



WHAT ARE YOU STRIVING FOR?

BY KENNETH WALKER

The Problem With Perfection

Have you ever thought about what motivates you to do what you do? What stirs deep inside you? What makes you show up every day and work as hard as you do? Whatever it is, it's driving you toward something. So here's the question: What are you striving for?

We're all striving for something in life. Many of us might say we're striving to provide for our families, to support our employees and community, or maybe something different altogether. But I think it runs deeper than that. I think many of us are striving for *perfection*—whether we admit it or not. Perfection has become the gold standard in our culture. And I couldn't disagree with this standard more.

“Unlike perfection, which is a fixed point that can never be surpassed, excellence isn't static. It can always be improved upon.”

Of course, the root word of “perfection” is “perfect,” which implies something that can't be improved upon. Perfection has been pushed on us from every angle. Media of all types advertise a perfect body, a perfect mind, a perfect car, a perfect life. And just when you think you've achieved it, you feel the same emptiness you felt before—the same feeling that originally set you on the quest for (you guessed it) perfection. That's why I believe perfection is unattainable.

But if you're not going to strive for perfection, what should you work toward instead?

How about excellence?

After all, excellence can be pursued by everyone at any time. And unlike perfection, which is a fixed point that can never be surpassed, excellence isn't static. It can always be improved upon. There's always more to do.

That said, if we want to pursue excellence in our businesses, we need to understand three things: Excellence is a journey, not a destination; excellence must be modeled from the top down; and excellence requires a clear vision to be sustained. Let's take a deep dive into each of these concepts now.

"EXCELLENCE ISN'T ABOUT ARRIVING.

Excellence Is a Journey

The quest for excellence will cost you time and energy for sure, and potentially money. It won't be found easily. It's like an incredibly challenging but amazing hiking trail up a beautiful mountain that just keeps going. Every time you round a corner, you see an even more amazing view, and you think, "Wow! How can it get any better than this?" But it does. In your search for excellence, you'll think you've made it to the top—and then you'll realize you can do better. So you keep going.

That's the point of excellence. It's not supposed to be a destination where you build your house. It's more like a campsite. When you first reach it, you should take a break and enjoy it. But when you realize there's more to improve upon, you pack up your things and keep going. Because it gets better.

So what does this journey look like in day-to-day business? For salespeople, this could be as simple as figuring out how to decrease the time it takes to respond to a customer inquiry, or as tedious as continually researching new products and expanding their knowledge base so they can be better prepared to serve the next customer. For owners or managers, this might look like developing or improving SOPs to simplify or clarify a process for your team members, or updating the company's computers and systems. This improves the team's efficiency and accuracy—and ultimately, customer satisfaction. Maybe it's taking a step back and letting team members take the reins on a certain task and make it their own. This develops responsibility and authority.

The point is this: Excellence isn't about arriving. It's about moving. And once you're on the trail yourself, you can start thinking about how to bring your team along.

Excellence Must Be Modeled

But how do we get our team members to join us on this journey? The quest for excellence starts with the owner, then the managers, and only then the rest of the team. If it's not exemplified at the very top, forget about it ever making it to the rest of the team. Excellence is modeled, not forced. This means it's the duty of owners to start the journey—improving themselves before they start improving their teams. Once they see you striving for excellence, then you can invite them along.

One practical way to instill excellence in your team is through required reading lists. I know—this sounds horrible to some people. I'll even confess that reading is not at the top of my list of things I love to do. However, many multi-million-dollar companies, such as Ramsey Solutions, believe in required reading lists for their team members. The United States Army Officer Corps is another organization that stresses reading. Many of our country's greatest military leaders were readers before they were leaders, and most of them had assigned reading lists for their junior officers. So why don't we, as leaders of our industry, assign reading lists to our junior leaders? *EntreLeadership* by Dave Ramsey, *The E-Myth Revisited* by Michael Gerber, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John Maxwell, and *How to Lead When You're Not in Charge* by Clay Scroggins are all books I've read and would suggest as a great place to start.

So start by reading these books and others like them yourself, then pass out copies to your team. Because at the end of the day, your team will follow what you model—not what you mandate.

IT'S ABOUT MOVING."

Excellence Requires Vision

Now, here's a word of caution before you go marching off on your journey to excellence: You have to be ready for the long haul. Remember, this is a journey—not a destination. You must keep going and not become too comfortable when taking a break. Too often, we start with great intentions but then get distracted and slow down—and eventually, we're no longer moving at all. Before we know it, we're either stuck or lost, and it's all because we got complacent. If you want to avoid this pitfall, you'd better have a vision.

One of the best ways to strive for excellence is to cast a clear vision. I believe this is one of the most overlooked pieces of an organization's foundation. Good team members have been known to leave organizations because of a lack of vision. A wise man once said, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." A clear vision gives your team members a general direction of where they're supposed to be going over the course of a journey—in this case, the business two to five years down the road. Knowing where they're supposed to end up allows team members to work independently from one another but move in the same direction to benefit the business.

The bottom line? Most businesses don't have a clear vision. Having one doesn't just keep your team on the trail—it puts you ahead of most of your competition before you've even started climbing.

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The First Step

There are an infinite number of ways you can strive for excellence within your business. The most important thing is to just take the first step. Find an area that needs improvement and strive to make it excellent, no matter how small it may be. Once you start, you'll find bigger and better ways to do it next time. The more outward-facing the improvement is, the better it will be for your business. When striving for excellence is targeted at making the experience better for the consumer, it can end up drastically improving your business—not only the perception of it, but the culture of it as well. And when the culture of your business starts moving toward excellence, you're on track for true success.

So start *somewhere* and start *now*—then keep climbing.

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