CEO MAGAZINE



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Leadership Business

When a crisis hits, the true measure of leadership lies not in what CEOs say, but in how they show up for their people. The most resilient teams power through obstacles with trust, compassion and consistency.

When the stakes are high and the pressure is relentless, people don't remember what you said in the boardroom. They remember how you treated them in the hallway or on the jobsite. They remember whether you listened, whether you protected them and whether your values held when it would have been easier to abandon them.

We have seen this play out publicly. When the COVID-19 pandemic brought global travel to a standstill, Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson addressed employees directly – candidly and without polish. The message focused on presence and honesty in the face of uncertainty. In that moment, leadership credibility came from showing up and staying connected.

For CEOs, this is not a soft leadership question. It's a business one. In moments of crisis, leadership presence directly affects execution speed, talent retention and enterprise risk. When trust erodes under pressure, decision-making slows, attrition rises and operational risk compounds. When trust holds, organizations move faster, even in chaos.

After decades of leading BELFOR through some of the most challenging restoration efforts in the world, I have learned this truth. Culture is not tested during chaos. It is exposed. Over time, I have come to rely on a simple, repeatable leadership framework during crises, one that scales across an enterprise and holds when conditions are hardest.

CONSISTENCY UNDER PRESSURE

In uncertain moments, people cling to what feels safe. When everything else is moving fast, it's the meaningful, trustworthy, repeatable actions that steady teams. Inside a company, consistency becomes an anchor.

At BELFOR, we don't treat routines as formalities. Daily huddles – even when they last only five minutes – recognition in the moment and handwritten notes became non-negotiables. These aren't symbolic gestures. They're leadership signals, repeated daily, that tell our people that even when conditions change, our standards and values do not.

Empathy is a competitive advantage.

I saw the power of that consistency during a series of hurricanes in the south of the United States. Our teams worked rotating shifts around the clock, exhausted and racing against time. With so much going on, it would have been easy to focus only on logistics.

Instead, I stayed connected to the people doing the work. I made it a habit to thank team members by name, sometimes with nothing more than a short email or a brief voicemail. Those simple habits cut through the noise. They reminded our teams that they were seen, valued and not alone. In the middle of chaos, that connection mattered as much as – if not more than – any operational decision.

PRACTICE COMPASSION AT SCALE

Responding to a crisis does not pause people's lives. Fear, family pressures and personal struggles all walk through the door with them. Leaders who recognize that reality – and create space for it – are not just offering a kind gesture. They are strengthening trust at a time when retention, focus and resilience are most fragile.

Research supports this. Harvard Business Publishing analyzed the factors that distinguish top-performing organizations and found that the top seven percent were significantly more likely to emphasize empathy as a core element of their culture. In other words, empathy is a competitive advantage.

Visibility matters when conditions are hardest.

Some of the most meaningful moments in my career have not come from planning sessions or formal reviews. They have come from quiet conversations. A check-in. A

question asked without an agenda. A pause long enough for someone to finally say, “I needed that.” Being seen in those moments carries more weight than any directive ever could.

That belief has shaped how I lead at BELFOR. Often it is not through grand action, but through simple presence. Showing up. Paying attention. Giving someone a reason to keep going when the work is hard and the days are long.

STAY CLOSE WHEN IT’S HARDEST

When pressure mounts, it is tempting for leaders to retreat into an operational abyss. But that’s usually the moment when teams need us most. Visibility matters when conditions are hardest. This is not about oversight; it is about shared accountability.

I have walked into hurricane zones, fire aftermaths and flooded neighborhoods while our crews were deep in restoration work. Not to inspect, but to listen, contribute and stand beside our brave team members doing the job.

Culture is not what you say when things are easy. It is what you carry forward when everything is on the line.

Presence and accessibility change the dynamic. Being there, or at least being personally reachable, reminds teams they are not carrying the weight alone. It also sharpens leadership judgment. You cannot fully understand risk, fatigue or urgency from a distance. Effective leadership requires proximity or connectivity to reality.

I can’t be everywhere at once, but I make sure I am never silent. Sometimes that means recording messages for crews. Sometimes it means acknowledging effort publicly or calling out someone who stepped up when it mattered. Leading BELFOR has reinforced

this lesson for me. When leaders are visible and engaged, trust grows. The message is clear – we are in this together.

CULTURE THAT LASTS

The most resilient teams are not held together by rules or hierarchies. They are bound by trust, reinforced by compassion and steadied by consistency. In uncertain moments, presence matters more than procedures. Listening counts more than having the perfect answer.

For CEOs navigating uncertainty, the implications are clear: Consistency steadies execution, compassion sustains trust and proximity sharpens judgment. Presence is not symbolic. It is operational.

In the hardest moments, people are not asking for perfection. They are asking who will stand with them, who will listen and who will stay. Be that person. Culture is not what you say when things are easy. It is what you carry forward when everything is on the line.



SHELDON YELLEN
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Sheldon Yellen is renowned for his unique approach to leadership as the CEO of BELFOR Holdings, the global leader in property restoration with over 13,100 employees across 49 countries. Known for his deep commitment to his team, Sheldon views BELFOR not just as a business but as a family, a perspective that shines through in his management style, which emphasizes personal connections over corporate formalities. His approach gained national attention when he appeared on 'Undercover Boss', earning an Emmy Award nomination for the episode. Find out more at https://www.sheldonyellen.com/