



## *The Quest for Quality*

*There is room for improvement in the quality of the things people produce and sell, but that is the least of it. The real challenge is to stimulate a drive for excellence not only at work, but in every corner of life . . .*

□ The paperback book could serve as a quick case study of the slippage of standards in our times. It bears the name of a best-selling author. Its cover is elegantly designed, strikingly illustrated, and printed in rich embossed type. On the back is a skillfully written come-on which persuasively conveys the message that you've simply got to buy and read it. You do; and you find that the text is shot through with typographical errors.

The misprints are irritating, but they detract only slightly from your enjoyment of the story. You can usually guess what a mangled word was intended to be. Your chief reaction is relief that the publishers don't build bridges or do open-heart surgery. If you are a fan of the author, you will probably go on to buy more of his books from the same company, knowing that the printing, to say the least, leaves much to be desired.

While badly printed (or badly bound) books are by no means the rule in the paperback trade, the point in this instance is that consumers are expected to put up with a flawed product. It does not require much looking around to find other examples of the same attitude. Some airlines routinely run planes late with the most perfunctory of explanations or apologies. Professional hockey players may be seen brazenly slacking off during the regular season because their teams can make the playoffs even if they have a losing record. The list could go on.

While people talk about "quality time" and "the quality of life," it seems that in many cases, they are getting less quality for their money than they used to. What has gone wrong? To return to that

paperback book, it is noteworthy that more effort has gone into packaging and marketing it than into producing it properly.

This is perhaps natural in the age of "hype," which has produced so many overnight millionaires in sports and entertainment of less than overwhelming achievement. Image has been allowed to triumph over substance. "In most American restaurants," *Harper's* magazine editor Lewis H. Lapham recently remarked, "the menu is more interesting than the food."

Lapses in quality could also be ascribed to the permissive school of thought which holds that, above all, you must never feel bad about yourself or what you are doing. Once, people who tried to fob off items that were visibly inferior could at least be expected to feel a bit embarrassed about it. Now, as in so many other aspects of life, it looks as if shame no longer exercises its restraining effect.

Before we conclude that the world has gone to the dogs, however, we should take into account the propensity of old-timers to look back through rose-coloured glasses. It is a demonstrable fact that, as soon as grey hairs start to show, people start to exaggerate the virtues of the past.

They slip into reveries of a golden time when there were never any queues or traffic jams, when all the children were well-schooled and well-behaved, all shop clerks were alert, polite and knowledgeable, all doctors made house calls, and all machines were built to last.

In reality, the good old days were not nearly as good as they appear in the glow of retrospect. Few of us would want to shop for our groceries from the



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sparingly-stocked shelves of a store with a cracker barrel. Urban hospitals may be crowded, but they are capable of successfully treating a long list of ailments that would have been fatal in the days of the kindly old general practitioner. We might moan about impersonal service, but life for the average person in the western world is incomparably more convenient than it was when you could only shop or do your banking during strictly limited hours.

The answer to the question of whether the quality of goods and services has declined over the years is a resounding yes and no. We are really talking about two different sets of conditions. Times change; we can mourn the passing of the fine old craftsman who did everything by hand, forgetting about the people in modern clean rooms who work on electronic products to tolerances that were unimaginable not so many years ago.

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### *Machines make good scapegoats for human lapses in quality*

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This is the age of mass production even in such things as the serving of food, and mass production by definition is more concerned with quantity than quality. At the same time, it has brought good-quality goods within the financial reach of the many instead of the few who once were the only ones able to afford it. As the classical economist Joseph Schumpeter liked to say, mass production means that a shop girl can have silk stockings as well as a queen.

"There is no reason why we should be palmed off with second-rate stuff on the excuse that it is machine-made," the Duke of Edinburgh told an industrial conference some years ago. Quite correct: machines today are capable of yielding top-quality products. But they do present a psychological impediment to the spread of the very highest standards which was once expressed by the English biographer John Aikin: "Nothing is such an obstacle to the production of excellence as the power of producing what is good with ease and rapidity."

