



Mark Fallon

PEER TO PEER

The Fight Against Mediocrity

My client's lead project manager wasn't happy. Her team had spent hours detailing business process rules for handling customer statements. She'd established a change control process for updates. However, at today's meeting, the outsourcing contractor announced they'd unilaterally changed the process because "that's the way all of their other customers do it."

After an unpleasant conversation, it was agreed that the contractor would reprogram the equipment and follow the client's original instructions. After the meeting, the project manager expressed her exasperation with the vendor. This was the latest in a series of gaffes, including poor print quality, missed deadlines as well as communication miscues. She asked, "Are my expectations too high? Am I being too demanding?"

Of course not. This leader had been chosen for the project because of her commitment to excellence and attention to details. She demanded a lot from her team and from herself. And now, she expected the vendor to meet that same level of performance. The wrong thing to do would be to lower the standards.

Yet, too often, that's exactly what we do. We accept mediocre service, mediocre products or mediocre performance. If allowing substandard work will move the project along, we allow it. If fixing a defect will cause too much rework, we let the defect go. If an employee performs "okay work," that's okay with us.

And we're wrong. While it's true that we can't be perfect every time, we should always strive for excellence. Accepting mediocrity leads to eventual failure.

In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins examines why some average-performing companies transformed themselves into great companies, while some of their peers couldn't make the leap. The book reveals the type of leaders, staff and culture a company may have to achieve greatness.

For me, the most important line in this book is the title of Chapter One: "Good is the Enemy of Great." This simple sentence holds the key to success and should become the motto of every person, team or company that wants to be successful. Failure is easy to recognize, average performance is not. We must be on guard against accepting "good" as "good enough."

To let others know his attitude, Jim Mullan, a friend of mine who works for Cushman Wakefield in New York, has posted "Good is the Enemy of Great" at the entrance to his shop. Customers and employees know his expectations as they come in. Coworkers have asked for copies to post in their work areas. But as Mullan knows, improving performance is about more than hanging signs.

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The fight against mediocrity begins internally. It's wrong to expect more from others unless we expect more from ourselves. And it's difficult to admit where we can do better. And even more difficult to change our behavior. To effectively make change only requires three simple steps — feedback, feedback and feedback.

The first group from which to get feedback is your customers. We all have customers. They may be internal departments, our bosses or paying customers. If people expect a service from us, then they are our customers.

Develop a regular feedback loop with your customers to see how you're doing. It can take many shapes — a formal survey, annual reviews or chats. The method isn't important. What's important is making sure that you get their opinions on your performance. Find out what they liked and what they wish you had done better.

Take notes. I carry a notebook with me everywhere I go. Sometimes a customer may make a casual comment about their expectations. I write this down and refer to their comments the next time we meet. We both will know if I've made improvements.

The second feedback group is your coworkers, friends and mentors — people who are confident in their relationship

with you and know that they can provide honest criticism. Usually, they will find a way to deliver that criticism with a dose of kindness, making it easier to accept.

However, most friends won't criticize you unless you ask. So ask. Have someone look over your work, discuss your performance or critique your plans. Share your goals and your timetable for reaching those goals. Plan updates to check on your progress.

The last feedback source is yourself. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask, "How am I doing?" And provide yourself an honest answer.

People often take this exercise to opposite extremes — some people have a negative self-image and can't see anything positive in their performance; some people can never see their own faults and blame any failures on someone else. You must try to be somewhere in-between. Be honest about your mistakes, and give yourself credit for things you've done well.

After you've received the feedback, make some changes. Then, go back out to your feedback sources. Repeat. Forever. The quest for excellence is a lifelong process. And the fight against mediocrity never ends.

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