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# Excellence: Are We Really Willing to Pay the Price?

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EXCELLENCE: ARE WE REALLY  
WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE?

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"Excellence" seems to be one of many buzz words commonly used these days. With popular books on the market such as *In Search of Excellence* and *A Passion for Excellence*, administrators sometimes are conscious of using terminology which rings the contemporary *zeitgeist* of our day. My concern, however, is that we are given more to the "idea" of excellence than we are to "true" excellence. Please allow me to explain.

Nobody wants to be labeled *mediocre*. Such a label carries with it a sense of demoralization—not to mention poor publicity. Hence, all wish to believe that they are striving for excellence. For one to be called excellent is a compliment and an honor; thus, it is a term by which all wish to be characterized.

The problem is that in reality not all who say they are given to excellence indeed are doing so. My thesis is that while all say they pursue excellence in their lives and vocations, few are willing to pay the price to obtain it. Let me begin illustrating this thesis by defining excellence.

A standard dictionary defines excellence as follows: "State of possessing good qualities in an eminent degree."<sup>1</sup> Contemporary usage implies the idea of doing one's best in a given field. One is not satisfied with being average; rather one pursues the highest quality attainable.<sup>2</sup> Certainly excellence is an abstract concept and to a large degree its

meaning is relative. Hence, in some ways it is a term which best is defined operationally rather than with denotation. With this in mind, I would like to offer three key characteristics of excellence.

#### *Internal Desire for Quality*

Doing things right is a mark of excellence. It involves an end product which shows craftsmanship; one that a person can behold with pride because of its highest quality. All the ingredients needed for success are included in the work. The temptation to cut corners is resisted.

But excellence does not infer that it results from another looking over one's shoulder mandatorily checking to make sure that the proper process is followed. Rather, a person given to excellence is obsessed from within to maintain the highest quality attainable. Quality is not sacrificed—not because someone might find out, but rather because it would lessen the value of the finished product.

#### *Commitment to High Standards*

Excellence does not end with a quality project. On the contrary, it holds the object up for inspection, scrutiny, and to be tested by all. A sense of overwhelming satisfaction sweeps over a person who is given to excellence when one's product passes the rigors of outside examination. Anyone can claim that their work is the best; it is the test of iatrogenic analysis that demonstrates true excellence exists.

An important element of maintaining high standards is a discontentment with the mere reputation for excellence. Once such a reputation is established, it is easy to become lax, let one's guard down, and enjoy the benefits of people thinking that your product is the best because of its name when in reality it is not. No, true excellence is so innate that mediocrity cannot coexist side by side with it regardless of what others think.

#### *Giving Attention to Detail*

Often it is detail which separates excellence from the mediocre. Inherent in the idea of doing something right is

seeing that all details have been given attention. Small things can make the difference between something functioning adequately and something functioning to its highest potential. It distinguishes something which looks acceptable from something which is its best.

Also essential to excellence is looking beyond the immediate elements and seeing potential hazardous detail which may confound an undertaking. Quality does not occur by accident: it is the result of careful and methodical planning. Often the best of intentions for excellence becomes spoiled due to factors for which a person did not account. Further, sometimes these factors are not the monumental ones which receive the most attention—often it is the “little foxes” which spoil the vines of excellence.

#### *Staying Fresh*

Excellence is not stagnate. By that I mean it is not something which can be achieved and retained without the need for cultivation. On the contrary, excellence is dynamic. It is always in the state of change, development, and improvement. Excellence is achieved by assimilating new, reliable data and accommodating existing structures to meet new and changing needs. Excellence does not rely on yesterday's reputation: it moves forward to stay on the cutting edge of development and advancement.

#### *Counting the Cost*

Having discussed the aforementioned qualities of excellence, I would like here to ask the painful question: Are we *really* willing to pay the price excellence demands? The following discussion outlines some of these costs.

#### *Time*

Establishing priorities, practicing good principles of administration, utilizing support services, and eliminating elements of time wasters aid in the process of excellence. But in the bottom line: excellence takes time. It takes time to give attention to detail. It takes time to accept responsibility for projects in which others have failed, to do the job yourself

and to make sure it is done right. It takes time to repeat a project over and over until it finally meets the highest of standards. And it takes time to check and recheck quality control to ensure no area of potential difficulty becomes overlooked.

