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The Speed Trap: When Taking Your Time (Really) Matters

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“Steve and Jony would discuss corners for hours and hours.”

—Laurene Powell Jobs

“Fierce conversations often do take time. The problem is, anything else takes longer.”—Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*

My first book, *In Search of Excellence* can be summarized in six words:

Hard is soft. Soft is hard.

My next sixteen books can be summarized in six words:

Hard is soft. Soft is hard.

My eighteenth book, just out, *The Excellence Dividend*, can be summarized in six words:

Hard is soft. Soft is hard.

The translation is simple, though the execution is apparently not so simple, or perhaps more people would have bought in:

“Hard” (the plans, the numbers, the org charts) is “soft.” Plans are more often than not fantasies, numbers are readily manipulated—case in point, super-“quants,” ratings-agency geniuses, and others of their ilk cleverly packaged and gave high safety scores to “derivatives” (and derivatives of derivatives and ...) consisting of

*This paper has been, as you will see, inspired by *The Excellence Dividend: Meeting the Tech Tide with Work That Wows and Jobs That Last*.

valueless mortgages—thus spurring the multi-trillion-dollar financial crash of 2007-2008++. And org charts: in practice, they have little to do with how things actually get done.

“Soft” (people, relationships, organizational culture) is “hard.” You get things done, for example, on the basis of your patiently developed network of relationships. You imbed a captivating and effective culture by living and reinforcing “the way we do things around here” day after day after day, in fact hour after hour after hour—forever. And the focus on people? Here’s the thing, an organization is nothing more and nothing less than “people (our folks) serving people (our customers and communities).” And for the leader, who is fulltime in the people business, it’s all about people (leaders) serving people (our folks) serving people (customers and communities).

Soft is hard. I am taken by this summary, courtesy former Medtronic CEO Bill George: *“The capacity to develop close and enduring relationships is the mark of a leader. Unfortunately, many leaders of major companies believe their job is to create the strategy, organization structure and organizational processes—then they just delegate the work to be done, remaining aloof from the people doing the work.”*

All the above amounts to the prelude to this paper. It is 2018. Things are crazy out there and in here, *wherever* “out there” or “in here” may be. Technology is evolving by the day—and dire estimates of worker displacement are commonplace. And evolving disruption is piled atop disruption—you might say we all suffer from “disruptionitis.” New competitors with radical strategies are arriving at a record pace. The “millennials” on our payroll want to take over the world during their first week on the job. Etc.

We must adapt ... fast. Or, rather:

Fast.

Faster.

Faster still.

Regardless of the task at hand, then, the watchword 2018 is therefore simple:

SPEED.

SPEED IS THE KEY TO PERSONAL SUCCESS.

SPEED IS THE KEY TO ENTERPRISE SUCCESS.

SPEED IS KEY TO LIFE ITSELF.

Or is it?

My view is that speed-for-speed's-sake is about the most counterproductive approach imaginable. (*I use "counterproductive" because it's impolite to use "stupid"—which is what I really believe.)*

While we must indeed evolve and experiment rapidly, the process of getting things done (especially radical-ish things that upset apple carts) is all about people. And working with people to get those interesting things done effectively, well, takes time, in fact lots of time. (And it takes just as much bloody time if you are "Agile certified" as it does if you have not been so blessed.)

(Perhaps you can now better understand why I started this paper—"speed trap"—with a discussion of "Hard is soft. Soft is hard." *Put simply, you cannot speed up the so-called "soft stuff"—to try and do so is a design for disaster.* Which is to say it more often than not causes more harm than good. E.g., cross-functional coordination, the be all and end all of getting complex tasks done, slows down to a snail's pace or goes into reverse if the people in the various functions do not have a degree of collegueship that can only be accomplished over time—and via many a lunch. [You'd/you'll see in *The Excellence Dividend* that I think lunch can cure almost any ill.]

THE SPEED TRAP

Below is a partial list of *strategic* activities—that underpin both personal and organizational success—which cannot be accomplished in a flash:

- ***BUILDING/MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS** ... take time.
- ***RECRUITING ALLIES TO YOUR CAUSE** ... takes time.
- ***LUNCH** ... takes time.
- ***BUILDING/MAINTAINING A HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE** ... takes time.
- ***READING/STUDYING** ... take time.
- ***WAITING (per se)** ... takes time.
- ***FIERCE/AGGRESSIVE LISTENING** ... takes (lots of!) time.
- ***PRACTICE & PREP FOR ANYTHING & EVERYTHING** ... takes time.
- ***MBWA/MANAGING BY WANDERING AROUND** ... takes time.

- ***SLACK IN YOUR SCHEDULE ... takes time.**
- ***HIRING/EVALUATING/PROMOTING ... take time.**
- ***THOUGHTFULNESS/INSTINCTIVE SMALL GESTURES (SMALL>>BIG) ... take time.**
- ***EXTREME HUMANIZATION/RADICAL HUMANIZATION ... takes time.**
- ***GAMECHANGING DESIGN (spending “hours and hours discussing corners”) ... takes time.**
- ***YOUR NEXT EMAIL ... takes time.**
- ***“THE LAST 1%” OF ANY TASK OR PROJECT ... takes time.**
- ***E-X-C-E-L-L-E-N-C-E ... takes time.**

At the end of the day (and the list), you can say with certainty:

ALL OF THE SO-CALLED “SOFT STUFF” (THAT IS THE REAL “HARD STUFF”) ... takes time.

