



Viewpoints

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Purpose

To provide unique views, concepts and ideas that challenge you to think differently about business and life.

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Extending the “Undercover Boss” Principle

I hardly watch any network television these days. Too many other things are more important. There is, however, one exception to this that my wife and I are now hooked on. It's a fairly new show on CBS called “Undercover Boss.”

For those of you that have not yet seen it, I would strongly recommend it. It's a reality show (a good one, without the “bleeps” every other word!) about CEO's of different companies that decide to step down as CEO for a week to go “undercover” in their business.

For an entire week, they spend a day at five different facilities working in different roles with different people. The chief's objective is to get an “unvarnished” view of what is really going on inside the business and on the front lines.

Some of the companies that have participated in different episodes include: White Castle, 1-800-FLOWERS, GSI Commerce, Waste Management, Herschend Family Entertainment and 7-Eleven.

The results in the beginning are quite humorous. The CEO's usually are terrible at the different roles! They are very inefficient, they generate a lot of wasted product and they realize how inept they are at many of these supposed entry level roles. In some cases, they were fired! A very humbling experience. Some classic scenes are the executive at White Castle working the late night drive through window and the executive at Waste Management cleaning out Porta-Potty's.

They also see the human element on full display. The people they work with are real people, not numbers, that have different personal situations and stories, some of them heart wrenching. The CEO's also see shining examples of people that make the company great. People with amazing attitudes, fabulous customer relationships and incredible productivity.

The end result for these executives is life changing. They come back from this undercover week with a new view of their business and a new appreciation for the people that make their company work. They almost immediately add, eliminate and adjust policies and procedures based on what they've learned. They also create new programs and initiatives that better serve their employees and their customers.

It's hard to finish these episodes without a warm feeling inside.

This leads me to the following questions:

1. **If the undercover experience is so impactful, why aren't more executives doing this?**
2. **Should this undercover experience be a one time event or should it be more?**

Answer One: Ego - I believe the answer to the first question has everything to do with ego. The executives who participated in “Undercover Boss” had to eat a big slice of humble pie to do what they did. Not only did they work the front lines, it was filmed and broadcast for the whole world to see. Talk about humbling!

If you've read any of my leadership writings, you know that I believe humility and vulnerability



are two of the most important leadership qualities. Kudos to these leaders for displaying both.

If executives can check their ego at the door, they will want to go out and have these types of experiences even if it has the potential to be humiliating. They know it is not about them, it's about making the company better.

Answer Two: Much More! – I believe there should be a more formalized approach in all organizations that ensures executives stay close to the business on a continuous basis.

Here are some suggestions:

Recruiting Process – Let executives in the recruiting process know they will be required to work in “the field” periodically to ensure they stay in touch with their people and their customers. If executives scoff at this in the recruiting process, do you really want them running major operations? I wouldn't.

Orientation – As a part of the new executive orientation process, require them to spend their first week in the field doing a variety of front line jobs. This will set the tone before they even start “executive” work as to what's going on in the business. What a powerful way to start!

Keep the Momentum – Have executives do this every year. A different role in a different location with a different product or service. If you can get a program like this started, it can really be addictive! The best ideas typically originate at the ground floor so why not spend time experiencing it. Leaders will wonder how they led anything without doing this!

Expected Benefits

There are many more but are a few that jump out:

- Employees will:
 - respect you more
 - believe you actually care about them
 - give you honest input as to what is working and what is not
- Executives will:
 - have a new respect for the difficulty level of many roles
 - see how policies, procedures and measures drive behavior
 - see how policies, procedures and measures sometime lead to unintended consequences that are detrimental to employees and/or customers
 - get new ideas from people that actually do the work what a concept!

Companies that understand the importance of keeping executives engaged at a front line level will gain a significant competitive advantage over companies that don't. Some would argue that executives can't afford to spend their valuable time doing this. My view is they can't afford not to!

Financial reports, operational statistics and ivory tower meetings with managers delivering watered down messages do not give you the whole picture. In fact, many times they can give you exactly the wrong one. I believe leaders need to engage in a more meaningful, direct and personal way!

What are your thoughts or experiences? Do you agree or disagree with my conclusions? All feedback, positive and constructive, is welcome. In addition, if you'd like to discuss these concepts in more detail, please send me an email or give me a call. My contact information is listed below.



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