

FINDING EXCELLENCE

How to Give and Be Our Best Every Day

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So you want to claim the title of “excellence” in your personal and professional life?

Or are you a leader of an organization or manager of a department and you want to be seen as best of class, at the top of your game? In short, you desire a score of a ten out of ten in all that you do. Neither the silver nor bronze will do.

If you fall into any of the categories above, then this is your wake-up call. What many call excellence is actually average incognito. So the first step to obtaining your title is to remove the veils of mediocrity and come to know what this elusive term called excellence really is. Once you view excellence in its purest form, then you can set your course—or your organization's course—with a compass that clearly shows if you are on the right path.

In the 80's, many began their search for excellence. Over three decades later, the search still continues for many of us and, for others, the search has just begun.

We were intrigued by the concept of excellence in both the professional and organizational domains and began on a journey to understand excellence, but soon found that a significant barrier exists.

Excellence does not have a generally accepted definition. Thus, any further value we could contribute to the understanding of excellence must be predicated on unshakable bedrock and pillars sanctioned by all those in search of excellence. In short, a common working definition of excellence must be derived.

It was with this spirit of inquiry that we produced *Who Kidnapped Excellence? What Stops Us from Giving and Being Our Best*, a business parable in which Excellence (personified) is kidnapped by Average (a make-up artist). Interestingly, it takes the leadership several months to realize its Excellence is missing. When it does realize it, leadership demands the return of Excellence. How will the company restore its Excellence?

First, how can we "get a handle" on true excellence? When we began this book, we initially identified multiple qualities of excellence. However, over the course of two and a half years, we vetted the number down to a few. This was no easy task. As we examined these qualities, we realized that many of the traits were actually a subset that belonged to one of five core qualities. Now we believe we have identified those core qualities/elements of excellence. And, ultimately, we distilled the complex concept of excellence down to five main elements which are based on four tenets.

The Four Tenets of Excellence

Do we believe we have stumbled upon the holy grail of excellence, the cup from which all must drink to gain membership? Absolutely not! But we do assert that the elements of passion, competency, flexibility, communication and ownership are the bedrock and foundational pillars if one desires to claim the title of excellence. We also assert the following four tenets.

First, one must display these five characteristics *consistently* in their personal and professional lives. We all know someone who is passionate and excited about what they do. By all reasonable standards, they are considered competent. They take ownership of the activities and the outcome. And yet, they consistently fail to communicate effectively and/or they lack flexibility (their way or the highway). They cannot claim the title of excellence. And we all know the person who displays excellence consistently in the office but obviously does not respect his/her spouse. Again, this person is not a candidate for an excellence title.

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Second, excellence is an inside-out proposition. For those of you who are just beginning your search for excellence, look in the mirror before you look outside the windows of your home or office. Stephen R. Covey talked about all things being created twice... first in the mind and then in reality. And so it is with excellence. Excellence begins one person at a time with a mindset, then with a choice followed by positive action, which leads to positive habits.

Third, excellence is not how you are measured against others but rather how you measure up against your potential. Imagine you have entered a race. You are on the track and poised to begin. The gun goes off and you bolt from your position and begin your run. You are focused! Finally, you look up and then back. There are no runners in front, beside or behind you. You look to the stadium and there is no one there cheering you on. This race is yours and your only competitor is your personal best. This epiphany is the essence of excellence.

Fourth, there is no silver or bronze medal for excellence. There is no grading on a curve. Excellence is your best. Anything less is less.

Certainly, every relationship, personal or professional, has requisite standards. Job descriptions have “essential functions of the job.” A marriage vow has the one big “I do” followed by a number of smaller “I do’s” and “I don’ts,” tacit expectations of behavior from one another to fulfill the contract. These are the basic assumptions of the social and work contracts we participate in,

but they are just that—basic, core covenants that form the construct in which we live and operate. To remain in this mindset is an agreement to live and operate in the land of average where “getting by on the minimal” is good enough. In contrast, a commitment to excellence is a commitment to evaluate your current environment, circumstances, challenges, issues, opportunities and contracts and to rise above the base foundation and lowest common denominator, to perform and behave in a manner that reflects *your* best.

The Five Main Elements of Excellence

1» PASSION | Passion is a primary building block for excellence. When we speak of passion, we are not referring to the contrived emotion evoked by the coach at half-time when his team is all but defeated. We assert that passion is a daily choice in our attitude. Passion creates that zest inside us for life that causes us to smile even when circumstances are against us, to go that extra mile, and to see our life and work as an opportunity, not something we have to get through.

So what stops us from giving and being our best when it comes to this characteristic?

