

Excellence: FORTY-THREE YEARS, FORTY-THREE QUOTES

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The research for what became *In Search of Excellence* began 43 years ago in 1978. The first “excellence book” was followed by 18 more—and approximately 2,500 topical presentations, and thousands upon thousands of slides. In this brief paper, I present my more or less “Top 45,” one quote per year for each of those 43 years. In fact, their totality paints a reasonably complete story.

All yours . . .

**“Business exists
to enhance
human well-being.”**

—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Good Business: Leadership,
Flow, and the Making of Meaning*

**“Amateurs talk about strategy. . . .
Professionals talk about logistics.”**

—USMC General R.H. Barrow

**My life in six words:
HARD IS SOFT. SOFT IS HARD.**

**Hard (Numbers/Plans/Org charts)
Is Soft.**

**Soft (People/Relationships/Culture)
Is Hard.**

—Tom Peters (TP)

THE SOFT EDGE: “I believe the business world is at a crossroads, where hard-edge people are dominating the narrative and discussion. . . . The battle for attention and money boiling inside most companies and among most managers is that between the hard and soft edges. . . . Far too many companies invest too little time and money in their soft-edge excellence. . . .

“This mistake has three main reasons:

- **The hard edge is easier to quantify. . . .**
- **Successful hard-edge investment provides a faster [return on investment]. . . .**
- **CEOs, CFOs, [chief operating officers], boards of directors, and shareholders speak the language of finance. . . .**

“Here’s the case for investing time and money in your company’s soft edge:

- **Soft-edge strength leads to greater brand recognition, higher profit margins. . . . [It] is the ticket out of Commodityville.**
- **Companies strong in the soft edge can often survive a big strategic mistake or cataclysmic disruption. . . .**
- **Hard-edge strength provides a fleeting advantage. [It] is easier to clone than the soft edge.”**

—Rich Karlgaard, *The Soft Edge: Where Great Companies Find Lasting Success*

“Business has to give people enriching, rewarding lives, or it’s simply not worth doing.”

—Sir Richard Branson, *Business Stripped Bare: Adventures of a Global Entrepreneur*

“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 have ever dreamed of being.”

—Robert Altman, Oscar-winning director

“No matter what the situation, [the great manager’s] first response is always to think about the individual concerned and how things can be arranged to help that individual experience success.”

—Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know . . . About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success*

“In short, hiring is the most important aspect of business and yet remains woefully misunderstood.”

— Philip Delves Broughton, “The Hard Work of Getting Ahead,”
Wall Street Journal

“The ultimate filter we use [in the hiring process] is that we only hire nice people. . . . I believe in culture so strongly and that one bad apple can spoil the bunch.”

—Peter Miller in Adam Bryant’s “Peter Miller of Optinose: To Work Here, Win the ‘Nice’ Vote,” *New York Times* (Candidates for even the most technical jobs in this biotech company must interview with people of all ranks and disciplines to test the “nice” fit. All interviewers have veto power.)

“training, TRAINING and M-O-R-E T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G”

—Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander in chief, Pacific Ocean Area, in *Neptune’s Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* by James D. Hornfischer (Capitalization, punctuation are Nimitz’s.) The U.S. Navy was woefully underprepared at the time of Pearl Harbor. Fix? First and foremost: T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G. *Training was more important than hardware/more ships,* per Nimitz.

If you don’t think training is of paramount importance (Capital Investment #1), ask a Navy admiral, an Army or Air Force or USMC general, a football coach, an archery coach, a fire chief, a police chief, a theater director, a symphony conductor, a pilot, the boss of an ER or ICU, the operations chief of a nuclear power plant, a great restaurateur, a public speaker (me) . . .

—TP

“Research [by McKinsey & Co.] suggests that, in order to succeed, companies should start by promoting more women.”

—Abstract for Nicholas Kristof’s “Twitter, Women, and Power,”
New York Times

“Women are rated higher in fully 12 of 16 competencies that go into outstanding leadership. And two of the traits where women outscored men to the highest degree—taking initiative and driving for results—have long been thought of as particularly male strengths.”

—Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, “Are Women Better Leaders Than Men?” *Harvard Business Review*

“Expose yourself to the best things that humans have done. And then try to bring those things into what you are doing.”

—Steve Jobs in Steve Denning’s “The Lost Interview: Steve Jobs Tells Us What Really Matters,” *Forbes*

“The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it.”

—Thomas Merton in *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*
by Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews

“As Fadell [Tony Fadell, founder of Nest] admitted, ‘Every business school in the world would flunk you if you came out with a business plan that said, ‘Oh, by the way, we’re going to design and fabricate our own screws at an exponentially higher cost than it would cost to buy them.’” But these aren’t just screws. Like the [Nest] thermometer itself, they’re better screws, epic screws, screws with, dare I say it, deeper meaning. Functionally, they utilize a specific thread pattern that allows them to go into nearly any surface, from wood to plaster to thin sheet metal. And the [custom] screwdriver feels balanced to the hand. It has the Nest logo on it and looks ‘Nest-y,’ just like everything from Apple looks ‘Apple-y.’”

—Rich Karlgaard, *The Soft Edge: Where Great Companies Find Lasting Success*

“Courtesies of a small and trivial character are the ones which strike deepest to the grateful and appreciating heart.”

—Henry Clay

“Janet Dugan, a healthcare architect, took inspiration from her recent experience having an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Image) scan. While she was lying still and waiting, she noticed a small mirror that had been placed below the head support piece. It was angled so that she could see through the barrel to the radiology technician and make eye contact with him. ‘What a small thing,’ she told me. ‘And yet what a difference it made. I felt less alone. I was connected to another person at the very moment I needed support. And even though I’m not claustrophobic, it calmed me some to be able to see out of the barrel. . . . I [saw] that the technician was friendly and that the nurse went out of her way to make me laugh. . . . I firmly believe in the power of design to contribute to the healing process—that architecture can shape events and transform lives. *But that day, in that experience, the thing that really gave me comfort was a tiny mirror about as big as a Band-Aid.*”

—Tim Leberecht, *The Business Romantic: Give Everything, Quantify Nothing, and Create Something Greater Than Yourself*

**“Design is everything.
Everything is design.
We are all designers.”**

—Richard Farson, *The Power of Design:
A Force for Transforming Everything*

“I would rather engage in a Twitter conversation with a single customer than see our company attempt to attract the attention of millions in a coveted Super Bowl commercial. Why? Because having people discuss your brand directly with you, actually connecting one-to-one, is far more valuable—not to mention far cheaper! . . . They want a community. They want to be heard.”

—Peter Aceto, CEO, Tangerine, in foreword to *A World Gone Social: How Companies Must Adapt to Survive* by Ted Coiné and Mark Babbitt

“Today, despite the fact that we’re just a little swimming pool company in Virginia, we have the most trafficked swimming pool website in the world. Five years ago, if you’d asked me . . . what we do, the answer would have been simple, ‘We build in-ground fiberglass swimming pools.’ Now we say, ‘We are the best teachers in the world on the subject of fiberglass swimming pools, and we happen to build them as well.’”

—Marcus Sheridan, founder of River Pools and Spas, in Jay Baer’s *Youtility: Why Smart Marketing Is About Help, Not Hype*

DELOITTE RESEARCH:

25,000 companies assessed
45 years of data
344 exceptional performers
27 superstar “best of the best”

Conclusion from the winners:

“The Three Rules”

“Better before cheaper.”

“Revenue before cost.”

“There are no other rules.”

—Michael Raynor and Mumtaz Ahmed,
The Three Rules: How Exceptional Companies Think

**Sustainability: “It’s the right thing
to do, it’s the smart thing to do,
it’s the profitable thing to do.”**

—L. Hunter Lovins in Joel Makower’s “Can Climate Capitalism
Save the World?” *Reuters*

**“Forget China, India and
the internet: economic
growth is driven by women.”**

—“The Importance of Sex,” *The Economist*

**“‘Age Power’ will rule the 21st century,
and . . . we are woefully unprepared.”**

—Ken Dychtwald, *Age Power: How the 21st Century
Will Be Ruled by the New Old*

**“The attempts by marketing executives
to reach those over 50 have been
miserably unsuccessful. No market’s
motivations and needs are so
poorly understood.”**

