Chapter One

Know Your People

I have this old, embarrassing photograph of myself wearing a Native American headdress. It's shoved into my desk drawer. Even though the corners are bent and I've got this big, silly grin on, the picture means as much to me as any of the framed images featuring famous people that line my office walls. The photograph dates from 1987, when I was vice president for support services at Anaheim Memorial Hospital in Anaheim, California. It was my first vice president job, and it put me in charge of an array of departments including environmental services (or housekeeping, as it was called back then), food services, engineering, and construction.

I made a practice at the time of meeting regularly with all of my staff, including the environmental service (EVS) workers. I'd go down to the EVS break room and say hello when employees were coming on duty and getting assignments for the shift. I wanted to know what my employees did; otherwise, I felt, I couldn't be an effective manager. I had learned as a police officer that if you wanted to get information about your beat, you had to be on the street talking to people. You had to develop rapport and trust, and after a while people would naturally start talking to you and telling you what they knew.

Sometimes I just sat and talked with the EVS staff; other times I went out and accompanied them on the job. They taught me how to use those big, circular floor polishers, and every time

I grasped the metal handles I was bucked around, much to their amusement. I didn't mind making myself a little vulnerable. Given how hesitant the employees acted around me and also how happy they seemed to see me, I surmised that I was probably among the few people from senior management to ever pay sincere attention to them.

As time passed, we built a relationship. The staff invited me to potlucks and other gatherings. "My boss's boss's boss knows more about what I do than my boss does," they would joke. They also challenged me to see if I could find dirt after they cleaned. "You guys are so good," I said, "I bet I can't find any." But I would still put on white gloves and poke around. A couple of times, to be honest, I did find a little bit of dirt on the gloves, but I never let them know. The point of this exercise was not for me to evaluate their performance. It was about going out there, showing I cared, and thanking the team for its hard work.

One day, a couple of the workers knocked on my door and asked me to accompany them to the break room. When we arrived, I found that all the employees had gathered. With smiles on their faces, they presented me with a Native American–style headdress they had made out of fur. It had two pointy horns protruding out of the top, a blue and red beaded design running across the front, and fluffy white feathers streaming down each side.

I held it in my hands and admired it. "This . . . is very nice. What is it?"

"This is for you," they said proudly. "Our chief."

Everyone applauded, and I didn't know what to say. What an incredible honor. Today, in addition to keeping that photograph in my drawer, I display the headdress in my office as a reminder of what I learned: that you can't be a distant boss and hope to be effective as a leader. You have to *connect* with people. You have to put time and energy into getting to know them and their work. Not just once. Or twice. Or three times. But regularly, month after month.

Fly-Bys Don't Count

Advice like this may sound familiar, but most CEOs and senior leaders don't do the kind of deep outreach I'm describing. More commonly they do what I call "fly-bys"; they flit in and out in a cursory manner—looking the part of the political candidate, shaking hands and kissing babies—not really bothering to *truly* engage with workers. Maybe they feel uncomfortable around line staff. Maybe they feel they have more important things to do. Maybe they're overwhelmed by the sheer size of their organization. Whatever the case, I doubt their attempts at outreach are doing as much good as they might think.

Here's an example. I once hired a chief nurse whom I'll call Marsha for one of our hospitals. Marsha's job was to oversee all nursing operations at her facility. Unfortunately, she became occupied with outside obligations, paying insufficient attention to her core duties. This led in short order to low morale among her workforce. Things got so bad that she had to leave the organization. Shortly after her departure, I happened to be in her hospital visiting my sick father-in-law. One of the nurses caring for him asked me to accompany her into the hallway for a private chat. "Chris," she said to me, "I wanted to thank you. I'm glad Marsha is no longer working with us."

"Why? You didn't like her?"

"No, because she was never here. Every so often she would throw on some scrubs so it would *look* like she was one of us. She would come up here and sweep through the units and smile and kind of talk to everyone a little bit. Then she'd disappear for months and you'd never see her. It was never real. We're glad she's gone."

Employees aren't stupid. They know a fly-by when they see it. By satisfying herself with fly-bys, Marsha was highlighting for her staff how *little* she cared about them. She wasn't bothering to listen, talk, and build relationships. She wasn't engendering trust. She was pretending to be one of the team—and, I would add, pretending to be a leader too.

