

MEN OF EXCELLENCE

SILHOUETTE VS. SUBSTANCE PERCEPTION OR REALITY?

BY **DYNAMC** ADVISORY BOARD CHAIR, LEE BENNETT ESQ.

Excellent leadership is central to the survival of nations, corporations, teams, and w^e we think about the characteristics of great leaders, it is easy to religiously trot out words such as honest, trusted, passionate, confident, decisive, visionary, calm, and purposeful. Most of us accept that a great leader is committed to excellence and that second best simply will not do. Our perception of men of excellence is that they are outstanding, superior, and brilliant, whether that be in family life, business, or politics. The lowly heights of mediocrity is not for men of excellence; for them the only path is the dizzying heights far above the clouds.

When we speak of men of excellence, people such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr., may spring to mind. These, and many more, are universally considered to be men of excellence. Men who exhibit great leadership traits.

But I believe that a man of excellence means much more than this. I believe it is as much about a poor man doing everything in his power to earn a few dollars a day to feed his family as it is about a CEO doubling his company's profits, or a world leader negotiating treaties with other nations. Excellence is both personal and public; it is exhibited by the high and mighty, as well as the poor and lowly. Excellence may be great and unique to some, or it may be commonplace and ordinary to others. It is relative.

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discrimination to flourish. We may not be able to identify a man of excellence by merely looking at what he has achieved or accumulated. You

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may be a multi-millionaire drug kingpin or an organised crime boss with properties scattered around the world, living the most lavish of lifestyles, but this does not make you a man

of excellence. It clearly means much more than this to be a true man of excellence. Nor is being a man of excellence an everlasting status. You may, at some point, be regarded as a man of excellence, but that image can be shattered as the perception is destroyed and the reality is exposed. It may be a scandal that causes a dramatic fall from grace. Think Dominic Strauss Khan, Richard Nixon, Silvio Berlusconi, Mark Foley, and Larry Craig. Notwithstanding, the many years of hard work put in by individuals perceived as men of excellence may count for nothing as their true character is exposed and their reputation goes up in smoke on the altar of public opinion.

Excellence is not, solely, about the result itself (indeed the result or goal achieved may appear rather ordinary to others). Excellence is also about how a person achieves their goal, who they inspire along the way, what people they engage with, as well as how they engage with them. It is as much about pursuing the right things in the right way as it is about the final result. It is also about an enduring adherence to the qualities and principles that made you a man of excellence to begin with. Fail to follow such principles and the “man of excellence” image is most likely lost forever.

We may fail to achieve excellence and fall below what is required due to fear and/or dishonesty.

We often fear the uncertain or the unpredictable. We allow others to define who we are and what we can truly achieve. We lack the confidence to stand up and be counted and face challenges. We don't show our real selves because we are afraid of standing up to others who won't allow us to be ourselves. Our fear prevents us from achieving our full potential.

When we are confident we are much happier because we are in control and can deal

with everything that life throws at us. We can deal with the changes and chaos that are part of life. When we know ourselves we can communicate with confidence in everything we do and say, and our personality and what we can truly achieve is displayed for all to see.

Unfortunately, some of us may spend most of our lives having our confidence diminished or destroyed by others, whether by our parents, our bosses, our colleagues, our competitors, our “friends,” or society in general. They conspire against us to lower our expectations of what we are capable of accomplishing. They lower our confidence and make us more likely to avoid challenges and opportunities, and we end up giving less than we are capable of giving.

Oftentimes, there may be experiences from our past, as well as our present, that have diminished our confidence, made us feel that we are not as capable as others, that we cannot achieve a desired result because we are simply not good enough. Societal attitudes and prejudices can also decrease our confidence and create negative self-thoughts about whether we can meet a particular challenge or opportunity, or whether we are even deserving of that opportunity.

I remember when I was a young kid at school and I had an interview with the careers officer. I said I wanted to be a lawyer and opened the page that laid out the profile and requirements to be a barrister.



He gave me this patronising smile, closed the page, and just moved on to leaflets about other jobs that he considered “more appropriate.” He had not listened to a word I said. He had no faith in me. He could not look to the future to see my full potential and what I was capable of accomplishing. In that one moment he could have destroyed my dreams and aspirations.

Did I listen to him and apply for other “more appropriate” jobs? I could have let him crush my dreams and destroy my confidence. Well this young boy who was brushed off by his careers officer and teachers at school didn’t let their lack of faith and lack of vision wash away his goals. In fact, I went on to pass a law degree, pass the Bar exam in England as well as in New York State, and also represented my country at the World Debating Championships. Not bad for a kid whose teachers had no faith in him. I often wonder how many kids have had their dreams and hopes crushed by that teacher.

