

07 January 2022/Tom Peters

## **BOB AND TOM'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE: 1977-2022**

Bob Waterman died, at age 86, on January 2, 2022; among other things, the second day of the year that marks the 40th anniversary of the 1982 publication of *In Search of Excellence*.

Bob and I co-created/coauthored *In Search*. It was a five-year marathon, and we both thought we had done a pretty decent job. The reception to the 100+ presentations of the book's material had been uniformly heartening. But make no mistake, we were both staggered by the reception the book received and continues to receive. The only person more surprised than we were was our Harper & Row publisher, Ed Burlingame.

Bob and I were, on the one hand, cut from the same cloth. We were both trained as engineers: Bob at the Colorado School of Mines, me at Cornell. We both earned MBAs from the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and we both labored at McKinsey's San Francisco office.

But we were also very different in ways that doubtless, in retrospect, drove our book's success. I was noisy (in person and in print), profane, and opinionated. Bob was calm and thoughtful. Blending those differences was, upon reflection, what distinguished the book. After Bob had done a re-write of an early draft of the manuscript on his spanking new Apple II, my closest

McKinsey friend, Alan Kennedy, was furious, and thought Bob had drained the spirit from the text. I was irritated, too; but I subsequently believe that the to-ing and fro-ing enabled *In Search* to find a sweet spot and connect with the real business or non-business reader and leader and the woman or man on the street—challenging them pretty darn directly, but not whacking them over the head with a splintery two-by-four.

Bob and I became close pals, and the Waterman family, starting with the wonderful Judy Waterman, became my second family during a rough patch in my personal life which coincided with much of the book's birthing.

Bob and I never argued. At least in the normal usage of the word. We “argued” by editing intensely and extensively the most recent draft of the manuscript that one of us had handed over to the other.

A year before the book's publication, I left McKinsey rather unceremoniously, having pushed some “strategy-first-last-forever” power players too hard with my incessant “people *really* first”/ “soft stuff” rules ranting. But the joint writing process, amazingly, moved ahead without a hitch. I even continued my presentations of the findings to dozens of McKinsey clients worldwide as the material was massaged and massaged some more.

Bob was a dear dear pal, his family was my family, and in some strange way the book reflected that interwovenness rather perfectly. The idea and flavor of the book aimed at getting beyond the sterile spreadsheets and org charts and process maps and checklist employee reviews by getting to the human heart of effective enterprise and the moral responsibility of the organization to the community and indeed the world. The data and our extensive research and the stellar leaders we met such as DANA Corporation's Ren McPherson and Johnson & Johnson's Jim Curtis led us that way; but the true magic in the end was arguably

the quiet Tom & Bob Show that made *In Search of Excellence* what it was and is, and made it a dramatic departure from the bloodless depiction of business and business practices that was the norm in the 1977-1982 interval that marked the book's birthing and road-testing.

I loved Bob dearly and miss him to an unimaginable degree. Rest in peace, brother.

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## CALL IT "NIRVANA DAY"

The Tom & Bob Show had a defining day. I call it "Nirvana Day." We worked at McKinsey's San Francisco office, housed on the 49th floor of the Bank of America Tower, two stories below the apex where the Big Guys resided. We'd been to the top on a handful of occasions and observed the lavish decor and the eerie silence of clerks and assistants and assistants' assistants treading quietly on the Holy Turf. But now we were gearing up our "good companies" research (the "excellent" moniker came later courtesy the San Francisco Ballet, but that's another story), and there was an exciting firm 30 miles south of us, in Palo Alto, in a pre-Apple-Google Silicon Valley that was just picking up speed. The energetic firm in question had just passed the \$1 billion sales mark, a big but not overpowering number in 1978. That company was Hewlett Packard.

Bob and I were Stanford MBAs as noted, and HP's new president, John Young, was a Stanford MBA as well. We thought a chat with him might be enlightening. I simply looked up HP's number in the, uh, phone book (remember those?) and dialed it (remember that?).