We would assert that indifference is the nemesis of passion. The pathway from passion to indifference begins with one choice to accept average, to give into circumstance, to stop short of complete realization. We begin to see our life and work as something we must get through. Choice by choice, erosion from the summit of excellence occurs.

So how does one develop passion? Make the choice every morning to give people the benefit of the doubt. Realize that bad things happen and when they do, you must deal with them. Accept that, notwithstanding these sentinel events (death, divorce, etc.), you have the ability to choose your attitude, your responses, and your actions. Maintain a watchful vigilance over your thoughts. Choose to be that person that lights up a room when you enter it, not when you leave.

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2» COMPETENCY | Who among us does not desire to be good at what we do—our work, our role as a spouse or parent? We often relate competency to the technical skills required to do the job. For instance, if you are a construction manager, reading blueprints is likely a required skill. But competency is not just the technical aspects of our work and lives. It is also in our relationships with one another. The construction worker who is great at reading blueprints, but lacks the interpersonal skills to be able to relate well with his employees and customers does not surpass the category of average. Suppose the tacit agreement between a particular couple is that the man takes the role of provider for the family. He does so with fervor and spends an inordinate

amount of time and energy to become a good financial provider. On the surface, this seems in order. The problem, however, is that he ignored a great deal of the emotional needs of his wife along the way, another competency implicit to the spousal contract.

So what stops us from giving and being our best when it comes to this characteristic?

We contend that ineptitude is the nemesis of competency. If passion speaks to attitude, then competency speaks to skills and behavior. Honing the right technical skills for your job is most easily measured, but what about those domains that are more abstract? For instance, the ability to navigate through a meeting in which there are hidden agendas, power plays, and nuance requires a competency that doesn't show up on the essential functions of the job or performance evaluation.

So how does one develop competency? This may be a good time to ask for feedback. Often, we have a blind spot as to the areas of competency we need to develop the most. For instance, you might ask your wife to suggest three things you could do to be a better husband. You could even begin by saying, "here's what I think I am good at, but I know I cannot see myself the way you do." Or, enlist your supervisor or peers to provide feedback on how you can support them better. Be ready to swallow a little pride. Accept positive critique with an open mind and discerning eye. Remember, excellence is an inside-out proposition.

3» FLEXIBILITY | The only thing that remains constant is that everything changes. We are not the same people we were when we took our vows. We get hired and things are going along well and then, boom, the reorganization announcement. What the average person does is try to hang on to the past, to wait it out, to expect it to go away. But those in the excellence category understand that change happens and they look for positive, practical, and professional ways to adapt to the changes. The husband who gets that the new baby resets the expectations of spousal agreement is moving away from average and toward excellence. In contrast, the worker who resists changes and hangs on to the philosophy of “that’s not the way we do things around here” may find himself not only in the land of average but also in the land of the unemployed.

So what stops us from giving and being our best when it comes to this characteristic?

Inflexibility is the arch enemy of flexibility. The remedy is the same as that for the body as it ages. How do we prevent inflexibility? We stretch. Can it be a little painful? Certainly, but we know the benefits outweigh the pains. The inability to “stretch” when a change happens at home or at work ultimately leads to missed opportunities.

So how does one develop flexibility? Again, all things are created twice, first in the mind and then in reality. We must deal with change mentally first. Accept that change happens. Choose the mindset to deal with the change positively (passion) and ask how you can acquire the knowledge, skills and behaviors (competencies) to most effectively deal with the changes.

4» COMMUNICATION | Perception is everything, and perception is primarily created by communication. Those who understand that there is a delicate balance between listening and talking and that listening is more than just paying attention to the words are on a path to excellence. You may remember the model of sender, receiver, and feedback loop in your studies of communication. We do not pay adequate attention to the feedback loop. We fail to validate the message we thought we sent or that was sent to us. There is a definitive art to this practice and those who master it are the ones who learn to “read between the lines.” The spouse who listens with his head and heart, who reads the subtleties of the body language, who integrates his previous knowledge and history with his wife and who, without parroting, is able to validate the meaning of his wife’s communication, will leave average in the dust. The manager, however, who is too busy “managing” and does not take the time to listen to the feedback of his staff, or does listen but does not or cannot discern the real meaning they are trying to convey, this manager is destined for average purgatory.

So what stops us from giving and being our best when it comes to this characteristic?

We chose Miss Communication as the antithesis of communication. Often we are concerned with telling our story, giving our advice, or asking others to see the world through our lens. Our ability to truly understand the other person’s view is clouded by the filters of our biases (age, race, gender, values, beliefs, position of authority).

