

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



1312 More CEOs Are Heading for the Front Line

I first heard about it almost 30 years ago, and I thought it was a great idea. I still do. I'm happy to say that more and more people agree. I'm Jerry Roberts, and I'll tell you about a great leadership strategy, next on The Extra Point.

It was while I published Directions magazine that I heard about the general manager of the famed St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, and that he had climbed out of his business suit, replacing it with a bellman's uniform for a few days.

The GM wanted to understand what his bell staff went through on a daily basis. What he discovered was a shocker.

Equipment didn't work, bellmen had to use countless workarounds in order to accomplish their jobs, and they were treated poorly by many of the hotel's elite clientele. Out of his suit and not recognized by customers, he found the attitude of some clients to be well below his expectations.

After he returned to his regular job, the GM made several changes to improve working life for his bell team.

The St. Francis GM wasn't finished. His short stint as a bellman had such an impact on him that he then required all of his managers to do the same.

Soon, those experiences resulted in significant changes throughout the hotel.

Many leaders have followed this example in getting to learn — first hand — about the jobs of their team members. Among these are:

Howard Schultz, former CEO of Starbucks, worked as a barista in one of the company's stores to learn about the coffee-making process and to better understand the challenges faced by employees. His experience led to several changes in the company's policies.

Jeffery Immelt, former CEO of General Electric, worked on the factory floor of a GE appliance plant for a day. He did this to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by manufacturing workers and to learn how the company could improve its products and processes.

Richard Branson, founder and former CEO of Virgin Group, has worked a variety of front-line jobs over the years, including working as a flight attendant on one of his company's flights, working as a trainee chef in a restaurant, and even cleaning his company's planes. He has said that these experiences helped him to better understand his employees and to make better business decisions.

Bob Moore, founder and former CEO of Bob's Red Mill Natural Foods, worked as a miller in his company's production facility for several months, which taught him things about the business he could never have learned sitting behind a desk.

Lyft, a distant second to Uber in the ridesharing category, has just seen new CEO David Risher get behind the wheel on his second day as leader. One of his key objectives is to persuade more people to become drivers. He says the job has to be a great experience, and it's where he'll be directing much of his time and energy.

If you are a senior leader in a private company, government agency, or even a military unit, when is the last time you changed out of your normal work clothes and hit the front lines of your organization?

Isn't it time that you escape the insulation of the executive environment, and rub elbows with the people who rub elbows with the people who use your products and services?

Would it help if you better understood the world of the workers who toil, hidden away from your sight, far away from the world you're used to? (Con't.)

Maybe you'll get outside as part of a cleaning crew, or go behind the front desk where you greet customers, or bus tables or wash dishes at a restaurant.

Whatever it is that you preside over, would it do you and your organization good for you to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with people on your team, and to share their experience?

What could you learn? What changes would you make? How much better a leader would you be if you did?

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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