

The Dark Side of Excellence

What is it we fail to see
in our blind pursuit of success?

by Phillip Moffitt

WE WERE sitting in his living room just across the Golden Gate Bridge in Sausalito, a little hill town over-looking San Francisco Bay. It was one of those scenic northern California afternoons, clean and beautiful. The man sitting across from me was looking out the window at the sailboats moving below like white specks on the quiet water of the bay. It was a scene for contemplation, which was why he lived here. I was here on a search, looking for a new perspective—or maybe I just needed a cheering boost.

I had become increasingly disturbed by what seems to me the trivialization of excellence, the hyping of success—the whole concept of “yuppiedom,” for instance—and the emerging tendency to measure performance in one dimension: immediate commercial success.

He suddenly looked up and said, “You know, there has to be a shadow side, a dark side,

to all this media promotion of excellence.” He is president of a large graduate school of psychology, one of the founders of the Aspen Institute, a former AT&T executive who has a broad background in business and venture-capital activities, one of those men who has read everything and knows everybody but still retains a kind of naïve idealism.

“What do you mean, a shadow side?” I asked.

“When I first saw this phenomenon—this preoccupation with excellence—I was very excited,” he began. “I felt it represented an effort to bring out the best of human capacity and to do it in new organizational forms. But as the subject of excellence became a kind of cult the subject matter itself became less carefully analyzed; people were merely looking backward and saying: ‘Oh, this is successful; it must be an example of excellence.’”

I wanted to hear more. At Esquire we were in the midst of preparing this issue, which celebrates quality and leadership, and I did not want us to fall prey to this kind of simplification.

“What bothers me so much,” he said, turning back to the window and the boats, “is that people seem to be reducing management to short-term, obsessional behavior and then equating management with leadership, so that we are being presented with the ideal leader as someone obsessed with short-term results. This is not just a phenomenon in business, but it is most obvious there because the stock market so overrewards the immediate performance. The net effect of this process is that a management team can be receiving reward and recognition at the time it is damaging the organization. In other words, this is an important subject, because how we measure things can make people and companies sick, while there is no

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evidence that a wholesale greed for profit, for the bottom line, has any value in itself for society.”

I told him I understood his dismay. I have seen in the last fifteen years how devastating it has been for many American companies trying to compete with the Japanese. But he seemed to be referring to something else, some more basic aspect of the workplace, and so I asked him to elaborate.

“I’ll give you two examples,” he continued. “We recently conducted a study of health programs in large companies and found most companies to be very reluctant to really deal with the health of their employees. Many of their health benefits were for an executive elite, and the general health programs were not well measured and innovative because, as one corporate health official told me, ‘We do not know how well they work, and we do not want to know.’ Meaning the company was afraid of the expense of true responsibility. Contrast this with the Japanese management system, with its total involvement in human assets, and you have an example of the dark side of how we measure success.

“Or, as a second example, look at the burnout rate of midlevel executives in their middle and late thirties. Almost all companies have problems with this—people simply lose

their enthusiasm, their passion for their work. At the same time, our society, in emphasizing the short-term result, now has a turnover among chief executives in large companies nearly every seven years. How can a leader be concerned about his young talent’s development when he will be gone before he could enjoy the benefit of investing in it? That is the dark side, my friend.” And he stood up and suggested a walk.

WE LEFT his house and started walking down the hill to the harbor. I told him how I had traveled recently around the country talking with men and women in their thirties and how shocked I was that so many of them seemed disillusioned with their careers. I asked him how he felt about the drive for success attributed to the under-forty crowd. He argued that mostly it is the same motivation that has impelled every generation and that this generation is unfairly blamed for being self-centered. The problem, he told me, is that self-esteem is getting too tied up in demonstrable success. He told me it was important to remember that only a small percentage of the generation was truly narcissistic. These he characterized as people so acutely self-centered as to be emotionally ill. He described them as very assertive, often charming, generally obsessive people who are absorbed in their own self-aggrandizement

and whose personal and professional relationships are exploitative. “They are almost impossible to work with in therapy because they exploit the therapy process as well,” he said with regret in his voice. “But most people in the under-forty generation need only to understand their success curve, really their learning curve, which I believe to be the sigmoid curve,” he said, now chuckling, as we walked along the dock admiring the sailboats.

“What do you mean, their sigmoid curve?”

“Studies show that living organisms have learning curves that are S-shaped. In learning, at first the individual has a period of slow orientation followed by rapid acceleration. However, at a certain point, the curve begins to tip downward. So, if a person or an organization does not change its learning curve—i.e., get on a new curve—its success life is sharply limited. We’ve recently witnessed numerous examples of this phenomenon in the computer field. Companies that initially enjoyed great success could not reassess their strategies, and they missed the changing market. Success gives the illusion that the curve only goes up. It requires tremendous introspection to know otherwise, and introspection is not high on most people’s list of leadership qualities.”

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BY NOW, we had walked the dock area and the town's little main street. What he was saying made sense, but I am suspicious of any general theory. I decided to question him more as we headed up the hill back to his house.