That teacher was most definitely not a man of excellence. I could have been afraid and decided that he must know what he was talking about as he was a teacher. In my mind, teachers represent authority, so they must know better than me. But no. I had my dream and I was going to pursue it. I wasn’t going to make excuses. I wasn’t going to use negative thoughts about my worth to think my way out of pursuing my dreams.

Often prejudices based on race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, or religion can also have an impact on the way we think about ourselves and others, and what we think we are capable of achieving. When we think negatively we project this onto others. This is the big lie: we don’t show the real us and what we can truly achieve. Instead, we show a false image, a fiction that reflects nothing more than the fear and lack of confidence that others have helped create within us.

We lie to others as we give them less than our best and just a small part of who we truly are. But more importantly, we also betray ourselves. Unless we embrace who we are and achieve our full potential, then each and every second of

each and every day we are living a lie; we are a fraud. Do we want to fulfil the role of “not good enough,” or do we want to project who we really are and the excellent results we can achieve? If we allow others to stop us from being who we really are, from achieving our full potential, and let our dreams evaporate into the ether, then we fail to be excellent. This mind-set means we’ll never volunteer to do a special task at work, we won’t deliver that all important pitch, we’ll refuse to chair that meeting, we’ll never apply for that job or promotion, we’ll always give a half-hearted fraudulent performance. Others will never know we can do the task and meet the challenge. They will only see the false image we allow them to see.

If we are afraid and lack confidence then we avoid challenges and opportunities. We become risk averse. What we don’t realise is that being risk-averse is the riskiest option. Theodore Roosevelt made the point very clearly when he said, “Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumph, even though checked with failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the grey twilight that knows not victory or defeat.”

As we think about these words we remember that each person’s triumph or mighty thing pursued is relative to them and their circumstances. It may be the president of a nation agreeing a trade deal, it may be the poor man who works 17 hours a day to earn a few dollars to feed his family, it may be the man stacking shelves all day and working most the night as a taxi driver so he can support his family, but as long as each is doing the best they can in the circumstances they find themselves in, then they are men of excellence.

It is only when we hold back and project the big lie about who we are and what we can truly achieve that we fail to be men of excellence.

Conversely, there is another lie. This is where we deliberately project a lie about how excellent we are; we project an image of excellence that is simply not true. This is where perception doesn’t match up to the reality. Think Richard Nixon, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Lance Armstrong, Silvio Berlusconi, and Jimmy Savile (the English celebrity and charity fund-raiser who was

exposed as a serial sex abuser after he died). In these cases the lie doesn’t just impact negatively on the individual, their family, and friends. The wider public is also affected. The public has bought into the lie and believed in these “men of excellence.” They bought into their story, their pursuit of greatness, and their achievements. Then the reality is exposed and the perception is shattered. The public’s faith in the system and the idea of excellence may be eroded. They may consider excellence to be nothing more than a myth, an illusion created by “those at the top” and their spin doctors. Real men of excellence will always pursue the truth, expose lies, and strive to be the best they can be. Men of excellence are men of principle.

To be a man of excellence it is imperative to understand the personality and character of others, their needs, their fears, and their goals. If we encourage people to be heard and to be themselves then excellence is sure to follow.

To be a man of excellence also means having the courage to ask for help. Oftentimes, leaders think that asking for help is a sign of weakness, when in fact it is a sign of strength. By seeking counsel from your team you are accepting that you are not God, that you trust and respect them, and that their views are welcome.

If you deliberately project a dishonest image of excellence, that does not match the reality, you fail to be excellent. If exposed, you may give credence to the view that excellence is an illusion, a puff created by men of power and their spin doctors. Further, when you have failed to show the whole, real you, and what you can truly achieve, then you also fail to be excellent.

If your prejudice prevents others from achieving excellence, then you, as well, also fail. The more actively we work towards eliminating prejudice the more likely people will be themselves, to reach their full potential, and become men of excellence. Real men of excellence are men of principle who pursue truth, expose lies, and fight prejudice wherever they see it. They may do so quietly and humbly and out of the public gaze. They may not be rich or famous. You may not find them on the front pages of newspapers or magazines, or in the society columns. But they are men who know that perception and reality do not always coincide; men who know that when people can be their true selves, and are allowed and encouraged to reach their full potential, that then, and only then, can society become a more positive, fair, productive, and rewarding environment . . . an environment more likely to produce real men of excellence.

**DYNAMIC ADVISORY BOARD CHAIR,
LEE BENNETT ESQ.
CEO & FOUNDER, POTENT COMMUNICATIONS LTD.**