—Peter Francese, publisher, *American Demographics*

**“Serious play is not an oxymoron; it is
the essence of innovation. . . . You can’t
be a serious innovator unless you are
willing and able to play.”**

—Michael Schrage, *Serious Play: How the World’s Best Companies
Simulate to Innovate*

**“Fail.
Forward.
Fast.”**

—High-tech executive, at one of Tom’s speeches in Philadelphia

**“Reward excellent failures.
Punish mediocre successes.”**

—Phil Daniels, Australian executive who attended one of Tom’s seminars, regarding “the six words that underpin my company’s success”

“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 behavior of hundreds of thousands of people is very, very hard.” “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* (Gerstner, in his McKinsey days, was wholly dismissive of my focus on “the soft stuff.”)

**“Culture eats
strategy
for breakfast.”**

—Edgar H. Schein, MIT professor (Generally considered founder of the culture movement.)

“Personal relationships are the fertile soil from which all advancement, all success, all achievement in real life grows.”

—Ben Stein, investment guru

“Being aware of yourself and how you affect everyone around you is what distinguishes a superior leader.”

—Cindy Miller, with Edie Seashore, in Sally Helgesen's “Masters of the Breakthrough Moment,” *strategy + business*

“Positive attention . . . is *thirty times* more powerful than negative attention in creating high performance on a team. . . . People don't need feedback. They need attention, and, moreover, attention to what they do the best. And they become more engaged and therefore more productive when we give it to them.”

—Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall, *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World*

“My education in leadership really began when I was in Washington, watching [Defense Secretary] William Perry in action. He was universally loved and admired by heads of state . . . and by our own and our allies’ 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 wasn’t enough to change my leadership style. Something bigger had to happen, and it did. It was painful, but crucial for my realization, that listening doesn’t always come naturally to me. Perry opened my eyes to how I often just pretended to hear people. How many times . . . had I barely glanced up from my work when a subordinate came into my office? . . . I vowed to treat every encounter with every person on the ship [Abrashoff was Captain of the USS *Benfold*] as the most important thing at that moment . . . *I decided that my job was to listen aggressively.*”

—Mike Abrashoff, *It’s Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy*

“The deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

—William James

“The two most powerful things in life are a kind word, a thoughtful gesture.”

—Ken Langone, cofounder, Home Depot

“Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.”

—Henry James

“I regard apologizing as the most magical, healing, restorative gesture human beings can make. It is the centerpiece of my work with executives who want to get better.”

—Marshall Goldsmith, arguably #1 exec coach, in his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful*

“The one piece of advice which I believe will contribute more to making you a better leader . . . provide you with greater happiness and . . . advance your career more than any other advice . . . and it doesn’t call for a special personality [or] any certain chemistry . . . any one of you can do it and that advice is—you must care.”

—General Melvin Zais, address to senior officers, U.S. Army War College

“I’ve been thinking about the difference between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.”

—David Brooks, *The Road to Character*

EXCELLENCE IS THE NEXT FIVE MINUTES

Excellence is NOT an aspiration.

Excellence is NOT a hill to climb.

Excellence is the ultimate short-term strategy.

Excellence is the next five minutes.

Excellence is your next ten-line email—
or 25-word text.

Excellence is the first three minutes
of your next meeting.

Excellence is listening . . . really really
("fiercely," "aggressively") l-i-s-t-e-n-i-n-g.

Excellence is sending flowers to the hospital
where your top customer's Mom is having
major surgery.

Excellence is going out of your way
to say "Thank you" for something "small."

Excellence is pulling out all the stops at
warp speed to respond to a "minor" screw-up.

Excellence is adding a final touch to a final
touch to a final touch.

Excellence is the next five minutes.

(Or-it-is-nothing-at-all.)

—TP

COVID-19 LEADERSHIP/ THE SEVEN COMMANDMENTS

Be Kind.

Be Caring.

Be Patient.

Be Forgiving.

Be Present.

Be Positive.

**Walk in the
Other Person's
Shoes.**

—TP