

# the EXCELLENCE MYTH

**h**ave you been to the business aisle of the bookstore recently? Judging by the mountain of books on excellence, we should have produced a *stampede* of excellence by now. It's clear that we are nowhere close. Excellence is not a permanent, integral part of our lives. The question is, why not?

Understanding excellence and how to deliver it is at the heart of the matter. We have been captivated by misconceptions and faulty logic that is encapsulated in what I call "The Excellence Myth." The myth presents a paradox: It is precisely the traditional definition of excellence that stops us from achieving our capacity for excellence. Instead of inspiring us to reach our full potential, The Excellence Myth debilitates us, permitting us to accept something less.

Management, for example, consistently diminishes employees' capacity for excellence. Willing and motivated employees are often squashed by a top-down insistence on procedures being followed. This type of bureaucracy sends a clear message to employees: Follow and obey rather than initiate and excel. Employees, as a result, are defaulting to playing the obedient soldier while surrendering any initiative or innovation. They do what they are told and try not to think too much. After years of this, how can employees even consider the pursuit of excellence? They just want to survive.

## DEFINING EXCELLENCE

But what does excellence look like? According to my dictionary, excellence is "the state, quality, or condition of



IN AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM HIS NEW BOOK *EXCELLENCE EVERY DAY*, INDUSTRY THOUGHT LEADER LIOR ARUSSY EXAMINES THE TRUTH—AND CRIPPLING FICTIONS—BEHIND THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE



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excelling; superiority.” I especially like the word “superiority,” which clearly indicates that “consistency” and “parity” are not excellence.

I define excellence as *the ability to exceed expectations*. In terms of CRM, excellence is simply *the ability to surprise customers*. It is the art of going beyond the expectations of your customers, your managers, and even yourself. When you go beyond expectations, you create something unique for your recipient. You add a personal touch and take responsibility. You contribute from the reservoir of your humanity. You surprise your customers (and sometimes yourself) with the creation of the new.

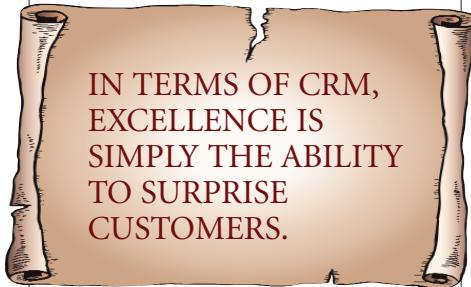
### EXCELLENCE OR NOTHING

Competition has presented us with a simple challenge: *excellence or nothing*. We live in times where “good enough” simply doesn’t cut it anymore. New competitors have demonstrated an ambitious spirit and a drive to succeed. While some may not yet have reached a genuine level of excellence, it’s clear that the *pursuit* of excellence is a main focus. Why are we losing ground to others? Are we really willing and ready to compete? Are we pursuing excellence with everything we have? Do we have a fully committed organization, with employees who are dedicated to delivering excellence—and to winning the customer’s heart in the process? Do our employees have the freedom to get around controlling processes and to make the types of personal choices that will let us rise to the challenge of excellence?

Sadly, the answer to these questions is “No.” With a culture of ineptitude developing among us, created by top-down management and reflected through countless “Dilbert” cartoons, episodes of *The Office*, derisive jokes, and books that tell us to “stop working so hard,” we are methodically stripping away our ability to win. As competition has intensified, so has our addiction to cynical content that places us on the fast track to diminished expectations and competitiveness.

To drive excellence, your organization needs willing employees who have been given permission to perform. Excellence cannot be mandated from above; it rises from the bottom up. Your employees need to *want* to deliver excellence. Meanwhile, managers need to create an environment in which delivering excellence is not the exception to the rule or something in the domain of the “suckers.” Enabling excellence will require you to give employees permission to perform. You’ll need to provide them with sound information for decision-making, and empower them by granting authority and the freedom to make mistakes.

Your commitment to excellence must be absolute because it is a matter of differentiation and growth. It is a matter of making you and your organization



indispensable. To stay competitive, you can no longer afford random acts of excellence conducted by a few individuals who are the exception to the rule. You need excellence to happen every day, by every employee.

*Excellence through processes* is a familiar goal, thanks to the Six Sigma formula that drives consistency through optimization. *Excellence through people* is still a rare virtue, commanding attention and premium. But by working with your people as the prime differentiators of the business, excellence will become the way to unleash the power of their innovation, caring, and commitment. It is only through their own choice that they will deliver their best.

### EVERYONE LISTENS TO CUSTOMERS

There is nothing more powerful than listening to your customers. A simple mes-

sage delivered in the voice of the customer can be more insightful than hundreds of pie charts and Excel spreadsheets. “Listening to customers” is a corporate mantra every executive loves to tout, but when executives are asked to join customer discussions at the contact center, they often decline, citing time constraints. (Executives always seem to have higher priorities than listening to those who pay the bills.) Even when executives do finally go meet customers, the agenda is predetermined—and the real voice of the customer is never heard.

