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“Strive for Excellence, Not Perfection”

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The title of this article is a quote from H. Jackson Brown, Jr. People often put the emphasis on perfection without realizing that perfection is impossible except in scientific laboratory experiments and mathematical applications. Most of the time, emphasizing perfection rather than excellence acts as an obstacle to progress. As such, we will explore the cons of perfection and the pros of excellence in this article, as it will enable individuals and institutions to strive for excellence and effectiveness.

What Is Excellence?

Colin Powell said, “If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude.” Excellence is about being the best, striving to be better, with an eye to delivering quality goods and services. People are not born with excellence. They cultivate it over a period of time through hard work, wise work, and smart work. It emerges from continuous improvement over the past. It is a corollary of passion and performance.

Excellence differentiates extraordinary people from ordinary people. Those who strive for excellence will have longevity in their endeavors. It is both the yardstick and the benchmark. When you benchmark against other achievers, you tend to improve and grow.

How to Achieve Excellence?

People first must develop the mindset that achieving excellence is a journey, not a destination. They must set their goals in order to achieve excellence. There are certain

tips that will help you achieve excellence, irrespective of your area of interest. Here are some nuggets of wisdom for achieving excellence:

- **Be passionate:** When you do what you love, you don't feel that you are working any more, as you derive pleasure from it. Hence, you have to be passionate about whatever you do. In addition, involvement is essential for excellence. When you involve yourself, the sky is your limit.
- **Spot your talents:** Once you know your passions, it becomes easy for you to hone them. Acquire skills and abilities in tune with talents. People often search for skills by ignoring their inherent talents. Hence, spot your talents and build your competencies and capabilities in and around them.
- **Read good books:** Read good books and upgrade your knowledge constantly. Continuous learning broadens your horizons. Never become complacent with your existing knowledge. Keep reading good books that enrich you with the latest knowledge from multiple perspectives. Books provide diversified knowledge, information, and ideas that you can choose and that can help you grow. Constant learning is a boon. Reading good books by great authors will inspire you. If possible, note key points for future reference. Sometimes people think they know everything. There is always something that can be learned from each book, provided you have an open mind to learn and grow. In addition, different authors present content from different perspectives, thus enriching your knowledge.
- **Work smart and wise:** You must learn to work smartly, wisely, and hard in order to achieve excellence. There is a difference between working hard and smart work. Working hard is all about perspiration without any planning and preparation. In contrast, working smart is about thorough preparation with a proper blueprint to proceed, along with perspiration. Hard work consumes a lot of time, money, and resources, while smart work conserves time, money, and resources.
- **Share your knowledge:** Knowledge grows when it is shared. Develop an attitude to help and serve others. We brought nothing into this world and will take away nothing from this world when we die. What we can do is share our knowledge so people can benefit. Sharing your knowledge, writing articles, and mentoring others will sharpen your mind. You will get great pleasure when you see people growing in front of you.
- **Solicit continuous feedback:** Continuous feedback is essential for excellence. As feedback is the breakfast of champions, people must take feedback from others without any false ego. Feedback spots the chinks in the armor. It helps people to know their weaknesses so they can work toward improvement. In fact, continuous improvement paves the way for excellence.
- **Manage constraints:** There will be several constraints and obstacles in the path to achieving excellence. Some are internally created by human errors, and many are externally created by forces beyond human control. Hence,

learn to manage both external and internal forces and factors that prevent you from achieving excellence.

Excellence vs. Perfection

Do not confuse excellence with perfection as it is easy to achieve excellence, but tough to achieve perfection. Michael J. Fox once remarked, “I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence, I can reach for; perfection is God’s business.” Perfection is a phobia. When you emphasize perfection too much, you tend to make more mistakes, resulting in failures. However, when you emphasize excellence, you tend to be comfortable as you find it easier to execute and deliver.

Excellence paves the way for improvement, while perfection paves the way for stagnation, limiting one’s creativity and innovation. People often fail to deliver goods when emphasis is laid on perfection. However, excellence tolerates mistakes and failures, thus allowing people to explore and experiment, and, in turn, paving the way for excellence. Excellence is feasible and possible, while perfection is a fantasy and often difficult to attain. Excellence is pleasure, while perfection is pressure.

Tale of a Carpenter

Excellence is about how you contribute to others. What goes around comes around. If you deliver something good, you get back good things in return. If you deliver something poor, you get back bad things in return. Here is the story of a carpenter.

A carpenter was very good at his work. He delivered his best and dedicated his entire life to his profession and services provided to his employer. Having reached old age, he told his employer about his intention to retire from service. The owner did not appreciate losing a dedicated carpenter. Since the carpenter had grown old and wanted to be relieved, the owner gave him his final assignment of constructing a home. The carpenter accepted the assignment unwillingly. He did his work without any interest for months, and somehow completed his final assignment. And then the carpenter went to the employer and informed him about the completion of the construction.

The employer asked the carpenter to come the next day, as that would be his final working day. The next day, the employer gave the carpenter the keys to the newly constructed home as a gift for his retirement, and thanked him for his long service of dedication and excellence. The carpenter was shocked as he had not realized that the home he had made without any interest actually belonged to him. He regretted not maintaining enthusiasm and excellence during the construction. Had he maintained excellence toward the end of his career, he would have ended up with a better home.

The moral of the story: What goes around, comes back to us.

Excellence Is Not an Act, but a Habit

I have collected many quotes from the last 30 years that I use when I write articles. I also have newspaper clippings from many years, detailing important events and activities. Whenever I write articles or teach students, I refer to them. Above all, I have the habit of jotting down key ideas and insights that help me write articles and teach my students better. Every time I write an article, I always think of presenting it better than I did before and in a more succinct way without compromising the essence, and that has paved the way for my excellence in writing. However, I still need to improve a lot. Aristotle rightly said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

There is a growing interest in excellence on the part of organizations. For instance, McKinsey’s Tom Peters and Robert Waterman published a book, “In Search of Excellence—Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies.” The book was famous for the 7S framework, where 7S stands for strategy, structure, systems, staff, skills, style, and shared values. It was researched at 43 of the Fortune 500 list of top-performing companies in America. In addition, Jim Collins’ book, “Built to Last,” was researched at 18 companies.

Currently, companies crave excellence to beat their competition and stay ahead of others. Excellence is the only thing that makes people walk on their toes to deliver amazing results.