

TOM PETERS' ALL-TIME TOP QUOTES 1978-2024

My colleagues and I estimate that I have given 2,700 speeches (3,000,000 air miles!) on this “excellence stuff.” Virtually all featured 35mm slides.* And virtually all those slides contained quotes. My reasoning goes this way. I have never run a sizable enterprise or commanded a ship of war. Hence, on any given topic, who gives a damn about what desk jockey Tom Peters thinks? Okay, don’t listen to me. But how about the words of Apple Design Chief Jony Ive? Or former Hall of Fame football coach Vince Lombardi? Or former IBM CEO Lou Gerstner? A USMC general? Listen to them, please—I suggest that they know of what they speak!

What follows is their words, and I urge you to consider them as potential calls for action.

* I went through a radical winnowing process to get here. At one point, I put together a “Master Presentation.” I checked it out, and it ran to 26 “chapters” and 2,481 slides!

The Quotes ...

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

—USMC General R.H. Barrow

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

—Late MIT professor Edgar Schein, father of the corporate culture “movement”

“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 to accomplish. ... 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*

“The role of the director is to create a space where 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

Action Now! Small>>Big!

These are “great quotes.” I’ve used each one a dozen dozen times. But I’m not looking for head nods and “yups.” I am suggesting that—alone or with colleagues—you cherry-pick a few that really make sense to you. And then you talk about how you might operationalize these in your organization. Then perhaps check in a couple of weeks later to assess stumbling blocks, successes, etc. Only then will I consider what I have done here to have been worth doing. As an old McKinsey boss told my teammates and me decades ago, “Don’t forget implementation boys. It’s the all-important ‘last 95 percent.’” I beg to differ. Let’s make that 98 percent! (The power of tiny successes [I labeled them “small wins”] was the topic of my Ph.D. thesis 48 years ago. My motto to this day, “Small>>Big, Small Stuff Rules!”)

“What employees experience, Customers will. . . . Your Customers will never be any happier than your employees.”

—John DiJulius, the DiJulius Group

“If you want the staff to give great service to customers, the leaders have to give great service to the staff.’

—Ari Weinzweig, cofounder, Zingerman’s.”

“‘Love’ is not necessarily ‘liking.’ You do not need to like someone in order to love them. Love is loyalty. Love is teamwork. Love is respect for the dignity of an individual.”

—Vince Lombardi, Hall of Fame coach of the Green Bay Packers

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

—Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*

“As Leaders, Women Rule: New studies find that female managers outshine their male counterparts in almost every measure.”

—*Bloomberg BusinessWeek*

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

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

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

—Ken Langone, Home Depot cofounder

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

—Henry Clay

“We don’t remember the days, we remember the moments.”

—Cesare Pavese, poet

“Believe it or not, I have sent roughly 30,000 handwritten [thank you] notes to employees over the last decade ... from maintenance people to senior executives.”

—Doug Conant, former Campbell Soup CEO

“Be the best. It’s the only marketplace that’s not crowded.”

—George Whalin, *Retail Superstars: Inside the 25 Best Independent Stores in America*

“Only one company can be the cheapest. All others must use design.”

—Rodney Fitch, Fitch+Co., *Retail Design*

“We don’t have good language to talk about this kind of thing. In most people’s vocabularies, design means veneer. ... But to me, nothing could be further from the meaning of design. Design is the fundamental soul of a man-made creation.”

—Steve Jobs in “Apple’s One-Dollar-a-Year Man,” *Fortune*

“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 we hope that we can make, in some small way, to culture.

—Jony Ive, former Chief Designer, Apple, in Ian Parker’s “The Shape of Things to Come,” *New Yorker*

“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, from *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*

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

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

“Buy less. Choose well. Make it last. Quality rather than quantity: that is true sustainability.”

—Vivienne Westwood in Jo-Ann Furniss’ “Vivienne Westwood Red Label Spring,”
Vogue

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

THE THREE RULES

“1. Better before cheaper...”

“2. Revenue before cost...”

“3. There are no other rules.”

—Michael Raynor and Mumtaz Ahmed, *The Three Rules: How Exceptional Companies Think* (from a study of 45 years’ performance of 27 superstars drawn from a base of 25,000 companies)

“The business of business should not be just about money. It should be about responsibility. It should be about public good, not private greed,”

—Anita Roddick, founder, The Body Shop

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

—Richard Branson

“It takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.”

—Warren Buffett, on the new age of social media

“The New Customer Majority [age 44-65] is the only adult market with realistic prospects for significant sales growth in dozens of product lines for thousands of companies.”

—David Wolfe and Robert Snyder, *Ageless Marketing: Strategies for Reaching the Hearts and Minds of the New Customer Majority*

Dear (Brainless) Marketers: Women have **ALL** the Money. Old people are enormous in number and have **DECADES** and **DECADES** left to go!

