



Lessons in excellence

NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL MAY BE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT LAW (TITLE 17 U.S. CODE)

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

Richard P. DuFour is principal of Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Prairie View, Ill.

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

(me) and six department chairmen, or directors of instruction, as we call them—met one afternoon a week to consider items presented on a formal agenda. Although we still hold weekly meetings, now we also meet informally over coffee at the start of each school day. We don't have an agenda for these brief, 20-minute meetings. Instead, we use this time for the exchange of ideas, concerns, and information. And what an improvement: Our school had reached the size at which our directors of instruction might not see me or one another except at the weekly meetings. As a result, minor problems or concerns could fester and accumulate, and the weekly meetings often deteriorated into gripe sessions. Daily meetings, by contrast, allow us to resolve minor problems as they come up and to reserve the weekly meetings for more substantive issues. What's more, the regular, informal contact helps build a sense of "team"—of united purpose and effort.

Replace standing committees with task forces. Longstanding committees tend to procrastinate: They find it easy to delay a decision until the next meeting. At Stevenson, we've replaced these committees with task forces, which receive specific charges and a limited amount of time (usually a month or so) to complete their work. We limit task force membership to ten (or fewer) people who meet frequently during the brief life of the task force and present a succinct statement of recommendations as the group's final act. In the past two years, these task forces have presented recommendations regarding the goals of the school, high school graduation requirements, professional growth requirements for staff members, and ways to encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities.

2 The best companies stick close to the customer. According to Peters and Waterman, excellent companies learn from the people they serve. These companies are good listeners and get many of their best ideas from their customers. Here's how we apply this idea:

Conduct intensive, ongoing, follow-up studies of your students. Typically, if schools bother at all to investigate how their graduates fare in college or the work world, they rely on mailings and settle for a smattering of responses. Because the rate of return usually is low, and because the information is biased by the self-selection of the respondents, the results often don't carry much weight.

At Stevenson, staff members in each

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 1984 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 students 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 students' performance: We analyze student performance on standardized achievement tests and on college entrance examinations. 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 computer helps us analyze student performance in as many as 15 different subtests within each examination. With that information, teachers can pinpoint areas in which their students performed above or below the school norm. Faculty members 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 surpass state and local norms on an examination, perform well in academic competition, or earn academic distinction.

To enhance the self-esteem of our faculty 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 aggressively seek out opportunities to publicize and reinforce our teachers' accomplishments.

5 **The best companies are hands-on, value-driven organizations.** In excellent companies, say Peters and Waterman, top management stays close to the action—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:



Encourage building-level administrators to keep a hand in teaching. The essential purpose of schools is to teach. Consequently, all our directors of instruction teach one class each term. As principal, I teach one three-week unit each quarter, during which time the regularly assigned teacher is free to work on a curriculum project. The superintendent, too, regularly serves as a substitute teacher.

Make sure the principal and department chairmen are highly visible in the school. At Stevenson, these school executives schedule specific times each day for roaming the halls and seeking out teachers and students for informal conversations.

6 **Excellent companies stick to the knitting.** According to Peters and Waterman, the best-run corporations stay with the basics rather than diversifying their goals or tasks. This lesson is especially important for schools: We tend to find ourselves spread mighty thin, trying to meet the demands of state legislatures, special-interest groups, parents, school boards, and so on.

Here's how your schools can focus on their mission:

Closely monitor students' achievement of course objectives. When schools accept every mission thrust their way, they seem to tell teachers that “everything is important—pay attention to everything.” As a result, teachers are left to struggle along with no clear direction. At Stevenson, we attempt to provide direction by mapping our curriculum. Each course has specific objectives that students should achieve. Through the departmental examinations I described earlier, we monitor student achievement of those objectives—and we stay focused on our mission.

7 **The best-run companies maintain a simple form and a lean staff.** Peters and Waterman say the best-run corporations

have a structure that is “elegantly simple.” Top-level staffs, they say, are lean. Schools need to take this lesson to heart.

Give individual schools large measures of autonomy. You don't need thick, insulating layers of bureaucracy to get the job done. Extending the findings of Peters and Waterman, school improvement plans do best when they're generated and executed at the building level. Here's one area where we were fortunate at Stevenson: We're a one-building high school in a district, so we never were burdened with a top-heavy organization. But even in large school systems, central offices can learn to run lean—and give principals and teachers the autonomy they need to do the job well.

8 **Excellent companies simultaneously are “loose” and “tight.”** Even as they encourage individual initiative and autonomy (“looseness”)—say Peters and Waterman—the best-run companies also demand rigid adherence (“tightness”) to a few core values that drive and give direction to everyone in the organization. Your schools need a similar balance.

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

At Stevenson, we asked ourselves, “What are the characteristics of an excellent school?” A task force polled faculty members, parents, students, and community members and gradually developed 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 teach to course objectives and provide evidence that students have achieved those objectives. (2) We make full use of instructional time. (3) We demonstrate our expectation 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 consideration.

Your schools—like Stevenson High School—successfully can apply the principles and practices that characterize successful businesses. With those forces driving them, schools, too, can lay claim to the benefits of excellent management.