

The Excellence Dividend: 28 Short Takes

1. Ask a general. Or an Admiral. Or a football coach. Or a police chief or symphony conductor. **TRAINING IS INVESTMENT #1.** Alas, the average business boss sees training as an expense rather than an investment. **DUMB.** (“Train ’em and they’ll leave.” **DUMBER.**)
2. Navy captain Mike Abrashoff called it ... “**AGGRESSIVE**” LISTENING. A leading business coach called it “**FIERCE**” LISTENING. I insist that Listening Excellence should be an enterprise’s Core Value #1. (And listening TRAINING requisite for one and all.)
3. Sergeants run the Army. Chiefs run the Navy. **FRONT-LINE LEADERS TAKEN AS A WHOLE ARE AN ORGANIZATION’S ASSET #1.** They are the culture carriers—or not. They are the chief determinants of productivity, retention, quality, and customer service. (Act accordingly.)
4. I call it “**WTTMSW**”: Whoever Tries The Most Stuff Wins. WTTMSW is Key #1 to INNOVATION success. The longer version: **WTTMS(ASTMSUTF)W.** Got it? Whoever Tries The Most Stuff (*And Screws The Most Stuff Up The Fastest*) Wins. An ironclad guarantee goes with this idea!
5. It’s first on my leadership success traits list: **MBWA.** Managing By Wandering Around. Starbucks chief Howard Schultz visits 25 shops ... **EACH WEEK.** Being in touch with the work and the workers where the work is done is a must—and, alas, often goes by the wayside on busy day after busy day. My command: **DOYOURMBWAEVERYDAMNDAY.**
6. Customer service guru John DiJulius Says, “Your customers will never be any happier than your people.” Richard Branson says, “Business has to give people enriching, rewarding lives, or it’s not worth doing.” I’ve been shouting “**PEOPLE (REALLY) FIRST**” for 35 years while traveling to 63 countries and giving approximately 3,000 speeches. But, still, too few listen. Help me!! **PUT PEOPLE (REALLY) FIRST!!** (Hint: It pays off. **BIG TIME.**)
7. The customer comes second: **IF YOU WANT TO “WOW” THE CUSTOMER, FIRST YOU MUST “WOW” THOSE WHO WOW THE CUSTOMER. (Q.E.D.)**
8. “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” per MIT’s Ed Schein. (And me.) Lou Gerstner turned around IBM. He said he came to the job with a “strategy and metrics bias.” “Yet I came to see in my time at IBM that culture isn’t just one aspect of the game—it *is* the game.” CEO Job #1: Development and maintenance of the corporate culture, “24/7.”
9. For the doctor, the best source of information about the patient’s problem is ... the patient. But a study showed that on average the doc interrupts the patient after ... **18 SECONDS.** So, boss, are *you* an “**18-SECOND INTERRUPTER**”? You may say “no,” but, sorry, I’m not sure I believe you—and the research is on my side.
10. **14 = 14.** Fourteen people report to you. Axiom: **EACH OF THE 14 IS RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER 13.** Hence: You need 14 (very) different communication and development strategies. (Disagree? Ask a successful basketball coach or a superior 2nd-grade teacher.)
11. Boards of Directors with gender balance have profits 56% above those that don’t. *New York Times*: “Research [by McKinsey & Co.] suggests that to succeed, start by promoting women.” A *Harvard Business Review* article reports that women score higher on 12 of 16 key leadership traits. Also: Women are better ... salespersons, negotiators, investors. Don’t fire all the men—but **ZERO** excuse for less than gender balance.

EXCELLENCE is ... the next email! Excellence is manifest far more in “the (one minute at a time) little stuff” than in the big stuff. The care and quality of the next and the next and the next email are the very best indicators of your Commitment to Excellence.

EXCELLENCE is *not* a “soaring aspiration,” *not* a mountain to climb. **EXCELLENCE** is ... **THE NEXT FIVE MINUTES**. Or it is nothing at all. **EXCELLENCE** is the next chance three-minute conversation in the hall, the two minutes it takes to hand write a “thank you” note for a “little thing,” briefly stopping by, on the way out at the end of the day, the youngster’s cubicle for a five-minute encouragement session.

“**MEETING EXCELLENCE**” is not an oxymoron. *Like it or not, boss, meetings are what you do*. Every meeting that does not stir the imagination **AND** curiosity of attendees **AND** increase bonding **AND** engagement is a P.L.E.O./Permanently Lost Excellence Opportunity.

10 August 2011 was “D-Day: **DESIGN DAY**, the day the market capitalization of Apple surpassed that of Exxon Mobil. No longer could anyone discount the role of Great Design. Great design? Nest’s founder says it’s the screws used to wall-mount his devices: “These aren’t just screws. They’re better screws, epic screws, screws with, dare I say it, deeper meaning.” The opportunity for Great Design resides in everything every one of us does.

