



The Price of Excellence

Entropy is all around us. Leaders provide the antidote

Tim Stevenson

LIKE MANY PARENTS, leaders are often on a search for the magic pill. While few verbalize it, they long for some method by which they can instruct people **once** and have them go on to function like wind-up toys, without further attention. It can't happen.

Meditations on a flag

I will never forget the train of thought that took me over one day in 2009 when I was

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I walked out to our west parking lot one morning, and there it was again, as plain as day. The Stars and Stripes proudly waved in front of the apartment complex across the street. Next to it flew our Texas flag — upside down.

One of the chief responsibilities of a leader is the "interception of entropy."

It had been that way since at least February, five months before. The first time I noticed it, I assumed that someone would correct it within a day or two. Obviously not. I thought about calling the management or even going over there myself and fixing it, but I had no claim on that property. "How long will it be before somebody does something about it?" I wondered. It became an intriguing mystery, almost a game to observe as time passed.



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Hundreds of people lived in that complex. In and out they drove daily, right past it. I had a feeling that if I contacted the apartment superintendent, he or she would say, “Nobody has said anything about it.” Why not? *People either don’t notice, or they don’t care.* It’s got to be one or the other.

The blind spot

An upside-down state flag isn’t an emergency. No one was being hurt by it. It did, however, illustrate a common human tendency, so let me ask a pointed question: **What obvious problem have you become blind to in your professional or personal life?**

You could call it an elephant in the kitchen, except that in this case it’s an invisible elephant. You don’t see it anymore. Either you don’t notice or you don’t care. But there’s another possibility that is more damaging, to you or to those who work alongside you: **You have accepted a state lower than you should and call it “normal.”**

This is how mediocrity begins and takes hold. Examples:

- It’s normal and acceptable to fail to produce work as promised.
- It’s ok to maintain a negative attitude most days, and to spread it to others.
- It’s acceptable for you, your department, or team to be “difficult to work with.”
- It’s standard practice to be sloppy with work and loose with the truth.
- It’s normal and fine to speak negatively and critically about others in their absence.
- It’s acceptable to view and treat external or internal customers as an inconvenience or annoyance.
- It’s normal business-as-usual to practice competitive maneuvering and politicking

rather than pursuing teamwork toward a common goal.

Perhaps the most amazing thing is that attitudes and actions like these can become entrenched and regular behavior exhibited by people who are otherwise intelligent, experienced, and hard-working.

“What obvious problem have you become blind to in your professional or personal life?”

How can this be? And what can you do to avoid it? The first step is to define the problem.

The tendency of all things

Entropy is the scientific name for it, technically dealing with the second law of thermodynamics. In everyday usage, entropy is “**a process of degradation or running down, or a trend to disorder.**” In other words, it is the natural tendency of things to fall apart.

Consider these questions:

What do you have to **do** for your lawn or garden to become full of weeds?

What do you have to **do** to get out of shape physically?

What do you have to **do** for your relationship with your mate or other family members to grow cold and distant?

What do you have to **do** as a company to lose your competitive advantages and market share?

Finally — what do you have to **do** for some of the characteristics listed in the bullet points above to take hold for you or your team?

The answer to all these questions is the same: ***Absolutely nothing.***

This is entropy. By doing *nothing* you guarantee that these things will happen, because the natural tendency of things in the universe is not upward, but downward.

That's why Max De Pree commented that **one of the chief responsibilities of a leader is the "interception of entropy."**

What you can do

A pilot friend once told me that a fully-loaded 747 weighs around 850,000 pounds. We're all used to airplanes, but how can that thing fly? Has someone found a way to turn off gravity? Of course not. Gravity is pulling downward on the plane just as strongly when it's flying as when it is sitting at the gate. What the Wright brothers figured out was how to take advantage of a **higher law** — the law of aerodynamics — that enables it to transcend the rule of gravity. But make no mistake: What does a flying plane have to **do** to begin immediately heading toward the earth? *Absolutely nothing.* Simply turn off the engine, and it will happen automatically.

In the same way, all a leader has to do to allow a downward trend to take hold is to stop applying pressure to do better.

As a leader you must:

1. Embrace the truth that the natural tendency of all things, including human beings, is to decline toward disorder.

2. Accept the responsibility of providing constant, never-ending pressure on yourself and your followers to progress upward.
3. Accept the responsibility as a team of encouraging and "positively provoking" *each other* to continually do better.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a company in America that doesn't state "Excellence" as one of their values and commitments. Yet, how many really do it? And how can you get there if you want to?

Excellence is not a *state*. It's a **pursuit**. In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras describe companies that achieved long-term success, and say this (emphasis theirs):

For these companies, the critical question is "How can we do better tomorrow than we did today?" They institutionalize this question as a way of life — a habit of mind and action.

For them, settled mediocrity in behavior or performance is simply not an option.

If, as the famous saying goes, "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance," then **the price of excellence is continuous diligence to improve.**

The one who will decide whether or not this happens in your area is the person you can see in any available mirror. May you make that inner commitment as a leader to press on ... and on ... and on ...

If you're wondering: Someone finally turned that flag right-side up after *7 months*. **L**