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# Redefining Excellence for Today's World



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Thirty years ago, Tom Peters published an incredibly influential business book, *In Search of Excellence*.

In it, he defined eight characteristics of excellent companies: a bias for action, staying close to the customer, autonomy and entrepreneurship, productivity through people, clear and compelling organizational values, focusing on what you do best, operating with a lean staff, and finding a balance between having enough structure without getting stuck in it.

These principles remain good guides to this day. However, the business world has changed almost beyond recognition over the last 30 years, and the time has come to redefine what excellence means. In today's world, excellence is more than a set of principles. It's a set of beliefs, ways of thinking, a matter of discipline, and ways of focusing.

Excellence starts with getting very clear on the end state you wish to achieve (winning) and relentlessly driving towards it every day. Excellence requires knowing when to push on (even when you don't have all the information or the perfect solution), but doing it well and constantly refining as you forge ahead. Excellence means accepting only the best, and understanding that when it is not given that you, as the leader, are at least partly responsible.

Excellence reveals itself in the language you use, the questions you ask, the people you surround yourself with, and how you interact with others. For example, do you show up on time for meetings? Are you present in the moment? Do you listen actively to employees and direct reports? Are you aware of the biases and thought bubbles you bring to the table? Do you take steps to minimize their impact on your decision-making, or at least explore others as well?

In today's hyper-fast world, excellence requires building flexible, nimble organizations that can quickly adapt to rapidly changing markets without losing sight of their vision of winning. Creating this type of organization starts with three critical elements.

Clarity

First and foremost, you have to know where you're going and why. When faced with adversity (or opportunity), having a crystal-clear definition of winning keeps the company from going off in too many directions. It enables clear and consistent decision-making, not only in terms of what you will do as an organization, but also what you will not do.

When things change very quickly, as they do in today's chaotic markets, it can be easy to fall into a reactive mode. A new technology enters the market... how do we respond? A competitor introduces a new product that easily tops ours...how do we respond? An innovation from a completely different industry suddenly disrupts our business model....how do we respond? Having a clear definition of winning serves as your north star from which to navigate these critical strategic decisions.

## Focus

Getting clear on winning represents the starting point for excellence. Keeping your people focused on winning is the engine that will get you there. As the leader, you live and breathe the vision, mission, and strategy every day (or at least you should!). But for the people in the trenches, it's all too easy to lose sight of the big picture. Excellence requires making winning a daily objective for your people as well.

How? By constantly communicating your company's definition of winning in as many ways as possible, and with as much specificity as possible. Start every meeting with a quick reminder of the goals. Post visual cues and "brain prompts" throughout the company. Clarify how individual jobs and teams contribute to everyone winning. Reward individual and team behavior that moves the company closer to winning. The more you keep people relentlessly focused on winning, the better your chances of achieving it.

## Connection

People won't buy into your vision of winning unless they feel connected to the organization. Connection starts with having a powerful vision people can believe in and feel good about. Keeping it going requires a variety of leadership behaviors that often get overlooked in the rush to get the product out the door.

To help people feel connected, give honest, candid feedback on a regular basis. Set clear performance expectations for each job, and hold people accountable for performing at the required level. Solicit ideas and input from people at all levels of the organization, and listen. When adversity rears its head, let people know why and how your company will still win.

Most of all, make sure your actions align with what you are saying. In an environment where employees have rightfully grown to distrust leadership, personal integrity is an essential precursor to excellence.

Clarity, focus, and connection are the hallmarks of corporate excellence in the 21st century. What will you do today to create them in your organization?



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As CEO and Managing Director of The Human Factor, Inc. ([www.TheHumanFactor.biz](http://www.TheHumanFactor.biz)), I help business leaders and their companies achieve higher levels of performance and...

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