Let’s briefly examine each item on the list:

BUILDING/MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

“Personal relationships are the fertile soil from which all advancement, all success, all achievement in real life grow.” —Ben Stein, investment/economics guru

Years ago, a top-of-the-heap AT&T systems salesperson said to me, “The great salespersons pay little or no attention to shifting quarterly or even annual incentive programs. They know that their bread and butter is enduring, rock solid client relationships built on trust. And you don’t want to lose that trust by selling the client something he doesn’t need just because sales is pushing it this quarter.”

Selling is based on relationships. Getting things done in your organization is based on relationships—in particular the breadth of your (ever-so-patiently developed) network throughout the company, in every function, and at every level from top to bottom. (Time and again it's the folks who have a wide and deep network three levels "down" in the organization who perform miracles, seemingly without raising a sweat.) And the strength and ubiquity and reliability of that network is a function of time invested. Lunches. A helping hand with a problem. A kudo for a little task well done. And a dozen dozen other things. It's funny really. Some marvel that getting even complex things done seems "so damned easy for Mary (or Mark)." So damned "easy" because of a long-term, nonstop, patient effort to extend and maintain her or his network throughout the entire organization.

Could I say more? Of course. A library full of books has been written on the topic. But I'll leave it at this:

Whoever invests the most clock time on relationship building and develops the broadest and deepest network wins.

Bottom bottom line: Relationships ... **TAKE TIME.**

My Relationships Riff: Google Gets a B-i-g Surprise!

I can honestly say that this staggered me. It is, of course, what I have been saying/screaming for a long long (long) time. But to see it with the authority of a Google "Big Data" analysis behind it is, yes, staggering.

To wit, from Valerie Strauss, "The surprising thing Google learned about its employees—and what it means for today's students" (*Washington Post*, 20 December 2017):

"Project Oxygen [data from founding in 1998 to 2013] shocked everyone by concluding that, among the eight most important qualities of Google's top employees, STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics] expertise comes in dead last. The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others' different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas. Those traits sound more like what one gains as an English or theater major than as a programmer. ...

"Project Aristotle [2017] further supports the importance of soft skills even in high-tech environments. Project Aristotle analyzes data on inventive and productive teams. Google takes pride in its A-teams, assembled with top scientists, each with

the most specialized knowledge and able to throw down one cutting-edge idea after another. Its data analysis revealed, however, that the company's most important and productive ideas come from B-teams comprised of employees that don't always have to be the smartest people in the room. Project Aristotle shows that that the best teams at Google exhibit a range of soft skills: equality, generosity, curiosity toward the ideas of your teammates, empathy and emotional intelligence. And topping the list: emotional safety. No bullying. ..."

RECRUITING ALLIES TO YOUR CAUSE

In the leadership chapter in *The Excellence Dividend* I suggest (insist, really) that when it comes to getting interesting things of consequence done, literally **80%** of your time should be spent recruiting and developing allies. (Yes, 8-0, damnit.) You are aiming to accomplish something which flies in the face of current practice. You have "enemies" whose applecart you will upset. Even some senior enemies. My line: *Only idiots spend time on enemies.*

Your goal is not to go head-on-head with those who disagree with you (and who are frequently senior to you). *Your goal is to patiently surround the buggers with your merry band of accomplished believers.* Believers you have dug out of the far corners of the organization and who have hopped on board with relish. Believers who have run experiments on the new approach and improved and improved the new way of doing things. How do you get such a pirate band together? Well, it takes time, 80% of your time in my view. You recruit those allies by asking around, by asking to go out for a cup of coffee, whatever. (And whatever and whatever.)

Bottom line: Ally discovery and development (and maintenance!) ... **TAKES**
(OODLES AND OODLES OF) **TIME.**

(What's the alternative?
As I see it: There is none!)

(It would appear, even three decades later, that I, a pretty junior soul, made a non-trivial impact on Mighty McKinsey—*In Search of Excellence* was the public face of the shift, but only part of the story. *In Search* in fact came five years into the project—and during those five years the great majority of my time was spent developing allies, often from the "boondocks," and often quite junior, from literally all around the world. "Painstaking," frequent-flying effort would be gross understatement.)

My Allies Obsession Riff

**LOSERS ... focus on (waste inordinate amounts of time/mental energy on) enemies.
WINNERS ... ignore enemies, never take the bait, and focus on allies, allies, and more allies.**

**LOSERS ... play defense and obsess on “removing roadblocks.”
WINNERS ... play offense, ignore roadblocks, and focus with allies on “small wins” that are positive demos of the “new way.”**

**LOSERS ... make enemies.
WINNERS ... make friends.**

**LOSERS ... focus on negatives.
WINNERS ... focus on positives.**

**LOSERS ... stick out like a sore thumb, attract flies, and are often in a sour mood and not much fun to be around.
WINNERS ... work via allies, develop a band-of-brothers-and-sisters, give full credit to those allies and fashion a personal invisibility cloak.**

**LOSERS ... favor brute force and relish organizational bloodshed.
WINNERS ... surround naysayers with allies, positivity, and small-wins-by-the-bushel.**

There is, of course, a Great Paradox imbedded in this paper. If you do spend the suggested time and effort on, say, ally development and maintenance—then projects will be speeded up by, maybe even dramatically. You could say the Great Paradox goes like this: TO SPEED UP, SLOW DOWN.