Roll Up Your Sleeves and Get Dirty

In reaching out to employees, don't content yourself with just making conversation. Observe them on the job, actually serving customers. As an exercise, we regularly have groups of middle managers sit in our lobbies for an hour or more. Their mission is to watch the interactions between our volunteers, our staff, and our patients. Every time we do this, our managers return with valuable new perspectives. One HR manager sat in a hospital lobby that she normally walks through nine or ten times a day. Afterward, she bubbled over with ideas for improvement. "I don't want to badmouth my hospital, but I never realized how dark the lobby was! I also watched a volunteer at the registration desk who was trying to multitask, answering phone calls at the same time she was trying to give directions to patients. It was very disorganized. And employees were spending more time paying attention to their BlackBerries than to patients."

An even deeper way to get immersed is to pull up your sleeves and work with line employees yourself. When Hubert Joly took over as CEO of Best Buy in 2012, it was reported that one of the first things he planned to do was clock in at one of the company's retail locations to work the floor for the better part of a week. Noting that he hadn't clerked in a store for almost forty years, Joly related that he didn't want to learn about Best Buy "from the headquarters" but "from the front line."[1] This gesture must have helped Joly build relationships with his front-line personnel. It likely humanized him in their eyes, reinforcing the idea that he was just another Best Buy employee like them. Similarly, by letting myself get spun around by that floor polisher, I was acknowledging that I was no better or higher up than my workforce.

I don't know if Joly made these visits a regular feature of his tenure; I hope so, because working with the front line really makes an impact when it's done repeatedly. Our leadership team joins line workers at Scripps in a number of capacities, and it has become essential to our success. Once a year, for

instance, as part of my ongoing training as an emergency medical technician, I trade in my suit for some scrubs and work in one of our emergency rooms as a technical partner. In a hospital, a technical partner works for and assists the nursing team; he's the person making and cleaning the beds, getting supplies, doing EKGs, taking blood pressures, and the like. During my shift, I'll tell the nurses not to treat me as the CEO, but as their trainee and subordinate. "I'm working for you," I'll say, "because you know more than I do about the work I'm doing today. So please guide me and help me to help you!"

And make no mistake, my gesture is not a put-on. It's real. Once, on my shift, a trauma came in, and the nurses had me throw on a lead protective apron (required during X-rays) and go up to the heliport with a nurse to accept a critical patient from the flight crew. Back in the trauma room, the surgeon had me stand right next to him. "Okay," he said, "you're going to help me deliver care. The patient has bilateral fractures from a motorcycle accident." And there I was, assisting the surgeon and nurses until the patient went to surgery. Although any assistance I provided was very limited and took place only under their complete guidance, I still soaked in the complexity of what the other caregivers were doing as well as the compassion with which they were delivering care. These professionals probably didn't have the knowledge or experience to run the whole health care system, but I couldn't do their jobs either. We had a lot to learn from each other. This meant that I needed to consult with them on decisions, not just assume I knew best because I had the "top job."

Obviously it's not possible to try everybody's job in your organization. But no matter what industry you're in or the size of your business, there are many ways to get a regular array of front-line experiences. One of my favorites is volunteering. I like to get out of the boardroom to teach first-aid classes to our front-line, nonclinical staff. This not only gives me another perspective on health care delivery but also allows me to engage with staff in an

entirely different way. When I'm teaching, I'm no longer the CEO; I'm just another first-aid instructor.

For over a decade now, I have volunteered several times a month with the San Diego County Sheriff's Department Search and Rescue team; I hold the rank of Reserve Assistant Sheriff and am responsible for search and rescue and law enforcement reserves. The assignment gets me outdoors—hiking, rappelling, and driving around in the backcountry on 4x4s. The work is sobering, though; we search isolated, rural areas for people lost or stranded and in need of help, and we also perform searches for dead bodies and crime-related evidence. On one occasion, my team was out in the wilderness doing an event to raise awareness about search and rescue. Toward the end of the day, a young woman riding her horse past the event lost control. After hanging on for a quarter of a mile, she fell off, sustaining moderate injuries. I chased her down in one of our rescue vehicles and, along with some colleagues, provided first responder care. Afterward we placed her on a backboard and readied her for transport to the hospital.

