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Thank You Mrs. Erlandson

Skills and Professional Development



We all have one somewhere in our lives, that teacher or instructor who stood out. For me, one in particular provided not only instruction but opportunities for application: Mrs. Erlandson, my high school drama teacher. Admittedly, a drama class lends itself to less traditional teaching methods than disciplines like English or Math. However, even within that creative environment she used an unconventional approach.

A play requires the execution of a myriad of tasks: Scenery and stage sets must be designed and built. Actors must be directed, put in makeup, and outfitted in costumes. Lights and sound equipment must be operated, and props procured and queued up for use at just the right time. Each student had an expectation of their role in a production. Some excelled in acting, some in set design or stage managing. However, Mrs. Erlandson required each student to work in every role throughout various plays performed over the school year. During my time under her instruction, I learned the difference between a Fresnel (pronounced “Frennel”) and a Leko light, when to use each one, and how to hang and position them on the catwalk rails. I also learned about different kinds of makeup; how to set up props in order of the performance; how to work a soundboard; and how to react in a scene as a supporting character.

Fresnel: soft-edge spotlight with certain degree of control on the size of the light beam. Leko: an ellipsoidal profile spotlight.

A [catwalk](#) is an elevated service platform from which many of the technical functions of a theater,

such as lighting and sound, may be manipulated.

Mrs. Erlandson exposed us to the entire landscape of a theater production experience, and each of us gained an understanding of everyone's role, regardless of which area our abilities and preferences eventually landed us. I not only learned other roles, but gained, through actual practice, an appreciation of them.

This idea of working various parts to better understand the whole has proven to be a valuable method for improving business and educating executives. Some of you may be aware of a reality TV show, ["Undercover Boss."](#) Senior executives go undercover and investigate their organizations to witness how their company functions many levels below the C-suite.

More often than not, the "undercover boss" realizes that a policy or procedure, which looked good in Powerpoint presentations and profit and loss projections, becomes much less appealing when applied to the rank and file. Faulty execution becomes evident due to lack of training and/or appropriate resources allocated to the people "on the line." The show demonstrates that many bosses have no concept of the effect of high level decisions on the day-to-day worker. In-house attorneys often suffer from the same lack of insight.

How many of us truly comprehend the effects our compliance plans have on the individual employees? Do we really know what our companies do, produce or provide? Do we understand the impact of the words we draft and approve in a contract's statement of work? Have we taken the time to walk the literal or figurative assembly line to see how those words actually play out?

In working for my company, I have performed the following tasks in addition to legal work: drafted and edited technical proposals, written quality assurance procedures, inspected and inventoried electronic parts, reviewed software user manuals, and even sat in on engineering design reviews. These non-legal tasks have given me a greater appreciation of how the legal department, and the contracts, procedures and instructions I produce, affect the rest of the organization. Having an understanding of what, how and why a given engineer, technician, controller or purchasing agent does their job has helped me provide more value to the company in my position. I have been with the company since its inception, and have had the privilege to not only understand what we do, but to influence the culture of how we do things.

Many of you do not have the same opportunity. You get recruited from prior outside counsel positions or move from a position in-house at a ski resort to a shipping company. For those of you not having the benefit of being on the founding team of an organization, and maybe even for some of you who are, I recommend you do the following: work the line for a day, a week, or if possible, a month. Talk to your CEO or your supervisor about serving on the front line. Adding value as in-house counsel isn't just about doing your job well, but doing it better. People have greater respect for organizational leaders who are willing to meet them at the ground floor and not just wave hello from the C-suite balcony.

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