LUNCH

I am a nut about what I call XFX ... Cross-Functional Excellence. The logic is simple. Nine out of ten business problems—execution screwups of all flavors (small and large), new-product delays, etc.—are caused by or exacerbated by cross-functional co-ordination and co-operation issues.

So if cross-functional shortfalls are so strategically important, what’s the answer? Often companies turn to software solutions—e.g., ERP/Enterprise Resource Planning software, which usually costs a pretty penny, and rarely meets the lofty expectations associated with all those once-pretty pennies.

I have another answer:

LUNCH.

(I'm not kidding.)

XFX is 90 percent about social issues. And lunch can fix that. You are Richard or Mary, in the purchasing department. Most of your problems are, or are perceived to be, caused by “the damned accountants.” So you fume and fuss about them to anybody and everybody. But here’s an alternative, Ask Marie or David in accounting out to lunch. My bet is that Marie or David is a pretty good soul. I’ll go further, and guess that in 50 percent of cases, you discover over lunch that you both have daughters in the 7th grade at the same local school—maybe they both even play soccer. Odds are sky high that you’ll emerge from lunch as more or less pals, laughing about your misperceptions of one another. Don’t get me wrong: You will still behave as the consummate purchasing professional and she or he will still behave as the consummate accounting professional. But when issues arise, or before they arise, you will be working together as colleagues as never before.

I call it:

THE SACRED 220 ABs. (ABs being “at bats.”)

That is, there are about 220 workday lunches a year. And that translates into 220 opportunities to meet somebody new (from, say, another function) and learn something new. The 220 “ABs” are the single best learning-/networking-/friction-reducing-opportunities that exist.

I could go on—and do in *The Excellence Dividend*—about “lunch power” (e.g., I urge you to keep records and notes on your lunching to remind yourself of the importance thereof).

The point *here*: Lunch/lunches ... **TAKE TIME**

My XFX Riff

Lunch is Key #1 to achieving cross-functional excellence. But there’s obviously more—from the all-important category of social friction-reducers and excellence enablers. Hence my list (from the book again) of “social accelerators”:

- 1. EVERYONE’S JOB #1:** Make friends in other functions!
- 2. “Do lunch”** with people in other functions! Frequently!
- 3. Religiously** invite counterparts in other functions to your team meetings and actively include them in your discussions. Ask them to present “cool stuff” from “their world” to your group. (Useful. Mark of respect.)
- 4. Proactively** seek examples of “tiny” acts of “XFX” to acknowledge—privately and publicly.

5. Present counterparts in other functions awards for service to your group. Tiny awards at least weekly; and an “Annual All-Star Supporters Banquet.”
6. When someone in another function asks for assistance, respond with more alacrity than you would if it were the person in the cubicle next to yours—or even more than you would for a key external customer.
7. DO NOT BAD MOUTH ... “the damned accountants,” “the bloody HR guy.” Never. (Never = Never.)
8. Establish “adhocracy” as S.O.P. Small XF teams should be formed on the spot to deal with an urgent issue.
9. Within days of coming aboard, the newbie should be “running” some bit of a bit of a bit project, working with people from other functions—hence, “all this,” working together, becomes as natural as breathing.
10. Work proactively to give as large as possible numbers of people temporary assignments in other functions—especially Finance. (“Get to know the ‘numbers people’”—perhaps Career Advice Tip #1.)
11. “Get ’em out with the customer.” Give everyone more or less regular, physical “customer-facing experiences”—such experiences are peerless motivators; one gets to literally see the impact of one’s work.
12. Everyone, starting with the receptionist, should have a “XF rating” component in their evaluation. “XFX Performance” should be among the Top 3 items in *all* managerial evaluations and promotion decisions.
13. Every unit should be formally evaluated by other functions concerning its usefulness and effectiveness and value-added to the enterprise as a whole.
14. Demand sustained XF experience for, especially, senior jobs. For example, the U.S. military requires all would-be generals and admirals to have served a full tour of duty in a job whose only goals were cross-functional achievements.
15. *Excellence!* There is a sublime ... “State of XF Excellence.” Talk it up constantly. Pursue it. Aspire to nothing less.

And, again ... “all this” takes time!

BUILDING/MAINTAINING A HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE

*“If I could have chosen not to tackle the IBM culture head-on, I probably wouldn’t have. My bias coming in was toward strategy, analysis and measurement. In comparison, changing the attitude and behaviors of hundreds of thousands of people is very, very hard. Yet I came to see in my time at IBM that culture isn’t just one aspect of the game—it is the game.” —Lou Gerstner, *Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance? Inside IBM’s Historic Turnaround**

IBM, in the seventies and early eighties, was the iconic American company—Bob Waterman and I treated them as such in *In Search of Excellence*. But as the eighties wound down, the company became flabby, missed many opportunities—and ended up in severe trouble. In a last gasp effort to return the firm to its glory, IBM’s board called in Lou Gerstner in 1993 to fix the mess. And fix it he did. At the end of his nine-year stint, IBM was once again riding high. And the secret; a painstaking effort to deal directly with IBM’s culture.

Hence and herewith my uncompromising “CEO’s First Commandment”:

CEO Job #1 is setting—and micro-nourishing, one day, one hour, one minute at a time—an effective people-truly-first, innovate-or-die, Excellence-or-bust corporate culture.

The key words in my declaration are ...