At one Fortune 500 corporation, however, the vice president of customer service had an idea: If the executives would not come to the customers, he would bring the customers to the executives. He started to record customer interactions at his contact centers. The CDs he created with selected calls—titled “Our Greatest Hits”—were then distributed to executives. “It was painful to listen to those calls,” one of the executives said, “but it opened my eyes to the way customers think and speak about us.”

The CDs became a regular part of the corporation’s executive agenda. Every few weeks, a new CD was produced with fresh customer comments. Thanks to this simple idea, executives began to shape their decisions to fit customer needs. People got used to incorporating The Customer into their daily thinking and decisions by listening to live customers.

Getting every employee exposed to the voice of the customer helps companies to be fully tuned to the customer’s way of thinking. Going beyond graphs and spreadsheets, employees get to hear real customers who express real feelings and emotions. It can be a painful experience, but it can also be the best wake-up call. (Alternatively, it can be thrilling to hear customers describe how they enjoy your product and provide some insight for new, innovative ideas.)

To deliver excellence that is based on the recipient, you need to know your customers better than they know themselves. You need to be well versed in your customers’ lifestyles, challenges, aspira-

# The Excellence Aptitude Test

Rank each comment on a 1–5 scale where 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 5 = “Strongly Agree”

tions, and fears to best design and deliver that excellence they are striving for, the excellence that will truly solve their problems. It’s all there in the unprocessed, real voice of the customer, expressed in the most human way.

## THE CHAINSAW ROCK STAR

Smashing guitars has been a fixture of the music industry for decades. But Henry Juskiewicz gave the old tradition a new twist. When Juskiewicz acquired Gibson Guitar in 1985, he faced a company with a great heritage near collapse. In a recent interview with *USA Today*, Juskiewicz disclosed one of the steps he took to turn around the flagging company. “Seconds”—guitars with some blemishes or subtle problems—were common in the industry and were sold as “good enough” guitars. To reinforce the concept of product excellence, Juskiewicz took a “second,” and, in the presence of employees, he smashed it. He declared that, as of that moment, any guitar that did not meet the standard of a first-class Gibson would not be sold to customers. Juskiewicz would rather see these guitars destroyed than in the hands of customers. To emphasize his philosophy, he instructed employees to smash each faulty guitar and pile them in a designated area. At the end of every week, he would lead his employees by using a chainsaw to destroy the faulty guitars.

This may sound theatrical and harsh. Finance people would likely argue that the company was sacrificing a potential revenue stream. They would argue that defects in these guitars are rarely noticeable and would not impede a customer’s guitar playing. But Juskiewicz realized a deeper truth: However tempting it may be to capture additional revenue from the sale of faulty or defective products, one cannot sell seconds and deliver amazing customer experiences. The impact on brand image and on the customer experience will ultimately be devastating.

Juskiewicz’s action sent two critical messages. For employees, the message is that Gibson Guitar is a “no-excuses”

experience and that anything less than perfection will not be tolerated. Any compromise in quality leads to an overall compromise in excellence. Product superiority is a competitive and strategic advantage and selling faulty guitars, however minute those faults may be, erodes that advantage. Furthermore, tolerating seconds will lead employees to accept less than the highest standards. Production standards will ultimately decline, and the customer experience will be diminished. A subsequent reduction in profits and a decline in customer loyalty will soon follow.

The message to customers centered on the company’s high product standards.

By witnessing product excellence each time customers bought or played a guitar, they would know that Gibson Guitar provides only the very best. Customer expectations would be exceeded, and their experiences would be delightful. By destroying faulty guitars, Juskiewicz was destroying any attitude of taking customers for granted.

Destroying guitars and sacrificing revenue from flawed products may be costly in the short term, but any organization committed to excellence must take such measures. The alternative—mediocrity—is worse. Organizations that seek true long-term loyalty from customers must deliver that same level

- My workplace strategy is competitive and successful.
- My boss is a competent and a respected leader.
- I work with people who support my pursuit of excellence.
- I live up to my excellence potential.
- I get many compliments for the quality of my work.
- I can see the results of my work.
- My work impacts others in a significant way.
- I am fully responsible for the results of my work.
- My work is personal and not just business.
- I have the tools and authority to do my job.
- In my organization, technology is secondary to people.
- I always strive to do more for customers.
- Decisions are not controlled by senior management.
- I always do what is right for the customer.
- My values and the organization’s values are fully aligned.
- I am excited by the results of my work.
- Everyone can be as great as the top achievers of our century.
- I can recognize excellence in my daily work.
- Excellence is not a once-in-a-lifetime achievement.
- I will take risks to do the right thing.

## TOTAL OF THE ABOVE

### Scoring:

**20–49:** You are a captive of The Excellence Myth, clinging to all the possible excuses for why you cannot deliver excellence. You believe that your destiny, and therefore your performance, is controlled by outside forces that stop you from living up to your excellence potential.

