Lessons in excellence

learning from the corporate giants

BY RICHARD P. DUFOUR

Stick to the knitting. Encourage autonomy and entrepreneurship. Ensure productivity through people. If you’ve done your management reading in the past couple of years, you recognize these concepts as a few of the characteristics of management excellence laid out in the best-selling book, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best Run Companies. At Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lake County, Illinois (45 minutes outside Chicago), we’re using the concepts that authors Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr. present in the book to help us focus on the search for education excellence. The ideas can work in your schools, too. (I’ll get to how in a moment.)

In their book, Peters and Waterman challenge executives to apply the lessons of well-run companies to their management spheres. But school executives face a special problem: Although the book’s ideas might alter your individual management style, you’re liable to run into a roadblock if you try to incorporate these concepts into your entire school system. The obstacle: conventional wisdom. Education and business are so dissimilar, many people think, that experiences in the corporate world hold little value or relevance for the way you run your schools.

The administrative team at Stevenson High School, District 125 (9-12; enr.: 1,700), proves that the conventional wisdom can be wrong. Acting on the assumption that school executives can learn from business experts, our team members examined In Search of Excellence, looking especially for ideas and practices that we could try out in our school. What we found: Many of the book’s precepts are as effective in schools as they are in business. Now, here’s a list of the characteristics of excellent companies as identified in In Search of Excellence. Note how readily you can adapt them to your schools, as we did at Stevenson High School.

1. The best-run companies show a bias for action—for getting things done. Peters and Waterman say, “Excellent companies get quick action because their organizations are fluid. These companies are characterized by a vast network of informal, open communications. . . . The right people get into contact with each other regularly. . . . [There is] a virtual technology of keeping in touch.” Although this lesson isn’t new to school executives, it’s a key to success. As in the corporate world, it’s important that you keep channels of communication open in your schools. Reason: When you want to get things done, you have an informed network of people who are ready to act. Here are two ways you can make sure people in your schools keep in touch, as we did at Stevenson:

   Hold daily meetings with your administrative team. Traditionally, our administrative team—made up of the principal,

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department helped us develop an extensive follow-up questionnaire, suggesting information to gather from our graduates. Teachers wanted to know, for example, how respondents assess their preparation at Stevenson—and how that information correlates with the specific courses respondents took. Other questions: How do students assess the usefulness of such activities as participation in the music or drama programs? How do graduates rate the value and the challenge of homework assignments they received at Stevenson?

Next, we used a random numbers table to select 15 percent of the 1986 graduating class. A secretary tracked down these 60 or so graduates, talked to them by telephone, read the questions to them, and tabulated their responses. By randomly selecting these students and eliciting a response from each one, we're confident that the results (which we're just beginning to compile) will be reliable. Furthermore, because students' opinions of their schooling might vary over time, we plan to conduct this study with every year's graduating class, repeating it the fifth and tenth years after graduation. This will allow us to compile a longitudinal look at how our "customers" regard the job we're doing.

3 Excellent companies encourage autonomy and entrepreneurship. Peters and Waterman point out that innovative companies foster many leaders and many innovators throughout the organization. Managers in these companies do not launch a new project unless an individual zealot or "champion" volunteers to embrace that project and become personally committed to its success. School executives can learn much from this concept, considering the number of new education ideas that die an early death because of lack of interest or commitment. At Stevenson, we apply this concept this way:

Seek out and encourage champions before attempting to implement a new idea. Actually, this idea is a significant deviation from the conventional school wisdom. Traditionally, school executives have waited for faculty approval (or at least acquiescence) before putting a new idea into action. Peters and Waterman suggest you don't need universal approval of a new project—but you do need at least one person who is committed to carrying it through to success.

Example: Last year, some of our teachers of remedial students complained that they had few opportunities to talk to each other—to share common problems and concerns. We invited teachers' ideas on how to correct this situation. One teacher suggested the school give release time once or twice a quarter for teachers of these classes to meet as a group. The result: The teachers formed a group called the Basic Council. At the council's first meeting, the group identified several topics, and the teacher who first spoke up took on the task of planning subsequent meetings. She contacted experts to speak on those topics and kept her colleagues informed of her progress. The meetings that resulted were wonderfully diverse. A psychologist from a nearby hospital instructed the Basic Council on how members might form a support group. Several meetings were devoted to how teachers could develop common expectations regarding student behavior, homework requirements, formats for reports, and so on. The group developed interdisciplinary teaching units and planned field trips. The teachers were unabashedly enthusiastic about the council—and when they noticed that the release time for meetings was interfering with their classroom responsibilities, they decided on their own to meet after school rather than abandon or curtail the meetings.