I followed the ambulance to Scripps La Jolla and went inside, still wearing my sheriff's department uniform. The nurses on duty looked at me funny—they knew me, because this was the hospital where I did my EMT training, and they were not used to seeing me in this uniform. I asked how the injured woman was doing, and they told me she was fine and in a nearby room with her mother. I went to visit her and introduced myself. Her mother was surprised to learn that the CEO had been directly caring for her daughter. That meant a lot to her. And, as our chief medical officer has told me, my work in the field means a lot to our staff too.

I'm lucky to have a wife who gives me leeway during my off hours to volunteer like this. Rosemary herself volunteers on the front line, which further helps me build a strong relationship with our workforce. Rosemary loves dogs, and she enjoys bringing our Labrador retriever into Scripps facilities for pet therapy visits. Certified therapy dogs like our Amber help alleviate stress and even

pain for patients and staff. In her presence, patients feel connected to their homes and their own pets, and they're distracted for a moment from being in a hospital.

Rosemary visits with Amber as often as she can, sometimes a couple of times a week, so she's a familiar sight around Scripps. She doesn't announce that she's my wife, but when someone recognizes her, she'll confirm that she's married to me. Thanks to these little moments, people seem to understand that I'm not just "the CEO" but a regular guy with a wife and a dog. From that, they feel that much better about their own jobs and the organization for which they work.

To be clear, I don't volunteer on search and rescue or as a first-aid instructor specifically seeking to make an impression on front-line personnel and patients. If that were the case, my efforts would probably appear contrived. I volunteer because as a former police officer, I feel fulfilled protecting people and rendering assistance in their time of need. If you're a manager or executive and you're interested in having more of a presence on the front line, find something you're passionate about and volunteer for its own sake. The benefits of staying close to line employees will emerge in due course, without your having to make a special effort. You'll be surprised how enjoyable you'll find it and how much it helps you as a leader.

Do Your Dance

It can be difficult to attribute a clear, quantitative business benefit to time spent on the front line or to any other tactic presented in this book; determining causality is just too complicated. The incredible financial and operational results we've seen at Scripps have resulted from many tactics *working together* over a period of years. Yet the physical presence of a leader is powerful—I know, because I've seen its effects firsthand.

In 1997, I left a position as CEO of Anaheim Memorial Hospital, a 240-bed facility, and took over as CEO of Long Beach

Memorial Medical Center, a much larger, 700-bed facility. The Medical Center had a long central corridor that stretched from the Children's Hospital to the Women's Hospital all the way to the Rehabilitation Hospital and an attached skilled nursing facility. This corridor was so big that at any given time you might see hundreds of employees walking from place to place. What I noticed immediately upon joining Long Beach Memorial was that very few of the employees said hello to one another. They were all rushing, paying little attention. It was a huge difference from Anaheim Memorial, where everyone greeted each other by name.

Witnessing people walk right past one another made me uncomfortable, so I decided, in a small way, to do something about it. I began walking that corridor and saying hello to as many people as I could. This wasn't easy at first: because I was the new CEO, many people didn't recognize me. And because they walked with their heads down, staring at the floor, I literally had to duck down in order to make eye contact and say, "Hey there! How are you?"

I kept doing this, month after month. I also used these walks to rub scuff marks off the floor with my leather-bottomed shoe. After about a year, I began to notice a change. People were looking up more, even saying hello to me. More important, they were saying hello to one another. The whole atmosphere became friendlier. People began to joke about my habit of rubbing off scuff marks, calling my particular style of walking the "CEO walk." Eventually one of my managers dubbed it the "Van Gorder dance." Other employees and managers started doing the dance (which incidentally resulted in noticeably cleaner floors). The entire culture of this relatively large organization began to shift, perhaps in part because their leader had left the boardroom and was regularly engaging with the workforce.

Of course, there was more to that story. In a large organization, cultural change occurs only if *everyone* in a supervisory capacity walks the hallways and does their own versions of the

Van Gorder dance. At Scripps, we now hold managers formally accountable for making rounds with their employees. It's part of their performance evaluation; if they don't do enough rounding, they miss out on some incentive compensation. This sends a message to managers, one that I hope you will heed as well. Face time with employees is something you *need* to do, not an option you might entertain. It's critical to the success of any team, department, or organization.