**50–79:** You try to deliver excellence, but somehow fail to do so. The good news is that you see your potential. The bad news is that your excellence performance is misguided. You need to rethink your definition of excellence and re-evaluate the severity of some of the perceived obstacles.

**80–100:** You refuse to take no for an answer. Despite the challenges, you see the potential of your efforts and strive to perform in a superior manner. You are proud of the impact you have on others and draw personal fulfillment and satisfaction from delivering excellence. You are on the right path. Continue to raise the bar and reach for new heights of excellence.



# The Experience Gap Analysis

of commitment. Organizations are either committed to excellence and the continued improvement of product and service standards, or they are not. Product and service excellence are more than just buzzwords or nice ideas; they serve as a competitive differentiator and strategic advantage.

Product and service excellence can also serve as a means to obtain a higher price for products and services. At Gibson, prices had been declining 20 percent a year and to the astonishment of employees, Juskiewicz not only raised prices, in some cases, he doubled them. Yet even with a dramatic increase in price, volume continued to increase. By offering an exceptional, uncompromised product that delighted customers, Gibson was able to raise prices significantly and have customers reaffirm their conviction in the value delivered by its premium price products. Ultimately, customers rewarded excellence.

Juskiewicz says that the chainsaw process continues to this day, but he points out that the pile of broken guitars is much smaller. By sending the message that only perfection would be accepted, he has not only raised the quality of his company's guitars, but the production and service standards of his employees. After all, no employee wants to see the results of his laborious efforts being destroyed by a chainsaw.

Do you allow mediocrity into your organization while touting the message of excellence? As a rule of thumb, if you are willing to sell mediocrity to your customers, do not expect excellence from your employees. In a place where "good enough" is accepted, employees will not strive for excellence. As with all commitments, if dedication does not go up, it naturally goes down. This is a compromise that no company can afford to make.

## ONLY YOUR CUSTOMERS CAN JUDGE YOUR EXCELLENCE

Never miss an opportunity for excellence, which is measured one customer at a time. The challenge posed by any

given customer problem is really an opportunity: a chance to convey your excellence. When you engage with your customer, do you address the bigger picture or just your narrow definition of customer needs? This is exactly why excellence should be defined *as judged by the recipient*. Often, we claim excellence, but by our own terms. Those terms are often narrow and easy to achieve, and may ignore the big picture or our customers' larger concerns. It is a common mistake when excellence is self-centric and not customer-centric.

Redefining and reframing excellence as an everyday occurrence—rather than a rare lifetime achievement—is important to shifting away from The Excel-

lence Myth. Excellence belongs to everyone who wants to deliver it. That means it is you who chooses to unleash your power for excellence. Your employees are capable of excellence, but they may simply choose not to deliver it in your organization in every act. They will take their excellence elsewhere.

The only question left unanswered is, Are you ready to believe in your own capacity for excellence? 

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**To identify the differences** between employee and customer definitions of excellence, I designed the Experience Gap Analysis (EGA) study. The EGA study surveyed seven companies in the U.S. and Europe and allowed us to analyze 23,088 responses from 18,261 customers and 4,827 employees who served them. (The customers and employees participating in the study represented a variety of sectors including B2B products, business services, and B2C products.) The survey asked customers and employees to rate the employees' performance during a single performance interaction: the employees from their perspective as the deliverers of the performance and the customers from their perspective as the recipients.

The EGA study measured the customer experience on the following four dimensions:

**Capabilities:** The extent to which the employee possesses the necessary tools and authority to deliver performance excellence (e.g., access to customer information)

**Knowledge:** The extent to which the employee understands the customer's business, lifestyle, challenges, and aspirations

**Willingness:** The extent to which the employee is motivated to deliver performance excellence (e.g., to go above and beyond the call of duty)

**Attitude:** The extent to which the employee's connection with the customer is affected by his personal communication style (e.g., arrogance, sense of privilege to serve)

Each of these four dimensions was addressed through several questions relating to the way customers and employees interact and the outcome of that interaction. Questions were measured based on strong conviction responses rather than on median response.

## THE GAPS TELL THE STORY

EGA survey results revealed a significant disconnect between employee and customer perception, and nowhere was this more evident than in the "willingness" dimension with a 35.8 percent gap. Relative to customer responses overall, employees consistently overestimated their level of performance excellence, believing that they had delivered greater value than their counterparts on the receiving end were willing to give them credit for. A pattern in the responses showed that the criteria employees used in defining performance excellence generally neglected to take the customer's own criteria into account. Especially surprising were the following statistics:

**79 percent** of employees said they often go "above and beyond" and exceed customer expectations, yet only **29 percent** of customers agreed. **Perception gap: 50 percent.**

**75 percent** of employees said their work makes a difference in their customers' lives, but only **29 percent** of customers agreed. **Perception gap: 46 percent.**

**88 percent** of employees said they use common sense and discretion in the way they interact with customers, yet only **40 percent** of customers agreed. **Perception gap: 48 percent.**