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'If I just lived in the C-Suite, the brand wouldn't prosper the same way': McDonald's Canada CEO John Betts



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McDonald's Canada CEO John Betts wants to bring more of a focus on hospitality to the chain's fast-casual restaurants.

Peter J. Thompson/National Post

John Betts is a long-time devotee of the Golden Arches. The 64-year-old chief executive officer of McDonald's Restaurants of Canada Ltd. started working with the company in 1970 in Southampton, New York. He worked his way up and took the top job in Canada in 2008 at a time when the company was struggling here. Since then he's turned it around — tripling its coffee sales and making it one of the fast-food giant's top performers.

Betts sits on the board of Ronald McDonald House Charities, which help sick children and their families, and on the advisory board for Catalyst Canada, a nonprofit organization that focuses on creating opportunities for women and business. He has a BA in business management from Long Island University. An American by birth, he now lives in Toronto with his wife Bridget and their two children.

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Q: What's new at McDonald's Canada?

A: We're moving from a transactional-based brand to one more focused on the customer. We're hiring ambassadors and to do everything from greeting guests and teaching them how to use kiosks — to do we now have this service in about 550 of our 1,400 Canadian outlets, with 450 to go.

Q: McDonald's has gone through a major transformation in the past few years. How do

A: I spent a lot of time with our franchisees. When you really listen and they know that it's safe to do environment of trust.

This dynamic is crucial for any transformation effort to succeed. If I just lived in the C-Suite, the way as it does having touch points with all levels of the organization.

Also, we're not perfect. If we make mistakes, we own up to them right away so we don't lose confidence and momentum.

Q: What led you to embrace that level of accountability?

A: It's not only the right thing to do — it makes good business sense. If you don't make a mistake once in a while, you're not pushing hard enough and not taking enough chances. When I came to Canada, we'd ranked number seven in the restaurant sector for comparable sales and guest count growth over the previous 10 years. We were playing it safe and mainly dealing with pricing issues.

I spoke to the franchisees about what they felt was most important to their guests and we made some fundamental adjustments. We no longer run everything out of corporate headquarters in Toronto and we have a strong engagement philosophy with the franchisees.

Although it can be uncomfortable for people to give up authority at first, going into year two we were seeing results and it just started to feed on itself. The team saw that we could get a lot more done working closely with people and creating an open environment.

Q: You've changed the menu and introduced McCafés among other things. What was was one of the biggest challenges?

A: Over the past seven years, we've given away 150 million cups of coffee for free. Nobody else has come close to doing that. To get franchisees to give away coffee was understandably challenging. However, we've grown our breakfast revenue and guest counts by over 100 per cent.

Q: Do you have any advice for people in the corner office?

A: CEOs should be constantly trying to stretch their company brand and transform it. I think a lot of times when people get to be a C-suite executive, they settle. Don't do that.

I think the opportunity for CEOs is to realize it's not just about your customers, it's about how you get things done in your organization and realizing you're the one who sets the tone.

Q: What are you most proud of?

A: Canada is recognized as one of the best McDonald's brands in the world. All of our people own a piece of that. When our franchisees go to a McDonald's convention and are asked if they're from Canada — they end up walking taller.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Craig Dowden (PhD) is president and founder of [Craig Dowden & Associates](#), a firm focused on supporting clients in achieving leadership and organizational excellence by leveraging the science of peak performance. Craig delivers evidence-based executive coaching and leadership development training to his clients. Connect with Craig via [email](#), [LinkedIn](#), or follow him on Twitter [@craigdowden](#).



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