

Talent Management Perspectives

Published February 2010



Lessons From an 'Undercover Boss' Deanna Hartley

On the premiere episode of the new CBS series "Undercover Boss," a senior executive at Waste Management went undercover as a new rank-and-file employee to discover insights about workers and empathize with their needs.

Larry O'Donnell III, president and COO of Waste Management, left his plush office desk to pick up trash at the dump, clean out portable toilets and work at a recycling center.

"When you find yourself doing almost any job in an organization, it's harder than you think," said Aubrey Daniels, best-selling author of *Oops! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money* and *Bringing Out the Best in People*.

Case in point: The president was fired from one job because he couldn't pick up paper fast enough, and he made mistakes while performing the recycling job that caused the equipment to be shut down.

"[In addition,] he was able to see [that] things that he did from the top when he's looking at the numbers do have an impact on the behavior of people in ways he did not intend," Daniels said. "Many times people who implement initiatives and systems in companies have no real idea of how things fall out at the bottom."

For instance, the incognito president noticed that a female truck driver who was a garbage collector carried a can in the back of her truck. Apparently, the woman had so many stops and so little time that she was forced to use the handy device when nature called.

"Can you believe they've got supervisors at the level above her who either tolerate that or don't know about it?" Daniels said. "We see this every time we go in a company; the variation in implementing policy at the top is huge when you get to the bottom."

Realistically, not all managers in the real world can be involved in experiments of this magnitude. However, there are a few fundamental lessons any manager or employer can pay heed to and apply in their own organizations.

"Every initiative that starts at the top of an organization will have unintended consequences as it goes to the bottom — and unless [employers] start at the bottom and figure out, 'What do we want people to do? And then how can we create support for that behavior?' it's going to be inefficient and ineffective," Daniels said.

Another key takeaway is not to make light of the complexity of any given job.

"Until you actually step in somebody's shoes, you don't really understand what's involved in making things happen — what seems simple in an office is often very difficult at the front-line level," he said.

Many senior executives make it a point to take a tour or walk around the different departments of a company to get a feel for what it's like to perform a particular job, Daniels explained. When observation is done at such a superficial level, however, it can be deceiving.

"[For example,] if the senior executive at Waste Management just looked at people picking up paper, he probably would have thought, 'That looks easy; it's a no-brainer; everybody can do that' — but the truth is he couldn't do it," Daniels said.

"There's always more to a job than people who don't have it realize. It's a game-changer for many people once they realize that. They say, 'Wait a minute, we need to approach our policies, procedures and processes in a different way.' And that basically is: 'Let's go to the bottom to see what's really going on down there and then build our systems and processes on that. Rather than start out at the top and push it down, we start at the bottom and build it up.'

Deanna Hartley is an associate editor for Talent Management magazine.