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MAY 2010 NEWSLETTER

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"The best-kept secret of successful leaders is love: staying in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor the organization by using its products and services."

—From *The Leadership Challenge, 4th Edition*, by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner

Welcome to The Leadership Challenge Newsletter!

This monthly publication shares stories, examples, and information about the impact of The Leadership Challenge in all kinds of organizations. [As always, please let us know how we are doing;](#) we may even contact you about featuring your ideas and stories in future editions of this newsletter.

Join the conversation on our Leadership Challenge blog: [LeaderTalk](#)
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Thoughts on the Model

Edmundson Northstar Institute takes The Five Practices global—to Honduras—and reports back on the enthusiastic reception and wholehearted acceptance their work received from workshop attendees, the larger business community, as well as the country's newly elected president. [More](#)

Tips and Techniques

Challenge your group to explore the value of risk taking and teamwork with the *Game of the Generals*—a strategic “war chessboard game” contributed by Elisa May Arboleda-Cuevas and Audie Bautista Masigan, leadership experts based in the Philippines, and culled from the recently-released *The Leadership Challenge Activities Book*, edited by Elaine Biech. [More](#)

Ask an Expert

Pat Schally of Sonoma Leadership Systems advances our thinking about innovation, suggesting that a “less is more” strategy is where the future lies for those leaders and businesses looking to generate greater rewards and profits in the years ahead. [More](#)

Rants and Raves

Listen in on two recent online interviews as Jim Kouzes discusses results from the most recent research that continues to demonstrate that the **content** of leadership has remained consistent for over 30 years—regardless of context or the dramatic changes in our world! Plus catch an early preview of Jim and Barry's upcoming new release, *The Truth about Leadership*. [More](#)

What We're Watching

Seven Leadership Lessons from Undercover Boss: It's Not About the Tears or the Fears...

Generally, the manic ‘reality’ television programs on the air these days don't make it into my praise file. [Amazing Race](#) is kind of fun. And I'll breeze in and out of shows like [American Idol](#) and [Dancing With the Stars](#) just to get a glimpse of what millions of other people are watching. However, most reality shows are just empty calories or fructose for the feeble mind. They fill up your time, but always leave you unfulfilled.

From a leadership perspective, however, two new shows have popped up on the tube this spring that deserve some added attention: [Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution](#) and [Undercover Boss](#). Since Oliver's show is just underway, it's the latter I'll focus on here, to shine a light on a few leadership lessons we can all learn from the main premise of the show as well as some of the participants.

Don't panic, I am not here to do a recap or critique of the show itself. There are plenty of comments on the Internet—both good and bad—that do that. In fact, many of my colleagues have beaten me to the punch with their own observations. However, I wanted to see where the show was going before I tossed out my opinions. Would it be relevant or would it bend to the vagaries of television and begin to “celebratize” it, ala the Donald Trump nonsense? As long as you keep in mind that it's a TV program trying to entertain millions, my sense is...so far so good.

If you have not tuned into the program, let me highlight what the fuss is all about. In this first season of *Undercover Boss*, nine shows aired, each focusing on a different company: Waste Management, Hooters, 7-Eleven, White Castle, Churchill Downs, GSI Commerce, Herschend Family Entertainment, Roto-Rooter, and 1-800-Flowers. Each week, a different CEO or senior level corporate chieftain shed his (all men so far) title, corner office and pinstripes to go “undercover” in his own operation. The idea is that the CEOs examine the inner workings of their companies. They observe first-hand how their decisions ripple down to others and where problems lie that would go unnoticed without their presence. They get up-close and personal with the good, the bad, and the ugly. Each week there is at least one unsung hero and usually one hard-ass employee who should be shaken not stirred.

So what's the key leadership lesson? Get off your perch!

Over the years, I've cautioned clients about the need to stay firmly in touch with their organization's reality—regardless of which rung on the ladder of success they find themselves. Too many “titled” leaders suffer from memory loss caused by too much separation from the day-to-day. It's almost as if the [Men in Black](#) wave their magic wand with each promotion: the higher up the ladder, the more disconnected some leaders are from the everyday.

To stay in touch, you don't need to go undercover. Just go do the work. Don't just watch for a few minutes and then rush back to your corner office to brag about how it felt “in-the-trenches.” Plan to spend time with the work—and the people who are doing the work, day in and day out.

