

In Search of (Personal) Excellence

We've all heard of the alpha male and female. The dictionary defines them as the dominant person in a group, the one everybody emulates and follows. The term was originally coined to describe behavior in wolf and dog packs, but for most of the 20th Century, it also accurately depicted the way we interacted in our careers. One person was on top, and the rest of us brought up the rear.

While wolves and dogs are stuck with this leader-follower relationship, however, we humans have an option. We can pull ourselves out of the back of the pack—out of the pack altogether, in fact—and assume a new role. I call it the “alpha career athlete.” It recognizes our innate ability to act as individuals and to set our own unique course in the world of work.

More often than not, the alpha career athlete still finds their employment in an organization. Most aren't free agents or independent contractors. They work in teams, on projects and for departments and they report to a boss. Their on-the-job experience is similar to that of every other person in the workplace. What changes is their view of who they are working for and why.

An alpha career athlete works on themselves for themselves. They are interested in learning just how good they can be in their profession, craft or trade. They accept a job because it challenges them to be better than they have been, and they devote all of their talent to passing the test. Moreover, that same commitment to self improvement also enhances the value of their contribution to their employer. In effect, they protect their employment and preserve their paycheck by persevering in their determination to excel.

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In 1982, Tom Peters wrote a business classic called *In Search of Excellence*. The book's popularity was largely based on the author's research into how companies achieved superior performance. It outlined a number of practices that other organizations could implement in order to achieve their own version of excellence.

What many readers missed, however, was the underlying premise of the book: success was best achieved through a commitment to excellence. If you wanted your company to prosper, it wasn't enough to be good or even very good and certainly not mediocre or just enough to get by. The one sure pathway to prosperity was excellence.

What was true for organizations in the 20th Century is true for individuals in the 21st Century. Success is not achieved by being loyal to one's employer or by knowing how things get done inside an organization. It is not assured with years of experience or even with a knowledge of the current state-of-the-art. What produces sustained career advancement in today's world of work is a commitment to personal excellence.

It is what drives the alpha career athlete. He or she is “in search of excellence.” They are on a quest to become the champion inside them. This is not some quixotic adventure, but rather an entirely rational determination to express and experience the talent with which they (and all of us) were created. Alpha career athletes believe that, just as every company can achieve superior performance, so too can they. And they're resolved to do so.

Companies, however, have Peters' guidelines with which to work; alpha career athletes need something else. They need a set of practices that will engage, refine and unleash the excellence within them. What follows are what I think those practices must be:

I. Pump Up Your Cardiovascular System. The heart of your career is your occupational expertise. Re-imagine yourself as a work-in-progress so that you are always adding depth and tone to your knowledge and skill set.

II. Strengthen Your Circulatory System. The wider and deeper your network of contacts, the more visible you and your capabilities will be in the workplace. Make nurturing professional relationships a part of your business day.

III. Develop All of Your Muscle Groups. The greater your versatility in contributing your expertise at work, the broader the array of situations and assignments in which you can be employed. Develop ancillary skills that will give you more ways to apply your core expertise in the workplace.

IV. Increase Your Flexibility & Range of Motion. Moving from industry-to-industry, from one daily schedule to another or even from one location to another is never easy, but your willingness to adapt will help to keep your career moving forward.

V. Work With Winners. Working with successful organizations and coworkers enables you to grow on-the-job, develop useful connections that will last a career and establish yourself as a winner in the world of work.

VI. Stretch Your Soul. A healthy career not only serves you, it serves others, as well. A personal commitment to doing some of your best work as good works for your community, your country and/or your planet is the most invigorating form of work/life balance.

VII. Pace Yourself. A fulfilling and rewarding career depends upon your getting the rest and replenishment you need in order to do your best work every day you're on-the-job. Discipline yourself and your boss to set aside time to recharge your passion and capacity for work.

All of us have the inherent capacity to be an alpha career athlete because all of us have an inherent talent that wants to be—deserves to be—discovered. Humans are the only beings, however, who can willfully choose to ignore their gift. And happily, they are also the only beings who can choose to recognize it. So, become the alpha career athlete you were meant to be; put yourself in search of (personal) excellence.

Thanks for reading,

Peter

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