone you hopefully pick that has far more experience and is smarter than you in many ways. But it's more about the ability to bounce some of your thoughts on, right?

And mentorship—to me, I wouldn't be where I am without people guiding me in many ways to help me get here. I also came from a very different background into a very different country, different culture. It was important for me to have someone that could help me—

Mike Kearney: And I think—yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: —and understand how to kind of work in this environment that was also a bit foreign to me when I started.

Mike Kearney: Right. One question I love to conclude on is, "What do you think are the most important attributes of a resilient leader?" But we can even extend that to just leadership.

And you talked about your CEO quite a bit. So when you think of a great leader, what are the attributes that you think are so important? Especially in today's day and age where things are changing so quickly and we live in this hyper-connected world, what are the attributes that you see in great leaders, resilient leaders?

Mandeep Grewal: The one thing I would say to that is a good leader, to me, is one who can provide to you a clear vision. It is very easy to say you're a good leader when the times are good. But a good leader really stands out in times when things are rough and challenging, but can provide you with a good vision for the future. I think

leadership stands out in challenging times. And in challenging times, if someone's not a good leader, that's when they collapse.

Mike Kearney: That's when—yep.

Mandeep Grewal: Right? But in challenging times, if you can stand up, provide a vision, a clear vision—

Mike Kearney: And stick to it, yeah.

Mandeep Grewal: —and stick to it, that's when you can rally everyone around you to kind of join in a shared purpose and move your company forward. To me, that's leadership.

When times are good, it's like—

Mike Kearney: It's easy to lead in good times. Right.

Mandeep Grewal: It's much easier.

Mike Kearney: It's like sports teams.

Mandeep Grewal: It's much easier to lead. But it's very hard to lead. But I think that's when leadership really stands out.

Mike Kearney: Great. Well, Mandeep, this was awesome. So I appreciate your time. I'm going to hit on a couple of things that I heard you say.

Mandeep Grewal: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: And at the end of it, tell me if you think I got some of the key takeaways. But I really appreciate you sharing some great insights.

The first thing I heard was the importance of team. I think that was one of the first things that you talked about. Like this is not just about Mandeep. This is about the collective team and achieving whatever. And in order for you to be successful in any organization, it's not about the one lone genius. It's about the collective wisdom of the team.

The other thing that you talked about—and maybe this is important for folks that are starting out in a career, or even people that have been in a career for quite some time, that you always excel or you do much better when you have a purpose and you're passionate about what you've done.

And obviously that's something that it seems like has driven your career since you came out of college. You came to the US and went to college. And passion is something that you exude.

The other thing that I think was interesting for me, especially in a customer experience arena—and I think this is probably true in many other disciplines—is

the need to learn how to influence multiple parts of the business, meaning it's not command and control.

You can't tell them, "I want you to smile at every customer." This is about helping them understand why it's of importance to them, the business collectively, and it's about influence. And you gave some really good insights on how you do that.

And then the other thing—and I wrote this down a few times—and I think this may be my biggest takeaway is sometimes we think about transformational efforts as being big bang, you know, change a lot of things. But sometimes it's about those little things—and I shared that story with the pilot.

And I will tell you, I will never forget that experience. And it did not take any really incremental effort on his part. And you gave some really good examples as well around the little things.

And then the last thing I wrote was insight—you didn't say this but you made it very clear, like when we go out and we're looking at the data and we're getting input from the front lines, that's great insight. But if you do nothing about it, it's of no value. So when you have insight, you need to act.

So how did I do?

Mandeep Grewal: Absolutely great.

Mike Kearney: Is there anything I missed or anything else you—

Mandeep Grewal: You got it. You got it absolutely right.

Mike Kearney: Good. Any concluding thoughts or anything else that you want to share before—

Mandeep Grewal: Just I appreciate the opportunity to talk. It's always a pleasure. And I thank you.

Mike Kearney: Thank you.

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My last name is spelled K-E-A-R-N-E-Y. Michael Kearney on LinkedIn, MKearney33 on Twitter, or just Michael Kearney. Please keep the feedback

coming. It is so helpful.

And, remember, leaders who embrace risk improve performance and are more prepared to lead confidently in the volatile world we live in.

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