It was answered by someone at a corporate front desk, and I asked if I might be put through to “Mr. Young’s office.” With the McKinsey top floor confines in mind, I assumed I’d be handed off to an assistant’s assistant with whom I would try to set up an eventual visit. Instead, the gruff but pleasant voice on the other end said, “John Young here, who’s this?” I guess I recovered quickly. I asked if Bob and I might visit and was responded to with something like, “Sure, when would you like to come down?” My McKinsey background was with those top floor folks at the Bank of America Tower, and it didn’t exactly take genius to smell something new and different.

To make a long story short, Bob and I drove some 30 miles down Route 101 a few days later, walked into the understated HP main building, up to the desk, and asked for Mr. Young. A minute later, at most, Mr. Young appeared, shirt sleeves rolled up, and ushered us into the executive suite. Whoops, ushered us into his eight foot by eight foot cubicle with plexiglass divider walls about four feet high.

Yup. This *was* different.

We had a vigorous conversation, and at some point, the Nirvana Moment in Nirvana Day occurred. That was the instant John Y. introduced us to the “HP Way,” the company’s approach to doing business. (Today it would be called “corporate culture,” but term had yet to be popularized. Bob and I called it a statement of “the way we do things around here” or “management style,” one of the “Ss” later incorporated into the fabled Waterman-Peters “McKinsey 7-S Model.”) In the middle of the HP Way discussion, that magic moment of moments, the life-changer occurred, when Mr. Young uttered “MBWA.”

Lights flash. Fireworks pop. A band strikes up a John Philip Sousa march. We were just introduced to the most un-51<sup>st</sup> floor notion

imaginable: *Managing By Wandering Around*, the centerpiece of that subsequently fabled HP Way.

MBWA. Busy leaders, senior leaders, determined to escape the rarefied confines of charts-and-graphs mania and a suckup parade and by hook or by crook get in touch with the real work and the real workers who do it. To cut the bullshit and stay intimately engaged with “at the coal face” reality. As we wrapped up a bit later, John took Bob and I on an MBWA ramble through some of the engineering area in the midst of which his decidedly unremarkable office was located. He knew pretty much everyone by name, including very junior engineers. The chitchat was about how HP went about its business and was not in the least bit strained, constrained or stilted.

MBWA per se and MBWA-as-metaphor for informal, in touch, very human management (even in a big firm with thousands on the global payroll) became in effect the metaphysical epicenter of what several years later became the de facto signature and character of *In Search of Excellence*.

One final anecdote on the topic. About five years after the initial John Young visit, *In Search of Excellence* appeared, a lot of folks bought the book, it became a phenomenon, and among other things Bob and I were invited to fly to New York and be interviewed at the crack of dawn on the “Today Show” by Bryant Gumbel. We were subsequently sitting in the green room waiting our turn to go on stage, and out of the blue I turned to Bob and said, impishly, “Okay, who gets to say it, who gets to say ‘MBWA’ on national television?” Bob was senior to me at McKinsey, but I was the book’s official lead author, so there was a technical standoff. We decided to flip a coin, quite literally. Bob won the toss and got to proffer the Holy Words to the nation. While I was slightly bummed at the time, I will say on this day in January 2022, “Good show,

my dear colleague and friend—so so sorry you are no longer among us.”

(Footnote/with sadness but not surprise: The praises of HP are sung loudly in this short missive. Alas, “that HP” is largely no more. With subsequent giantism, acquisitions for acquisitions’ sake, the invidious shareholder value maximization obsession, etc., HP lost its verve—and became, in my opinion, just one more stumbling giant. My career in the last 25 years has turned away from those stagnant monsters and focused primarily on the SMEs [Small and Medium-size Enterprises]. *They* are the job creators. *They* are the innovators. *They* are the backbone of every community and economy in the world. And, alas, footnote #2, McKinsey itself has lost its way as giantism badly dented its character—witness its intimate involvement in the disgraceful Perdue Pharma fiasco.)