

The Little Things That Lead to Excellence

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By: *Interview by Gerry Romano, CAE*

Achieving true excellence in your association may seem like an big, audacious goal, but according to management guru Tom Peters, it's actually all about the little things. In a conversation with *Associations Now*, Peters shares his advice on how organizations can do great things by focusing on what matters most.

If excellence is so easy breezy, why aren't all of us pursuing it, adding sparkle to our personalities and wow to our job performance, inspiring our colleagues, setting tremendous goals, revitalizing our associations, and really making a difference in the world?

Tom Peters has no idea. Many of the ways to achieve excellence are so simple, he says, that they "rank at the top of the obvious."

The management expert, author, and blogger talks about many of those ways in his latest book, *The Little Big Things: 163 Ways to Pursue Excellence*: Jump out of bed and hit the office running. Say "please." Say "thank you." Hire cheerful people. Go look for the curiosity you seem to have lost. Don't redo the lobby; redo the employee cafeteria. Don't aim high; aim very, very high.

In other words, crank it up.

Peters discussed his new book and the thinking behind it in a conversation with *Associations Now*.

Why are you so passionate about the little things? What makes them so big in their importance?

Tom Peters: It's all about relationships and politics. Politics is the way things get done in the world—period. And for effective politics, it's *always* the *little* things.

I was reading an article about former Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson. He said that in his Goldman Sachs days, at the beginning of every year, he always called 50 clients to wish them a happy new year. Obviously they knew what he was doing; he wanted more of their business. Nonetheless, the reaching out to make the little call was the kind of effort that people appreciated.

Ninety-nine percent of what I've been talking about in recent times is back to the future. In the age of the internet and social networking, making the call is still where the game begins and ends.

What's the biggest roadblock to excellence, and how can it be overcome?

To some extent, it's forgetting those basics. The book includes a little list of 46 tips for dealing with the recession. On the list are things like get to work earlier, stay longer than normal, be decent and thoughtful to people, say thank you to everybody, call an important outside contact before nine in the morning. It's the collection of little tactics rather than some huge strategic thing.

Give me a great example of an association that is pursuing organizational excellence in—as you would call it—an insanely public way.

A couple of years ago, I spent a little bit of time with the National Association for Home Care and Hospice and its president, Val Halamandaris, and I was just blown away. What impressed me so much was that they talked about what they do as opposed to just the strategies of how to deal with Washington or Sacramento or Albany or whatever the case may be.

Val is a fanatic about care, and it comes through in every way known to humankind. It comes through in the speakers he invites to their events; it comes through in all the stuff he shares.

Are organizational excellence and success becoming more tied to the technology that's used rather than personal leadership approaches?

Tweeting is great; blogging can be great. But—I have a slide that's called “Minus 21-L = Plus 21-L,” and my line that goes with that is: “Leadership in the 21st century B.C. was the same as it is in the 21st century A.D.”

You use new tools, but—I'm a great student of General Grant, and he was absolutely magnificent in wandering around amongst the troops, not being very formal, and he ended up being loved by soldiers, which was incredibly important. So if you look at the communication skills or the leadership skills of a Grant, in essence, the skills needed today have not changed in the least.

With organizations downsizing and cutting positions, what should people be doing to keep their jobs or get new ones?

My whole new book, and to some significant degree, my whole career, is devoted to the fact that there are no magic bullets. There are a lot of people who do what I do and give you the guaranteed 10-step method to making a million dollars before the sun rises tomorrow morning. My smart-aleck response is: If you haven't worked like the dickens over the past 10 to 15 years putting together a great network, you are to some extent out of luck. Constant investment in networking is key, and not investment limited to the rather narrow area that you may be involved in right now, but investing to the left and to the right and investing in all sorts of strange places.

There's another thing that I'm talking a lot about now, and like all these things, it ranks at the top of the obvious. When things are tough, people tend to get a little bit short tempered and tend to be a little bit abrupt, and my belief is that when things are tough, kindness, thoughtfulness, and decency are even more important. A little bit of a helping hand now is the sort of thing that lingers in people's memories for years and years.