“... one day, one hour, one minute at a time”

Culture is the chief’s obsession or it’s pretty much nothing at all.

Culture is shaped by the casual comment the boss makes to the receptionist as she walks through the door in the morning.

Culture is shaped by three casual comments—no more than thirty seconds each—that the boss makes as she walks the 25 yards from the receptionist’s desk to her office.

Culture is shaped (dramatically) by the tone and quality and care put into the six emails the boss responds to in the fifteen minutes after she gets to her desk.

Culture is shaped by every twitch and blink and comment the boss makes at the “morning meeting.”

The creation and maintenance of an effective culture ... **TAKES TIME.**

READ/STUDY

“In my whole life, I have known no wise people (over a broad subject matter area) who didn’t read all the time—none. ZERO. You’d be amazed at how much Warren [Buffett] reads—and how much I read.”—Charlie Munger

Indeed there is a lot, and a lot new, going on. The pace is inarguably unprecedented. How can you keep up? Well you probably can't, at least not entirely. Sure, if you're a big boss, you'll hire people with contemporary skills. But that's not enough either. *You* need at least to be conversant with what's coming down the pike. There is only one surefire way as far as I'm concerned: *Become a devoted, determined, obsessive student!* And the nature of that studenthood ...

At a social dinner, I sat next to a Washington-based investment-banking superstar. The conversation was a casual one. This and that. Out of the blue, my dinner companion said, "Do you know what's the number one failing of CEOs?" I made a smart-aleck response along the lines of, "Well, I can think of ten major failings, but, no, clue me in on #1." To which he responded: "*They don't read enough.*" The response, frankly, caught me completely off guard. And if you need more of the same, here's confirmation: Re-read the opening quote from Berkshire Hathaway's number two, Charlie Munger: "In my whole life, I have known no wise people (over a broad subject matter area) who didn't read all the time—none. ZERO. ..."

In 2018, reading and reading and studying and studying—by hook *and* by crook, age 22 (just out of university or trade school) *and* at age 75 (me), computer coder or appliance repairman—is imperative. PERIOD. And, uh, reading and reading and studying and studying ... take time and cannot be rushed.

(About 36 months ago I decided the tech world had passed me by. I dramatically cut back my schedule and spent the best part of a year with my head in the books, dozens and dozens and more dozens of books. No, I am hardly a pro in the areas I examined—but I have reached the point where I can have an intelligent and informative conversation with even those at the top of the field. My reading "approach": BRUTE FORCE.)

My (and yours, I hope) reading/studying regimen ... **TAKES TIME.**

WAIT

Rarely does a single volume flip my worldview upside down. But his one did: *Wait, The Art and Science of Delay*, by Frank Partnoy. Mr. Partnoy, in a thoroughly researched book, persuasively argues that to slow-down-and-think-about-it (any "it") is the very definition of what it means to be human. (Ponder that statement, "what it means to be human")

Consider/from *Wait*:

“Thinking about the role of delay is a profound and fundamental part of being human. ... The amount of time we take to reflect on decisions will define who we are. Is our mission simply to be another animal, or are we here for something more?”

“Life might be a race against time, but it is enriched when we rise above our instincts and stop the clock to process and understand what we are doing and why.”

“... computer programmer, investor, writer, painter Paul Graham wrote, ‘The most impressive people I know are all terrible procrastinators.’” (There is an entire chapter in *Wait*, Chapter 10, titled “At Last, Procrastination.”) (Incidentally, the last chapter, Chapter 12, is titled “Get Off the Clock.”)

No commandments from me will be forthcoming. I am simply suggesting that you take a deep breath (yes, that’s permissible in 2018) and reflect on this idea—and please consider reading Mr. Partnoy’s book.

Quite a mouthful: *To delay is what makes us human.*

And, yes, per the theme of this paper, procrastination/pauses to reflect ...
TAKE TIME.

FIERCE/AGGRESSIVE LISTENING

“The best way to persuade someone is with your ears, by listening to them.” —former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk (In my massive collection of quotes, this is on my Top 5 list.)

“If you don’t listen, you don’t sell anything.”
—Carolyn Marland, advertising executive

“The key to every one of our [eight] leadership attributes was the vital importance of a leader’s ability to listen.”

—Richard Branson (Branson is serious about listening: Fully ... **ONE THIRD/PART ONE/100+ PAGES** ... of his most recent book, *The Virgin Way: How to Listen, Learn, Laugh, and Lead*, is devoted to listening per se)

And recall one of the two epigraphs to this paper:

“Fierce conversations often do take time. The problem is, anything else takes longer.” —Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*

I singled Listening per se out as the topic of a separate chapter in *The Excellence Dividend*. I thought it was that important. (I almost made it Chapter ONE.) Then I went a step further and suggested that listening per se should be no less than ...

Enterprise Core Value #1:

“We are Effective Listeners—we treat Listening EXCELLENCE as the Centerpiece of our Commitment to Respect and Engagement and Community and Growth.”

Here’s my sales pitch: An *obsession* with Listening is

... the **Ultimate Mark of Respect.**

... the heart and soul of Engagement and Thoughtfulness.

... the basis for Collaboration and Partnership and Community.

... a Developable Individual Skill. (Though women are, in general, notably better at it than men.)

... the core of effective Cross-functional Communication.

(Which is in turn Attribute #1 of organization effectiveness.)

... the key to Making the Sale.

... the key to Keeping the Customer’s Business.

