



UniFirst CEO Puts 'Undercover Boss' Lessons into Practice

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CEO Ronald Croatti of [UniFirst](#) (NYSE: UNF), a leading provider of [uniforms](#) and related business services throughout North America, was recently featured on the hit CBS reality TV series, [Undercover Boss](#), and has wasted no time implementing corporate policy and procedure changes as a result.

Going "undercover," Croatti donned a 1960's era retro look to work in disguise alongside his employees in some of the company's receiving, washing, processing, sewing, and garment personalization operations. During the process, he gained valuable insights which have already led to important changes at the billion dollar company.

For example, Mr. Croatti recently mandated a new company-wide program dubbed "EARS," which stands for *Executives Assessing Real Situations*. In the spirit of the *Undercover Boss* experience, this "continuous improvement" initiative requires all operational Vice Presidents to roll up their sleeves (or "put on the greens" as Mr. Croatti puts it) and perform various floor level jobs they are ultimately responsible for overseeing.

"It became clear to me during our 'Undercover Boss' experience that too often we establish rules, protocols, and training programs by simply 'observing' various jobs rather than actually 'doing' them," Croatti said. "We need to become more informed by 'doing' the tasks prior to developing or refining job requirements, policies, and new service offerings. That's the purpose of *EARS*."

As an illustration of how direct experience brings valuable insights, Croatti pointed to his "undercover" job of receiving full laundry bags, emptying them, and sorting through soiled wiping towels. "The job specifications for sorting towels included the use of a sorting table developed for 25-pound bags of product. In practice, the bags actually weigh 75 to 125 pounds or more, and the contents cannot fit on the table. That's a significant difference that impacts how the sorting job can *and should* be done. This particular set of tasks needs to be modified to make processing more efficient and to better safeguard our employee-Team Partners doing the job." To that end the CEO has asked his engineering department to work directly with floor level workers doing these tasks, including those featured on the *Undercover Boss* episode, to reevaluate and redesign the process, as well as other production processes. "From now on," he says, "this will be a routine part of all our operational assessments."

Another instance of "hands on" learning occurred in the pressing department, where Mr. Croatti experienced great difficulty trying to button the collars on damp cotton shirts prior to pressing them. "We press all of our shirts at no additional charge because we feel that's important for our customers' professional image," he explained. "I've asked for a test of snaps to replace the top buttons on some of our 100% cotton shirts to make the pressing job easier. Snapping is much faster than buttoning when it comes to wet garments and such a change should speed up the pressing line considerably. Ultimately that's good for our production employees and good for our customers." UniFirst's EARS initiative will be looking at all production jobs in a similar manner hoping to better ensure continuous improvement in the quality of all its textile products and customer services.

UniFirst maintains employee communication and suggestion programs on both the local and corporate levels, and the *Undercover Boss* experience shed additional light in these areas as well. "I discovered instances where our Team Partners had great ideas for improvements, but the ideas were not reaching the people who could drive change. They were not moving beyond the supervisor level, to line management, and up to corporate, where they could be acted upon." Croatti has since directed the UniFirst Human Resources department to revisit and revamp the company's programs that are geared toward maintaining and facilitating direct, two-way communications with all its 10,000 employee Team Partners.

On a related note, while filming the *Undercover Boss* episode, Croatti was pleased to see that his company's prized "family culture" was firmly rooted throughout his many facilities. At one recently acquired laundry operation, however, he learned that important information concerning employee benefits had not been effectively communicated to some employees. In response, he assigned a UniFirst "CARE" team (*Conversations, Answers, Respect, Education*), which is also part of the corporate Human Resources department, to visit that location, meet with all levels of staff, and determine how to best integrate these and other important corporate communications going forward. "We dispatch the CARE team whenever and wherever necessary to help our family culture thrive at all our locations," Mr. Croatti said. Under this program, employees get to speak openly with CARE team members, one-on-one, and all discussions are kept confidential to allow UniFirst to more quickly determine the best courses of action for change.

Croatti recommends that all CEOs do whatever they can to meet and work alongside their employees in non-threatening, real work environments and to be receptive to their suggestions for improvement. "It doesn't necessarily require going 'undercover,'" this 'boss' says, "just use your 'EARS.'"

UniFirst is a North American leader in the supply and servicing of uniforms, workwear, and protective clothing, currently outfitting more than 1.5 million workers each business day and helping to enhance the professional image of more than 225,000 businesses throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Company offers managed uniform and apparel service programs with rent, lease, and purchase options. As part of its image- and brand-enhancing services for businesses, UniFirst also offers Facility Service programs including floor mats, mops, and restroom products such as hand soaps, paper towels, and sanitary tissues. For more information, contact UniFirst at 800-455-7654 or visit <http://www.unifirst.com>.

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