When the quality of goods and services is less than it ought to be, the cry goes out: "Don't blame me, blame the computer." Machines of all kinds make capital scapegoats for what are actually human deficiencies. In many cases, the machine is either not being used properly, or people have tried to make it do something it was not designed or

programmed to do. By rights, computerized machines and systems should ordinarily produce better goods than human beings, because they can function more accurately and never suffer the fatigue or distractions that lead to carelessness.

The onus of workmanship has fallen on the machine operators, maintainers and computer software designers who ensure that the machines are doing the best they can. This remains the work of conscientious craftsmen — or, if you prefer, crafts-persons. They are like the sailing masters throughout the centuries who were able to make their ships use the winds to their greatest advantage. Unlike the artisans who are usually associated with craftsmanship, their skills lie not in making something, but in making something run like a charm.

As if to prove that the spirit of craftsmanship is alive and well, countless numbers of people display it both in their work and leisure activities, fashioning handicrafts, gardening, cooking, and what-have-you. The deeply-felt instinct to do things really well is manifested in a variety of ways. Some are bizarre — break dancing, building "funny" drag racing cars, or travelling cross-country on a pogo stick. A recent documentary film explored the lives of the Black and Hispanic youths in New York City who go to great and dangerous lengths to spray-paint colourful graffiti designs on subway cars while the cars are lying idle. The film showed these youngsters to be craftsmen of the first order in their unpaid and illegal "trade."

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### *Excellence is blocked by our tolerance of the 'good enough'*

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There is certainly no lack of talent or a reaching-out for superlative performance when, as in this year's Olympic Games, a strong incentive is offered for exceeding all previous standards. To hark back to that paperback book again, the main thing that keeps us from fully exploiting the potential for excellence in our midst is our blithe acceptance of the "good enough."

We are in danger of being "gratified with mediocrity when excellence lies before us," as Isaac d'Israeli put it. This attitude has serious implications for our economy, and indeed our entire society.



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In a recent speech, the president of one of Canada's most successful high technology (and, needless to say, high quality) exporters, Robert Ferchat of Northern Telecom Canada Ltd., said that "we in North America have long felt that 'nobody's perfect' and 'isn't one per cent error acceptable?' Think for a moment about what it would mean in our daily lives if people got things right only 99 per cent of the time: at least 200,000 wrong prescriptions would be processed every year; there would be nine misspelled words on every page of a magazine; we'd have unsafe drinking water four times each year; there would be no telephone service for 15 minutes every day."

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*High quality is not synonymous with luxury or great expense*

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Clearly a 99 per cent performance does not rank as "good enough" even by our tolerant standards, let alone by those maintained by foreign competitors and customers who regard zero-defect production as absolutely normal. But though the challenge from more quality-conscious producers has long been plain to see, Mr. Ferchat said, "We in North America do not yet have throughout our culture — outside or inside the corporation — a real, deep, unshakable conviction that quality is the key to competing, the key to survival, the key to growth and profitability."

Confronted with competitive threats from the rest of the world, North American companies would be well-advised to launch deliberate programs to foster a commitment to quality at every level throughout their organizations. Many indeed are doing so right now. The point to be put across is that quality is not only the concern of management — that it is the concern of everybody in the corporation. Henry Ford had a simple way of stating this: "It is not the employer who pays wages — he only handles the money. It is the product that pays wages." He might also have said that it is the customers who pay the wages, and customers cannot be expected indefinitely to accept less than the best a seller can provide.

One of the fallacies regarding quality is that it only comes at a price — a price which is often out of range for the average person. When we think

about quality, visions of luxury goods made of silver or hand-tooled leather spring to mind. But just as much quality can go into the making of a zipper as a Rolls Royce, because quality is no more or less than a "degree of excellence." A high degree of excellence can be attained in anything from interpreting columns of figures to collecting the garbage in such a way that bits of it are not strewn on the road.

Marcus Aurelius wrote that "there is a proper dignity and proportion to be observed in the performance of every act of life." The emperor-philosopher's use of the word "dignity" is not too high-flown in the context of everyday work. It is dignity that prevents quality-conscious people from giving less than their best effort, whether on the job in anything else.

Quality can be anywhere and everywhere provided enough effort goes into it. Where some have gone wrong is in lavishing more time and money on creating an impression of quality than on actually delivering it. It should go without saying — but unfortunately it does not — that excellence in any degree can never be achieved by merely proclaiming it. In this as in all things, we should be careful not to mistake the smoke for the fire.