... the linchpin of Memorable Service.

... the core of taking Diverse Opinions aboard.

... the ticket to profitability. (The “R.O.I.” from listening is arguably [inarguably?] higher than from any other single activity.)

... the bedrock that underpins a Commitment to **EXCELLENCE.**

This list of benefits of an obsession with listening may read like a laundry list dashed off in a flash. But I would urge you to go through the items one at a time—and draw your own conclusions: “Ultimate mark of respect? Hmmm. Well ... OF COURSE.”

“Key to making the sale? Hmmm. Well ... OF COURSE.” “Linchpin of memorable service? Hmmm. Well ... OF COURSE.” And so on.

And per this paper, listening, really listening, “fierce” listening as author Susan Scott puts it, “aggressive listening” according to top-of-the-heap Navy ship captain Mike Abrashoff ... **TAKES TIME!**

**“Aggressive Listening”/Captain Mike Abrashoff/
*It’s Your Ship: Management Techniques from
the Best Damn Ship in the Navy.***

“My education in leadership began in Washington when I was an assistant to Defense Secretary William Perry. He was universally loved and admired by heads of state ... and our own and allied troops. A lot of that was because of the way he listened. Each person who talked to him had his complete, undivided attention. Everyone blossomed in his presence, because he was so respectful, and I realized I wanted to affect people the same way.

“Perry became my role model but that was not enough. Something bigger had to happen, and it did. *It was painful to realize how often I just pretended to hear people. How many times had I barely glanced up from my work when a subordinate came into my office? I wasn’t paying attention; I was marking time until it was my turn to give orders.* That revelation led me to a new personal goal. I vowed to treat every encounter with every person on USS Benfold [Abrashoff’s award-winning ship] as the most important thing at that moment. It wasn’t easy, but my crew’s enthusiasm and ideas kept me going.

“It didn’t take me long to realize that my young crew was smart, talented and full of good ideas that usually came to nothing because no one in charge had ever listened to them. ...

“I decided that my job was to listen aggressively.”

**PRACTICE & PREP FOR ANYTHING
& EVERYTHING**

Basketball’s John Wooden may have been the best coach of anything, ever. He gave us a lot of well-known sayings, but this one is perhaps my favorite: ***“I was never much of a game coach, but I was a pretty good practice coach.”*** Then there’s Winston Churchill’s rule of thumb: one hour of preparation for one minute of a speech. (And mine: two weeks of intense work to get ready for a 45-

minute presentation—yes, still, after about 3,000 such presentations.) There are things of marginal importance (doing the dishes?) that can be cut short in my experience, but things that matter require you, first, to win the Great Preparation Game. I’ve long said that among speakers in my world, many are smarter than I am, but none can out-prepare me. Perhaps arrogant, but outsiders say it’s pretty close to the truth.

(In the Leadership chapter of *The Excellence Dividend*, I suggest that the boss should strive for excellence in every, yes, *meeting*. And secret #1 of Meeting Excellence? No surprise: *preparation*. An especially important point, because in my experience boss’s meeting prep leaves a lot—a whopping lot!—to be desired; and, hey, like it or not, meetings are what bosses do. Meeting Excellence or bust is my mantra. Anybody listening?)

Preparation? No shortcuts. It may be 2018, and everything may be crazy outside, but in my opinion that cries out for *more* preparation, not less. (Start today! Prepare like a maniac and make that next meeting a Paragon of Excellence!)

Preparation ... **TAKES TIME** (lots of).

MBWA/MANAGING BY WANDERING AROUND

“I’m always stopping by our stores— at least 25 a week. I’m also in other places: Home Depot, Whole Foods, Crate & Barrel. I try to be a sponge to pick up as much as I can.”

—Howard Schultz/Starbucks (*Fortune*, “Secrets of Greatness”)

In some sense, MBWA is the beginning and the end and the middle of the story. Bob Waterman and I discovered it at Hewlett Packard in 1978 (part of the “HP Way”), featured it in *In Search of Excellence*—and to this day its literal and symbolic importance is unsurpassed in my canon.

MBWA stands for being in touch with reality, spending time where the action is, establishing an intimate connection with those who do the organization’s “blocking and tackling.” Most of us still work in spaces with others, and can do MBWA the traditional way. But for those who don’t, the leader of an important project, for example, still needs to find a way to be in direct touch, which might mean a quarterly visit to six countries (damn the cost, pay out of your own pocket if necessary). And, at the very least, substitute constant Phone MBWA instead of

relying on messaging and email—nuance over the phone is 10X more valuable (and human) than a dashed off email or 2-line Message.

Whatever the form, and the more direct the merrier, getting out and about by hook or by crook ... **TAKES TIME.**

(In the for what it's worth department, MBWA is leadership trait **#1** of 26 in *The Excellence Dividend*. And please re-read the quote that opens this section:

Starbucks' chief Howard Schultz religiously visits **25** stores per week—to stay in intimate touch with the true nature of his vast operation. In fact, when the company hit a rough patch a few years ago, Schultz concluded, “[We] had become operationally driven, about efficiency as opposed to the romance. We’d lost the soul of the company.” And he attributed a lot of that lost romance to his and his team’s having lost touch with the point of action—i.e., in my terms, not enough MBWA.)

(You want my 2-cents worth?

Here it is ...

MBWA is a **DAILY** requirement.

PERIOD.