“I think I understand what you mean about the learning curve and how it needs to change for a person to a company. But what can we do not to fall into this trap?”

He had anticipated this question and was ready to answer. “Let's go back to the idea of the learning curve. If change occurs at the time learning starts to slow, that is, if perturbation happens [to perturb, interestingly enough, means ‘to disturb but not destroy’], then there is a chance to avoid the dramatic deterioration. If we call this the ‘observation point,’ when you can see the past and the future, then there is time to reconsider what one is doing.”

“Easy to say,” I countered, “but most difficult to achieve. Who ever does that? How would one do it?”

“It's a matter of retreating in order to reassess, and yes, this kind of introspective withdrawal will often bring with it the dark mood of depression, but that is part of the process. Look at our own history, think of President Lincoln and his bouts with himself in

between his great acts of leadership, or in more recent times, Winston Churchill, who quite simply stepped out, and wrote a beautiful book on painting before returning as a great leader.

“If you study Toynbee, T.S. Eliot, Carl Jung, you will discover they understood the concept of retreat and return.”

I WAS a bit overcome by all this. By now we had returned to his house, fixed some tea, and were sitting watching the fading light. I know of so many people who are caught up in the reevaluation process right now, questioning the career paths they've chosen and realizing the limited time they have in which to make a major change. The smartest of these people seem to me to be the ones who have recognized they cannot achieve every goal, every dream, in a lifetime and have begun deciding what matters most to them.

I have come to believe that my career goal must be quality work in an area that excites and fulfills, and that this time of work, however difficult, must be balanced by a time of self-renewal.

Maybe this man's learning curve, with its observation point, is a helpful metaphor, one I can use in my own life right now. Maybe. I asked him about his own career, how he had resolved these

issues for himself.

He put down his cup and began to reminisce. “My own experience with that observation point occurred when I was about thirty-seven and really full of myself as an up-and-coming boy of the executive team at AT&T. Ironically, it was the designation of my status, the conferring of a top perk, that was to take the wind out of my sails. In those days, at a certain level of responsibility you were assigned a personal limousine and your own driver. I really thought this was it—no more taking trains, hunting for cabs, et cetera. But as I spent more and more time in the limo I became increasingly aware that my driver was not in the least responsive to me as an individual. I would initiate a conversation and invariably he would let it drop. I got really disturbed by this.” He laughed as he relived that time. I did not know where his story was headed, so I waited for him to go on.

“Finally, one day I just asked him: ‘Why don't you talk with me?’ He looked me dead in the eye and said: ‘Because you are boring. . . you have a boring life.’ I was shocked. I resented it, wanted to angrily deny it. But you know, he was right. In going so fast, in being driven, I had missed building any kind of life within me, not spent enough time with my family

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or myself. I realized then, What difference would it make if I made it to the very top of AT&T? Would it give me a personal life? I had hit that moment, that observation point, and I looked back and looked ahead. I really did. And so I just dropped out. I retreated. AT&T was very kind, and they helped make it easy by saying: 'Here's some money, take some time and go away and think about it.' But once I dropped out I could not go back. Funny thing, how it took that driver to personally connect me to a problem I already knew about but had never related to me."

I sat there looking at him. He had done so many interesting things in his life—he was a consultant, an entrepreneur, a venture capitalist, and now an educator.

"How does an individual know he's at his observation point or, rather, one of his observation points?" I asked.

"This is a tough question," he replied. "Look for value conflicts between you and your work or between you and the organization. Is it affecting your health, your individual integrity? It may not be the organization's fault, it may be your own. But still you have to face up to it and determine, Can you change within the organization or do you have to get out?"

The time had come for us to join two authors for dinner at a local restaurant, after which I would return to San Francisco. I asked him how American business or any organization should reflect what we had discussed.

He thought for a moment and replied: "If we really do believe that human initiative is one of the most important aspects of our society, then we have to start addressing the question, What is the ultimate value of the human beings in the organization? I think every annual report should have a formal report—one page in length—a balance sheet for the human resources of the business. On one side would be the human assets, and how much the company increased those assets during the year, how well it was able to utilize them. On the other side would be the depreciation of those assets for health reasons, retirement, job misallocation, resignation, et cetera."

ON MY way back to San Francisco and many times since then, I've thought about this conversation, trying to distill it into practical terms for myself as an individual and as a company leader. The dark side of any subject is by definition hard to see clearly, and this is true with the subject of excellence. I feel the necessity for change in the work environment, the need to create a richer human

experience, and I feel the personal opportunity for me to be a more daring leader. Yet I remain skeptical and cautious—skeptical because human behavior is not very changeable except over a long period of time, and because many ideas for change are really just additional laws someone wants to impose under the guise of enhancement when in fact they only serve to limit individual initiative. Similarly, I am cautious because I am a practical man who, knowing how hard it is to make things work, is ever concerned that people stay focused on their responsibilities. However, in the end, I have come to believe that everyone has to struggle with change, to take risks in the belief that what exists now as the work experience can become much better if we are persistent in our caring. So I struggle on, still not even sure exactly what it is I am searching for.