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*Aiming for excellence means raising the target ever higher*

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"Excellence" is a forbidding word. It means "surpassing merit." The thought of pursuing it is liable to make people run scared. The implication is that those who would aspire to surpassing merit must be equipped with surpassing natural ability. Ordinary mortals need not apply.

In fact, excellence is obtainable by anyone who follows the advice of the 17th century French critic Nicholas Boileau: "Hasten slowly, and without losing heart put your work twenty times upon the anvil." As someone once said of genius, it flows not so much from talent in itself as from "an infinite capacity for taking pains."

The painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was hailed as a genius in his time, had this to say on the subject: "Excellence is never granted to man but as the reward of labour. It argues no small strength of mind to persevere in the habits of industry without the pleasure of perceiving those advances, which, like the hands of a clock, whilst they make hourly



approaches to their point, proceed so slowly as to escape observation."

If it takes hard work to achieve it, it takes even more hard work to keep it up. Because it *is* surpassing merit, it calls for a constant effort to surpass your best previous performance. Masters of any art or craft guard against the temptation to rest on their laurels for fear that their work may imperceptibly deteriorate. Josef Hoffman had reached the top of his profession as a concert pianist when a traveling companion noticed him leaning back with his eyes shut on a train.

"Are you resting?" he was asked.

"No, I'm practicing," he said.

A person who strives for excellence must make perfection the goal, even though everybody knows that absolute perfection is unattainable. It is "the impossible dream," but to dream it, as Logan Persall Smith proclaimed, is "what alone gives a meaning to our life on this unavailing star."

To strive for perfection is to accept a risk. It may end in humiliation. But there no progress can be made without having it in view, because, as that fine old essayist Sir Philip Sidney wrote, "[He] who shoots at the midday sun, though sure he shall never hit the mark, yet sure is he that he shall shoot higher than he who aims but at a bush."

Anyone who aims for excellence should be aware that it is a moving target that keeps rising higher and higher. You create this effect yourself by continually improving your performance and setting fresh criteria. For the target ever to stand still would be against the laws of nature. "Advance and decadence," wrote Alfred North Whitehead, "are the only choices offered to mankind."

The prospect of toiling day after day to improve yourself is not an agreeable one when you first approach it. That is why so many people never make the effort to live up to their full capabilities. They will tell you that they are satisfied with themselves the way they are, though they might admit that they could have done just a little better. But anyway, why live in a perpetual sweat?

Are they really as satisfied as they would have you believe? Or do they find in their private moments that there is something missing from their

lives, something they can't quite identify? If they do feel this way, a good workman could probably tell them where the gap is. They have deprived themselves of the satisfaction of knowing they have accomplished something really first class, not to mention the elation that occasionally comes with the discovery that they have done something better than they ever imagined they could.

The rewards for excellence are not, of course, wholly spiritual. Those who reach out for it are usually more successful than the others. Still, the real benefits of constant striving do not come in the form of material success; money can't buy what they do for a person. Striving is perhaps the one and only true elixir, for "while we converse with what is above us, we do not grow old, but grow young," as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote.

What would the world be like if everybody could be persuaded to do his or her very best, continually setting and meeting higher standards? For one thing, many of the problems that plague our society would recede, if not completely disappear. The sheer concentration demanded by the pursuit of excellence tends to prevent people from making trouble for themselves and those around them. "To the extent that an individual sublimates his power drives in . . . the 'instinct of workmanship,' he has less need for dominating drives toward his fellow man," political scientist Joseph Rosenfarb wrote in his *Freedom and the Administration State*.

As the phrase "the honest workman" suggests, workmanship is founded in personal integrity. Those imbued with it have nothing but scorn for sloppiness, shabbiness, cheapness, sharp dealing or false fronts. Thus if the instinct of workmanship could be stimulated throughout the population, it would affect far more than the economy. In a "quality society," honesty, excellence, and the principle of giving full value for what we receive would become the rule of conduct both in business and personal relationships. What began as an effort to improve the quality of work could end in a revolutionary improvement in the overall quality of life.