

Avoiding the Downside of Excellence



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If you are on the receiving end of a service, excellence is always preferable to mediocrity. Yet there is a dangerous downside to focusing on excellence that is usually invisible to those working inside an organization.

What's wrong with this picture?

I recently came across an intriguing photo on the Internet of the Choluteca Bridge in Honduras. (You can view it by searching for 'Choluteca Bridge Honduras photo.') Hurricane Mitch ravaged Central America in November 1998. More than 5,600 people died in the storm and more than 12,300 were injured. Over 150 bridges in Honduras were destroyed but the Choluteca Bridge was engineered and constructed so well it survived intact. The Japanese company that built the Choluteca Bridge was so proud of their workmanship they put a photo of the bridge on their company brochure.

The problem after Hurricane Mitch wasn't with the bridge, it was with the river. The storm was so severe it actually shifted the river, which now flows around the bridge instead of under it. It is a very sturdy bridge to nowhere, without any useful function.

The Choluteca Bridge is a powerful metaphor for ministry organizations that focus on excellence without preparing for and adapting to changing conditions in their ministry context. No one chooses mediocrity over excellence. And many organizations openly aspire to excellence in missions and ministry. But while we strive to do things right, we must ensure we are doing the right things or we run the risk of something excellently that no longer needs to be done.

Movement>Methods>Monument

Have you ever wondered why movements plateau and eventually decline? Movements

tend to go through three phases. The initial phase is one of explosive growth. Many people are moved by the cause and willing to get involved. There is a lot of vision but not much organization. Therefore, activities and programs can be chaotic. Soon, a concern for quality control focuses attention on methods. Leaders change the conversation to excellence. They focus on getting better at what they do and improving their methods. But the half-life of an effective method is getting shorter all the time. Movements that obsess over refining existing methods to the exclusion of innovating for the future will eventually begin to decline. Leaders of declining movements change the conversation to survival, tradition, and heritage.

In a local congregation, the church is almost always planted with an orientation to reaching people who do not know Jesus. Their focus is primarily outward. Too often, over time churches turn their focus inward and give priority to taking care of their members. In a rapidly changing context taking excellent care of people inside the church can make it increasingly difficult to attract new people outside the church. Over time inwardly focused churches lose momentum. Eventually, when attendance is sparse, the focus changes from caring for the members to maintaining the building.

Organizational decline can be an unforeseen consequence of focusing on excellence.

How can ministry organizations strive for excellence without falling into this natural cycle of professionalization and decline?

Adapting to change

Adapting to changes in the world can be painful. But we have to keep our eyes open to what is changing and how fast it is changing. If we focus only on doing what we currently do with excellence it can blind us to the need to adapt. The desire for excellence can blind us to changes we need to make. If we explore new methods or reach out to a new audience we rarely engage them with excellence at first. Usually it is more comfortable to focus on doing familiar things right rather than on doing the right things.

In the 1930's there were hundreds of orphanages across the US. Many of these orphanages were truly excellent at providing care for children. However, government policies began to change state by state to deinstitutionalize these children and move to a foster care system. Some leaders saw the changes coming and successfully transitioned to Christian social service agencies providing adoption and foster care services. Other leaders who were only focused on being an excellent orphanage slowly and painfully went out of existence. They were passionate about their mission. They were committed to excellence. But they were resisting the larger sea change that was occurring. Funding sources moved away from orphanages and they could not find new donors willing to support their work. Their relentless focus on being an excellent orphanage made them unable to adapt to the critical changes that were occurring.

Currently, the landscape for Christian publishing is shifting as more of us buy eBook readers. Traditional bookstores are struggling to compete against the ease of ordering online. Self-publishing has become much more affordable. Amazon recently announced that they now sell more Kindle eBooks than softcover books each year. The rise in popularity of eBooks has become a threat for Christian publishers. In this industry, those who are focused on simply doing what they do with excellence will be blindsided. Many of these organizations are responding at a painfully slow pace to a publishing environment that is digitizing rapidly.

The environment for international missions is changing rapidly too. In a flat world we can communicate with missionaries in remote parts of the world easily. Many missionaries have immediate access to donors and prayer partners by email. Skype is free. None of this was true twenty years ago. How have these changes impacted the support systems we created decades ago? Are we alert to the changes occurring even now? Do we face market pressure from our donors to keep doing the same thing the same way?

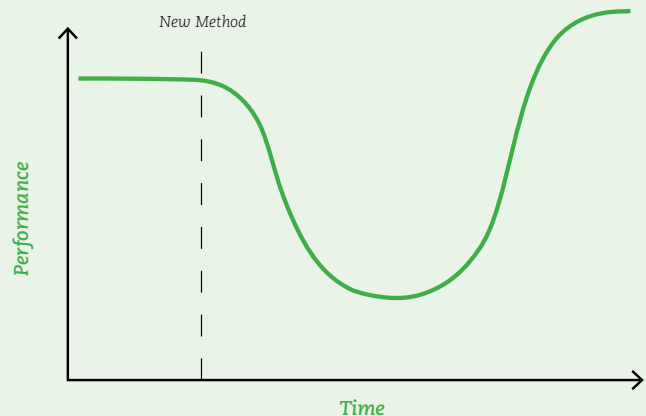
Keep an Eye on What's Changing

We should continue to do missions and ministry with excellence. It beats mediocrity hands down. But we should also avoid focusing on excellence so myopically that we miss the changes happening in our ministry context. This requires us to be ready to stop doing something we do with excellence now and be open to

try something that we may not do as well yet but is aligned with how the future is unfolding. Unfortunately, we must be willing to try new methods that we are not yet excellent at doing. We must be willing to experiment. We must be willing to try something new with mediocrity rather than sticking with tradition and keep doing what we do the same way we have always done it but trying harder.

In other words, we should do things right while checking to make sure we are also doing the right things. We must keep one eye focused on excellence and the other focused on the rapidly changing ministry context.

Once a functional methodology is in place changing to a better method will almost always produce a decline in productivity for a season while people unlearn the old way and climb the learning curve for the new way. This is why significant upgrades in the software on your computer can actually decrease productivity for a season while you figure out how to utilize them. When viewed as the relationship between performance and time it looks like this:



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