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Insights

Media Event

Undercover Boss or Undervalued Communications?

New reality show is a case study in poor executive communications

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A big part of effective leadership is demonstrating a clear understanding and appreciation of the practical challenges employees face on a daily basis – whether they deal with the public or work behind the scenes. It's a tough task if leadership is isolated and two-way communication with the rank and file is filtered, ineffectual or non-existent.

Who could have imagined prime-time television bringing us a weekly reality show demonstrating the hazards of being a CEO insulated from the daily workings of his or her organization?

If you haven't seen it, *Undercover Boss* is a CBS reality show in which CEOs work anonymously among the employees of their respective companies. Over the course of the hour-long program, CEOs pick up garbage, make coffee, sweep floors and deliver goods while learning the challenges employees face and what they really think of the company they work for.

The takeaway, while intended to be both eye-opening for executives and, ultimately, heartwarming for viewers, should raise big questions for professional communicators, particularly for those responsible for managing the internal and public perceptions of a company.

How can a CEO be so out of touch with employees?

It's easy for a CEO who is knee-deep in corporate meetings and spreadsheets to neglect visiting plants,

Any CEO who wants to hide from an ugly reality at his or her company will be faced with a tough choice: Would you prefer to appear naive or ignorant?

Awareness of and preparation for operating methods and practices that can become issues are critical to defending your business.

Why is the male CEO so underexposed to employees that he is unrecognizable when he grows (or shaves) facial hair?

In every episode of *Undercover Boss*, the CEO puts on a minimal disguise (think Clark Kent's glasses) and no one recognizes him. Time to raise the internal exposure of management. Eblasts, newsletters, company events, videos, satellite feeds, social media – there are a multitude of effective internal communication efforts that can carry the CEO's message to the employees.

Just as the CEO needs to make a connection with employees, employees need to make a connection with the CEO. Show your face! Get out in the field, around the office, at events. Demonstrate your understanding, interest and passion for the business.

A CEO – especially of a public company – is the voice and image of an organization.

People want to believe in you. Don't make it hard by being invisible.

Why are employees so disconnected from corporate initiatives?

During one episode, the CEO of 7-Eleven was surprised to see franchise workers throwing out day-old food and was befuddled to find that they didn't know about the company's food donation efforts. Communicating to employees at franchises and other outposts takes consistent and regular effort – especially in areas where there is high turnover.

Launching and sustaining corporate-wide initiatives such as charitable activities requires involvement and interest from employees and it's up to communicators to get the rank and file engaged. Social media tools can be useful, as well as efforts to recognize employees for their participation.

Undercover Boss is not just a reality show, but a reality check for communicators and their CEOs. It's a perfect example of why you cannot underestimate the power of executive communications.

franchises, distribution centers, stores or other locations where he or she could gain a clear understanding of day-to-day challenges. **Feedback is the key to continuous improvement.** If you are not available and accessible to staff who can speak honestly about frontline experiences, then you are missing a critical opportunity to understand your company's strengths and weaknesses.

Face-to-face communications create a connection and provides a reality check that can be filtered, lost or forgotten before it reaches anyone at HQ.

How can a CEO be so out of touch with his or her business?

If you're the CEO of Hooters (who appeared on the second show) and are genuinely surprised that your business model objectifies women, then you're seriously out of touch. Management must be 1) aware of and 2) prepared to deal with questions on controversial issues.

The Quell Group created "Leadership in Action," a dedicated effort to raising the profiles of CEOs both inside and outside their organizations. For more information contact Mike Niederquell, mike@quell.com or Donna Fontana, dfontana@quell.com.

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