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## **“Undercover Boss?” How About Undercover Hermit!**

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## **“Undercover Boss?” How About Undercover Hermit!**

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Last television season, a new reality TV program surfaced entitled, “Undercover Boss.” The premise was that a CEO or top executive of a company travels to a store or factory of the company where the senior manager pretends to be an entry-level employee. Cameras are present because he informs the employees in the company that he is newly unemployed and a local TV station is filming a documentary to discover how he adapts to a new position.

While at the company the “boss” attempts to discover what the employees are thinking about the company and how each of them interacts with each other and the management. Over the course of several weeks, the program featured bosses from Hooters, White Castle, 7-11 convenience stores, Waste Management, Churchill Downs and 1-800 Flowers. In many instances, the “boss” finds employees that are dedicated and some that need additional training.

What struck me about this series is what kind of a company has a CEO that is not known by the employees? Aren’t there annual reports with pictures – how about periodic internal newsletters – what about regular site visits – haven’t these companies ever telecast a message from the CEO - and aren’t new hires exposed to the management hierarchy by providing them with an organizational chart which often contains pictures?

To my way of thinking, an exceptional company could never have its CEO wander around without someone recognizing him or her. Management should be practicing MWA or “management by walking around.”

The companies featured on the program are not companies one would consider exemplary because if they were, the employees would immediately recognize the CEO. Obviously the companies featured have rarely had their CEO travel to the various sites. Harsh as this may appear, these are not exemplary companies or exemplary CEOs.

I’m confident that there are numerous CEOs who could not portray themselves to be “undercover bosses” because of their commitment to presenting a “face” to their staff. While I was Director of the Michigan Quality Council with responsibility for quality and customer service, I interacted with hundreds of companies at both the state and national level. What struck me

was the commitment of senior management to be present at staff meetings and even travel to the various company sites for feedback meetings.

One CEO that immediately comes to mind is West Paces Hotel CEO Horst Schulze. Horst has a strict policy of greeting, meeting and interacting with every new employee. In some circles this is known as “onboarding” and suffice it to say, Horst participates in every onboarding. As such, the staff develops a relationship with him and his team, which would make it impossible for him to act as an “Undercover Boss”.

To carry this concept further, it is my understanding that Mercedes Benz dealerships do not allow a new employee to start unless the owner/leader is available for that employee's first day. Having been exposed to the management team of Mercedes Benz, I can personally attest to their commitment to seek out the wants, needs, and expectations of their employees and then assure that those expectations are met or exceeded. And that philosophy carries over into their everyday dealings with customers.

These meetings and interactions with staff are critical to the success of any company. It provides the leadership with an opportunity to discuss and infuse the mission, vision, and values of the company. How many times have we heard about a new employee coming on board when the only information provided is the location of his or her workplace and the cafeteria. Exemplary companies provide the entire playbook and share with staff the goals, financials, strengths of the company and even the opportunities for improvement. Anything less is doing a disservice to the employees.

Having said all this, I must share with you an incident that occurred recently. We were visiting in St. Louis and decided to order pizza for dinner. As luck would have it, a Little Caesars Pizzeria had just opened in the community. It was this company's entry into the Missouri market and we being from Michigan where Little Caesars is a mainstay, were delighted that a location was in the neighborhood.

Upon entering the establishment I remarked to the crew on duty that we were from Michigan, headquarters of Little Caesar. I then asked the employees if they knew Mike Ilitch who happens to be the owner of the Detroit Red Wings and Detroit Tigers. In addition he is the founder and

owner of Little Caesars since 1959. To my surprise and astonishment no one had heard of him! To me this was unacceptable! How can one work for a company and not be aware of the senior management! Obviously this location is a strong candidate for an “Undercover Boss” visit!

From what I understand, “Undercover Boss” will launch again in late September featuring executives from Chiquita Brands, DirectTV, Great Wolf Resorts, and NASCAR. The byword seems to be that the execs wanted to get down in the trenches and interact with the staff. But isn't that something that should have been done prior to the producers of the program offering the opportunity. I sure think so!

Furthermore, I couldn't help but think that some of the bosses who were featured are more akin to being hermits than being real CEOs. And if you are working for a company where the boss has become barricaded in his or her office how about mailing a record album from the singing group Herman's Hermits to the office with a note stating: “Unless you are in a Witness Protection Program how about coming out of your cushy lair and meeting with the staff!” It may not endear you to the boss but it will give you an indication how this hibernator values the staff and depending on the response, you may want to refresh your resume! There are lots of companies out there that are not managed by hermits! Look for one and move on!

In the meantime, I suspect that I will tune in. Maybe one of the employees will recognize the exec and ask the question, “Where have you been all this time.” Now that would be entertainment!

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