[And ... if you don’t get off on MBWA, choose another career path. Truly.]

MY MBWA/NORDSTROM RIFF

For the love of MBWA. Consider this conversation I had with an exceptionally successful Nordstrom regional manager. We were talking about this and that, and then, and I don’t know what triggered it, she said, almost wistfully, and my memory is quite vivid,

“What I do today is important to the company, but it will never match the joy of having my own store as I did for almost five years. There were always a dozen problems to solve, but when I was stuck or frustrated or just plain weary, I knew exactly what to do.

“I’d get up from my desk and wander through the store. I’d chat up an employee for 30 seconds, or sometimes five minutes. I’d probably meander all told about a half hour. Corny as it probably sounds, just being in their presence was a genuine high. We were truly a team, every bit as much as my high school or college

basketball team, and we cared about each other. They were my personal community, to be honest, almost as much as my family.

“I don’t want to sound melodramatic, but when I got back to my desk after that 30 minutes or so roaming the store, my head would be clear, and usually I saw the ‘problem’ that had befuddled me transform itself into an opportunity to do something positive. Now that I’m an ‘executive,’ I’ll never have that thrill again.”

(MBWA/T-I-M-E ... very well spent.)

SLACK IN YOUR SCHEDULE

From Dov Frohman, former Intel exec and father of the Israeli tech industry, in *Leadership the Hard Way: Why Leadership Can’t Be Taught—And How You Can Learn It Anyway* (Chapter 5, “The Soft Skills of Hard Leadership”): “Most managers spend a great deal of time thinking about what they plan to do, but relatively little time thinking about what they plan not to do. As a result, they become so caught up in fighting the fires of the moment that they cannot really attend to the long-term threats and risks facing the organization. So the *first* soft skill of leadership the hard way is to cultivate the perspective of Marcus Aurelius: Avoid busyness, free up your time, stay focused on what really matters. Let me put it bluntly: *Every leader should routinely keep a substantial portion of his or her time—I would say as much as 50 percent—unscheduled.* ... Only when you have substantial ‘slop’ in your schedule—unscheduled time—will you have the space to reflect on what you are doing, learn from experience, and recover from your inevitable mistakes. Managers’ typical response to my argument about free time is, ‘That’s all well and good, but there are things I have to do.’ Yet we waste so much time in unproductive activity—it takes an enormous effort on the part of the leader to keep free time for the truly important things.”

I cannot imagine adding anything to this, except my belief that overscheduled bosses who, among other things, run late to meetings with subordinates (by as little as 30 seconds!) are being rude and disrespectful.

Whether Mr. Frohman's 50% or a lesser, say, 25%, slack does matters, Big Time and ... **TAKES TIME.**

HIRING/EVALUATING/PROMOTING

Peter Drucker, in *The Practice of Management*, insisted that promotions are

“life and death decisions.”

Drucker's sentiment is hard to argue with. As I see it, a leader at any given level makes on average two key promotion decisions every year. If she is in a job for five years, say, that adds up to ten promotion decisions. *In short, and at the end of the day, those ten promotion decisions are, collectively, her principal legacy!*

Do most leaders take promotion decisions seriously?

Absolutely!

But the question is, do they take them seriously *enough*?

In general, in perhaps nine cases out of ten, I'd say “no.”

For example, as I see it, a promotion decision is a close kin to an acquisition decision. You (chief, deciding on who gets promoted) are effectively going to anoint someone or someone else with the wholesale responsibility (“ownership”) for the future performance of a vital segment of the organization. He or she, regardless of the formal language on the organization chart, will in effect be:

CEO/XYZ Division

CEO/Training Department

CEO/Customer Service

You'd spend months on that acquisition decision. And I believe a promotion that turns a “company” (division, department) over to Ms. X or Mr. Y should get more or less the same degree of attention.

AND: What's true of promotion decisions is also true of HIRING decisions and EVALUATIONS.* At the end of the day, “leadership stuff” is ... “PEOPLE STUFF.”

And “people stuff” ... TAKES TIME.

(*Note: Hiring and evaluation processes are increasingly being automated—and AI is playing an ever more central role. While AI may be of use to both activities, overdependence on AI will, in my opinion, have disastrous effects. Hiring decisions and evaluations require total human engagement—and such engagement takes an enormous amount of time and emotional commitment.)

**Repeat: P-E-O-P-L-E-S-T-U-F-F-T-A-K-ES-T-I-M-E-
L-O-T-S-A-N-D-L-O-T-S-O-F-T-I-M-E.**

THOUGHTFULNESS/INSTINCTIVE SMALL GESTURES (SMALL>>BIG)

A harried Southwest Airlines pilot, running late for his next flight, nonetheless pauses as he gets to the departure gate, goes courteously up to the woman in the first wheelchair in line, and asks her if she'd mind if he took her down the jetway. *First time I'd seen that in approximately 7,500 flight legs.* (One frequent flyer who heard me tell this story said he'd never actually seen a pilot *look* at a passenger as he headed down the jetway.) No, escorting one passenger in a wheelchair down the jetway did not take much time. But it did take an attitude (or “culture”) of caring. And, in sum, caring-as-a-matter-of-course does takes time—in the office as it does with your nine-year-old at home.

That is, the essence of the “culture of caring” is that you do make the time, no matter how busy or harried you are, to make the small gesture of human connection.

