

On the front lines: Why 7 CEOs still make time for their teams

By Andreas Rekdal | August 10, 2017

For CEOs, there's no shortage of things that demand time and attention, leading to tough decisions about where and when to delegate.

For many leaders, working hands-on with entry-level employees is the first thing to go. But some CEOs make a point of not losing sight of the front line. We spoke with seven of them to learn more about how they find the time, and what insights they garner from their junior team members.

SMS Assist

One of Chicago's fastest-growing cloud companies, SMS Assist reached a \$1 billion valuation last summer. With that kind of growth, it's important to keep lines of communication as clear and open as possible, which is why CEO Taylor Rhodes spends a significant amount of his time meeting with employees at every level of the organization.

How do you make time to stay close with your team?

I've made sure we keep our weekly one-to-one meetings. It is tempting to let the "urgent" things that pop up every day push these interactions off the calendar, but I have found that making these times sacred is the best way to stay close with my direct team members. We also carve out time for team offsites, where we take a step back and create space for team health and time to work on bigger picture, longer term things.

Moreover, I spend a significant amount of time "walking the floor" to get a sense for the pulse of the company and learn what the buzz and rumor mill are focused on. This is a good way for me to gain context to inform decisions, test whether our communications are creating clarity and alignment, and make sure our team members get the message that who they are and what they do matters to me.

What is the most important thing you've learned from a junior team member?

I get some of my best insights and ideas from walking the floor and doing skip-level one-to-one meetings with team members all over the organization. In my first couple months at SMS Assist, I held one-to-ones with over 75 team members from across the business. I trended the feedback so I could see what was clustering, where the wisdom of the crowd told me we should do something different and where we were missing opportunities.

One of the common themes was that our internal communications about priorities and expectations were not cohesive or consistent, and that some leaders were inadvertently creating confusion and conflict with their communication. This left front-line managers and team members feeling like they were pulled in different directions and unable to execute well. Based on this feedback, we are re-designing a multi-channel communications strategy that starts with clear vision and mission. It is translated into clear priorities and measurements and communicated in multiple formats on a weekly and monthly cadence.