

Being a Chief Executive

In my fifth year as a Chief Executive, and my second year as Chief Executive of Jones Bootmaker, I am often asked what I do. The question usually comes from new store managers whose 2-day induction at our Head Office includes an hour or so with me. Or occasionally I am asked by staff in one of our eighty stores as I end another of my surprise visits by inviting questions from them.

Mindful of the importance of not confusing or losing the attention of the questioner within a minute of beginning my answer, I tend to avoid references to profit enhancement, board meetings or strategic visions. Important as these elements are, they rarely convey the essence of the role or inspire ambitious young retailers to seek such heights themselves.

Instead I tend to focus on three behaviours which, though not automatically profit-enhancing, clearly can lead to such an important outcome.

The first behaviour is to 'see the things that others do not'. I am fortunate at Jones Bootmaker to be surrounded by some great talent and lots of valuable knowledge. Colleagues are encouraged to develop the business through a variety of ideas and activities. As Chief Executive, I believe my role is to be constantly monitoring these developments and their implementation. I try to use all my experience, and whatever expertise, gained from twenty-three years of retailing, to support, guide and protect colleagues as we work to improve our business together.

The second behaviour is 'to make the decisions others can't or won't make'. Regardless of the quality of colleagues, some issues are just too sensitive or too significant to be resolved by others. Hopefully, for any business, these situations are rare. When they occur however, the Chief Executive must take the lead. This does not require the decision to be taken in isolation or in haste. Taking the advice of colleagues is often a crucial factor. The outcome, and the reasons for it, must also be explained thoroughly to prevent confusion or misinformation. Often, despite careful consultation, due consideration and clear communication, the outcome will still cause some negativity. But then, who said being a Chief Executive is a popularity contest?

The third and final behaviour is 'to make time for your colleagues but as yourself'. Some Chief Executives seem to be two people. One person appears at work and a completely different character emerges outside of work. This 'acting' can make the person more remote and difficult to relate to. Obviously, if the individual is genuinely a horrible piece of work with no real interest in the business or the people then acting differently at work is probably advisable. However, true colleagues want to be able to relate to their Chief Executive just as with anyone else they work with. Making time to discuss yesterday's football results or the health of their new-born baby will have a greater long term benefit to the business than a quick chat about last week's best sellers.

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