

# In Search of Excellence?

As I was waiting to check in for a flight on a major U.S. airline, the person in front of me began acting rudely toward the airline representative handling our line. The nature of the problem was not clear to me, but the passenger was screaming and yelling, and, occasionally, I heard a profane word being uttered. The airline representative remained calm and composed, making a conscious decision not to respond in kind. Watching this interaction from a distance, I was amazed by her ability to stay calm despite the customer's repeated verbal assaults. When it was my turn, I smiled and congratulated her for the way she had navigated the storm. "If that happened to me, I would probably have lost my temper and responded to this rude guy in an even ruder fashion," I said encouragingly. She looked at me unmoved and replied dryly, "Don't worry, sir; his luggage is going to Alaska." She then asked if I had any luggage to check—to which I responded with an unequivocal "No," while tightly clutching my bag.

The scene I witnessed at this airline counter is representative of the shift in power taking place in organizations across the spectrum. Individual employees are taking power away from the top executives. In spite of efforts by executives to control brand and the customer experience, excellence is being determined—and delivered—by individuals,

on their own terms. In a world where the importance of personal connections is increasingly emphasized, an organization's strength comes directly from its employees who choose to deliver superior performance. Organizational excellence (or lack thereof) is, ultimately, the sum total of the accumulated impact of decisions made every day by individuals. Taken together, these decisions—what I call “Daily Choices”—are the key to an organization's competitiveness and strength.

My experience on line at the airport is a great example of the Daily Choice: At the moment of truth, an employee made a decision that defined the company's success in the eyes of a customer. Every day, millions of similar choices either to deliver superior service or to sustain mediocrity by following generic rules and processes are being made by individuals. It is these millions of daily choices, not corporate strategic decisions, that ultimately account for companies' superior performance and success.

To drive excellence, your organization does not need another top-down strategic plan, but, rather, willing employees who have been given permission to perform. Excellence cannot be mandated from above, it rises from the bottom up. Your employees need to *want* to deliver excellence. So, don't rush to appoint a CEO (Chief Excellence Officer) in your organization; this will not be one of those top-down, enforced activities. At the same time, excellence will not result from the random actions of your employees. (Random acts of excellence will not be sufficient to keep an organization going.)

The roles of organizations and managers will not disappear, but they will evolve in the pursuit of excellence. These changing roles will serve to define and create an environment that encourages employees to choose excellence. Managers need to create an excellence-enabling environment, an environment in which delivering excellence is not the exception to the rule or something in the domain of the “suckers.” Enabling excellence will require you to give employees permission to

perform. You'll need to provide them with sound information for decision-making, and empower them by granting authority and the freedom to make mistakes.

## **Excellence—Today More Than Ever**

“Capitalism—you basically make people do things they would prefer not to do. You have to have a sort of evil personality to even want to get into that.” This is a quote from Scott Adams, the creator of *Dilbert*. Welcome to your employee manifesto!

Why write a book about excellence now, with so many other books available on the topic? A recent search on Amazon.com, using the key word “excellence,” resulted in more than 5,400 possible titles. It appears that excellence has been researched and analyzed from every conceivable angle—all that's left is for people to just do it.

But I beg to differ. Judging by the mountain of books and articles on excellence, we should have produced a stampede of excellence enveloping our economy. It's clear that we are nowhere close. Excellence is not a permanent, integral part of our lives. The question is, why not?

Understanding excellence and how to deliver it is at the heart of the matter. We have been captivated by misconceptions and faulty logic that is encapsulated in what I call the “Excellence Myth.” The myth presents a paradox: It is precisely the traditional definition of excellence that stops us from achieving our capacity for excellence. The people we admire as legendary—our “excellence heroes,” if you will—are holding us back (through no fault of their own). Instead of inspiring us to reach our full potential, the Excellence Myth debilitates us, permitting us to accept something less.

Management consistently diminishes employees' capacity for excellence. In many organizations, willing and motivated employees are squashed by a top-down insistence that procedures are to be followed at

all costs. This type of organizational bureaucracy, littered with controlling processes, sends a clear message to employees: Follow and obey rather than take the initiative. “Excellence” is defined as the domain of the rare and few at the top. The rest are expected to remain quiet and keep on marching. Processes have become the primary focus of these organizations, and employees are required to follow them without question. Given such a restrictive environment, it’s no wonder that even the most motivated employees are giving up. They are defaulting to playing the obedient soldier while surrendering any initiative or innovation. They do what they are told and try not to think too much. After years of this, how can employees even *consider* the pursuit of excellence? They just want to survive.

Management’s eagerness to control everything and everyone has created a new form of employee: obedient, cynical, and devoid of any initiative. The employee’s refuge? *Dilbert*, and a descent into “Dilbertism.”

Threats from new economies have become the topic of academic research and a multitude of articles. Gloomy reports seem to appear every other day, declaring more job losses to emerging markets with lower cost structures. Asian countries, in particular, are carving a niche in the global economy. Many claim that their successes are the root cause of the decline in new jobs in established markets such as the U.S. But competition is not a new concept to most organizations. We have lived with competition for quite some time. However, it seems that competitive forces have intensified in recent years, accelerated by these new economies seeking their shares of the global marketplace.

Competition has presented us with a simple challenge: excellence or nothing. We live in times where “good enough” simply doesn’t cut it anymore. We need every piece of excellence we can gather and every employee’s commitment to excellence in order to forge a tough response to the new competitive forces. The new competitors have demonstrated an ambitious spirit and a drive to succeed. While some may not yet have

reached a genuine level of excellence, it's clear that the pursuit of excellence is a main focus. We should reflect on why we are losing ground to others, whether they are competitors down the street or across the globe. Are we really willing and ready to compete? Are we pursuing excellence with everything we have, ready to fight back and claim our rightful place? Do we have a fully committed organization, with employees who are dedicated to delivering excellence in order to differentiate our products, services, and experiences—and win the customer's heart in the process? Do our employees have the freedom to get around controlling processes and to make the types of personal choices that will let us rise to the challenge of excellence and win this critical battle?

