

Excellence.

I was particularly proud of my son's 1st Class Honours degree which he received last week. Clearly an excellent result based on hard work and, I'd secretly like to think, the quality of the inherited gene pool ! But as he moves on to the first stage of the career ladder the accolades and congratulations surrounding his achievement of excellence will rapidly fade as he strives to put in his next big performance in meeting his future career challenges.

What is excellence, and how should we really treat it?

I know what excellence is not. In fact I find it easy to spot poor or substandard performance in individuals that I coach or businesses that I advise. But sometimes, I find myself stopping short of identifying and praising excellent behaviour, performance or results in order to try and encourage even better achievements. Perhaps that's a good attribute in someone who seeks to unlock hidden potential in both individuals and businesses alike. Or maybe I am just being unfair and expecting too much?

Will excellence today simply become tomorrow's norm? It always seemed that way with sales revenues and profit targets in businesses I have worked in, whereby last year's stunning performance becomes next year's baseline. Quite often managers find themselves recognising great performance in their teams one minute and then raising the bar and expecting even more the next. Recognise this in yourself or your boss?

It's a similar picture with performance reviews for individuals: it is not enough to rest on your laurels as expectation levels are set higher and higher until something happens or the candidate moves on. Some organisations operate 'top grading' policies in their pursuit of excellence, where only certain fixed percentages of employees in each function can achieve high performing annual assessments, with the remainder risking termination or sideways moves. It must be tough for these employees not to become divisive and look out for themselves rather than the collective team.

Should we really be in the business of continual improvement, inflating standards in all that we do? Kaizen philosophies have permeated into the workplace across the Globe. It may have been good for Japanese businesses in terms of rebuilding their quality standards at the end of the Second World War but isn't there a danger of change, in the guise of improvement, for change sake? Isn't there a risk of trying to fix and upgrade something in business that's not really broken? Shouldn't we just lighten up a bit, relax and reflect on our excellent achievements just a little longer. Isn't 'just enough' good enough? Shouldn't we allow teams to have some breathing space to flourish and look towards different challenges that are broader rather than upwardly linear?

Sure, I enjoy high standards and strive for excellence but once you, your team or your business has raised its game and is playing at a higher level, why not enjoy that state of excellence, create some stability, and be confident carrying a bit of fat for a change?

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