

The Secrets for Linking Excellence to Strategy

By Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

In American folklore, the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys has long served as a metaphor for bitterly warring rival parties. However, this thirteen-year dispute in the backcountry of West Virginia pales in comparison to the battle that rages between competence and excellence in most organizations. When people deliver pedestrian performance, senior leaders too often settle, and mediocrity reins.

Those who excel in the hot seat do better. They focus on effective execution of the strategy and don't skew the mission by placing value on tertiary issues that have little to do with where the company needs to go and how it needs to get there. In other words, they know the secrets for linking excellence to strategy.

It all starts with "who." Your organization can be no more excellent than the least excellent employee in your building. Certainly, top performers in senior positions will hold the most sway, but at every rung of your organizational ladder, you must have the best. Not every person needs to offer the skills, aptitude, or desire to move up that ladder, but each, from the janitor to the CEO, should represent the gold standard of performance. If you accept less, you compromise excellence.

Frustration leads myriad reasons people don't perform to their potential. They simply don't know what you expect; strategy remains fuzzy; priorities change too often; or the implementation plan, if it ever existed, can't be found. Without clarity and transparency on these issues, you can't hope to attain excellence. If senior leaders fail to communicate to those who crave it, they stand no chance of attaining excellence. Clarity is the voice, accountability the echo. Once people understand the direction the company needs to take, they must be aware of the specific roles they will play in winning the race.

After "who?" comes "what?" What do we do that is world-class? If the answer isn't obvious, discover where the gaps exist between you and the competitor who outruns you. If the answer is apparent, become acutely aware of the factors that keep you in first place. This knowledge will help you maintain your best-in-class position and avoid diluting your excellence with products and services that don't support it.

A goal, strategy, intention, or plan to be excellent is not the answer. Rather, an *understanding* of what you can be the best at holds the key. This awareness will force the trade-offs when you face decisions about allocation of resources—human and financial. Stick with what you know—and what you can do at a world-class level. Let that, not your ego, determine what you attempt. That's the secret.

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