With that in mind, and setting aside the “drama” aspects of *Undercover Boss*, here are seven lessons we can all learn from:

1. **Passion:** Each week, the featured CEO seems to have his passion gear kicked up a notch or two—although time will tell if that was only for the camera. What is obvious is that many of the employees in relatively low-level positions are very passionate about what they do and why they do it. From the fellow who cleans portable toilets at Waste Management to the Duck Boat Captain at Herschend, their energy radiates from the TV. Is this you? Does the passion for your job radiate to others in your group or organization? If not, why not? Perhaps it's time to do your own reality check. Leaders at all levels care about what they do. If you've lost that loving feeling around your work, perhaps it's time to go undercover with yourself to reflect on the choices you've made and what you need to do next to re-spark the flame. Be sure to write your responses down. Mull them over often, especially during moments of frustration.

2. **Presence:** Going undercover appears life-changing for these corner office commanders. Even this short time in the trenches helps them grasp that the gap between their beliefs and behaviors has grown too wide. They find themselves reflecting anew on what their company stands for and why. They scratch at their core values to relieve the itch. Finding themselves in awkward positions in the presence of a truly authentic employee who is dealing with severe issues in life, they finally seem to listen. Are you listening? Truly effective leaders are always in listening mode. They ask questions as teaching opportunities. Those questions allow them to open up a new credibility path so others don't just follow, but eagerly join.

3. **Voice:** When the CEOs return to the boardroom after their weeklong excursion, they appear to have changed. They are full of energy and ready to share their new understanding with their

executive team. It seems they have discovered their voice once again. They left the comfort of the cerebral and ventured into the beating heart of the organization. Their story seems to have shifted from demanding quarterly results at all costs to transforming lives. Their employees' stories about overcoming adversity offer them a new frame in which to look at their company and their own lives. Where's your voice? Do you speak from the heart or the head? Real leaders balance the two, helping everyone to see the positive future and their individual role in it. This balance attracts and invites others to be an enthusiastic part of what's next.

4. **Action:** Whether it's toilet cleaning at Waste Management or bun-breaking bun making at White Castle, these *Undercover Boss* CEOs are elbow deep in their new work. They find themselves face-to-face with where the work is and how it affects both customers and employees alike. Have you rolled up your sleeves lately? Have you jettisoned that limited thinking that keeps you in the middle of muddle? Effective leaders understand that sitting and talking only goes so far. Whether it's picking out jockey silks or picking up after a champion horse, the *doing* takes you past the finish line. Grab your shovel and question everything. Your efforts should aid others in seeing obstacles as opportunities.

5. **Service:** *Undercover Boss* is actually a misnomer. It should be Undercover Servant. Real leaders know that their work is to remove obstacles and provide resources so that the work can be done. Servant leadership, as a frame of reference, has been around since the 1970s thanks to Robert Greenleaf. However, real leaders have understood the concept for centuries. Do you honor those who work with you with your respect? When you recognize and reward, is it personal or perfunctory? When undercover, the UB chief connects with each person at a visceral level. It is at that place that true understanding begins. When the people you work with today talk about you 20 years from now, what will the topic be about. What will your legacy be?

6. **Evolve:** Near the end of each show, the tears flow from the CEOs' eyes. Are those salty drops a sign of real change or just moments of television drama? Only time will tell. However, it's not about the tears or the fears. Whether you are undercover or out in the open, each moment brings us the opportunity to choose a new approach...a new way to live. Leaders are always trying something new and encouraging others to do the same. Have you developed a few stretch marks along the way? Leaders are learners and attract other learners to them. Together they change the workplace and the world.

7. **Demonstrate:** Embrace the above lessons in every moment of your day. It's easy and you don't have to go undercover. Just engage with my simple, but effective **The Four Commitment Questions™**: What Can I Do More Of? What Can I Do Less Of? What Can I Start Doing? What Can I Stop Doing? Commit to this new way of living. Without commitment, nothing changes. Not you. Not them. Nothing.

One final lesson from *Undercover Boss*: we all need to ponder our connections to each other. We need to understand how our decisions ripple—harmfully or helpfully—into the lives of others, whether forcing people eat beans with no hands (Hooters) or encouraging others to give it all they've got and live the life of their dreams. Leadership is a choice. Have you chosen it today?

View episodes from the past season of *Undercover Boss* at www.cbs.com/primetime/undercover_boss/

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