

Undercover Assessments

When Companies Want to Know What's Really Going On

By ERIC EGELAND

You have likely seen the CBS television show *Undercover Boss*, where the chief executive officer and/or family owner of a large corporation goes undercover in their own company.

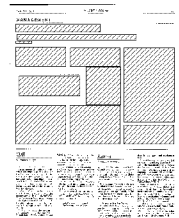
They pose as a new employee or trainee and spend one day with each of three or four different employees. Of course, the employees don't know the \$10-per-hour trainee is the CEO of the company, so they dish out personal stories, share complaints about the company, and even share ways they shortcut the company. The boss comes away from the experience suitably charmed by some, but almost always flabbergasted by what is really going on in their company day to day.

Doing an undercover assessment is a great idea, and can really improve your company whether you do it yourself or hire someone. But I can tell you from experience that what you see on television is only part of the story. Our firm has been providing this service for years to companies under 200 employees where everyone knows the boss. We go undercover as an employee, trainee, temp, or whatever the owner is comfortable with, and real life is a little different.

Like all good TV, things get edited. In the case of prime-time TV, all the boring stuff and dead time gets cut, and so does some really good stuff. In the real world, doing an undercover assessment is a little like surveillance. Actually, it's a lot like surveillance. You watch and listen to a whole lot of nothing for what seems like forever, and then, suddenly, you witness something big.

As an undercover employee, you train with co-workers, hang out at the water cooler, go to meetings, and start to make friends. You typically learn a few things right away that help the company. But for the most part, it can stay pretty benign for weeks or even months. The reason varies, depending on the size of the company. For smaller companies, people are more cautious of what they say and do 'outside the family' and can maintain formality for quite some time. Small companies just tend to be too tightly knit for anyone to give dirt to a stranger right away or let them see the family's dysfunction.

Three to six months is a magic time frame when people start to get tired of faking who they really are day to day. The bigger the company, the more



likely there exist employees who feel removed enough that they never fake formality and always act and speak freely, but in a bigger company, you have to find them.

So now you know that real-life undercover assessments can be significantly longer and much duller than on television. But in real-life assessments, we also see some very serious issues that might be too much for television or too embarrassing for the CEO to publicly share. Of course, for our clients, it stays between the boss and the consultant.

Over the years, we have learned about various seedy activities performed by employees. We have seen employees engage in immoral behavior while requiring subordinates to watch guard. We have seen the most respected member of a management team threaten and assault the employees of an entire department as part of their natural management style. We have seen groups of employees in one department band together to undermine another department. We have seen employees purposely provide poor service to customers they didn't like and brag with a sense of accomplishment after chasing them away. Extreme? Yes, but more common than you think.

On the less dramatic, but just as damaging, side are the bookkeepers who really don't know how to keep the books, employees who get angry about the boss's new car and retaliate by lowering their productivity, and the snoops who go through the boss's desk and computer when alone and then brag about it. The part that should surprise and shock you the most is that the overwhelming majority of these examples involve the longest-term and most-trusted employees.

Why the long-term employees and not the new employees? The new ones can certainly pull some doozies, but they can't get away with such nonsense for long. They haven't been there long enough to have the support and/or fear of the other employees. They do something wrong, and the current employees sell them out.

Finding and correcting the issues above can have a huge impact on your organization. It can help avoid lawsuits, improve morale, and make the whole company more productive. But we find many issues that are far less dramatic, yet equally important, like inefficiencies, safety issues, and potential breaches in data security.

We always find improvement opportunities that increase the bottom line, and that is the true value of the undercover assignment, whether it's real life or television. ■

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