



Excellence is the next five minutes

What excellent leadership is—and is not—in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excellence matters now more than ever. As the writer Hugh MacLeod said recently, “Creating excellence is not a job. Creating excellence is a moral act.” In different ways, the work we’ve both done over decades highlights the importance of putting people first to create organizations that excel. The basic idea of creating a humane culture, taking care of your people and preparing them for tomorrow, getting everyone to play the innovation game full-time, and offering products marked by unabashed excellence was and still is the bedrock.

The way to do so is by what Tom has long called “managing by wandering around,” building a human community among employees and leaders. Soft has always been hard, but now, when putting people first is even more important, how does it work when wandering around isn’t possible? How do you “wander” when interactions between leaders and teams are virtual, scheduled, or video-driven? Is it possible to truly build and maintain human community within the limitations of social distancing and shuttered offices?

Yes. Managing by wandering around is a state of mind more than a physical act. It takes leaders who fully engage each team member and let their humanity and give-a-damn-ism show, leaders who worry more about how individuals and their families are coping than making it through every agenda item. In the current crisis, we have seen the humanity of leaders make values and cultures real, moving them from what is stated to what is lived daily. And we have learned that letting humanity show through is the single thing leaders are doing that has the greatest impact on the health and well-being of individuals, teams, and organizations. Leaders and teams have been at their best as they’ve found the right balance in priorities between home and work, between well-being and a drive for performance. And all this has reinforced, spectacularly, that these are not mutually exclusive priorities, that a focus on humanity will surely drive a focus on results.

Excellence is conventionally—in fact, almost without fail—seen as a long-term aspiration. We disagree. *Vehemently disagree*. Excellence is not a destination at which you arrive on a glorious sunny day after years of brutally hard work. Excellence is a way of life, a way of being that sustains us and inspires us and inspires those who are around us day in and day out.

Around the globe, we celebrate daily the heroism of first responders, healthcare workers, and employees at the front line whose commitment to purpose and drive to serve every day are at the very heart of excellence. Now, with reentry and reopening of businesses occurring with some pace, we are also seeing the daily commitment of every employee who has recently been visible only through the glare of the screen, as they step up to serve customers and support team members, with the same focus on excellence.

Successful leaders are focusing on excellence in every action:

EXCELLENCE is your next four-line e-mail.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is your next virtual meeting.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is shutting up and listening—*really* listening.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is your next customer contact.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is saying “Thank you” for something “small.”

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is pulling out all the stops at warp speed to respond to a “minor” screwup.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is learning the names of all 10 of your team members’ kids.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is bothering to learn the way folks in other functions think.

Or not.

EXCELLENCE is waaaay overpreparing for a three-minute presentation.

Or not.

In the end, excellence is the next five minutes—or nothing at all.



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About the authors

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Tom Peters

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