An *obsession* with Listening is ... the ultimate mark of **RESPECT**. The heart and soul of **ENGAGEMENT** and **THOUGHTFULNESS**. The basis for **COLLABORATION** and **COMMUNITY**. A developable **INDIVIDUAL SKILL**. The key to **MAKING THE SALE**. The key to **KEEPING THE CUSTOMER’S BUSINESS**. Highly **PROFITABLE!** The bedrock of a Commitment to **EXCELLENCE**.

Arguably the eight most important words a leader can utter: “**THANK YOU.**” “**I’M SORRY.**” “**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**”

Doug Conant was the CEO of Campbell Soup. During his ten years at the helm he penned 30,000 “Thank You” notes, about a dozen per workday. We all want (are desperate for) acknowledgement. Some have called it the greatest of human needs. The best manifestation thereof: “Thank you!” What’s your “thank you note count” this week?

Retail banks are closing branches and tossing people out on the street. The UK’s Metro Bank is the exception. Founder Vernon Hill wants customers *in* his beautifully appointed branches where he showers them (and their pets!!) with attention, 7-days a week. His mantra: “Are you going to cost cut your way to prosperity? Or are you going to spend your way to prosperity?” “Over-invest in our people, over-invest in our facilities.” “Cost cutting is a death spiral. Our whole story is growing revenue.” Profitability is superb—and thousands of good jobs have been created.

Little beats big. It’s the little kindnesses we remember for years. Two quotes: “Courtesies of a small and trivial character are the ones which strike deepest in the grateful and appreciating heart.”—Henry Clay “Let’s not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives.” —Vincent Van Gogh. The key to employee satisfaction and customer happiness are those little things. Believe it!

I was at dinner with one of the USA’s most prominent investment bankers. At one point he turned to me and said, “What do you think is the number one failing of CEOs?” I mumbled something, and he replied, “**THEY DON’T READ ENOUGH.**” These are crazy times. Studying and reading—and reading some more--may indeed be CEO (and your) Success Strategy #1.

Most powerful success tool? Maybe, just maybe: **LUNCH**. About 250 workday opportunities per year. Opportunities to get to know people in other business functions, which can have a huge impact on getting things done. Opportunities to meet interesting folks in other businesses who look at the world through a different lens than we do—truly an imperative in these crazy times. I say learn, learn, learn, grow, grow, grow—put an end to unproductive lunches!

The business of leadership is people. The people business is first and foremost helping people grow to do today's work better and to prepare for a madcap tomorrow. Movie director Robert Altman nailed it when he spoke these words, "The role of the Director is to create a space where the actors and actresses can become more than they have ever been before, more than they've dreamed of being." Make that your Gold Standard for all of your team members!

Dov Frohman is a wildly successful tech executive. He insists that a leader should keep 50% of his or her time unscheduled. Sounds nigh on impossible. But it's surely true that overscheduling is the bane of most leaders' existence. Thoughtfulness goes down the drain. Rudeness becomes the norm and civility suffers. Creativity tanks. Ability to react to a crisis is impaired. So give something like Frohman's Commandment a try—how about 25% unscheduled? DAMN IT.

Southwest Airlines' chief laid out the company's hiring criteria: "We look for listening, caring, smiling, saying 'Thank you,' being warm." (True for pilots and mechanics as much as customer-facing staff.) A pharmaceuticals CEO says his key to maintaining a productive culture is only hiring "nice people" (including Ph.D. scientists). A wildly successful football coach says character rather than physical traits drives his recruiting decisions. Hiring that emphasizes the so-called "soft" factors makes a staggering contribution to short- and long-term success. (Even Google learned that.)

AI in the next few years might wipe out as many as 50% of white-collar jobs according to an Oxford study. Hence what I call Corporate Mandate #1: **YOUR PRINCIPAL MORAL OBLIGATION AS A LEADER IS TO DEVELOP THE SKILLSET OF EVERY ONE OF THE PEOPLE IN YOUR CHARGE TO THE MAXIMUM EXTENT OF YOUR ABILITIES AND CONSISTENT WITH THEIR "REVOLUTIONARY" NEEDS IN THE YEARS AHEAD.** (Bonus: This is also the #1 profit maximization strategy!)

Old people get short shrift in the marketplace. STUPID. Old people have the money—effectively ALL the money. AND, these days, years and years left to spend it; one guru says: "At 50, only half your adult life is over." Given the baby boomer bulge, there are a ridiculously large number of old people around—over 100 million in the USA alone. Virtually none of marketing budgets are aimed at the oldies. REALLY REALLY STUPID. (FYI: Older women in the USA will inherit \$22 TRILLION in the next few years.)

\$28 TRILLION = 2X (C + I). The women's market worldwide is \$28T, more than twice as much as China and India combined. Women buy ... EVERYTHING. Yet too few companies are acting accordingly. The "trick" is not "marketing to women;" the "trick" is Wholesale Enterprise Strategic Re-alignment to take advantage of this staggering large market. (Query: Is your top management team at least half female?)