

What is Excellence?

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Twenty-five years ago, my life (and yours, too, probably) was changed by Tom and Bob's book, *In Search of Excellence*. After that, on a regular basis, Tom has provided us with shots of brilliance and unsettling reminders that we've got a long way to go to reach our potential as organizations and individuals.

Along the way, there's a question that's been nibbled at but never really answered. I mean, I already know many of the 687 ways to create excellence and the imperatives of excellence, but what is it, really?

At first, organizations got excited about the formula: excellence = quality. If we can meet spec, regularly and on budget, we win.

But the quality mantra only takes you so far.

Take, for example, my water company. Are they excellent? Every time I turn on the tap, water comes out. The bills aren't outrageous. I never need to call them. Are they excellent? Or boring?

What about the local grocery or the other boring commodity providers in my life? By my definition, once you start providing a commodity that your customers treat as a commodity, you're no longer excellent.

Here's my take:

Excellence means that you're indispensable. At least right now, in this moment, there's no one else I would choose but you. You, the excellent one, are so surprising, so delightful, so over-the-top and, yes, so human that there really isn't anyone else I'd rather dance with.

The "in the moment" nature of excellence makes it a moving target. JetBlue was excellent, for a while, but then others started catching up and new management started slowing down. Suddenly, it wasn't a JetBlue flight any more, it was just a flight. Easy to switch to Virgin Atlantic or someone else.

Excellence isn't about meeting the spec, it's about *setting* the spec. It defines what the consumer sees as quality right this minute, and tomorrow, if you're good, you'll reset that expectation again.

The surefire way to achieve excellence, then, is not to create a written spec and match it. The surefire way is to be human. To be artistic: to make a connection with the customer and to somehow change them for the better. The reason Tom and I and others can continue to write about excellence twenty-five years later is that we're not writing about business at all. We're writing about people.

When the Ritz-Carlton hotel empowers every employee from chambermaid to manager to "make things right," they're not engaging in the sort of quality control most managers are comfortable with. In fact, if they were able to write down exactly what to do in every situation, the excellence factor would disappear. What the hotel accomplishes with its policy is this: they challenge their employees to become artists.

The art of connection, the art of being human, the art of making a difference. Artists do things that have never been done before. They dig deep to create passion. They connect by changing things for the better.

The economy has been better, and the economy has been worse. Through it all, the market seeks out, recognizes, and embraces artists, people we can't live without. That's our opportunity right now. To be excellent means you must be an artist.