

The business of care: Sheldon Yellen

CEO Sheldon Yellen has grown BELFOR into the world's largest disaster restoration company without ever losing sight of the people at the heart of the work.



Every year, Sheldon Yellen handwrites 13,000 birthday cards – roughly 50 a day. And no, he's not working at Hallmark or angling for a pen endorsement. The BELFOR CEO is reinforcing a belief that leadership, at its best, should feel personal.

"The 13,000 are just the birthday cards," he tells *The CEO Magazine*. "I also do

anniversary cards, graduation cards, thank you notes and notes of gratitude throughout the world."

Yellen has been in the role for four decades. During that time, the company has grown from a single office in Michigan with 19 employees into the world's largest disaster restoration business, operating in 36 countries, employing more than 12,000 people and responding to roughly 380,000 claims a year.

The scale is vast and the work is relentless. Yet the detail he returns to isn't revenue, technology or market share – it's connection.

"Cards are a great way of communicating," he says with a smile. "I get to drop notes to people all over the world. It lets them know that I listen. It's become a beautiful thing."

Moments that matter

For Yellen, connection isn't just about correspondence though. It's central to how BELFOR shows up in the moments that matter most.

"After an insurance loss – a fire, a flood, wind, tornadoes, hurricanes – we are there to help facilitate the rebuilding process. And it is a process," he explains.

There's the claim, the adjuster, then the estimate and negotiations, and finally the repairs. It's complex and often slow, particularly for those living inside the disruption.

"We help facilitate that process for homeowners and business owners throughout the world. It can be very cumbersome, but we make it more fluid," he says. "And we don't just write an estimate. We actually do the repairs. So it's full service."

But the mechanics, he insists, are secondary.

"We have 13,000 of the greatest people on Earth doing some of the best of things in the worst of times," he enthuses.

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BELFOR's growth has come from both organic expansion and acquisition. But Yellen has never approached the subject as a purely financial exercise.

"We still run the company like a family-operated business," he reveals. "That one-office mentality is still how we operate today."

That means when assessing acquisitions, Yellen starts as far away from the numbers as possible.

“A lot of people would sit and say, ‘Well, let me see that profit and loss (P&L) statement. How do we make one and one equal more than two?’” he says. “Of course, that’s a goal of a business. But what I look at when I look at growth is right at the heart. I want to hear about the people. How long have they been there? I want to hear stories about them.”

And if those stories aren’t forthcoming? To Yellen, that’s a big red flag.

“If somebody says, ‘Well, I just have great people. And we do US\$12 million a year in business and we make US\$2.2 million every year consistently,’ but my question was, ‘Tell me about your people.’ And that’s the answer? I’m a little suspect,” he says.

“As we grow the business, our vision is for more family members to come into this wonderful BELFOR family because of their heart, their passion and their compassion for others. Because we’re serving those in need. Our wonderful BELFOR people are giving people hope that their tomorrow is going to be better than today.”

Technology as a tool

While the culture hasn’t changed much over the decades, Yellen says the industry certainly has. He came in when estimates were handwritten on legal pads and roof measurements required ladders, tape measures and at least two people.

“Everything was longhand,” he recalls. “Today, there’s software packages. We have infrared testing. We can see behind walls, which we couldn’t do 40 years ago. We can tell if there’s moisture behind drywall. We can take a 3D picture of a room today and do the estimate back at the office.”

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Basically, what once took hours can now be completed in minutes. However, Yellen is wary of confusing efficiency with effectiveness.

“Technology is terrific, but it can’t replace human communication,” he says.

Yellen encourages his team to pick up the phone, which is, in his view, far more meaningful when clients are under stress.

“They just had a very bad day. They may have lost their home, their business, their livelihood,” he points out. “A call provides comfort and gives them confidence that tomorrow will be a better day.”

Leadership without armor

That same empathy extends to his leadership style, which Yellen describes as authentic and intentionally unguarded.

“I’m vulnerable. I cry often when I hear stories from our people,” he admits. “It’s not an act.”

He believes emotion is a strength, particularly in moments of responsibility.

“If you want to see someone’s character, don’t just look at how they handle adversity – give them power,” he says.

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This sentiment has guided some of his most defining decisions. During the 2008 global financial crisis when companies across industries were laying off staff, BELFOR made a public commitment.

“There will be no layoffs at BELFOR,” Yellen told employees. “Everyone will go home knowing their jobs are secure.”

The same commitment was made during the COVID-19 pandemic. And with the loyalty that kind of leadership and care promotes, employees don’t hesitate to deliver for clients when it matters most. Case in point: when a cruise ship carrying 3,000 people was stranded in Japan at the start of the pandemic, BELFOR was the only company called to manage the response.

“It was the height of the fear factor – March of that year,” he recalls. “We sent out the word that we needed 300 volunteers. Within four minutes, we received over 450 requests from volunteers to go to Japan. That’s the culture of one for all and all for one.”

People first

Despite its scale, BELFOR deliberately remains in the control of Yellen and his hand-selected partners.

“Maintaining control of our culture is everything,” Yellen says. “That’s the gem we protect.”

Financial discipline is vital to his approach. In fact, Yellen reveals that BELFOR has never breached a covenant or missed a debt payment in 40 years. And when it comes to driving decisions, he doesn’t mince words about profit and loss (P&L).

“I will not allow the P&L to dictate choices that affect people’s lives,” he insists. “It’s our people that affect the P&L – not the other way around.”

That philosophy stretches beyond employees to vendors and partners as well.

“We treat them like family,” he adds.

Yellen explains that forging strong relationships creates a true partnership, which makes it much easier to mobilize quickly when disasters hit.

“We have long-term relationships with our vendors,” he says. “Our relationships allow us to show up in a devastated area and use their properties as staging points to restore properties and help thousands.

“If we need to get into a supply yard at two o’clock in the morning, then we have relationships that will get the gates open for us to get materials and equipment. Our relationships with vendors across the world are deep, long-standing and real.”

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Within BELFOR, ‘excellent service’ isn’t enough, Yellen explains.

“We want service excellence,” he says. “That includes emotional connection.”

And it looks like over-communicating, showing up and doing the right thing when no-one is watching. Yellen shares stories of BELFOR employees returning cash found in damaged homes. Of tradespeople who have been with the company for decades. And of staff that began in laboring roles and now run multimillion-dollar operations.

“This isn’t just a job. It’s a lifetime career opportunity,” he explains.

And he would know. Having spent more than four decades in the business, Yellen’s mark has been meaningful. So much so that on his 60th birthday, he arrived at his office to find quite the surprise.

“I walked into my office and 8,000 birthday wishes were there in card form from 8,000 employees from around the world,” he says with a laugh. “I was shocked to have seen it.”

With Yellen at the helm, BELFOR is a company where people feel seen. Perhaps that is its real restoration work – not just rebuilding homes and businesses, but reminding people, one handwritten card at a time, that leadership is ultimately an act of care.