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LEADERS & SUCCESS

Time To Guide, Not Hide

By Cord Cooper

Posted 04:58 PM ET

Especially in tough times, execs must build workers' trust. A sure way to miss the boat? Go in disguise to get information — like top guns on the CBS reality show "Undercover Boss." This sends the wrong message, experts say. To get it right:

- **Give 'em truth.** Building trust means starting with basics. Execs must be viewed as honest, says human resource coach Jon Younger, co-author of "HR Transformation." When leaders go undercover — with fake mustaches, new hairdos and unexpected uniforms — they nuke the trust of workers and lower-level bosses alike, he says.

"By going in disguise to get information, execs basically tell front-line employees, 'Your managers aren't leveling with me,'" Younger told IBD. Result? "Workers and their bosses lose faith in the leadership team."

Though the CBS show is well intentioned, it has a false premise, Younger says.

"Going undercover could be seen as a harmless deception that helps build better relationships," he said.

The TV show's positive messages? "It's good to get to know employees and to understand what's getting in the way of workers delivering to customers," Younger said.

Those details could be discovered in better ways. "Start by visiting workers and foremen on the front line and having candid conversations. Then get out there and meet customers one-on-



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one. That's the difference between management by walking around and management by skulking."

- **Stay out front.** The TV show begs the question, "How could top leaders go undercover and not be recognized?"

"The answer is (1) it's unlikely and (2) when it does happen, what a telling statement about a firm's execs — they're so invisible nobody knows who they are," Younger said.

The remedy? Get to know workers at all levels, says "Building Trust" lead author Robert Solomon.

Added Younger: "How many times do bosses visit a regional unit, only to go from airport to limo to conference room, then back to the limo and airport?" he said. "They haven't met front-line workers. They leave as ignorant about day-to-day issues as when they arrived."

- **Give them a link.** Employees want to know that bosses understand what's involved in their jobs, and that their work is appreciated. "They want opportunities to grow," Younger said, "and to be rewarded commensurate with performance."

They want reality, not a reality show, says Anne Herman, a consultant for HR firm Kenexa Research Institute: "In large global firms, there's often a lack of awareness among top execs of how policy translates into operations — how it affects lower-level managers and workers. Firms should have feedback channels for managers and employees to share concerns. This cuts the need for (bosses) to hide to get the truth as they do on 'Undercover.'"

- **Go further.** Building trust goes beyond avoiding mistakes. Play offense, Younger said: "When you collect employee survey data, act on it — quickly. If you don't respond to worker polls, you do more harm than good. Look at the data and ask questions like, 'What are the issues workers complain about on a regular basis?' 'What are four things we could improve to boost production levels and team morale?'"

He added: "Responding in dramatic ways to worker concerns is the best and fastest way to build trust."

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