

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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What Price Excellence?

by Dr. Mike Armour

One of my current coaching clients is a highly successful senior executive in the high tech industry. He is also an avid cyclist – the bicycle variety. And he's good at it, ranked among the top road racers in the U.S.

At the same time, he travels constantly, from China to Canada to England to the Continent. It sometimes seems he's in town only a week each month. He copes with a grueling schedule.

Right now he's starting to prepare for the U.S. nationals. When he mentioned that the other day, I asked, "With your travel schedule, how do you maintain the necessary training program to be ready for big races like that?"

Thirty Flights of Stairs

"Well," he said, " when I'm in town I'm out of bed every morning at 4:15, out of the house by 4:30, and I ride 30 miles before breakfast. When I'm traveling, I obviously can't be toting my racing bike with me everywhere. So I find an office tower that has 30 flights of stairs. I run to the top taking the steps one at a time. Then I repeat the run taking the steps two at a time, and then I do it again three steps at a time. After that I put my feet together and hop all the way to the top."

Can you imagine the kind of physical conditioning that would result from his training regimen? But what amazed me the most in his statement was not the regimen, but the simple, matter-of-fact way in which he described it. He was not trying to awe me or cause my jaw to drop in disbelief. He was merely describing what it requires, in his opinion, to be good at what he does. And because he wants to be the best, he doesn't see this training regimen as all that exceptional.

What he knows is that excellence is costly. It calls for sacrificial commitment. There are no shortcuts. Here's a man who negotiates half-billion dollar acquisitions. Imagine how tempting it must be for him, at the end of many grueling business days, to slip back to the hotel room and crash for the rest of the evening. But no, he dons his jogging shoes and heads out to the street to look for thirty-story office towers. He's willing to pay the price to be world-class.

A Passion? Or Merely A Value?

His is what I call a passion for excellence. Just about everyone values excellence. We all want to be known for doing things excellently. But what a gulf separates those who merely value excellence from those who have a passion for it!!

When I was a teenager, I was part of a six-man jazz combo that occasionally crossed over into light rock music. I played the keyboard, which in those pre-synthesizer days, basically meant piano. I was never very good at it. But I loved the instrument. Still do. And because of my love for it, I genuinely admired people, whatever their style of music, who seemed to love it, too.

So I would study the styles of everyone from Artur Rubenstein in classical music to Ferrante and Teicher in popular music to Floyd Cramer in country and western to Jerry Lee Lewis in rock and roll. But the pianist I admired the most was Roger Williams, who at one point had two platinum albums in the top ten at the same time. An amazing accomplishment for an instrumentalist in any era.

One night he appeared as a guest on Johnny Carson's Tonight Show. In the course of their conversation, Carson said, "I would give anything to be able to play the piano the way you do." Williams immediately shot back, "No you wouldn't." Carson raised his eyebrows at the rebuff. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Because you're not willing to give up the time to be good at it," Williams explained.

"So if I was going to play like you, how much time would that take?" Carson inquired.

"Well, I can't say for you," Williams answered. "I can only speak for myself. Right now, because I don't have any upcoming concerts or new albums in the works, I only practice eight hours a day, seven days a week. But as soon as I have an approaching concert or recording commitment, I'll move that up to 12 to 14 hours per day."

Carson was dumbfounded. "But why should anyone as good as you are put in that many hours of practice?" he asked. Williams replied, "If I cut back to six hours per day, within a week I could hear the difference. Within two weeks other professionals could hear the difference. And within a month to six weeks my audience could hear the difference."

There it is again, the passion for excellence. And a willingness to make the sacrifice that excellence demands. Beyond that, we see here the recognition that even having attained excellence, we can lose it quickly if we are unwilling to pay the price to retain it.

A Little Self-Examination

These two sets of comments — one from a musician, the other from a racer — force me to ask myself whether I truly treasure excellence or whether I merely value it. I look at goals I've spelled out for myself, my career, and my business, and I notice that many of them describe a commitment to excellence.

But then I have to stop and ask myself, "Do I have this commitment to excellence among my goals simply to make myself feel good? Make myself look good? Or am I really passionate about excellence in this arena of my life? Am I currently paying the price daily in order to excel?"

All too often, when we are honest with ourselves about questions like this, we have to face the fact that our commitment to excellence is more nearly of the Carson variety than

the Williams variety. That is, we are in love with the idea of excellence (like Carson), not truly passionate about it like the immortal Roger Williams.

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