—Tom Peters (My marketing/product development department: 60% women, 40% of staff over the age of 45.)

A BUSINESS IS [!!!!!!] ITS PEOPLE. THEY ARE NOT “IMPORTANT” TO THE BUSINESS FOR _____’S SAKE. THEY A-R-E [!!!!!!] THE BUSINESS.

—Tom Peters

NOTE: In early 2023, I sent out a retirement letter. There were many kind responses, but in a way, I found it odd. I was being thanked profusely again and again for “putting people at the head of the table.” Huh? That’s “news”? Well, alas, it seems as though it is. “People first” seems to me to be the biggest “duh” there is. But it turns out it is not a “duh”—it is news.

Hmmmmm ...

“Fail. Forward. Fast.”—High-tech CEO, Philadelphia

My version: WTTMSW (Whoever Tries The Most Stuff Wins). WTTMS[ASTMSUTF]W (Whoever Tries The Most Stuff [And Screws The Most Stuff Up The Fastest] Wins)

“Reward excellent failures. Punish mediocre successes.”

—Phil Daniels, Australian executive on “the six words that underpin my company’s success”

“I’m uncomfortable when I’m comfortable.”

—Jay Chiat

MBWA (Managing By Wandering Around)

—The HP Way. Leadership as an intimate act. The genesis of *In Search of Excellence*

“Diverse groups of problem solvers—groups of people with diverse tools—consistently outperformed groups of the best and the brightest. If I formed two groups, one random (and therefore diverse) and one consisting of the best individual performers, the first group almost always did better. ... Diversity trumped ability.’

—Scott Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*

MBWA

“Nirvana Day” for Yours Truly

I call it “Nirvana Day.” My future *In Search of Excellence* coauthor Bob Waterman and I were visiting companies that eventually made it into the book. We were based in San Francisco, and one of our candidates, Hewlett Packard, was just down the road, in Palo Alto.

We met with the president, John Young, and at one point he was talking about “The HP Way.” Its signature trait was MBWA (Managing by Wandering Around). Bob and I were both trained as engineers (mining, civil). Engineering—and business as far as we were concerned—revolved around numbers and quantitative analyses. MBWA was about as far from that as one could imagine. MBWA is about connection, emotion, interaction. Yes, Nirvana Day, the day, courtesy MBWA, my professional life did a more or less 180-degree flip that’s lasted 40+ years.

30:1

“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*, Chapter 5. Lie #5: People Need Feedback

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

—William James

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

—Ben Stein, investment guru

“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, CEO of the biotech firm Optinose

“We look for people who are warm and caring and actually altruistic. We look for people who have a fun-loving attitude.”

—Colleen Barrett, former president, SouthWest Airlines

Promotions are “life-or-death” decisions.

—Peter Drucker, *The Practice of Management*

“The best way to persuade others is with your ears, by listening to them.”

—Former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk

“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’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*

“Creating excellence is not a job. Creating excellence is a moral act.”

—Hugh MacLeod

BONUS: THE CORE STORY/1978-2024

HARD IS SOFT. SOFT IS HARD.

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

Soft (Abstract/Manipulable)

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

Hard (Lasting/Bedrock)

DRAFT TP MEMOIR TITLE

TOM PETERS' MEMOIR
PURSUING EXCELLENCE FOR FORTY-SIX YEARS

THE DEAN'S LIST, DIFFERENTIAL-EQUATION-CHEWING QUANT'S QUANT, 2-DEGREE CORNELL ENGINEER WITH AN MBA AND PH.D. IN "BUSINESS," AND CUSSING-VIETNAM-VET COMBAT-ENGINEER WHO BECAME A, OR EVEN THE, WORLD CHAMPION FOR BUSINESSES/ ORGANIZATIONS THAT FOCUS ON AND LIVE TO FULLY ENGAGE THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE PEOPLE-WHO-MATTER-AT-THE-FRONT-LINE AND WHO EXUDE PASSION AND COMPASSION AND CARING AND CREATE, DESIGN, AND DELIVER CONSCIOUSNESS-BENDING, WORLD-ALTERING PRODUCTS AND SERVICES . . . AND PUT WOMEN LEADERS IN CHARGE OF IT ALL. THAT IS, CHAMPIONING AND RANTING ABOUT THE— HEAVILY DISCOUNTED BY THE DESICCATED "ESTABLISHMENT"—SO-CALLED "SOFT STUFF."

Author's note: For any who see this as a neo-Marxist screed, I would point out that a dozen-dozen refereed studies would confirm that the ideas herein are the demonstrated paths to mid- to long-term growth and maximized profitability.

Note: My design guru insists that she can get all this on the cover!

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Does a short paper like this merit a formal acknowledgments page?

Yes, it's short, but it is a summary of 46 years of work. Let me single out just a few colleagues who have been partners or inspirations:

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