Small>>Big: And, believe it, those gestures—yes, those collective *small* gestures—are the ones that define both employee engagement and an excellent customer experience. It's the “small stuff” that lingers in the customer's and employee's minds for years and years. The great American statesman Henry Clay captured this sentiment, on a larger scale, perfectly: *“Courtesies of a small and trivial character are the ones which strike deepest in the grateful and appreciating heart.”* (I used the Clay quote as the epigraph to my next-to-last book, *The Little BIG Things*.)

Taking the time to help a colleague as a matter of course, taking a passenger down the jetway, digging deep-deeper (and with the utmost thoughtfulness and an attitude of I've-got-all-the-time-in-the-world-to-help-you) into a “little” customer problem or query. It requires that attitude/culture of care and concern and connection. That

attitude transcends, and is designed to transcend, “faster, faster, faster, speed, speed, speed.”

That is, to repeat, small-collective-differentiating gestures ... **TAKE TIME.**

RADICAL HUMANIZATION/ EXTREME HUMANIZATION

The “collective small gestures” are important in any context.

Always have been.

Always will be.

But in 2018, there’s more. I sincerely believe that “collective small gestures” is the best way to take the fight to AI/artificial intelligence—and to win the fight for the foreseeable future. Win the fight for customers. And, at least as important or more so, the win the fight for jobs-that-last.

I believe that the collective-small-human-gestures will be the least copiable by AI for that foreseeable future. I wrote extensively about this in *The Excellence Dividend*. In fact, I offered up a sample of human-differentiating-service cases. I repeat here three cases of Radical Humanization/Extreme Humanization:

(1) **OWNER ON THE STREET.** Several years ago my wife and I flew to Chicago for New Year’s Eve. We went for the express purpose of having dinner with two good friends. They chose one of this great restaurant city’s top restaurants. The meal was fabulous as expected. We stayed until just past midnight. Most diners decided to leave at about the same time. It was a bitter cold Chicago night, with wind coming off the lake. We went out to try the difficult pre-Uber task of hailing a cab. Outside, in that merciless cold, we saw someone in a beautiful light dress running back and forth practically dragging cabs to the curbside. The “someone” was none other than the restaurant’s owner. Wow. (I’d add that she was always on the short list of most influential foodies in food-mad Chicago.)

“Bottom line”: *I remember the meal and I remember the lovely time with our friends and the well-worth-it trip from the East Coast.*

But mostly I remember the owner on the street passionately pursuing cabs in the bitter cold for her guests.

(2) **OVER THE (BRUTAL) HILL.** My wife and I spend a bit over two months every winter in New Zealand, on Golden Bay at the top of the South Island. We rent a car, and frankly are too frugal to pay sixty days' worth of the exorbitant Hertz or Avis rates. Hence, we use a local company and end up with a manageable tab.

Last year, I drove Susan about 25 miles from our tiny cottage to a ferry dock, where she took a short hop to a trail head and went off for a full day's walk. After dropping her and wandering around a bit, I planned to head for home. I would come back about seven hours later. However, when I got to the car, I couldn't find the key. I searched and searched to no avail. There was no use going home, because we didn't have a spare key. It was a Sunday, and I decided to call the rental car manager, who we'd gotten to know over the years. Frankly, I had no idea what he could do for me. It wasn't cab country, but maybe I could hitchhike home and then get a neighbor to pick up Susan.

Our rental pal was genuinely sorry I'd gotten myself in a jam. He asked me to hold on for a minute. He came back and said, "Problem solved. I like to take my wife and mother-in-law for a Sunday ride sometimes. I'll come over and bring you a spare key." There is more to the story. He was in fact sixty miles away in the town of Nelson—and between him and me was a brutal hill with, it's said, about 200 switchbacks. That is, the trip was a major undertaking by any standard. Nonetheless, he and family came over the hill, about an hour-and-a-half slog, and delivered the key. "No worries," he said.

To say that his act of kindness is "memorable" is totally inadequate. I can only say that I've recommended his company to everyone I can think of, done blogposts on it, and in general tried my best to lionize him. (His drive-over-the-hill has probably even had an infinitesimal impact on New Zealand tourism—I use the story to illustrate to friends what a neighborly attitude we typically find in Kiwi World.)

(3) **ADVANCED PNEUMATIC ENGINEERING.** My granddaughter, age four at the time, came with her parents to visit us on the South Coast of Massachusetts. We are about five minutes from Buzzard's Bay and a spectacular beach. Among other things, I got Zoe a cute dragon float to play with at the beach. When it came time to inflate it, I was out of luck. The toy had a weird valve, and my bike pump wouldn't fit. I decided to try the local service station, about ten miles away. Well, their air hose coupling device wouldn't work either. It's a longish story, but the short version

is that a station mechanic I knew jury rigged a fitting, but the job wasn't easy. At one point, with customers untended at the gas pumps, there were no less than three of them working to inflate Zoe's dragon float. Eventually the job was done, and back I went to the beach.

I took a picture of the three guys at work on Zoe's float. Among other things, I put the picture on a slide and used it in a speech to car dealers. Also, just a little bit later we had a car problem, and should have taken our vehicle to the dealership. Instead, we took it to that local service station for what amounted to an \$800 job.

I have given 'all this' a name—two names actually:

“Radical Humanization”/

“Extreme Humanization.”

Radical/Extreme Humanization is/are of the utmost (strategic/social] importance.

