

Must You Go Undercover to Advance Your Organization and Leadership?

Reality television is today’s trend in the entertainment business. Real people in (sometimes) real situations are cast in a variety of scenarios. One show of particular interest to us, *Undercover Boss*, takes C-suite executives and literally disguises them so they can work in entry level and mid-management positions within their company. *Undercover Boss* attempts to reacquaint these top leaders with the people and mission of their company, affording the CEOs an opportunity to capture unvarnished feedback. Each episode typically ends with a CEO’s recognition (sometimes tearful) of the strength of his people and the mission-critical values of their organization. Often, the CEOs conclude that they have strayed too far from the front lines, instead dwelling in the confines of their corner office.

Undercover Boss taps into the fear that many executives are becoming too removed from daily operations, serving as a leader in only name and sometimes face. The question then becomes, what makes a good leader? *Good to Great* by Jim Collins (\$29.99, published 2001 by HarperBusiness) examines the traits of great leaders. Through his research, Collins determined that top leaders possess two important traits: humility and an intense professional will. Leaders in



Roto-Rooter President Rick L. Arquilla, right, went “undercover” in an episode of the CBS Television series “Undercover Boss.”

this highest category invest their ambition in the institution, not their own careers and wallets. Collins admits not all leaders possess these characteristics, but the best and most effective executives and leaders do.

Collins also challenges the notion that great leaders are flashy and extroverted. Because humility and introversion have not always been viewed positively in business circles, leaders with these traits have to overcome organizational biases. For example, Collins tells the story of when Darwin Smith, a quiet

man, was selected as CEO of Kimberly-Clark. A director pulled him aside and “reminded him that he lacked some of the qualifications for the position.”

A *Harvard Business Review* article furthers this notion, citing a survey that 65 percent of senior corporate executives viewed introversion as a barrier to leadership. However, this is where the professional will, as Darwin Smith noted, is critical. He stated that he “never stopped trying to become qualified for the job.” He never allowed himself to become too comfortable in the corner

office, never forgot that he had to earn the respect of his peers on a daily basis, and always placed the good of the company above his own.

While many types of leaders can be successful, you should ask yourself a few pertinent questions:

- Do you promote a culture that encourages openness and celebrates the success of others?
- Have you established processes to gain honest feedback from all levels of your organization?
- Are you perhaps overlooking star

talent simply because they don't fit the stereotyped view held by you or others of a "traditional" leader?

■ Do you need to go undercover to reconnect with your employees and truly gauge your company, warts and all?

Although *Undercover Boss* is just cheap entertainment, its outcomes serve as powerful anecdotes and provide some key lessons.

First, stay actively connected to your employees and your mission. Complacency can blind your vision. Next, be sure that you are keeping your eyes to

the horizon and your nose to the grindstone. Finally, examine what Collins describes as "the brutal facts," for they may reveal the greatest opportunity. ■

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