

When You Put People First, Performance Follows. Here's What I Wish More Leaders Understood.

In a world obsessed with metrics and scale, the leaders who last are the ones who never forgot that people come first.

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Key Takeaways

- Vulnerability builds credibility. Hiding your humanity shows weakness. Showing up imperfectly takes courage.
- If you practice emotional intelligence on the inside, it will permeate to those on the outside.
- The best leaders get their boots muddy. You can't understand the work by reading about it. You have to be there doing it.
- Honest leadership cannot be random; it needs structure. Try ending one meeting a week by asking what made someone's job harder than it needed to be.

When Bob Iger stepped down as CEO of [Disney](#) in 2020, something subtle broke. Not the balance sheet. Not the brand. But the spirit. For two years, you could feel the tension creeping in. Creatives went quieter. Leaders hedged. People stopped taking the kind of risks that make magic.

So, when Disney's board asked Iger to [come back](#) in late 2022, the reaction was not polite. It was raw. Friends inside the company told me it felt like oxygen rushed back into the room. Meetings took on a new energy. Decisions sped up. Teams leaned forward again.

The stock jumped, sure. But that was not the real story. The real story was belief. The leader people trusted to steady the ship was back at the helm.

That moment says everything about leadership today. [Great leaders](#) do more than run organizations. They change and shape the emotional climate inside a company. They make people feel steady and seen. They give teams the confidence to do their best work, take smart risks and care. When confidence returns, effort and creativity follow. And when effort and creativity follow, performance is never far behind.

I know this because I see it play out every day. As the CEO of BELFOR, the world's largest property restoration firm, I have been given the honor of running a company that shows up when life falls apart. Our teams walk into hurricanes, wildfires, factory explosions, floods and homes turned upside down.

In those moments, speed, logistics and expertise matter. But what truly holds people together under pressure is heart, passion and commitment. Those are the things that steady people, [inspire them](#) and give them the confidence to do what others just can't.

And trust is built through emotional, meaningful connection. Leading with heart is not a nice extra. It is my job. The absolute differentiator.

And the cost of getting this wrong is enormous. [Gallup's 2026 State of the Global Workplace](#) shows that employee engagement has fallen to 20%. That translates into \$10 trillion in lost productivity. For any founder or CEO, what begins with a culture problem ends with a balance sheet problem.

After decades of challenging the CEO playbook, I have learned a thing or two about culture and [team engagement](#). From joining teams in disaster zones, to impromptu phone calls, to squeezing through crawl spaces on *Undercover Boss* to see what our teams experience every day, one truth keeps coming back: Resilient and heartfelt leadership puts people before profits.

Here are four lessons I live by, whether I am standing in mud with a crew or sitting in a boardroom:

1. Vulnerability builds credibility

In my playbook, if you hide your humanity, you're showing weakness. Showing up imperfectly takes courage. That honesty does not weaken authority. It strengthens it.

Our team members have joined me in laughter, tension and yes, tears. Real [vulnerability](#) sends one powerful signal — I trust you enough to bring you in. I am not the person I think you want me to be ... I am the person I am.

2. Emotional intelligence is kindness and business strategy

When I say [emotional intelligence](#), I am not talking about feel-good slogans. I am talking about how you show up. Do you stay calm when things blow up? Do you actually listen? Do you notice when someone is struggling? Do you tell the truth without tearing people down?

At BELFOR, we meet people on some of the worst days of their lives. We are often surrounded by chaos and emotional turmoil. In order to take genuine care of those we serve, we must care for each other; I mean, truly care, and that starts at the top.

If we practice emotional intelligence on the inside, it will permeate to those on the outside. In a business where humanity matters, [humility](#) empowers. That is not fluff. That is a purpose and a return on investment.

3. The best leaders get their boots muddy

Howard Schultz of Starbucks knew how to be a barista. Ed Bastian of Delta often flies coach. Bob Iger of Disney walked the parks. And I get my boots muddy.

In fact, in 40 years of leading BELFOR, I have gone through countless pairs of work boots. I am not joking. I have been in hurricanes, floods, tornadoes and fires, working [hand in hand](#) with our team members. Because if I understand their struggles, I can help make their jobs safer, better and the process more efficient.

So, get your boots muddy, no matter what kind of company you lead. It is the lifeline to your team members and ultimately your customers.

You cannot [understand the work](#) by reading about it. You have to be there doing it. That is why I still go into the field. I want to feel the pressure our teams feel, see the obstacles they face and experience the delays, the friction and the frustration firsthand.

Because leadership that stays comfortable never really knows what the job is like.

4. Honest leadership cannot be random; it needs structure

At BELFOR, we build emotional connection into our workflows. After deployments, we ask teams for moments of courage and what kept them going. We share those stories company-wide. We require leaders to spend time [listening](#), not just reporting. We celebrate examples of doing the right thing when nobody is watching.

If you want to build this into your own company, start small and stay consistent.

End one meeting a week by asking what made someone's job harder than it needed to be. Read one piece of feedback out loud without defending it. Change one process because of something a frontline employee told you. Thank one person publicly for doing the right thing when it was inconvenient.

That is how culture shifts. Not through slogans. Through visible, repeatable behavior.

So, my invitation to lead differently starts now.

- Does your team [feel safe](#) telling the truth?
- Do they believe you have their back?
- Do they trust you to do the right thing when it is hard?

If you answer no to even one of these, everything else breaks. Engagement drops. Good people go quiet. Fast-growing companies start shrinking and collapsing from the inside.

If you want a [stronger culture](#), start acting like the standard you want everyone else to follow. Admit mistakes. Listen without getting defensive. Show up when things are messy.

One person really can change everything. Especially when that person is the CEO.

Do not wait until the cracks become a crisis. Start now. Lead with trust, understanding and [consistency](#). The return does not just show up in morale. It shows up in performance.

Oh, and if you need a pair of muddy boots, give me a shout. I've got plenty. They're in the closet with my disco jacket and a few other questionable fashion decisions.