

The secret to being a good boss: it's a balancing act

Sylvia Pennington | Mar 31 2016 at 12:20 PM

Spend all their time in the executive suite and they're likely to be deemed out of touch. Get down and dirty with the troops too often and they run the risk of being seen as a control freak or micro-manager.

How do CEOs strike a balance between focusing on the big picture and spending time with front-line staff?

With great difficulty, says Domino's CEO Don Meij. The one-time delivery driver presides over an international empire of 2000 takeaway outlets and says it's a source of "enormous tension".



If you can go ahead and work on the business, not in the business, that would be great.

Photo: Fox

Are you in or out?

"You have to work on the business, not in the business," Meij says. "You don't, and can't, jump in all the time [but] you need to make time to be in the business – if you don't, you become a space cadet and lose touch with reality.

"You need to work in the world of humble and be real and transparent ... I don't buy that when you're the CEO you think you're lofty and you're focused on big important stuff that's full of mystique – it's not [like that]."

Meij aims to spend between three and 10 days a month out and about, talking to suppliers, business partners and franchisees. While his diary is planned months in advance, he leaves gaps that can be filled with semi-impromptu meetings and catch-ups.



Domino's CEO Don Meij was once a delivery driver. *Photo: Jorge Branco*

"There's no question that to be able to have clear thoughts, you've got to see things for yourself, versus sitting in a room with lots of opinions," Meij says. "As we get bigger and bigger, it does get harder and harder."

Balancing act

Meij's balancing act is common for CEOs, says management consultant Roger Simpson, who coaches senior executives in the retail industry.

Most would benefit from more, rather than less, contact with operational staff, Simpson believes. He cites entrepreneur Richard Branson as an example of a CEO who understands the value of spending time in the trenches. "He always takes time to go and talk to the front line," Simpson says. "He's like a messiah to them because what he does, he just listens."



Management consultant Roger Simpson. *Photo: LinkedIn*

CEOs seeking genuine feedback should aim for regular unscheduled contact with their workforce rather than simply making symbolic, scripted visits.

"Once every couple of months they've got to go out and spend time talking to frontline staff, spend time talking to customers," Simpson says. "Random is always the best. Like a mystery shopper, they don't know you're coming. It's

keeping it real."

Stay connected

Lead Better business coach Ed Plant says CEOs need to discover the balance between hands-on and hands-off that works for their own business.



Lachlan McKnight, founder of virtual law firm Legal Vision. *Photo: Supplied*

"One of the benefits of being involved at that core delivery level is you get a really good feel for what's happening in the business," Plant says.

"And it keeps you connected to the real problems your staff and team are having.

"But it is [a balance], nobody wants to work somewhere where their boss is with them, next to them, every day. But also a lot of people don't want to work with that boss who never sees them and just yells orders from behind the office window."

Find your rhythm

Smart CEOs find the middle ground by incorporating a good rhythm into their working days and weeks, Plant believes.

"So that they're meeting with the right people at the right time in any given week and in any given month or quarter, they have time set aside for development, being down with the troops and working, whatever's needed for the business in their area," he says.

"It's achieving the flexibility inside a regimen or regime.

"Most business owners get in and do, and work, and are achieving great things and working really hard but they don't have a good rhythm that sets them up for success."

Back to basics

It can be less of a challenge in new businesses, where the demarcation between executive management and staff is minimal, says Lachlan McKnight, a former corporate lawyer and CEO of LegalVision, an online law start-up.

"I think start-ups are much more like that in terms of everyone pitching in, working together," McKnight says. "When you start out there's a couple of you in the business and then you grow ... we've got a lot of young people in the business, everyone's learning how to do things quickly. It's much easier for me to be on the floor with everyone else than to be in an office."

McKnight manned the phone in the early days and regularly jumps back in during busy patches.

"It is good to get back to it occasionally and see what sort of leads are coming in, what sort of potential clients are coming in, how our pricing goes down with clients – all that sort of information is incredibly useful," McKnight says.

"And also to remind myself how difficult it actually is to deal with a large volume of people calling in with problems and to work out a solution and how to help them quickly. It's not an easy job and it's good to be reminded of that."

What experience or advice can you share about striking a balance between managing a business and working alongside staff? Let us know in the comments section.