



## CLOSE THE POWER GAP AND STAY IN TOUCH

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### Closing the power gap when you're 'influencing down'

1. First, consider how accessible you are, especially if you think you're running an 'open door' policy. People at one of our client organisations pointed out how their boss's door was always open but that didn't translate into accessibility. Either he was in but unavailable or he was out! Regardless, the door was literally never closed. Find out how others experience your open door policy.
2. Do you have an army of assistants who guard your perimeter? Does the value of 'distance from the floor' outweigh the challenges and costs that accompany it, especially in relation to being in touch with the pulse of the business?
3. Do you get the 'raw truth' from diverse levels often enough? To this end, it can be useful to bring together people with differing levels of power gap. Having different levels present helps deemphasize the size of the largest gap. The style of interaction, including the behaviour of the more powerful present, will impact the extent to which people experience a reduction in the power differential and willingly open up.

#### *Opportunities squandered*

If you haven't done so recently, you might find watching an episode of 'Undercover Boss' an extremely thought provoking return for your investment. Although the context changes according to the industry, some consistent messages are useful.

In one episode, the COO of a large, rapidly growing health club chain disguises herself so well that even those closest to her hardly recognise her. A great start for an 'undercover' program. Under the guise of participating in a filmed documentary, looking at different work roles, the COO spends a week visiting and working undercover in various health clubs in her chain. As with all the episodes, the COO learns a number of valuable lessons about her business from people on the frontline.

She realises that a high-energy, but relatively inexperienced, salesperson has fantastic commitment but would benefit from a little more guidance around the finer aspects of the sales process. Then, important for the new club, there's the problem that urgent repairs aren't happening and many staff don't turn up for work, leaving the rest pretty stretched. As a result, customer experience is not supporting the building and sustaining of customer loyalty.

One of the instructors at another club is outstanding in giving the COO reassurance to actually lead a large fitness class. In part, it's because the instructor is adored by the regulars. The COO had dreaded the opportunity but ended up finding the challenge invigorating. Key point is that the classes are a vital driver of profits within the club and chain in general, so high quality outputs in this area make a huge difference. But, we learn, the instructor's future with the chain is not guaranteed.

Other individuals performing exceptional services to the business are identified throughout the program. In most cases, they're doing an outstanding job, showing amazing ingenuity and/or inspiring customers and colleagues. In short, they're gold dust within the business. Yet, the people highlighted don't seem to have any profile (or impact) beyond their immediate surrounds. In the context of the company, this means that opportunities to leverage off these great works are being wasted. Not something businesses would want to see happen at any time, and especially when conditions are tough.

#### *What's the common problem?*

Duped by careful editing you might be thinking? Well, let's acknowledge the program is edited. But, across the series there's a common theme of bosses gaining incredibly useful insights while undercover. Interestingly, that's what it takes to discover these nuggets which, in many cases, might substantially benefit the business (and the individuals).

How might an undercover boss scenario unfold in your own context? If you're in a large organisation, what gems might you gather from frontline people working in different areas from you? Closer to home, what might you learn about your own team if you spent even one day as a fly on the wall?

#### *Close the power gap*

Allan Cohen and David Bradford recently published 'Influencing Up' as a follow on to their first excellent book on influencing. To influence up, they've adjusted their influencing model, adding two steps. The first is considering the power gap – the relative power differential between two people. Large gaps pose particular challenges for those trying to influence up. The second new step, which links with power gap, is working out ways to access the more powerful person.

Including these two additional steps as express, rather than implied, stages in the 'influencing up' process reinforces their importance. But do they have any relevance when you're the more powerful person? When you're influencing down and you'd prefer to avoid using your formal authority. Actually, considering and then working to reduce power gaps is just as vital when you're the more powerful person.

Compared with many countries, Australia is relatively low on the power-distance index. That is, hierarchy is generally less emphasised in exchanges, even when there may large differences in relative power. A boss at the top of the pile, for example, is often addressed by anyone in the organisation using their first name rather than title and family name. But, this informality doesn't mean that the less powerful will share their feelings or insights in the same unrestrained way. Often, the power gap translates into a costly information gap.

Going undercover is the short-term solution that bosses in the program use to close the power gap. In fact, they're not only closing the power gap but positioning their undercover identities as less powerful than any of the people with whom they interface. And, that's when they make these incredibly powerful, sometimes business saving or changing discoveries.

#### *What will you do to close the power gap?*

How does the power gap impact you? First, you may have come to realise that relative informality may not be synonymous with a completely free exchange of all relevant information. How often is a power gap impeding the flow of information, some of which may be vital, to you? What would you find if you played undercover boss in your own context? What is it that your organisation does that leads you to believe things are different, in a positive way?