How to Achieve Excellence

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Excellence is not a mystery. It is the cumulative result of focusing on what matters, eliminating what does not, and refusing to lie to ourselves. Most organizations fail not because the problems are hard, but because they tolerate confusion, waste, and wishful thinking.

This memo lays out a set of operating principles for building and sustaining excellence.

Ruthless Focus on Real Value

Start with the customer. Not the roadmap, not internal politics, not what sounds impressive.

Ask relentlessly: what generates actual value for the customer? If an activity, feature, process, or role does not contribute to that value, it is a candidate for removal.

Busy work is not neutral. It actively destroys excellence by consuming time, attention, and energy that should be spent on what matters.

Chase Down What's Off

Anything that feels "funky" usually is.

If something looks wrong, investigate it. If something is unclear, make it clear. If something is not understood, do not proceed until it is.

Ambiguity compounds. Small misunderstandings turn into large failures if they are ignored. Excellence requires discomfort: stopping, digging, and asking why.

Root Causes or Nothing

Always chase root causes.

Yes, it takes time. Yes, it consumes resources. Yes, it is worth it.

Treating symptoms feels fast but guarantees recurrence. Every unresolved root cause is technical debt, organizational debt, or cultural debt waiting to collect interest. Excellence is incompatible with bandaid fixes.

Constraint Is a Feature

Resources are always constrained. Pretending otherwise leads to mediocrity.

If resources are limited, build fewer features. If a job does not need to be done, delete it. If a task does not meaningfully advance the goal, remove it.

Doing less, better, beats doing more, poorly, every time.

Kill Bureaucracy Aggressively

Bureaucracy is inertia made visible.

If a process slows people down without improving outcomes, delete it. If someone consistently does not contribute, or generates busy work, remove the role. If a meeting has no clear purpose or decisions, cancel it.

You do not need to sync every week. You need clarity, ownership, and trust. Meetings are tools, not rituals.

Support the People Doing the Work

Understand the real problems your teams face.

If they need resources, provide them. If they lack skills, help them acquire them. If they need guidance or direction, give it.

Upward communication matters. Learn to articulate problems precisely to your lead, and explain exactly how they can support you. Vague complaints are useless; concrete asks move systems.

Ask Questions Relentlessly

Assumptions are silent killers.

Ask questions. Ask again. Ask until the system makes sense.

Curiosity is not weakness. It is a prerequisite for correctness.

Optimize for Truth, Not Consensus

Agreement is cheap. Being right is expensive.

Focus on what is correct, not what is popular or agreed upon. Consensus that ignores reality eventually collapses. Truth, even when uncomfortable, compounds.

Do not believe things. Show the data.

Treat the Customer Timeline as Holy

The customer's timeline is holy.

Never overcommit. Never promise what you are not confident you can deliver. Never say "yes" to avoid discomfort.

Say no when necessary. Honesty beats optimism theater. Broken promises destroy trust faster than missing features.

Separate Identity from Job

Your worth as a human being is not tied to your job performance.

You can be bad at your job and still have value as a person. Failure at work is not failure as a human.

This separation is essential. People who fuse identity with job become defensive, political, and afraid of truth. Excellence requires psychological safety grounded in reality, not ego.

Control Emotion, Keep Passion

Leave personal feelings out of decision-making. Bring passion for the work itself.

Emotion-driven execution leads to noise. Passion-driven execution leads to intensity, care, and pride in craftsmanship. The goal is not detachment, but disciplined focus.

Treat Work as a Game, and Play to Win

Work is a game with rules, constraints, incentives, and opponents (complexity, entropy, time).

Understand the game. Learn its mechanics. Exploit them intelligently.

Playing to win does not mean cutting corners. It means optimizing for outcomes, not appearances. Excellence is not accidental; it is the result of playing the game deliberately and well.

Appendix

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Carsten Wulff received the M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees in electrical engineering from the Department of Electronics and Telecommunication, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), in 2002 and 2008, respectively. During his Ph.D. work at NTNU, he worked on open-loop sigma-delta modulators and analog-to-digital converters in nanoscale CMOS technologies. In 2006-2007, he was a Visiting Researcher with the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada. Since 2008 he's been with Nordic Semiconductor in various roles, from analog designer, to Wireless Group Manager, to currently Principle IC Scientist. From 2014-2017 he did a part time Post.Doc focusing on compiled, ultra low power, SAR ADCs in nanoscale technologies. He's also an Adjunct Associate Professor at NTNU. His present research interests includes analog and mixed-signal CMOS design, design of high-efficiency analog-to-digital converters and low-power wireless transceivers. He is the developer of Custom IC Compiler, a general purpose integrated circuit compiler, and makes the occational video on analog integrated circuits at https://www.youtube.com/@analogicus. For full CV see https://analogicus.com/markdown-cv/.