Make It Real with Questions and Answers

Make no mistake: rounding alone won't cut it. With almost fourteen thousand employees under my watch, our leadership team can't regularly interact with each one or even a majority of them on a one-on-one basis. Fortunately, we've developed other communications tactics that allow us to remain meaningfully accessible on a broader scale to line employees and managers. These tactics allow us to keep tabs on what's going on in our workplaces, *and* they reinforce the notion that we're leaders who genuinely care.

First, we hold transparent question-and-answer sessions with groups of line employees and managers. I started doing informational meetings early on in my career when I was head of security and safety at Los Angeles' Orthopaedic Hospital. Every so often, without thinking much about it, I would gather the troops and simply tell them what was going on throughout the organization. I was willing to talk about anything, so long as it wasn't confidential. After a year, I noticed that none of our security officers were leaving the company. This was highly unusual; in most industries security officers didn't get paid much and turnover was high.

"It's surprising," I said to a couple of the department supervisors one day. "We've had the same staff now for a couple of years. Nobody is leaving for other jobs. What's going on?"

They told me that the department felt loyal simply because I spent time talking to them; it meant as much to them as their

paycheck. Because most other managers didn't openly share information with their teams, our staff had become information sources for the entire organization. Even some of the doctors had taken to asking the security officers for updates.

That was a wake-up call. I realized that the higher up you get in an organization, the more vital it is that you serve as a teacher and communicator. Today I make sure to get out on a weekly basis to talk to groups and answer their questions. I might arrive at a hospital break room and invite employees to come and chat. To show respect for the chain of command, I always call ahead, letting managers on site know I'm coming and asking them to participate in the session with me. The last thing I want is managers thinking that I've come to spy on them.

When I lead these gatherings, I make sure not to deliver a lecture, opting instead for Q&A sessions. I want the staff to know I'm comfortable with tough questioning, as it gives me the opportunity to teach. I have a rule that *anything* is a valid topic of discussion, with only three exceptions: I won't violate patient confidentiality, I won't discuss personnel issues relating to specific individuals, and I won't discuss business arrangements that have confidentiality agreements. Within these constraints, I tell employees to have at it.

Much of the time employees don't ask tough, probing questions; they don't feel the need to test me, because they've come to know over time that they have both my attention and my commitment to give them real answers. Sometimes they do push the envelope, though. On one occasion, physicians at one of our hospitals were furious that we had acquired a competing medical group. The medical group had been on the verge of bankruptcy, and the doctors at our hospital saw this group as rivals. Why should money our doctors had brought into the system be used to bail out their competitors? I held a Q&A session, and some of the physicians got up and told me, "We're angry. Remember how we voted 'no confidence' in your predecessor? We can do it with you too."

I explained the decision and rationale to them in detail—with facts and figures. "Look," I told them, "give me some time, and let me see if we can turn the medical group around and make it profitable. As we go along, I will give you updates and show you the numbers." And that's what I did. The medical group's performance improved dramatically during the next couple of years, and as I promised, I continued to hold sessions with the physicians to keep them informed. About two years later, a physician at one of the sessions began to harangue me again about the purchase of the group. To my surprise and pleasure, another physician stood up. "Guys, stop it. Enough is enough. Chris has done everything he promised. He has turned the medical group around, and he has been forthright. It's time for us to get off his back."

The whole room went silent. For several years before then, Scripps had been plagued by conflict between administrators and the physicians who work at our hospitals. It meant something that a physician was now publicly jumping onto our side over a very sensitive matter. Afterward, this issue lost its emotional intensity. We were able to come together, thanks in part to the years of work our leadership team had put in getting to know the physicians and communicating transparently with them to address their concerns.

Stay Accessible

When I meet with groups of employees, physicians, and managers, I always conclude by telling them if they ever have a problem they can't resolve, they should feel free to email me directly anytime. I encourage them to operate within the chain of command, but if for some reason that fails, they have the right to contact me. And as employees are surprised to discover, they will always get a prompt response. That's because, again, I make a practice of responding to every single employee email, usually the same day and most of the time within minutes.

