

When “Excellent” Isn’t

Why “Excellence in Everything” Produces Excellence in Nothing

Like most people, I’m a fan of excellence. But when everything gets labelled “excellent”, we devalue the word to where it doesn’t really mean anything. And it certainly doesn’t create the motivation we’re trying to inspire when we use it in our mission, vision, and value statements.

The problem is that no one can be excellent at everything. Rare is the Olympic athlete who has the time and energy to become a concert violinist while pursuing their Olympic dream. To become excellent at one thing requires sacrifices in other areas. The pursuit of excellence requires prioritization. When we state our goal to be “excellence in everything”, we’re

1. setting an unattainable goal that sets people up for certain failure;
2. not sending any clear messages to help our followers decide how to prioritize their efforts;
3. not defining what excellence really means to us; and
4. causing our other value statements to be discredited as hyperbole like our “excellence” statement.

So how do we get our intended message across when we use the word, “excellence”? Here are a few suggestions:



1. Don’t toss it out generically – give it meaningful parameters. For example, instead of offering “excellent products”, try something like, “our products provide excellent value to our customers by...”, or “our products have excellent life expectancy”. Although you could probably communicate your product’s excellence more effectively without using the word “excellent”; e.g. “our products last twice as long as our competitors” is a more meaningful statement of excellence. I’m suspicious when I see “excellent” – it’s often a cop-out from describing what’s really good about the product or service.
2. Have a shared understanding of what you mean by it. Do finance, production, and sales people all agree on what excellence is? Do you all believe a Rolls Royce sedan is more excellent than a Ford pickup? Not if you want to haul sand and rocks. Gold plating everything might describe excellence in decorating a palace, but it might be a liability if excellence requires a hard surface. Whatever your product or service, you make trade-offs between highest quality, lowest cost, quickest delivery, and other criteria. Make sure your whole organization has a shared understanding of the thresholds for important criteria. Which is the more important excellence criteria in your organization: on-time delivery, low cost, or high functionality? People make these trade-offs every day whether they’re delivering services to customers or reports to management. And they’re making those decisions on their own if you don’t provide guidance to help them prioritize.
3. Once you have shared clarity around what excellence is, reward it when you see it. And talk about it frequently with a willingness to wrestle through the marginal cases. The more defined and visible your standards of excellence, the more your followers will embrace them.

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