Sadly, the answer to these questions is “No.” With a culture of inaptitude developing among us, created by top-down management and reflected through countless *Dilbert* cartoons, episodes of *The Office*, derisive jokes, and books that tell us to “stop working so hard,” we are methodically stripping away our ability to win. In the first decade of the Millennium, as competition has intensified, so has our addiction to cynical content that places us on the fast track to diminished expectations and competitiveness. While some may say, “I’m realistic, not pessimistic,” or frame the *Dilbert* attitude as a coping method for stress, it does not dilute the damaging impact of this new direction in our business culture. The harbingers of mediocrity are sending a clear message: “Don’t try too hard. After all, what’s the point?” “You’re working for a moron.” “You’re helpless.” “You’re a small screw in a huge machine.” “Nothing you do will make a difference, anyway, so you might as well quit trying.”

Steeped in this growing “Why bother?” culture, we buy deeper and deeper into the message of our own incompetence and insignificance. The cynicism is affecting our long-term competitiveness. Slowly but surely, one joke at a time, one cartoon at a time, we are ripping away our potential for excellence, committing ourselves to the kingdom of the

zombies. We reinforce the message that we are useless and incapable of impacting the big machine we call our organization. After all, it was management that discouraged any initiative and required blind obedience. What *is* the point of striving for excellence, after all? No one will notice, no one will see the difference, and, besides, they don't deserve my best.

Forget about the organization for a minute. Do *you* deserve your best? At the end of the day, if you haven't performed to your potential, you may penalize your boss, but first and foremost, you've penalized yourself. It's your career, your track record, and your reputation on the line.

In light of emerging competitive forces, the market has been flooded with books proposing faster innovation, greater creativity, more intimate relationships with customers, and an entire slew of strategic and tactical solutions to the threat from the global marketplace. I have read many of these books, and one question lingers in my mind: Who will execute these legendary ideas? Who will be there to innovate products or care for customers? Are we talking about the same people? Are we expecting controlling, process-centric managers to allow this type of performance? Are we expecting employees who are afflicted by Dilbertism to go and create excellence that makes a difference?

This intensified competitive landscape requires employees and organizations to be at the top of their game—to genuinely care about the customer and to deliver innovation and distinguished service. In short, it requires us to achieve excellence. “Consistency” doesn't provide differentiation anymore. Consistency is necessary, but it's insufficient. Consistency is far from interesting; if that's all we're offering, customers are likely to seek more exciting options at a competitor's store. The new reality is that organizations today need to be at peak performance all the time. To achieve this, they can only depend on one thing: employee excellence. We need all the innovation, creativity, and risk taking we can muster. But we can't get any of this from top-down, executive-mandated decisions. The decisions must come from the employees themselves.

## Excellence or Nothing

Excellence or nothing is the survival choice of every organization or individual today. “Good enough” and consistency are simply not going to cut it anymore. Achieving excellence is our only chance for growth and success.

I wrote *Excellence Every Day* as a wake-up call and as an invitation. As a wake-up call, it warns of danger: Inaction is a self-defeating state that results in miserable mediocrity. It has greater negative impact on each and every one of us than most of us are willing to recognize or accept.

The book is also my personal invitation to you to choose excellence every day. With each new day, we are given opportunities to make conscious choices for either mediocrity or excellence. Any time we choose mediocrity, we get further away from competitive advantage and the chance to win in the marketplace. Each choice should be viewed as an opportunity for organizations *and* individuals to unleash our abilities to maximize performance, to be competitive, to win in the marketplace, and to be the best we can be. Today, more than ever, every personal choice counts. Every Daily Choice for excellence increases our overall excellence capacity. Each employee’s Daily Choices impact the sum total of choices contributing to an organization’s excellence and competitiveness.

Because the competitive battleground is in the trenches and not at the top, every employee’s choice for excellence matters. Together, millions of Daily Choices for excellence made by an organization’s employees can create an amazing differentiation and a huge competitive advantage.

It’s time to abolish the corporate culture characterized by *Dilbert*-style messages; this culture is damaging our productivity and competitiveness. It is time to empower every employee to make the Daily Choice for excellence. Managers need to shift from a focus on process to a focus on enabling employee excellence. By giving employees permission to

perform, managers allow employees to unleash their excellence capacity and make a difference.

We urgently need to regain our capacity for excellence and deliver it every day. We need to dispel the Excellence Myth and redefine excellence as positive, thoughtful, everyday action that is capable of being delivered by each and every person at any time. In doing so, we must defy the misconception that excellence is once-in-a-lifetime achievement that is the domain of the rare and the few. We must make excellence a personal matter and define it as a personal commitment. We must make the Daily Choice every day and execute excellence in everything we do. To get started, we must work to bury the Excellence Myth and to regain an attitude of aptitude. The myths and obstacles we may encounter on our path to excellence will be discussed in upcoming chapters. But in Chapter 2 I'll show how a faulty definition of excellence can cause individuals and organizations to miss the mark when it comes to meeting and exceeding customer expectations. Self-centric definitions of excellence can place organizations and customers on completely different paths that are not destined to meet. As a result, individuals often miss opportunities to perform to their excellence potential, and organizations fail to remain competitive.

Excellence or nothing is the choice we face every day. Only when we learn to make a *conscious* choice for excellence will we stand a chance of winning.