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FORWARD THINKING:

WE DON'T WAIT

I am writing this on Canada Day, heading into our July 4 weekend — Independence Day in both of our countries. I deeply wish for all of us that this is also the beginning of independence and liberation from the constraints and consequences of COVID.

It is time.

COVID has taken its toll on so many personal and business fronts. In two weeks, I will be able to see my parents for the first time in 16 months.

It is time.

We all experienced hardship over the past year in similar ways, and in some ways that may have been similar to our situation at Forward Air. Here at Forward Air, my professional home, we were hit hard. We are the best across North America when it comes to moving and handling higher value items that are “bigger than a box.” We started 40 years

ago moving what otherwise would have been air freight on the ground. Much of our “sweet spot” business is high precision execution for events — from trade shows and concerts to conferences and cruise lines — and all this business temporarily went to sleep in March of 2020.

We furloughed more than 2,000 teammates. My investor calls started with “Good morning, Tom. What’s wrong with you?” Then, to close out the year, we endured a cyberattack.

Now, 16 months later, we are stronger than ever. Our stock price, which had plunged from \$60 to \$40 a year ago, is currently at \$90.

How so?

We reinvented ourselves and lived our leadership imperatives. Let me share eight observations, and I hope you find a couple of nuggets for your business.

First, “We don’t wait.”

When a lot of our precision execution events business went away, some of our teammates started getting into the explanation business — “Nothing I can do. I am waiting for events to come back.”

Most of us went the other direction. Being constructively impatient, finding premium freight business with similar characteristics. When it looked close enough directionally, we moved.

We are not a philosophy club. In fact, I banned the use of the word “wait” inside Forward Air.

We don’t wait.

Second, “Luck is when preparedness meets opportunity.”

In 2019 — nine months before COVID — we started our “Grow Forward” program. This prepared us to find, keep and expand more premium freight business. When COVID hit, we dialed up all industry codes that are “essential” at maximum reasonable speed.

Luck is when preparedness meets opportunity. We did not know COVID would become our opportunity to ramp up — but we were prepared for it.

Third, “We operate as one.”

On December 15, we received a special holiday gift: We were hit by a massive cyberattack that shut down all our customer-facing operations and back-office systems. So, our holidays were a bit different, with three conference calls a day. Every day. We had to decide how to dispatch freight and how to make driver payments.

The Forward Air team stepped up — thousands of us — with zero finger pointing, leading with integrity and empathy. We truly operated as one. My team was “Forward tough,” and I was never prouder of them.

Fourth, “We communicate with two ears and one mouth.”

In March of last year, we all shifted to work from home to the maximum extent possible.

I did too, and I started calling each of my top 50 customers — some for the first time. Listening to how we can make things lighter for them, and then going to work in support of them. I never communicated more with customers than I did in the past year. With two ears and one mouth.

We used this time to build relationships, which paid off in a big way when we were struck by the cyberattack. Every single one of our customers stuck with us.

Fifth, “Every day is Driver Appreciation Day.”

While many of us were able to work from home last year, my teammates in our terminals and on the road never had that choice. With truck stops closed, in such scary times, drivers kept moving all of us forward.

We used to have a day in the fall when we honored and celebrated our drivers. Now, every day is driver appreciation day.

Sixth, “We remove the ceiling.”

In the past five years we bought companies only in two spaces: Drayage and Final Mile. Our less-than-load (LTL) business was only growing organically. Well, we just bought J&P Hall Express, an LTL company.

We did not do much in and out of Mexico. Now we are 10x-ing. We used to say, “We don’t ...” Well, “we do now.”

We remove ceilings.

Seventh, “What would have to be true?”

The single best question to ask when we remove the ceiling is, “What would have to be true to ...”

If something seems impossible, ask “What would have to be true for it to happen?” Then write it down and go to work. We did that.

In March of last year, after so much of our volumes broke away, we asked ourselves, “What would have to be true for us to have the same volumes we had a year ago?”

By July of last year, we had the same volumes.

Eighth, “Be tough on issues, not on people.”

In the midst of the cyberattack, emotions were high. It was the holiday season, and none of us could celebrate them. In times like these, tensions can rise, and people can get tough on others.

My teammates chose not to. They were tough on issues, not on people — and they focused their energy positively on bringing our company back.

On this Independence Day, I wish for independence from COVID for all of us. And I hope we keep many of the lessons learned during the past year alive. Life is too precious and short.

We don’t wait. ➔