

Four Key Learnings from “Undercover Bosses” Mary Tomlinson

The television series of *Undercover Boss* follows executives going “undercover” to experience their operation as a frontline worker. Fresh insights and a bit of drama ensue as the disguised Boss sees what it is really like – and at the end of the show, once the Boss sheds his/her disguise, high performing employees are rewarded – the emotional tug of the show.

Recently an episode entitled *Epic Undercover Boss* showcased a variety of past Undercover Bosses and what they had learned from the experience.

As I watched and captured four ‘aha’s’ reflected by these bosses during their experiences on the show, I believe that their learnings can benefit all leaders:

1. Visibility - all leaders committed to continue the practice of unannounced visits with their teams. They realized how much they personally could learn from their employees and seeing what is “really” going on. One executive said he was committing to spending ½ his time in the stores rather than the executive office suite. How much time are you spending on the front line?
2. Listening – all these leaders realized that when they actually took the time to sit and listen to an employee – to both their personal story and their ideas – the leader came away with a deeper understanding of their teams and new ideas for improvements. Leaders said they committed to holding more Town Hall meetings and providing bridges to management so that good ideas could be heard. Do your employees feel like they can come to you with their ideas?
3. Being teachable – one leader said it was so important for him to “Get into areas that I thought I knew and find out that I really did not know how work was done”. Another said it was important for him to “...stop being a CEO and become an employee again”. Being vulnerable enough to work alongside someone who knew more about a task than they did, was key for them to learn new things about their own company. What is it that you don’t you really understand or what could you learn from an employee or department and are you willing for them to teach you?
4. Support and Care – One female executive now regularly asks herself “Is what I am doing making a positive difference in the lives of the people I touch?” Another commented that he realized that “...there are always more ways that I could support my employees”. All were deeply impressed by the dedication, commitment and passion by their employees and came away with a new commitment of their own to support them. How do you support and make a positive difference in the lives of your employees?

Whether you are the star of Undercover Boss – or the star executive in your own organization – these are valuable insights to live and lead well as an executive.