I've been responding to all employee emails since the early 1990s, when email first appeared. Before then, business was

conducted mainly over the phone, and I believed that if someone phoned me, I should return the call as soon as possible. What frustrated me about phone calls were the endless, time-consuming bouts of phone tag that would arise. Email by comparison seemed incredibly efficient. You could skim an email to get to the key point. It took only a few seconds to hit Reply and get back to someone. You could respond at a time convenient for you and avoid playing phone tag. I got in the habit of making sure I never left work without handling every email in my inbox.

Today I keep my BlackBerry with me wherever I go (set on vibrate!). If I'm at home reading or watching a football game, I'll feel it go off and answer it immediately. If I'm at work and not in a meeting, I'll also dash off a few lines and press Send. I can do this extremely quickly (more quickly than ever, since a transcription program on my phone lets me talk out my emails), and I can also quickly distinguish between messages that need a response and junk messages that don't.

I regard email as a core part of my job, a digital form of the in-person rounding that all leaders need to do. Email allows me to keep current on what employees are thinking about the organization, their bosses, and my own performance. Sometimes the information I get is positive, sometimes not, but either way I have a chance to teach by explaining issues that arise. I get to do this teaching in a customized way instead of writing a generic memo, hoping it covers the topic. And employees really appreciate that. I can't tell you how many people have emailed me saying, "Wow, I can't believe how fast you responded," or "I can't believe you responded at all!" I've even been able to intervene in many misunderstandings and get them resolved before they blew out of control.

Email has also allowed me to build personal connections with individuals I wouldn't have been able to meet in person. I have line employees who have emailed just to see if I really would respond and who have kept checking in regularly with

me, keeping me updated on developments in their careers and personal lives. Everybody knows that if they communicate with me, they're *going* to hear back. This flattens the organization, breaking down the notion of the executive suite as an impenetrable ivory tower. Besides, emailing with employees is fun. Sure, I get messages from people who have a problem and are angry. But I get many more from people who love their work, love Scripps, and just want to let me know.

Keeping Employees Current

Another critically important way I keep in touch in the digital age is through something I call "Market News." Every day, seven days a week, I get up early and search the media for relevant articles to send to Scripps managers, physicians, and employees. These articles cover medical developments as well as technological, political, and economic trends that affect our industry. I summarize these articles in an email and send it out to hundreds of people. I'm an avid photographer, so I always drop in a couple of nice shots I have taken or that front-line employees have shared with me. Some employees may just glance at the pictures and proceed with their work, but that's okay; at least they're opening the email and possibly scanning the news headlines, occasionally diving into a topic of interest. In some small way I'm able to make a daily connection with them that I might not otherwise have made.

One of the greatest things about Market News is that it allows me to give Scripps employees an understanding of the big-picture context affecting the health care industry and to do it a little bit each day so that it's manageable. Market News reminds me of the neighborhood watch meetings I used to run as a police officer. At neighborhood watch, citizens can get a broader picture of what's going on in their city or state, and they can connect that picture with what they see happening in their local neighborhoods. Neighborhood watch meetings also invite dialogue—as

does Market News. Every day employees email me about items they've found interesting, asking specific questions and giving me still more opportunities to teach.

Employees who like Market News also occasionally email asking what service I use to produce it. "It's not a service," I reply. "*I'm* the service." There are two reasons I feel compelled to do Market News myself. First, it's a good discipline for me, because I need to keep up on industry news myself if I'm going to make informed strategic decisions. More important, I don't want my employees and managers staying up to date by reading things some other service thinks they should be reading. I want them reading news that *I* think is important.

As I've mentioned, we have a no-layoff philosophy at Scripps—a key part of my front-line approach to leadership. But how can employees at Scripps come to appreciate how special that is if they aren't aware of all the ugly layoffs that have been occurring throughout our industry? Among the many dozens of articles I cover each week, I make sure to include some that report on layoffs in our region and elsewhere. When bad news happens at Scripps, as it inevitably will, I'll also include reports on that. On a few occasions, a Scripps facility was unfortunately listed on a California state government list of hospitals that have been fined for a violation. When that happened, I put articles announcing it in Market News, just as I insert similar information about other health care organizations. It's important for employees to feel they're getting the honest truth, not just the good news about Scripps.

