

INDUSTRY TRENDS

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Taking the Lessons from 'Undercover Boss' to Any Operation



When Jeff Young, co-owner of YESCO, was asked to appear on the Emmy Award-winning "Undercover Boss," it presented a unique opportunity to interact with his employees—and to showcase the sign and graphics industry.

"I've always felt like our industry does not get enough recognition for what we do," he said. "I just saw it as a huge opportunity to highlight the real people behind the scenes who do the work. Those in our industry understand the allure of the lights and the design. I thought that it provided an opportunity to show the industry to people who were considering a career."

That's already paid off. Within days of the show's airing, Young said he'd received an

"up-swell" of phone calls, emails and texts from people who were interested in the industry.

For the uninitiated, the CBS show disguises the boss of a large company then sends them into the field to get an unvarnished look at the operations. Along the way, the boss often meets employees who have great ideas, or perhaps an interesting story. The humor comes from the boss often not knowing how to do the job; the heart, from the employee with the unique challenge.

Of course, not every boss can go "undercover" or on a TV show. But Young, who also is vice chair of the ISA Board of Directors, believes that his experience could prove valuable for other bosses.

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Overall print volumes in North America will demonstrate a compound annual growth rate of 14%, rising from 379 million square meters in 2014 to 737 million square meters in 2019,

A few of his lessons learned:

Create an atmosphere where employees feel free to share what's working—and not—in the field. “My biggest fear in going on the show was to hear things about the organization that are true, but that we don't like,” he said. “We all work hard every day and we think everything's better than maybe it really is. The blind spots are the worst.”

For Young, that meant hearing that the front-line employees felt a disconnect with the head office—something that was particularly true with the franchised operation. The undercover nature of the TV show made it easy, with Young's appearance altered (to include purple hair): “They were not in fear of saying what they needed to say,” he said.

But taking that throughout the operation means creating a culture where “employees feel comfortable to say what they feel. It's an acknowledgement that their perspectives are vital to the improvement of the operation. They can see some things that we're doing that are not really helpful to the customer.”

The biggest obstacle to creating that environment is “fear and defensiveness.”

This isn't just about creating a positive work environment, but it can have a significant impact on the bottom line. Research from Cornell University found a direct link between financial and operational results and employees who felt they could speak freely. Another research project, from Salt Lake University found that local managers at one national restaurant chain were able to convince senior leaders to implement programs that reduced employee turnover by 32 percent.

Understand that decisions you make affect real people—and they may be facing extremely challenging circumstances.

One of Young's experiences took him to a shop that had experienced recent layoffs. The employee he shadowed had once been homeless, but thanks to the job at YESCO

was now able to provide for his family. “I came face-to-face with the harsh reality of how that plays out on the frontlines, and understood the real anxiety of someone who had been homeless now coming to work wondering if he'll have a job tomorrow.”

That drove home the point that every decision the company makes “affects real people in very, very dramatic and financial ways. It's very real.”

If you think what happens off-the-clock doesn't matter, think again. Research from a workplace benefits firm showed that 16 percent of employees said their personal challenges caused absenteeism. About half said it was hard for them to concentrate at work.

He also learned that employees may be dealing with extremely difficult challenges. One had lost a son and was a single parent to his other children. Staying involved—and coaching youth sports—was important to him.

“He said, ‘I never could have done it without the organization supporting me.’ The big lesson learned here is that our frontline people need to be absolutely connected to their supervisors. Their needs need to be known.”

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This can be a sticky area to navigate. Employees note how one employee is treated during a crisis and will expect similar treatment during their own challenges. Create policies that treat those with similar problems fairly.

Any message is worth repeating. As YESCO approaches its 100th anniversary, growth is a major strategy, particularly in expanding its service franchise. But as any company



grows, it is important to keep repeating the message to ensure that is delivered. One employee brought up a need for more training. The latter was in place—but the message wasn't getting to the frontlines. “We assume that the frontline people get all the information we tell supervisors and franchise owners,” Young said. “They don't always do that. We've realized that we have to magnify the frequency and intensity of our message out to the people.”

That's proven by Harvard research, which found that managers who repeat their communications frequently—and in multiple ways—move projects forward more quickly and smoothly than those who do not. That may mean an in-person conversation, followed by an email or text message. For a company, it may mean something said in a staff meeting, followed by an article in the newsletter and a poster in the break room.

Any sign and graphics company can put into place the lessons Young learned from his “Undercover Boss” experience—no purple hair required. | 

STATS • FACTS

according to Digital Print Substrates, a white paper published by ISA. Over half of U.S. wide format printers expected their digital wide format media spending to increase for ink and media. •