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Executive Life; For the Boss, Days of Sweat and Fumbles

By MELINDA LIGOS

LARRY FLAX and Rick Rosenfield have made millions of dollars with their 19-year-old chain of upscale pizza restaurants, California Pizza Kitchen, which they started from scratch. But ask them to handle some of the most rudimentary tasks required of their front-line employees, and they are clueless.

That became clear during the filming of an episode of a new reality series, "Now Who's Boss?," which is scheduled to start on March 8 on TLC, the cable network. On the show, corporate leaders work for five days in rank-and-file jobs in their companies. In the California Pizza Kitchen episode, to be shown on March 29, Mr. Flax and Mr. Rosenfield, the company's co-chief executives, blunder their way through a number of tasks at two of its restaurants in Southern California.

During a stint as a waiter, Mr. Flax fails to ask for proof of age when a young Japanese tourist orders a beer, forgets whether the restaurant serves Pepsi or Coke and is flummoxed when he has to take care of four tables at the same time.

Mr. Rosenfield also has problems. His tie becomes caught under several drinks on a tray while he is waiting tables. Working as a pizza maker, he struggles to shift the pies in a wood-fired oven, receiving a stern talking-to from a kitchen manager who insists that he remake several of his creations.

"The truth is, we would have been fired from every job we undertook," Mr. Flax said. "We were completely incompetent." In other episodes, Jonathan M. Tisch, the chief executive of Loews Hotels, plays bellhop at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel and does not get a tip after lugging 15 bags for a family of 10; Dan Brestle, group president of the Estée Lauder Companies, works as a makeup artist at a cosmetics counter and balks when a young woman tells him she wants to look like "J. Lo"; and John D. Selvaggio, president of Song, the low-fare service of Delta Air Lines, wrestles with the hoses connecting a plane to a sewage truck.

Can such stunts make chief executives better at running their companies? It is a start, said Barbara Ehrenreich, author of "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" (Metropolitan, 2001), in which she tries to experience the struggles of the working poor.

"This would be a great, humbling exercise for any C.E.O. to undertake on a monthly basis," she said. Ms. Ehrenreich said chief executives who stepped into their employees' shoes were likely to develop more empathy for their workers.

"Few C.E.O.'s have had to claw themselves up from the bottom," she said, "and so they have no concept of what it's like to do backbreaking or underappreciated work."

Such exercises can help executives find ways to make their workers' lives easier, said Doug Lipp, president of G. Douglas Lipp & Associates, a leadership consulting firm based in Sacramento.

Mr. Lipp, who worked as the head of training for the Walt Disney Company until the mid-1980's, said new executives at Disney were required to spend up to two weeks in various entry-level jobs. Mr. Lipp himself spent a day picking up trash and another parking cars while helping to open Tokyo Disneyland.

But the most difficult training exercise for most new executives, he said, was to dress up as Mickey Mouse or another character and walk around a theme park for a few hours. "One cannot don 40 pounds of heavy, stinky fur, and trip all over your feet, and not be somewhat changed after the experience," he said.

Mr. Lipp said many of the company's top executives recommended the purchase of new suits, made of more breathable fabrics, after participating in that exercise.

Indeed, several subjects of "Now Who's Boss?" say they have already made changes in their companies as a result of their experiences. The day after Mr. Flax and Mr. Rosenfield resumed their executive duties at California Pizza Kitchen, they instituted a new procedure in their restaurants to separate knives, forks and spoons before they hit the dishwasher, Mr. Rosenfield said.

"Washing dishes was a hot, hard, never-ending job," Mr. Rosenfield said, and it was made more difficult when servers tossed all utensils together in one bin, leaving him with the task of sorting them out.

MR. BRESTLE of Estée Lauder said that after working on a lipstick assembly line, he realized that most of the company's factory workers did not know how the company was run, or much about its overall direction. He said the orientation of new employees would now include

information about the company's brands and planning.

And after failing to sell a single product while working at a counter for the company's Stila line, Mr. Brestle plans to add sales skills to the training program for new makeup artists.

Still, a day or two on the front lines can take a chief executive only so far, said John Katzenbach, senior partner for Katzenbach Partners, a management consulting firm based in New York. For shows like "Now Who's Boss?" to be "more than a publicity stunt," Mr. Katzenbach said, executives need to spend time more regularly with their rank-and-file workers.

"The trick is to make your workers so accustomed to dealing with you that they're not deferring to you or playing up to you," he said.

Barbara Corcoran, chairman of the Corcoran Group, a residential real estate firm based in Manhattan, said she previously relied solely on her top managers to tell her what workers were thinking. Then, late last year, she sent e-mail messages to the managers asking about sales representatives' top concerns so she could set the agenda for a sales meeting in January.

She was told they were all happy. But, she said, "it turns out that many were nervous about how fast the company was growing, as well as a number of other things."

Now Ms. Corcoran says she sends e-mail messages directly to sales representatives when she needs their feedback. "We C.E.O.'s are so often out of touch," she said.

Editors' Note: March 7, 2004, Sunday An article on the Executive Life page last Sunday and a brief report in the Business People column on Feb. 22 described a new reality series called "Now Who's Boss?" on the TLC cable network. Both accounts described the way the series follows corporate leaders as they tackle rank-and-file jobs in their companies. The accounts should have noted that New York Times Television was the producer of the program, though the news staff of The Times was not involved.