Be Yourself

Interacting personally with employees isn't just about you getting to know them; it's also about them getting to know you in a transparent way. And not just your beliefs or your positions on burning business issues, but also your experiences, your personality, who

you are, and what you're made of. I became aware of this during a Q&A session I held in 2013 at Scripps Mercy Hospital. I went in prepared to talk about the usual items: the state of Scripps finances, recent decisions we've made, the Affordable Care Act and how that might affect us going forward, and so on. When the session started, I was greeted, as I often am, by a brief period of shy silence as employees considered what questions to ask. Finally the manager in the room said, "You know what they want to know, Chris? They want to know who *you* are."

This pushed me a little off balance. "Okay," I responded. "What in particular do you want to know about?"

"Well, tell them how you got this job and the fact that you used to be a policeman and a security guard and all that."

So that's what I did. I spent a half hour telling my story. I thought about stopping, but every time I did, I saw from their faces that the employees were truly interested. Afterward, individuals came up to me and sent me emails thanking me for telling them about who I was. What they wanted, I think, was to know that their leader, and by implication their organization, had a moral compass. They also wanted to know that I was a human being, someone to whom they could relate. I in turn wanted to let them know I had once been a clerk in the emergency room and I had worked my way up; I wanted to convey that it was possible for *every single one of them* to accomplish something similar if they so desired and were willing to put in the effort.

I'm not advising that you write an autobiography or that you spend hours talking about yourself wherever you go. Just speak honestly about your background when people ask. Even if you never held a front-line position in your life, you certainly will have something in your past—some challenge, some personal struggle—with which line employees can connect. And in everything you do, try to have fun and let your personality shine through. During each of the last few years, I've done a cameo in a spoof video to promote a movie event we offer our employees.

In past videos, I've dressed up as Commander James T. Kirk from *Star Trek* and as an agent from *Men in Black*. At another event, called Scripps Night at the Ballpark, I greet thousands of our employees and shake their hands as they push through the entrance at a San Diego Padres game. Make yourself accessible. Be visible. And do it in a way that feels natural.

The Job Never Ends

Rounding, volunteering on the front lines, running question-and-answer sessions, answering employee emails, participating in videos—all this may sound like a tall order, even downright exhausting. It is a lot of work. I estimate I spend at least 25 percent of my time getting physically in front of my line employees and managers, and up to 50 percent of my time communicating or teaching in some capacity. I do it because I want to build trusting relationships with our line employees, no matter where in the organization they happen to be. I want to know about the realities of our work environments so I can make good administrative decisions. I want to educate and spread information, so baseless and destructive rumors don't have a chance to take hold.

Getting to know your people means engaging all the way. I sometimes talk to groups of college kids, and the first question they ask is, "How much money do you make?" I always respond, "More money than I ever thought I would." Their next question: "Tell me what your typical day is like." I tell them there is no typical day. But then I go off and relate how I work late into the evening, answering emails and responding to anything that might come up. Watching the eyes of these young people, I can see them thinking, *Yeah, I want to make the money, but I don't really want to do all that work.*

I don't blame them. I've accepted a calling to be a leader. Staying truly engaged with our entire organization means being available 24/7, even when I'm on vacation. That's the sacrifice

required. But the blessings far outweigh the sacrifice. Remaining connected with street-level realities is a labor of love for me, just as it was when I was a cop. In fact, despite all I already do to get to know my people, I wish I could do more. People sometimes greet me in the hallway at a Scripps facility and say, "Oh, wow, Mr. Van Gorder. I've only seen you in photographs." I apologize, telling them, "I'm sorry, it's such a big organization. I wish I could know you personally." And that's the truth. I really do.

Taking Action

To know your people better:

- Invest time and energy in personal engagement, to truly lead at every level of an organization.
- Make drop-ins regular and genuine, with substantive interactions. Employees know a fly-by when they see it.
- Use Q&A sessions, emails, and other regular communications to stay in touch with large groups of employees.
- Open up about yourself; let employees know the real you. You'll find they respect and trust you even more.