Time is an expensive price. Each day yields the same amount of time for everyone—no one receives more and no one receives less. Further, once time is spent it can never be retrieved. Hence, a person must weigh each activity in light of its value to the time which it requires. It is this issue that separates excellence-wishers from excellence-pursuers. Either doing things to their fullest potential is worth the time involved or it is not. Excellence exacts its price and will not accept alternatives.

Perhaps it is at this point that some agree in principle with the concept of excellence but fall short of its practice. For some, it is because they would rather accomplish *more* items to a lesser degree of quality than a few items to an excellent degree of quality. For others, it is because they do not see long-term value in the cost relative to other pressing demands of their time. Still others lack the patience for the time required for genuine distinction and excellence.

Regardless of the case, my exhortation is the following: let us not *claim* that we are pursuing excellence if we are not willing to pay the price it demands in time. Let us be honest with ourselves and not seek the benefits (e.g., reputation, prestige, status, etc.) that we have forfeited due to its cost. Many times, I'm afraid, we wish to have our cake and eat it too, as it were. Let us make choices and live responsibly within those choices.

### *Energy*

More often than not, excellence involves effort which is tedious, mundane, and monotonous. This is not to say, however, that masochism is a prerequisite for excellence! Rather, there comes a point where quality simply demands items which become taxing to one's energy level. It is taxing to check and recheck items for potential pitfalls. It is taxing to continually search for new and creative means of exercising

self-improvement. It is taxing to give attention to detail. It is taxing to consume great amounts of energy gaining the highest credentials to meet the highest levels of standards. But it is at this point where one separates those who truly pursue excellence from those who are content with the status quo.

Again, let me urge us not to say we are pursuing excellence if we are not willing to pay the price in effort which excellence demands. Let us openly admit that in order to conserve energy we accept mediocrity. Let us also be willing to accept the status in the eyes of others which comes with a deficiency in pursuing true excellence. Facades will take us nowhere: if we aspire to excellence let us enjoy its fruit; if we do not, let us not desire its reward.

### *Monetary Investment*

There are cases in which excellence does not involve actual dollar costs, but in most cases it does. If in no other way excellence often exacts its financial expense through spending time. In the time it takes to give attention to a project's details, for example, one could be involved in other money-making activities. There is a sense in which time is money.

In many cases money is the ultimate factor which sifts those truly pursuing excellence from those who do not. There are always cheaper ways of doing things. There are always means by which corners may be cut. There are always details which can be eliminated. Cost does not guarantee quality, obviously, but at the points where funds or support are not made available the diminished quality is normally noticeable.

My sense is that a special frustration arises when we pursue true excellence while others around us cut costs (and quality) yet produce results. It is important to remember, however, that we must look at the larger picture. Sometimes the cheaper route is in the long run the more expensive route. It normally costs less to do a job right one time than to do it cheaply and spend great amounts of time effecting repairs. We must also remember that if we are producing projects of true excellence, the long-term benefits will be far greater than

the short-term benefits seen by those who sacrifice quality for quantity.

Again allow me to implore us not to *claim* the pursuit of excellence if we are not willing to pay its monetary cost. Certainly we want to be frugal and exercise the wisest stewardship possible with all available finances. But if we are not using them to obtain the highest quality, let us not advertise ourselves as pursuing excellence. Perhaps we should admit that we are attaining *quality*; but attaining quality is different from pursuing excellence. One is good and the other is the best that can be done.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

Today is a day of integrity crises. Let us give special heed to represent ourselves in the most accurate manner possible. Let us not look to see how much status we can evoke with the least amount of effort expended on our part. Rather, let us attempt to be honest with ourselves. If we are not pursuing true excellence, let us say just that. Integrity never should be sacrificed on the altar of prestige.

The solution to the dilemma, of course, is genuinely to pursue excellence. Let us be willing to pay the prices of time, effort, and monetary investment. This may mean that we must cut back in the quantity of items which occupy our ventures. It is most often better, however, to do a few things with excellence than many things at the sacrifice of quality. As we pursue these items with excellence we will also reap the dividends of joy and blessing which come from inwardly (and outwardly through results) knowing that the job represents the highest quality attainable.

#### *References*

<sup>1</sup>"Excellence," *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed. unabridged. (Springfield, MA: G. C. Merriam Company Publishers, 1954), p. 888.

<sup>2</sup>See Tom Peters and Nancy Austin, *A Passion for Excellence* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 4-5; and Tom Peters and Robert Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Warner Books, 1982), pp. 37-8.

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