

Pursue excellence



**“Your X-ray showed a broken rib,
but we fixed it with Photoshop.”**

Excellence is doing ordinary things extraordinarily well. —John Gardner

Librettist and theatrical producer Oscar Hammerstein II once remarked on an aerial photo of the Statue of Liberty taken from a helicopter. He described how the photo revealed finely etched strands of hair atop the head of Lady Liberty, details placed there by Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi.

It's important to remember that the Statue of Liberty was dedicated in New York Harbor on October 28, 1886, almost two decades before the Wright brothers' first flight. In those days, no one believed that human beings would ever be able to fly over the statue and look down on the top of Lady Liberty's head. Yet Bartholdi refused to cut corners with his sculpture. He paid attention to the little things, to the fine details he thought no one would ever see” (from *Coach Wooden's Greatest Secret* by Williams and Robinson, pg. 119).

Pursuing excellence means always doing your best. But it also implies that your best will be better than the norm.

Here are some key factors in pursuing excellence.

- Pay attention to details. The pursuit of excellence will always involve an obsessive infatuation with details. Famous American designer Charles Eames said, “Details are not the details. They *make* the design.” Everything that exists is a compilation of details; pay attention to them.

- Take the time to get it right. Picasso used up no less than eight notebooks just for preliminary sketches of his revolutionary painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. It takes a lot of time to fill eight notebooks with sketches but he wanted to get it right so the time he did take.
- Try to “do it once, do it right” but if the end product is inferior, be willing to “do it again to get it right.” Excellence can be obtained on the first attempt, but if it isn’t, be willing to stay with it.
- Embrace the concept of continuous improvement. In the 1960s and 1970s, W. Edwards Deming developed and introduced his quality-improvement methods into Japanese manufacturing. In two decades, Japanese products, which had been referred to as “Jap scrap,” became synonymous with “quality” and “super-engineering.” These quality improvement methods took Japan, within one generation, from a country that had been completely destroyed in 1945 to the number two economic power in the world. This transformation was built on the Japanese process called “kaizen” which means “continuous betterment” or “continuous improvement.” Never be content with the way things are; continually strive to make things better. Adopt the mindset that everything is a work in progress; incremental improvements will always be made.
- Be knowledgeable of benchmarks—they reveal how excellence is defined in any given area. Excellence is gauged by comparing an outcome with the generally accepted benchmark for that particular result. That’s why achieving excellence demands more than just doing the best we can do; our product must exceed standards that are established by others.
- Realize that excellence is an end unto itself. We should draw deep satisfaction from a job well done. Even if no one else notices or acknowledges our striving toward excellence, it will be its own reward. A job well done is very gratifying.

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'” ?
Martin Luther King Jr.

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