

## What Would Your Workers Say If You Went ‘Undercover’?

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



It had been one of those really tough, really long weeks. When it finally ended and I dragged myself home, I propped up my feet and clicked on my flat screen to take in a bit of mindless television.

“Undercover Boss” came on and I was just too tired to scroll through the menu to see what else I could watch. I’m not a fan of “reality television,” but I was instantly drawn into the adventures of the “chief talent officer” of Popeye’s Louisiana Chicken, who went “undercover” to learn more about her company and its primary asset – its employees.

Started in 1972 as a small fast-food restaurant in a New Orleans suburb, Popeye’s is now an international, Atlanta-based company with franchises located around the world, including two in Bakersfield.

When a company grows so big, so fast, the bosses at the top can lose track of the challenges presented on the “front line.”

I have only watched a few episodes of “Undercover Boss,” but they all seem to follow the same pattern: boss clumsily tries to do the jobs of the line employees; he or she is surprised and pleased by the performances of some employees and appalled by others; a few tear-jerker moments of “revelation” are thrown in; and the boss identifies needed company improvements.

In the Popeye’s segment, there was the veteran employee who had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina; the “personality plus” guy who could sell chicken strips to a chicken; the cook who bad-mouthed co-workers and customers; and the maintenance man with a passion for community service.

While hosing off the sidewalk outside the Popeye’s franchise, the maintenance man proudly pointed to his watch – his prize for being selected “employee of the month” years earlier. He regretted that the company had discontinued the recognition program. “If they did more for employees, they would get better employees,” he said.

Co-worker Josh invited the “undercover boss” to eat lunch at a nearby Taco Bell. He would have eaten at Popeye’s, but the company had discontinued “employee discounts” and he could not afford to eat at his own restaurant.

Gina, a trainer and Popeye’s employee for nearly three decades, told the “undercover boss” about being fired by Popeye’s after Hurricane Katrina wiped away her home and she was unable to report for work. Several months later she was rehired.

The “undercover boss” discovered the strengths in Popeye’s operations, as well as its shortcomings, including its failure to sometimes support its employees and serve its customers. The “look behind the scenes” resulted in employee discounts and incentives being restored, and an employee relief program started.

It would be wonderful if every boss, including those who head big and small Bakersfield businesses, could go undercover to see how their companies really perform and how the policies established in their boardrooms affect the workers on the front lines. But even if local bosses wear fake moustaches and wigs, likely they would be quickly recognized.

But watching the show reminded me that there are steps that top managers can take in every company to better understand the day-to-day operations and its employees.

- **Ask yourself some questions:** If you went “undercover,” what would your employees be saying about your management style? Would they say they are proud to work for your company? How would they describe the benefits they receive? Would you be proud, or ashamed of what you heard?
- **Put yourself in your employees’ shoes.** Many top managers worked their way up from the bottom and never want to look back. They should look back. They need to remember what it was like to be a line employee.
- **Visit every division.** By that I mean actually spending a day with the workers, their supervisors and customers. A semi-annual “update meeting,” where the boss pontificates about his accomplishments, isn’t a “visit” or an “information gathering” opportunity.
- **Experience your company’s “customer service.”** Without fanfare, eat in the restaurant, shop in the store, call in to the receptionist, as every customer has to do. If your company involves sales, try selling your company’s product.
- **Ask employees for feedback.** Remember the old “suggestion box” that no one ever opened and if they did, they found hate notes from disgruntled anonymous workers. That’s not meaningful feedback. Really go out and ask workers how new policies are affecting them; if the new computer system is helping them do their work; and if they have ideas to help make the company more profitable.
- **Empower employees.** Give employees a clear understanding of the company’s goals and operations. Let them know how they fit into the big picture and how important they are. Job shadowing is a good technique for promoting companywide understanding.
- **Take care of your employees.** Sincerely thank your employees. Provide employees with the tools they need to do their jobs, the training they need to perform well, and the support they need in the way of incentives and benefits.

The difference between a succeeding and failing company is the quality of people it employs and the support it gives its workers. That’s the message conveyed by the “Undercover Boss” television show. It is the same message that we see reflected in Bakersfield’s top performing companies.

*This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on Friday, March 23, 2012. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website [www.pasassociates.com](http://www.pasassociates.com) and through the [PAS Facebook](#) page or by phone at 631-2165.*

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