So how does one develop communication? Realize that we can reach conclusions better collectively. That is, when each member of a communication event has the opportunity to contribute while the others listen with an intent to understand, not an intent to reply (Covey, again). Frame a positive message (passion). Be open to others' opinions and insights (flexibility). When it is your turn to contribute, be mindful of who your audience is and construct your message in a way you believe will appeal to them (competency).

5» OWNERSHIP | Who among us has changed the oil in a rental car? Most of us have not. It is not part of the expectation. We are more likely to take care of the things we own. We can go into work with an attitude of just meeting the basic expectations of the job and we may, in fact, be able to fly under the radar screen. Or we can come to work with a perspective of how we would work and operate if we owned the company, the department, the specific work. That is a perspective of excellence. Suppose it is 5:05 PM and the shop closed at 5:00 PM and a customer is knocking on the glass door. Those with an average mindset will mouth "we're closed" and turn their backs. Those with an excellence (ownership) mindset will open the door and say, "how may I help you?" In a marriage, those with an excellence perspective take ownership of problems, issues, and challenges. They do not point fingers and pass blame.

So what stops us from giving and being our best when it comes to this characteristic?

We use the term "poser" to describe the nemesis of ownership. We all know a poser.

It's that person who does just enough to stay under the radar screen. They do not come in early nor do they stay late. Their communication and body language exude "that's not my job" and "that's not my department." Some posers are good at appearances. On the surface, they appear to be model employees (when the supervisor is near). But those who work close to posers know them for who they are.

So how does one develop ownership? By now, you are taking in that the interrelationship of these five core qualities is not mutually exclusive, but instead, the qualities build upon and reinforce one another. Ownership begins with passion, a choice to see situations and opportunities from an owner's perspective. This inside choice leads to outside actions. Owners seek out those competencies to help them maximize their resources, position and vision to improve. Owners incorporate the understanding that ownership is not static. Circumstances change and owners are poised to be flexible to change, but with uncompromising values. Owners know they must communicate effectively with others. Thus, they work hard to understand others' positions, opinions, and concerns and they articulate the same, ever mindful of the biases they may have.

“Ownership begins with passion, a choice to see situations and opportunities from an owner's perspective.”

Your Excellence!

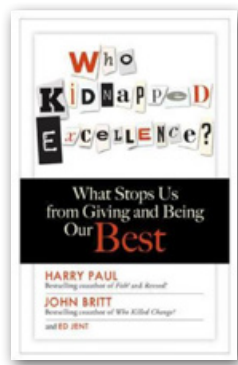
It's time to take an honest assessment of your personal and professional life. Have you settled, compromised, given up, or given in? Has the fool's gold of average distracted you from true excellence? In *Who Kidnapped Excellence? What Stops Us from Giving and Being Our Best*, we assert that:

- 1»** The core elements of excellence are passion, competency, flexibility, communication, and ownership.
- 2»** We must demonstrate all five of these core qualities consistently to claim the title of excellence.
- 3»** Excellence is not how we are measured against others, but rather how we measure up against our potential.
- 4»** There is no silver or bronze medal for excellence. There is no learning curve. Excellence is your best. Anything less is less.

We do not pretend we have the magic formula that will bring happiness and an improved life. But imagine, if you will, working for a boss who strives to come to work every day with a positive mindset, who is very good technically at what she does and she has great interpersonal skills. She consistently demonstrates flexibility in an ever-changing work environment. Her communication skills are second to none. She does not pass the buck. She takes ownership of her department's issues and does not pass blame. Imagine that your significant other greets each day with a smile and with kindness toward you. They have taken their role seriously in the relationship. You experience flexibility, great communication, and an ownership mentality with them consistently.

Now look in the mirror and envision those qualities in yourself. Be realistic about where the bar is in your current life and raise it. It must happen in your mind before it happens in your day to day life. **A positive mindset leads to positive choices. These choices lead to positive actions. These actions lead to positive habits, which leads to excellence. Seek out the right mentors, experiences, courses, coworkers, and friends to help you on your journey to giving and being your best every day.** 📌

Info



BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of [Who Kidnapped Excellence: What Stops Us from Giving and Being Our Best](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS | **John Britt** is director of healthcare solutions at Kforce. He has been assisting large organizations' leadership and management with change for over twenty years. He is the coauthor, with Ken Blanchard, of *Who Killed Change?* **Harry Paul** has over thirty years' experience in business, including management training and consulting, sales, distribution, product development, and international operations. He is the coauthor of six books, including *Revved!* (with Ross Reck) and the New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestseller *Fish!*

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