

## The Power and Pain of Excellence

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*Abstract: Excellence is spoken of as the desired outcome for individuals and organisations, but rarely seen in action. Fear and pain associated with change and being seen to be different are drivers for mediocrity. This article explores excellence and hurdles that must be overcome to be outstanding.*

“I am just calling to let you know you have missed out on the job. I know it has been a long time but I just felt too guilty to leave it any longer.”

“Why did I miss out? What would I have needed to do to get the position?” asks the rejected candidate.

“That’s where the guilt comes from. You would have been excellent. You are really well qualified, have the experience, and are passionate and excited. You would be ideal for the position but we went with the other person.”

“So why did I miss out?”

“You would have unsettled everyone else. You would have put pressure on the rest of us because of your obvious drive for excellence. We went with the other person because they will fit in without disturbing the status quo.”

This was a real conversation between someone I know well to be driven by excellence, who has just completed a degree with nothing less than straight As and has years of business experience; and a consultancy firm that markets itself as an industry leader. The potential employer really had waited weeks to advise of the rejection and the call was driven by guilt rather than simply a courtesy following a standard interviewing process. Little wonder guilt had to be the driver. Who really wants to admit that their organisation cannot tolerate excellence? Yet this is sadly true much of the time, only it is rarely so honestly stated.

Human nature tends towards average. Excellence is scary, challenging, and is the harbinger of change. Excellence will not allow us to remain settled in our entrenched comfort zone. It requires that we actively seek better ways of working. It not only suggests that we are not the best we can be, it announces it. It threatens the ego that enjoys gentle strokes of self-adulation and the gentle hum of everyone around us being supportive and encouraging. Often those who have no interest in pursuing excellence in themselves resent others who do because the average or mediocre feel ‘shown up’. The pursuit of excellence results in standing out from the crowd - becoming a tall poppy. In New Zealand we actually have a colloquialism that accepts we culturally chop down the tall poppy to punish anyone who rises above that painless standard.

### **So why is excellence such a threat to many of us? PAIN.**

The three sources of pain are:

- Attachments to the past being severed, whether relationships, places, practices, traditions or experiences
- Protections being breached – anything that keeps us physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually safe, whether the protections is real or merely perceived
- Expectations being dashed – the loss or adjustment to what might have been

Our standard processes and ways of doing business, personally and organisationally are rooted in what we have done in the past. We are attached to them, and creating change requires that we let go our attachment to tradition and move into the unknown. Fear of the unknown is a significant factor behind people clinging to what they have previously done, even when it is painfully obvious that it does not work. Pain in what does not work is not nearly as frightening as the threatened pain associated with trying something new or 'pushing the envelope' that may have an uncertain outcome attached to it.

Simultaneously, entrenched patterns of behaviour act as a protection for us. We have our shield to hide behind. Whether it is called tradition, culture, standard work practice, teaming or any other cover for dodging the bullet of change, we are protected by what we have done in the past. Excellence requires that we step outside our protection and become vulnerable. Note that many of our protections relate strongly to things we are attached to. We can shift from behind the protection of something we have always done, but if we do not sever the attachment we will most certainly find ourselves back in the same place we were before. Ask an addict if this is true.

Excellence threatens our expectations of a cushy ride, that we can carry on as we are, that change will only be modest.

There really is pain involved with excellence. No wonder average behaviour is by definition mediocre. But excellence is also where the power is... Like a titan rising from the ocean someone driven by excellence dislodges and challenges, creates change and provides competitive advantage. It is fuelled by energy and passion, desire and adventure and also courage. It necessarily sets us apart from the pack and though the pack may attempt to overwhelm and restrain excellence, an individual or organisation driven by excellence will always be pushing forward and creating space for themselves.

Where do you sit on this issue? Are you in the crowd for the safety and comfort of numbers? Or are you out in front, establishing direction, leading, seeking ways of improving and developing yourself and your organisation? Can you tolerate the discomfort of isolation and the chaos and confusion (or fog) associated with stepping into the unknown that excellence requires? Are you engaged in work or other activities that mean enough to you to be excited and driven; that actually engages your passion, or is life something that fills the gap between sleeps?

When you find your passion, you also find your power and drive. Apply this to excellence and watch your life change. Align yourself with an organisation and friends who value your drive for excellence. You can then all enjoy the journey and the rewards that excellence can bring. Demonstrate greater commitment, maturity and empowerment to yourself and your organisation. Go out there and be excellent.