

Excellence Is No Mystery, But Some Like It That Way

Blog Post in NonprofitThinking on www.capdevstrat.com

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May 23, 2016



I LEARN A LOT FROM PODCASTS, and a recent episode of NPR's "[Hidden Brain](#)" illustrated something about human behavior that I believe is relevant to nonprofit management.

The podcast's host, Shankar Vedantam, was interviewing psychologist and researcher Angela Duckworth. Their topic was "grit." Duckworth is known for her writing on "[grit](#)" and its power to affect behavior and performance. In this podcast, Duckworth was highlighting her research on kids who were able to be successful in spelling bees. In her research she identified that efforts to establish a "deliberate practice" were essential elements of success for these kids.

With my attention already drawn in, she then made reference to a late 1980s research paper by former Olympic swimmer David Chambliss called "[The Mundanity of Excellence](#)." Now she really had my attention!

Excellence is a topic of great interest to me. For years, I have been associated with the Washington, DC region's top award for management excellence, and I have watched excellence in nonprofit management evolve along with the sector. However, an exact formula for management excellence continues to be somewhat elusive, despite a desire for one to exist. There is a push to find a clear intersection of sustained competency, thoughtful deployment of best practices and the occasional development of innovative tactics that neatly defines excellence.

And while many search for a distinct set of factors that lead to excellence, I am discovering that the reality is actually not nearly as complex and perhaps not as exciting. And Chambliss' research, along with some of Angela Duckworth's commentary, has provided a useful way of describing the basic truth about excellence.

Different, Not More

Most people think if they just do more of the same thing, they will get better results; organizations are no different. ("Let's have weekly meetings, not monthly." Or "Let's send out twice as many solicitations as we used to.") It

doesn't work, just like the simple fact of swimming more laps does not automatically lead to a Gold Medal. Instead, organizations must fundamentally rethink the way they approach their management practices. They must transform *how* they operate, interact with clients, work with employees, engage their donors or communicate their message. As Chambliss puts it, it requires a level of "qualitative differentiation."

Chambliss refers to the concepts of "technique, discipline and attitude" as central to creating this different quality of work. This is the "deliberate practice" to which Duckworth refers. It's a key process that leads to great achievements. Others use the term "mindfulness" to associate the intentional attention that can be focused on every aspect of an organization's life. And these mindful, qualitatively different practices will lead organizations to the next level.

Talent as the Barrier to Excellence

When we look at a champion, we immediately think, "Wow, they have something that I certainly don't have." Our typical first response is to associate that winner's excellence with what some call "talent." And with that one word, we ignore all of those small moves, deliberate practices and occasions of mindfulness that got that winner to that very place. Chambliss focuses a great deal of attention on the concept of "talent" in his paper, decrying how this concept fails as an appropriate explanation for athletic success.

"Talent," Chambliss claims, provides us with a reason not to compete. When we see that other person, group, organization exhibiting excellence, it becomes easy for us to say, "That's not us; they have talent. They're special; we can't compete with that, and we shouldn't try." In the Hidden Brain podcast, Vedantam and Duckworth talked about how audiences in fact relish the opportunity to witness a winning performance. We enjoy sitting back and marveling at such effortless magic. They revel in the spectacle while forgetting, or perhaps ignoring, the hours of careful preparation that got that performer to the stage.

Organizations can get lulled into the same passive admiration. They look at winning organizations and say, "They've got something we don't have – an amazing board, a huge capacity building grant, a really great cause to promote, etc. – and we will never get there." But throughout my work with the management award, I continually stress that all organizations can compete here. Good management is good management. All organizations, regardless of size, should put aside this concept of "talent" and explore all of the small ways through which these winning organizations got themselves to that place.

The Boring Truth

We want excellence to be a magic formula that enables us to plug in x, y and z ingredients and take our work to the next level. Or in other cases, we simply ascribe excellence to a quality and characteristic that we don't possess and remain content to marvel at a distance. I don't think either gets us to where we want to be.

No one suggests that achieving excellence is not hard work. Champion swimmers do in fact spend plenty of time in the pool taking lap after lap before we ever see them at a meet. Organizations do not transform themselves overnight either. A great deal goes into making an organization excellent.

But excellence is mundane. The truth is that excellence is nothing more than a thoughtful, intentional focus on a whole stack of small, qualitative adjustments. It is not luck. It is not "talent." But rather it is the convergence of a host of actions and attitude driven toward a common goal. For swimmers that goal could be competing in the state championships or winning an Olympic Gold Medal. In the nonprofit sector, that goal is the impact our organizations seek to have on our community, issue or clients; the impact seen through changed lives and improved situations.

Striving for excellence is pretty boring by itself. Excellence that underpins a singular vision for what needs to be accomplished is pretty exciting.

Excellence may be mundane, but changing the world sure isn't.

Citation for research paper:

Chambliss, Daniel F. "The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Swimmers." *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 70-86.

