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Managing by walking around: 'The staff all know me'

This CEO of a not-for-profit housing organization makes sure he works hands-on with his staff, even if that means making beds and cleaning toilets. Here's a look at his management tips

Craig Dowden

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Raymond Swonek is the chief executive of GEF Seniors Housing, the largest not-for-profit seniors housing organization in Alberta and a [multiple award-winner for Best Small and Medium Companies to Work For in Canada](#). In a recent interview with Financial Post contributor [Craig Dowden](#), Swonek talked about his hiring philosophy, why you need to earn employees' trust and why CEOs should speak last. Following is an edited version of that conversation.

Craig: What are some of your favourite leadership practices?

Raymond: When I took over, morale was really bad. A big part of my philosophy is managing by walking around. The staff all know me by name so I could never do *Undercover Boss*.

I also ask lots of questions. It doesn't matter if it is with my employees or with the board of directors, I think a lot about what these different groups need or want from me. Asking questions is a great way to learn about that.

I also make it a point to visit and work at each of the lodges one day a year. I work with the housekeepers to make the beds, clean the toilets, vacuum. I work in the kitchen and make meals. I do whatever they tell me. What's great about this is that I get to talk to employees. They get to see me and I can sense whether something is wrong.

I also think it is important to let people make decisions as much as possible. People who are on the ground are the experts. They know much more than me about what's going on. I want them to make these decisions because it will be much better for the business and it will also engage them more and make them more accountable to the final result.

Craig: What led you to involve your employees as much as you do in the decision-making process?

Raymond: It probably comes from my background as an auditor. No one likes auditors, so you had to learn to talk to people and engage them in a non-threatening way.

At one point, we pitched an idea about us going out to the field and sitting down with the different areas to learn about their business. This was great because when I went back to make the case for certain expenditures, I had real-time experience with what I was talking about. The other parts of the business respected and understood me as well. I saw first-hand how engaging this approach can be.

Craig: What are some of the lessons you have learned as CEO?

Raymond: In the beginning, I was trying to move things forward too quickly. I learned that I have to sometimes slow down. You first have to get people on board and help them understand where you are going and why you want to go there.

In one of my earliest board meetings, I thought I had made an easy request to approve. I couldn't make the meeting, so I sent someone else on my behalf. I couldn't imagine my request not being approved. Boy was I wrong. When my request was turned down, I learned that I had not done a good enough job of prepping the board.

Another lesson I learned is that I do not want to give my opinion first. When you are the CEO, you can strongly influence other people's opinion so I make a conscious effort not to speak first. This helps bring lots of great ideas to the table and allows us to make better decisions as a result.

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