

Get better at your own job by doing someone else's

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Growing and scaling your company requires a certain balance between getting into the trenches with your team members and getting out of their way to let them do what they do best. Knowing the best time to do each requires your understanding what your employees face in their roles each day.

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I bet that most leaders consider themselves hands-on managers who, without micromanaging, are able to work alongside their employees to get stuff done. Leaders want to picture themselves as part of the team -- people not detached from the challenges their team members tackle every day.

But you don't learn the responsibilities of someone's role just by sitting in on phone calls or reviewing reports. You've got to actually handle the day-to-day responsibilities of that role. This is exactly what I did for two weeks as an account strategist at my company, , and I learned much more than I expected.

Filling in was a happy accident.

Let me start by saying this wasn't some elaborate *Undercover Boss* maneuver. I didn't set out with a goal of understanding the roles of our team members or the questions of our clients, and I wasn't on the hunt for , either.

What happened was that when our backup plan for covering for an account strategist (AS) fell through, I took it upon myself to fill in. I thought it would be better for the clients than piling unnecessary stress on other members of our and realized that this would be a great opportunity to reacquaint myself

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with the account strategist role -- and all the ups and downs that come with it.

What I learned has informed our internal support structure and helped me become a better leader.

1. Stepping into a different role makes you more empathetic.

Within my first two days in this role, I was reminded of some of the difficult situations our account strategists face. Sure, on a logical level, I knew that our employees made tough calls sometimes and handled stressful interactions when necessary. But actually experiencing it all firsthand gave me a different type of empathy for our members in this role, one that's been important for effective support and, I believe, teamleadership.

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2. You'll get to know your clients in a new way.

There's no better customer research tool than conversations with your clients. Stepping into the client-facing AS role allowed me to gather transparent feedback from our clients -- the kind I may not have received from a simple survey tool. This kind of feedback is like gold to a growing company because it can help improve your business.

Plus, these conversations make great additions to your company knowledge bank, which you can use to create better content that keeps your clients engaged and satisfied with your company.

3. Identifying new areas for improvement becomes easier.

It's one thing to create processes for various projects, and it's another to put them to the test. Even if you worked with your team to develop those procedures, they can look very different on paper than in practice. After about a week as an account strategist using our custom content software, I had a list of new features for our development team to work on, to help streamline some of our processes.

Taking on the role of another team member, I found, opens your eyes to the realities of those processes and highlights areas that can be improved.

4. You'll be able to give better feedback to your team.

It's much easier to communicate constructive criticism and positive feedback to an employee when you understand what's involved in his or her role on a daily basis. When the AS I was covering for returned from vacation, I was able to give her concrete feedback, both on the areas I noticed that could be improved and the areas she was truly thriving in.

Avoid shining a spotlight on yourself.

This experience opened my eyes to more of the ins and outs about how our team works than any phone call or report ever could. If you believe your company could benefit from similar discoveries -- trust me, it will -- there are two key points to keep in mind.

First, don't use this as an opportunity to prove to the team how awesome you are. You started the company, so you can probably step in and perform many different roles well. But telling someone that you completed all his or

her tasks in half the time this person needs to do the same won't prompt any improvement

Instead, keep in mind the knowledge and experience you have that made the job easier for you, and communicate it to ensure that it enhances and motivates this individual's work.

Second, keep your title anonymous if you step into a client-facing role. When I told clients I was covering for their AS, I identified myself by my first name only, not as the company co-founder and president. If anyone had asked what my role normally was, I wouldn't have lied. But the anonymity of my role gave me great insight into how our clients and team members interact with one other.

Remember, the benefits of stepping outside your comfort zone and into a team member's role don't apply only to company leaders. You can create opportunities for any role in your company to perform some version of this experiment, from cross-training to shadowing. Our team is working on implementing a similar program, and you can expect a follow-up article once we see the results -- stay tuned.

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Until then, step into your employees' shoes, and let the experience guide your leadership.