

Leadership Insights

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In Pursuit of Personal Excellence

by

Dr Norman Chorn

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WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

In a conversation between Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, Fitzgerald is reputed to have said “*The rich are different to you and me*”, to which Hemingway replied, “*Yes, they have more money*”. Notwithstanding the literary dispute as to whether this conversation actually took place, Fitzgerald was alluding to the fact that the rich seemed to behave differently in their everyday lives.

Are the rich different? Do they behave differently? I’m not suggesting that the rich are in any way superior to those without vast sums of money, but I have been wondering about the differences between those who pursue (and often achieve) excellence in their lives and those not motivated by that ideal.

We’ve all read the personal development material that emphasises the importance of stretch goals, self-discipline, confidence and the like. I don’t doubt the importance and relevance of these factors, but I wanted to explore some of the things that perhaps go unnoticed in those who pursue personal excellence. Do they do different things? Do they do things differently?

I began by reviewing my notes and transcripts of interviews with the leaders I had met in the course of our corporate

resilience research¹². In doing so, I identified a number of interesting behaviours displayed by these leaders as they pursued their own goals of excellence. I went back to several of these leaders and attempted to understand further some of the reasons and motivations behind these behaviours. Some of these were obvious, while others appeared somewhat counter-intuitive initially.

These are some of the behaviours that really stood out amongst the group of leaders who were pursuing their own personal excellence:

SEEK HELP FROM FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES

It is remarkable how often these leaders ask for help from friends and colleagues. They understand that people enjoy helping others where this help is valued and the need for assistance is genuine. It is a symbiotic relationship where both parties derive something from the interaction. The leader gets the benefit of additional expertise, and the helper gets the self-satisfaction of knowing they’ve added value in a relationship.

¹ Chorn, N: *Signposts on the road to Corporate Resilience*. 2010

² Chorn, N: *Eight Traits of Resilience*, 2008

But there was another dimension that attracted my attention. In their pursuit of personal excellence, these leaders are comfortable being seen to ask for help. They recognise that, as leaders, they are not expected to always know the answers or be the best at everything. This is not a common trait in many organisations. The traditional view is that seeking assistance is a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Obviously the leader has to bring something to the party, ie they must be capable of making a real contribution to the thinking and practice within their organisation, but it seems increasingly unreasonable that the leader is the font of all knowledge in complex situations.

HANG OUT WITH EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE

Those leaders pursuing their own personal excellence seem to spend a good proportion of their time with other exceptional people. *It is said that you are the average of the five people you spend most of your time with.* Whether this is true or not, it seems as if we are influenced by those we interact and speak with the most.

In about half of the cases, these exceptional people are not personal friends or acquaintances. They are authors or successful people in their own fields. In these cases, the leaders make a conscious effort to read their books, attend their lectures or study their lives in whatever way possible.

It reminds me of Newton's famous quote where he referred to his progress being due to the fact that he had "*stood on the shoulders of giants*" in his pursuit of scientific excellence. There seems little doubt that these leaders, each on the pursuit of their own personal excellence, seeks out the wisdom of others from which to leverage and improve their own positions.

SHARE VISIONS AND PRINCIPLES GENEROUSLY

In my discussions with these leaders, it became obvious that they believe in sharing their visions and views on the world generously, without necessarily being self-centred. They are explicit about what they stand for, and don't mind being open about their intentions.

I wondered how this openness might thwart their visions by giving their opponents undue warning and opportunity to resist. But it seems that almost all of them agree that more can be achieved by openness and bold action. It seems as if more damage is done by being vague and indecisive than by being explicit and bold, particularly during periods of change.

Despite this willingness to share openly, these leaders also believe in not talking too much. They will say just enough to be perfectly understood – and then move to favour action over talk and long argument.

NOT PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is often viewed as being an element of excellence. This is disputed by many of the leaders I spoke with. They view it as a real brake on progress and a cause of bottlenecks in many situations.