The simple fact of the matter is that this horrid downturn is the most significant professional test of character that we'll ever have. The way you behave and stick it out is the test of character.

What additional “way” have you come up with since the publication of your book?

I recently read a thin book titled *Helping*, by Edgar Schein. The [book's] subtitle is *How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*. The point that Schein makes is: What do bosses do for

a living? And the answer is: They help. By definition, the boss can't do the work. The boss enables other people to be creative; he or she induces them to be enthusiastic. It's all about helping.

Schein, who has been talking about this stuff for 50 years, did this beautiful little book that talks to us about something that we all know: We rely on people. But as he points out, there are a thousand forms of resistance, there are a thousand forms of why somebody doesn't want your help, and so on. In reading the book, I was a) mesmerized and b) kind of embarrassed that I hadn't figured this out a long time ago.

Based on your experience, what's the most important thing that might contribute to an association executive's success?

My mother taught me that politeness and manners were one step above godliness. I think you can get anywhere you want, to some extent, if you say "yes, ma'am" and "yes, sir" and "thank you."

Do you really mind your manners all the time?

One time when I flew into BWI, where the rental car area is about a million miles from the terminal, the rental-car bus came by, and the bus door opened and I said, "Is this the bus to the car-rental area?" The guy who was driving the bus looked at me and said, "Don't we begin conversations like this with 'How are you today?'" You talk about the greatest management advice that I've gotten in a long time!

Minding your manners works. The thing that makes me angry is that it doesn't mean that you are not competitive. This is a guy problem more than a woman problem: If you're nice, people say, "Oh, he's soft." Well, that is the biggest bunch of baloney in the world.

Along with excellence, what are you searching for?

People who care about people, which of course is the essence of excellence.

The Power of Caring

When Tom Peters suggests that an association is a great example to emulate, we want to know more. Luckily, Val Halamandaris, president of the National Association for Home Care and Hospice (NAHC), agreed to share some advice on how associations can pursue and achieve excellence.

Aim high. "Excellence means setting goals that are in the stars, as high as possible, and aspiring to reach those," says Halamandaris. "There's a wonderful line from Browning, from the poem 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' where he said 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?'"

When announcing a challenging goal, Halamandaris mentally aims for something twice as audacious. "Now, we're human beings, so most of the time it's not possible to reach the stars," he says. "But by setting goals that most people would think are impossible, what you achieve is generally far greater than if you set goals that were more modest."

Take a global view. One thing that sets NAHC apart, according to Halamandaris, is its global or holistic view of its work. "Many associations do a very good job of representing their clients. Sometimes they

take it to the extreme ... without understanding that we're in a common boat, we're all in this together," he says.

"You have to represent the interest group [your association stands for], and we do; we go to extreme lengths to fight for them and represent them. But it has to be in the context of making the world a better place."

Plan. Halamandaris says that only a small minority of associations and other businesses in the United States plan, and he sees that lack of planning as a critical weakness. "Most people fail because they're trying to execute when they're still in the planning process," he says.

Proper planning should give your organization the focus it needs to set priorities.

"You need to be able to sort out the immediate from the important," Halamandaris says. "There are all kinds of things that need to be done and that have value, but there are a few things that, if you don't do them, they will kill you. You need to identify what those are and then handle them immediately."

Care. Peters calls Halamandaris a "fanatic about care," and Halamandaris doesn't disagree with that assessment. "Part of it, I think, is that that's the way that I was raised," he says. But he was also inspired by a meeting with Mother Teresa, when she told Halamandaris and others that there was a "poverty of the spirit" in the United States that she saw as worse than the poverty of the body in the developing world. Then she then jabbed Halamandaris in the ribs with a finger and told him, "Do something about it."

Over time, his friendship with Mother Teresa inspired him to found the Caring Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to honoring the values of caring, integrity, and public service.

Halamandaris encourages other association CEOs to grab hold of words like "love" and "caring." "And yeah, even Mother Teresa told me, 'No margin, no mission,'" Halamandaris says, but "to be successful, you have to have as your lodestone a management by values, by the highest values. If you manage according to the highest values, the bottom line is always going to be there. If you manage in terms of the short-term bottom line, then you may do well for a while, but not in the long term."

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