The enthusiasm spread. Teachers of our advanced students proposed that they establish an Honors Council, and other faculty members began considering how they might form similar groups to pursue common interests. Will all these groups succeed? Chances are, if at least one teacher is willing to champion its cause, the group will receive administrative and faculty support. If no one takes responsibility for making the group succeed, it won't.

4 The best-run companies achieve productivity through people. According to Peters and Waterman, managers in excellent companies realize that a prime motivational factor is the individual's perception that he is doing well. Consequently, these companies set goals that most people can reach and let employees know when they're doing well. These firms celebrate success with ceremony and hoopla. Here are a couple of ways to implement this concept in schools:

Provide teachers comparative feedback on how they're performing. Consider what happens when teachers don't get this feedback: Last spring, a teacher with 16 years' experience in another school system applied for a position in our science department. He acknowledged that in all
those years, he never was told how his students performed in comparison to stu-
dents in the nation, the state, the next
town, or even the next classroom. Small
wonder he thought he'd been operating in
a vacuum for his entire professional
life.

At Stevenson, we provide teachers
comparative information on their stu-
dents' performance: We analyze student
performance on standardized achieve-
tment tests and on college entrance exa-
ninations. We administer nationally
normed, criterion-referenced tests in
many of our courses so we can compare
our students' performance with national
averages. Most important, we require
common semester examinations for all
courses that are taught by two or more
teachers. These examinations, which are
developed by the teachers, assess student
attainment of course objectives. A com-
puter helps us analyze student perfor-
mance in as many as 15 different sub-
tests within each examination. With that
information, teachers can pinpoint areas
in which their students performed above
or below the school norm. Faculty mem-
bers also can discuss materials, strategies,
pacing, and so on with their colleagues
who teach the course.

Celebrate the success of your teachers.
We also use student achievement data to
celebrate the success of our teachers and
students. Daily announcements, sign
boards, press releases, and newsletters
trumpet the news when our students sur-
pass state and local norms on an examina-
tion, perform well in academic competi-
tion, or earn academic distinction.

To enhance the self-esteem of our fac-
ulty members, we also encourage teachers
to play an active role in professional
organizations. Indeed, the school board
pays the expenses of any teacher who
makes a presentation at a state, regional,
or national meeting. In short, we aggress-
ively seek out opportunities to publicize
and reinforce our teachers' accomplish-
ments.

The best companies are hands-on,
value-driven organizations. In excellent
companies, say Peters and Waterman,
top management stays close to the ac-
tion—walking plant floors, visiting
stores, and so on. These leaders believe
in "management by walking about." And
they continually remind employees of
the organization's values and mission.

Here's how you can stay involved in
the action and keep your finger on the
pulse of your schools:

5

Encourage building-level administra-
tors to keep a hand in teaching. The es-
sential purpose of schools is to teach.
Consequently, all our directors of instruc-
tion teach one class each term. As prin-
cipal, I teach one three-week unit each
quarter, during which I become the regularly
assigned teacher is free to work on a cur-
riculum project. The superintendent, too,
regularly serves as a substitute teacher.

Make sure the principal and depart-
ment chairman are highly visible in the
school. At Stevenson, these school execu-
tives schedule specific times each day for
roaming the halls and seeking out teachers
and students for informal conversations.

6

Excellent companies simultaneously
are "loose" and "tight." Even as they en-
courage individual initiative and
autonomy ("looseness")—say Peters and
Waterman—the best-run companies and
demand rigid adherence ("tightness")
to a few core values that drive and guide
direction to everyone in the organization.

Identify the core values of your school
and insist that they be observed in daily
to-day operations. Every organization
must balance two significant but con-
dictory goals: On the one hand, encour-
age autonomy and innovation (and
thereby, greater productivity and high
morale); and on the other, set a focus that
binds individuals in pursuit of a commo-
tional goal.

At Stevenson, we asked ourselves,
"What are the characteristics of an excel-
lent school?" A task force polled faculty
members, parents, students, and com-
unity members and gradually de-
veloped a composite description of
the kind of school those groups sought.
From that, we identified the following five
values that drive our efforts: (1) We tea
course objectives and provide evidence
that students have achieved those objec-
tives. (2) We make full use of instruc-
tional time. (3) We demonstrate our ex-
pectation that each student will achieve
basic course objectives. (4) We ensure
an orderly atmosphere that is conducive
to learning. (5) We treat all members of the
school community with respect and con-
sideration.

Your schools—like Stevenson High
School—successfully can apply the prin-
ciples and practices that characterize su-
cessful businesses. With those forces driv-
ing them, schools, too, can lay claim
on the benefits of excellent management.