



# Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

June 2013

Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse and DC

## From the Golden Zone

### Take a cue from reality TV and get out in the DC

By Thomas L. Tanel

Have you watched *Undercover Boss*? The television show features senior executives working undercover in their own firms to investigate how the company really works and identify how it can be improved, as well as rewarding the hard-working staff.

The executives alter their appearance and assume an alias and fictional backstory. The fictitious explanation given for the accompanying camera crew is that the executives are being filmed as part of a documentary about entry-level workers in a particular industry, or a competition with another individual with the winner getting a job with the company. They spend a week undercover, working in various areas of their company's operations, with a different job and in most cases a different location each day. They are exposed to a series of predicaments with amusing results, and invariably spend time getting to know the people who work in the company and learning about their professional and personal challenges.

What amazes me is that the senior executives who appear in *Undercover Boss* should be doing this on a regular basis! Today, many distribution executives are so busy making decisions, analyzing problems, and seeking answers that they pay little or no attention to simply observing.

#### Observe objectively

Observing is more than merely looking. It requires actively looking and objectively interpreting what you see. There are four parts to clear, objective observation in the distribution center or warehouse.

- Use all of your senses (sight, hearing, touch, and smell) to make qualitative observations.
- Review your observations to be sure they are accurate and objective.
- Whenever possible, count or use measurements to make quantitative observations.
- Check your observations to be sure that they are statements about information gained through your senses, not explanations of what you observed.

The power of observation does not give you the ability to judge a book by its cover; however, it does give you a very strong indication as to what the book is about.

Through the observation of people and their surroundings, you will be able to pick up on key messages about who they are, what they think, what they value, and how they really feel, all without ever asking a question — if you pay attention to the clues and the cues.

**"In addition to observing ongoing processes and procedures, interact with the 'doers.'"**

This article was reprinted from the June 2013 issue of *Distribution Center Management*.

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## Observe deeply

In addition to observing ongoing processes and procedures, interact with the “doers,” not just management or supervisory personnel. Become more observant as you do your mental re-warehousing when touring your facilities.

- Become hyper-vigilant of the more discrete elements of your everyday environment.
- Look for patterns amidst your everyday routines.
- Regard anything outside of the ordinary patterns as possibly a risk or intentional distraction.
- Focus on incongruent people, equipment, processes, methods, material flow, etc.
- Look beyond what you are shown or told.
- Do not tune out familiar surroundings.

Look more deeply for things that you may have missed.

## Move from observation to action

Engage with what you see. For instance, don't just “look” at the broken pallet in the aisle. Rather, try to think where it might have come from, and what made it break. As Sherlock Holmes points out, there is a big difference between seeing and observing. For everything you see that is out of place, ask yourself why it is there and how it got there, and what it tells you about the bigger picture.

To both see and observe, therein lies Sherlock Holmes' secret. The confluence of seeing and observing is central to the concept of mindfulness: A mental alertness that takes in the present moment to the fullest.

“In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king.” It's one of those sayings that seem universally acknowledged for its truth, and equally universally ignored. The thing is, the saying isn't about how many eyes you've got, or how good they are, it's about how well you use them.

They say “God is in the details.” Paying attention to the little details keeps your mind more alert and always on the watch for interesting bits that you could use later. The more we observe, the more problems and the more opportunities we find. We can then work to provide solutions to those problems. By becoming a good observer, you will recognize problems before other people do, which is a distinct advantage for a distribution executive.

As practiced by scientists, observation is a rigorous activity that integrates what the scientists are seeing, with what they already know, and what they think might be true. It's also important to pay attention to and preserve newly observed ideas, even if they don't seem valuable at the moment. That's why scientists carry pads or tablets everywhere and jot things down.

Finally, what is the point of working in so many areas in *Undercover Boss*? It is to touch as many people, and as many kinds of people, as possible. Leaders must be motivators, educators, role models, sounding boards, confessors, and cheerleaders — they must be accessible, and they must aggressively pursue contact with supervisors and workers.

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*Distribution Center Management* is published monthly by Alexander Communications Group, Inc., which provides news, data and information on key distribution and warehousing topics through its newsletters, books, and website.



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