Radical/Extreme Humanization ... **TAKES TIME.**

GAMECHANGING DESIGN/ DISCUSSING CORNERS FOR HOURS

“Steve and Jony would discuss corners for hours and hours.” —Laurene Powell Jobs (epigraph #1 to this paper)

More:

“Huge degree of care.” —Ian Parker, *New Yorker*, on Apple design chief Jony Ives' approach to creating products

“Expose yourself to the best things humans have done and then try to bring those things into what you are doing.” —Steve Jobs

“In some way, by caring, we are actually serving humanity. People might think it’s a stupid belief, but it’s a goal—it’s a contribution that we hope we can make, in some small way, to culture.” —Jony Ives

“Apple’s great design secret may be avoiding insult. Their thoughtfulness is a sign of respect. Elegance in objects is everybody’s right, and it shouldn’t cost more than ugliness. So much of our manufacturing environment testifies to carelessness.” —Paola Antonelli, MOMA

Design = Corners

Design = Care

Design = Elegance

Design = The Best of Human Achievement

Design = Contribution to Human Culture

Design = Respect

Design = Thoughtfulness

Design = Avoiding Insult

I am not Steve Jobs.

You are not Steve Jobs.

And our product is not the next generation iPhone.

Yet I fervently believe that the terms above—corners, care, elegance, respect, thoughtfulness, avoiding insult, even “best of human achievement”—fit the next speech I give, the customer-interaction process you follow in your auto repair shop, the character of the new training course you are developing.

Design merits a standalone chapter in *The Excellence Dividend*—and it is treated as No. 1 of eight value-added strategies in the value-added section of the book.

I think (yes, fervently believe!) there is never any excuse in any activity for less than great design. (E.g., the office picnic honoring Memorial Day—did you hire a local superstar chef to do the hotdogs and spend \$250 on a local improv group to put on a show for the kids?)

And great design, obsessing thereon, of the iPhone, the housekeeping service, the Memorial Day office picnic, well ... **TAKES TIME!**

YOUR NEXT EMAIL

I'm not sure my shrink friends would agree, but I contend that I could do a complete psychiatric evaluation of Joe or Anne—or you—based on a collection of five 5-line emails.

So suppose my shrink pals disagree? I can live with that, but I will nonetheless insist to my last breath that that small set of emails can indeed reveal a whole helluva lot about you as a human being and, in particular, as a leader.

They will exhibit the care and concern you put into even a “trivial” act/communication.

They will reveal character—equivocation or clarity, etc?

They will reveal (loud and clear!) the degree to which you are—or aren't!—a “people person.”

As one observer put it, for a leader, “It's always showtime.”

Every gesture and action a leader takes are parsed by the 6 or 66 people who report to her. And at or near the top of the list of observable and analyzable leader actions is ... your next 5-line email.

Hence, I urge you to apply the utmost care to that next email.

And emails constructed with the utmost care ... **TAKE TIME.**

“THE LAST 1%” OF ANY TASK OR PROJECT

I am giving a speech, say, early tomorrow, and need to be in the auditorium for a tech check at 6:45AM. Regardless of the evening before (a client dinner that may have gone on to 10:30PM), I will wake up more or less like clockwork, with no help from an alarm, at about 2:30AM. I will have spent days and days perfecting my slide deck and tailoring it to this audience. But now it's “game time.” I would guess that I make 200 or 300 changes between 2:30AM and 6:00AM. Underline this word,

take the underlining off that one, and so on—it feels like a monumental change as I run through the presentation and my goals therefore in my head for the umpteenth and final time.

In short, I am an avowed “last 1%” fanatic.

I believe in polish and polish and polish—and sometimes, albeit rarely, I throw half the damn thing out between 2:30AM and 6:00AM. No, I do not have all the time in the world—I’ve got to be downstairs at 6:45AM—but I will wait until the last moment, practically last second, before finally locking the presentation in. Win or lose: It damn well depends on that “last 1%.”

Speed.
Speed.
Speed.

But the last 1%... **TAKES TIME**

... and must be given its due. (And, frankly, I don’t want to work with anyone—or hire anyone—who is not a fellow “last 1% fanatic.”)

E-X-C-E-L-L-E-N-C-E

Yes, it’s true that I have been going on about Excellence for almost 40 years now. And my passion grows more intense, not less intense, over time. *Particularly today, when I think human-driven Excellence (e.g., “courtesies of a small and trivial character ...,” Steve Jobs and Jony Ives’ corners that speak of elegance and care) is the best offense as artificial intelligence, for example, intrudes deeper and deeper into the workplace.*

I have given “Tom’s Excellence Lecture (rant)” literally thousands of times—and written hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of words examining Excellence and exhorting one and all to get on the Great Excellence Bus.

*It is a hyper-fast paced world.
And the speed therein is madly increasing.
Excellence, however, takes time; and by some, or most, measures cannot be rushed.*

I leave it to you to deal with the contradictions of the age. But I do hope you will reflect on the above as you tackle your next project or sales call or public lecture. Take the time to pursue and do Excellence. Don't get automatically caught in the Speed Trap.

(FYI, as a certified old guy, I promise you it is the Excellence you will remember with pleasure—not the time that you beat a competitor to market with tyrannical behavior toward staff and an embarrassing half-done product or service released to the customer. You may have made some bucks by getting there first, but when you're my age, you surely won't remember that episode with pride—and the people you browbeat may remember you, but for all the wrong reasons.)

South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, 11 August 2018