

When CEOs become workers, call centre execs

Taking On Different Roles Helps Them Understand Processes Better, Become More Empathetic

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Bengaluru: At air-conditioner manufacturer Danfoss, the entire senior management team, including MD P Ravichandran, has to work one day in the shoes of their factory workers every year. For the company's head of strategy Dinesh Rajesh, the exercise proved both illuminating and humbling. "Illuminating because I identified quite a few processes we could improve. Humbling because I came in for some good-natured ribbing after my fellow-workers realised I couldn't do more complicated tasks, but had to be assigned the simplest ones," he recalls. Following the success of the programme, management teams are now expected to spend time in the shoes of customer sales and R&D executives too.

CEOs and top executives often take time out to not simply talk to employees, but to be part of them and experience what they do, in order to understand the roles and operations better. They also sometimes perform front-end roles to understand customers better.

At Reliance Health Insurance, all 120 employees, including CEO Ravi Vishwanath, have to handle customer calls for three hours every week. Vishwanath says the company did not want to outsource customer calls to a BPO, because as an insurer, they would get calls only during a real emergency, like when someone's had a heart attack or road accident. "And at that time, we'd like to do our utmost. So we have specified duty hours," he says.

Everyone in the company has been trained not just to handle customer calls, but also on aspects such as policy details, extent of coverage and repudiations.

The story of Sachin Bansal and Binny Bansal becoming delivery boys for Flipkart for a day has been much written about. TVS Logistics Services HR head E Balaji says such executive practices



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have been around for decades. "Airline CEOs used to do one day at baggage handling or check-ins. FMCG CEOs would do route-trips with their salesforces. It helps senior management understand ground realities, they also get a better idea of customer expectations," he says.

Globally, there are CEOs who have even swapped roles to gain fresh insights. Marketing agency GYK Antler's CEO Travis York swapped roles with another internet tech company CEO, Dyn Inc's Jeremy Hitchcock. The exercise turned out so impactful that York swapped roles thrice more to gain better insights into different business models.

Mustafa Moochhala, who has 35 years experience in the HR industry, and now runs Innobridge Consulting, says in the 1980s, social scientist Barry Oshry started a workshop that helped executives become more sensitive to the impact of power structures. "It's a fairly long workshop, 3-4 days. And this started the thinking that CEOs need to also look after the welfare of the lowest common denominator: Today Harvard runs this as part of its executive level programmes. And in India too you have this conscientiousness building exercises," he says.

Bajaj Allianz General In-

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urance MD Tapan Singhel goes anonymously to dealers and asks them about the company. Some have good things to say, some don't, and it's only after the feedback that he tells them he's from Bajaj Allianz. Says Singhel, "For me, the review mechanism is simple - be with the customers on the ground, be with your people on the field and be with your service teams at their job. Talk to them, listen to them very carefully, as that is where strategy should be created."

Companies say what such exercises particularly help in is building a culture of empathy. At Ford India, as part of its programme 'Feel like a Family', senior management teams, including MD Anurag Mehrotra, engage with employees and customers. The meeting Mehrotra most cherishes is one he had with 82-year-old John Thomas, one of Ford's first customers in India. He had bought an Ikon in 1999.

During the meeting, Thomas narrated how his first drive was to Velankani, how he kept a tab of every petrol bill and car service. Mehrotra was astonished to note that he'd even made a note of when he had dismissed his driver for bad driving. "As we drive the next chapter of our growth, we should be very conscious of the lives we are touching, the families we are part of," says Mehrotra.

Rajesh of Danfoss says senior management, over time, tends to function in their own silos. "We don't realise how work is done. But when I did this 8-hour shift, which starts as early as 2am, I realised how grueling it could be. It needs a lot of stamina. It was also fun, bonding with workers," he says.