In a way, perfectionism may be interpreted as a fear of having one's work judged and receiving feedback – hence the need to continually avoid releasing it. In addition, the notion of “completing something to perfection” connotes that there is no more to be achieved or learned. These leaders appear to favour the view that the pursuit of excellence is an ongoing dynamism – something that keeps moving as we learn and develop our capabilities further.

SKILL IS NOT ENOUGH

Many of these leaders are highly skilled in their own fields. Some are talented engineers; others have real skills in areas such as consumer insight, communications and financial analysis. But they all seem to spend significant amounts of time engaging in and practicing their skill.

In his book on outstanding human performance, Malcolm Gladwell³ outlines the pathway to personal excellence achieved by many famous artists, scientists and leaders. He demonstrates that a significant amount of practice is often the key difference between those who simply show promise and those who achieve excellence in their chosen field.

³ Gladwell, M, *The Outliers*, 2008

By examining the experiences of people as diverse as the Beatles and Bill Gates, he argues that approximately 10,000 hours of practice is what's required to achieve excellence. Simply having the skill or talent is not enough.

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

These leaders demonstrate a strong willingness to get their hands dirty – to do what it takes when the situation demands it. So, there are no “ivory tower” behaviours in pursuing personal excellence. But, they recognise that spending all their times “in the weeds” is not beneficial either. “Finding the right balance to achieve the best use of my time”, is how several of these leaders express it.

Closely related to the willingness to get your hands dirty is the willingness to be a follower when the situation demands it. Delegating and empowering others means that you often have to step aside and allow them to lead – even though you may personally prefer an alternative approach to the one they have chosen. Failing to do so will damage any attempt to empower, decentralise or delegate.

RATIONAL OPTIMISM

Pursuing personal excellence requires a rational optimism, a belief that you can and will make progress by pursuing a sensible approach. These leaders are all optimists and hold an optimistic view of life. But they recognise that optimism is NOT necessarily the opposite of pessimism. It is not the idealistic belief (or

hope) that things will get better simply because you want them to.

Instead, rational optimism is a balanced understanding of the whole system of which you are part. It is recognition of both strength and weakness; an interest in building the best as well as repairing the worst; and a concern for finding self fulfilment as well as healing sickness. These rational optimists are realists, but their defining point of difference is that they will never give up on themselves.

At a more practical level, these leaders try to avoid spending too much time with negative people and sceptics. Or if they have to, they try to limit the impact of these people on their outlook and enthusiasm.

STRESS AND DE-STRESS

The leaders all seem to have their own strategies for building and maintaining their personal resilience – an important attribute in the relentless pursuit of excellence. Despite their personal differences and preferences, there seems to be an overall pattern.

In much the same way as athletes develop (resilience in) their muscles, these leaders have a regime that alternates between periods of stress and periods of de-stress.

In much the same way as muscles are developed, we know that human capabilities have to be subjected to a degree of stress or stretch in order to grow. No real development is possible unless the capability is tested to the limit for periods of time.

But equally important are the phases of rest and de-stress that punctuate the periods of high stress. This allows for the recuperation and regeneration of strength.

But not just any rest. These leaders all confess to having their own favourite activity that provides them the opportunity to de-stress. For some, it is a pastime such as music or reading, while others prefer cycling and other physical activities. In each case, it is an activity that generates its own happiness and pleasure. And in each case, they have learned to retreat to this pastime without feelings of guilt because they understand its recuperative benefits.

TOWARDS EXCELLENCE

It seems as if those pursuing personal excellence do go about some things differently. In some cases, these behaviours are planned and quite deliberate, while in others they are implicit and not done consciously.

The good news is that many of these behaviours can be learned and cultivated as we pursue our own pathway towards personal excellence.

About the author

Dr Norman Chorn is a strategy and organisation development practitioner with over 20 years experience in Australia, UK, New Zealand and South Africa. His work is focused on strategies for growth and corporate resilience.

Inovatum works with businesses and organisations that are increasingly challenged by the accelerating pace of change and globalisation. Our partners provide fresh advice and insights on markets, strategy, supply-chain, organisation design and leadership.

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