

***Undercover Boss* exposes lessons for us all**

By Jan Risher, Corporate Communications & Public Relations, ArchPoint Consulting & Richard Spoon, CEO, ArchPoint

When I watch *Undercover Boss*, I'm struck by the insights corporate officers gain into their companies, their processes and their employees. I watch and wonder, "Was it really necessary for them to wear a toupee and nerdy glasses to gain those insights?"

I'm unsure about the answer.

When corporate executives from headquarters visit field locations, the visits often produce choreographed action and dialogue scripted to perfection — mini-tableaus sometimes worthy of regional theater awards. The scenes portrayed are to everyday reality what today's middle class household is to an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. If C-level leaders are looking for a slice-of-life perspective on a field location's day-to-day activities, carefully orchestrated corporate visits rarely, if ever, provide that insight.

Instead, typical executive visits effectively illustrate the social intelligence and corporate cultural insights of the local director and managers — insights not to be underestimated in importance, but insights that often have little to do with how the site managers lead or relate to each other or their crews.

Managing up is part science and part art — often lost on those who are being managed. Sometimes the most effective up-managers are not, in fact, effective operational managers — and vice-versa. A big part of managing up is telling the above level or levels what they want to hear. Employees can't be blamed for participating in that process. After all, they've recognized how the game is played and who gets rewarded for what, but critical data about real-world operations is lost as each message is delivered and tailored for its receiver(s). While the life of corporate officers may seem easier and less stressful if they only hear what they want to hear, the company they are charged to lead will make decisions based on a warped sense of reality.

The brilliant aspect of *Undercover Boss* that alleviates up-management filtering is the pairing of the company's CEO with frontline employees less familiar, and sometimes less interested, in climbing the corporate ladder. Guaranteed that the unannounced arrival of a C-level leader to walk a mile in the shoes of the lowest tier employees offers insights into the reality of the performance of the company. All companies are designed to get the results they get. Additionally, this incognito-CEO approach could demonstrate misrepresentations in the traditional lateral communication system, illustrating the chasm between ivory towers and what frontline employees recognize as the real world.

For example, in *Undercover Boss*, one company faced a significant inventory problem. Frontline employees had been dealing with the issue for months and had given up on asking for the problem to be solved. The inventory issues came as a great surprise to the CEO. He immediately recognized the need for a change and acted. In most real-world cases, employees likely would have stopped telling their managers about the problem because it consistently fell upon deaf ears. The chain of selective information goes upward and often becomes more selective with each level of the corporate ladder.

Regardless of how high up the ivory tower we climb, executives need to keep perspective. Ivory tower living sometimes insulates executives from the real world and its challenges. In fact, in the television show, C-level officers often seem surprised at the struggles most people experience.

Perhaps the human angle between the CEO and frontline employee is played up for better television and to conjure a way for the C-level officer to “give back” in exchange for the experience he or she has gained. The show works hard at illustrating the challenges corporate leaders face in keeping a realistic perspective about the impact business has on the lives of employees.

Outside the manipulated world fit for network television, CEOs must maintain constant diligence to stay in touch with employees beyond their immediate circle of direct reports. However, true leaders realize the effort and constant evaluation necessary to maintain the balance between the organizational big picture and frontline detail. They also realize the value in giving credence to employees brave enough to limit filters on information flowing upward. True leaders who work to hone their emotional intelligence skills often succeed at gaining valuable, real-life perspective on their companies and employees.

All without a camera crew and fake mustache.

1. Listen to your employees.
2. Stay close to your customer.
3. Get out of the ivory towers.
4. Open opportunities for more lateral communication.
5. Don't forget your bottom line is about people.