

## 5 Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Before I Became a CEO

Being a CEO isn't all corner offices and high-stakes decisions — it's mostly pressure, people and pretending you know what you're doing ... until, eventually, you kind of do.

By [Sheldon Yellen](#) Edited by [Chelsea Brown](#) Jul 4, 2025

---

### Key Takeaways

- The pressure never lets up — and that's not a bad thing.
  - The journey is more important than the destination.
  - Lead by doing, not just by deciding.
  - Trust is your most powerful tool.
  - Vulnerability isn't weakness — it's strength.
- 

From the outside, [becoming a CEO](#) can look like reaching the top of the mountain — a final, triumphant chapter after a long climb. But here's the real story: It's not the end. It's a new beginning. One filled with curveballs, late-night worry sessions and more lessons than any business school could ever cram into a syllabus.

As CEO of BELFOR, the world's largest property restoration company, I've had the incredible privilege (and, let's be honest, the intense supposed pressure) of helping grow our team from 19 people to more than 13,000 across the globe. That journey has taught me a lot — about leadership, about people and about what it really means to carry the weight of the word "CEO."

So, if you're [stepping into leadership](#) (or dreaming about the day you do), here are five things I wish someone had pulled me aside and told me sooner:

## 1. The supposed pressure never lets up — and that's not a bad thing

When your choices affect others, the pressure doesn't take a day off. What surprised me most? How personal it gets. Being a leader isn't just about strategy; it's about heart. It's about caring deeply. Sometimes too deeply. DDI reports that [one in six leaders](#) feel burned out in 2025. [A study from Deloitte](#) found that 41% of executives experience high stress, and 36% are completely exhausted.

Here's the truth: Pressure comes with the job. And once I stopped trying to dodge it, I learned to carry it like a badge of honor. That pressure builds resilience. It grounds you. It reminds you that your work matters. If you're looking for comfort, leadership may not be your path. But if you're looking for meaning? Pressure just might be your compass.

## 2. The journey is more important than the destination

When I was starting out, I had my eyes locked on the next big goal: the promotion, the win, the title. I was so focused on climbing the ladder that I nearly missed what was happening on the ladder.

Leadership [isn't a finish line](#). It's a road trip, complete with pit stops, scenic detours and the occasional flat tire. The best leaders I know aren't obsessed with arriving; they're dialed in to the ride. There's a reason the windshield is wider than the rearview mirror. Sure, we glance back, but we move forward. Every challenge, every small win, every hard lesson shapes who we become.

So, if you're feeling behind or unsure, remember this: Done is done. Keep growing. Keep moving. Be the [CEO of your own life](#) — the Cheerleader, Enthusiast and Optimist who sees potential, even on the tough days.

## 3. Lead by doing, not just by deciding

I'll never forget my time on [Undercover Boss](#). Working shoulder-to-shoulder with our team — cleaning, lifting, listening — changed the way I think about leadership. It wasn't just eye-opening. It was heart-opening.

At BELFOR, we don't print titles on our business cards. Why? Because when someone needs help, it doesn't matter what your title is. It matters what you do. Real leadership isn't about barking orders from a corner office. It's about showing up. Rolling up your sleeves. Listening twice as much as you talk (there's a reason we've got two ears and one mouth). And doing ... leading by example!

[A Harvard Business Review study](#) backs this up: Leaders who match actions to words build trust. And I'll add this — they also build family. Everyone on your team has a story. A struggle. A spark. When you lead with trust, compassion and listening, you light the path for others to lead, too.

## 4. Trust is your most powerful tool

CEO life can be overwhelming. So, here's the lifeline: You don't have to do it alone.

Some of my best decisions started with someone else's idea. That's the power of trust. When you believe in your team and show it, you unlock something extraordinary. [Delegating](#) isn't giving up control. It's sharing belief. It's letting people know, "I see what you can do. Go for it."

A culture built on trust creates a ripple effect: more engagement, more [ownership](#), more magic. When your team feels trusted, they rise — not just to the occasion, but beyond it. One person CAN make a difference. Sometimes, that one person is the one you empowered.

## 5. Vulnerability isn't weakness — it's strength

Somewhere along the line, we picked up this idea that strong leaders are tough, silent, unshakeable. I say this with all my heart: Let that go. The most powerful moments in my career have come when I let down the walls. When I asked for help. When I cried. When I let people see the real Sheldon — flaws, fears and all.

We spend most of our lives at work. If we can't be ourselves there, where can we? [Vulnerability](#) doesn't make you soft. It makes you human. And humanity is the heartbeat of leadership.

When your team sees that you're not perfect — but you care deeply, try hard and show up anyway, they feel safe to do the same. That's where trust begins. That's where innovation is born. That's where everybody's little hero within them comes out.

If I could hop in a time machine and talk to my younger self, stepping into that CEO seat for the first time, I'd say this: "The title doesn't make you a leader. Your actions do. You're going to mess up. You're going to feel overwhelmed. But if you stay rooted in [empathy](#) and passion; look at, walk with, feel and live compassion; believe in and trust your people; and keep your eyes on the road ahead ... you won't just grow. You'll [lead with purpose](#), with passion and with heart."

Because leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about walking with your team while you guide, follow and truly care for each and every member of the family you're now honored to be part of. Together.



**Sheldon Yellen**

CEO of BELFOR

Sheldon Yellen is the CEO of BELFOR, the global leader in property restoration and disaster recovery, overseeing a \$3+ billion company with more than 13,000 team members across 550 offices worldwide.