



# It's Smart to Suck (Sometimes)

Jake Breeden



Think about work that has made you proud. Do you remember something that you've produced—a product, a pitch, a proposal—that represents you at your very best? Pride feels good. We want to feel it more, and we'll work hard to get that good feeling.

Now think about work you did that made you ashamed. Can you remember something sent off incomplete because you didn't have time to do it justice? Remember that early work you turned out before you climbed up the learning curve? How'd that feel?

We're driven to do work that makes us proud and avoid the work that makes us ashamed, and, usually, that's smart. Pride pulls us to do things well, and shame pushes us away from doing things poorly. But in certain critical times—especially when it's time to accomplish something new—these emotions can push and pull us in unwise directions.

Sometimes doing your very best is the very worst decision. In fact, sometimes it's smart to suck.

There are few workplace advocates for the value of sucky work. If you need to kill someone's point in an argument, just whip out the mighty sword of excellence. It's the strongest weapon leaders have to win debates. "We need to protect our brand" is always a nice way to frame it. Or, if that doesn't work, blame someone else: "Our customers deserve better than this." Or invoke a higher power: "The CEO won't accept lowering our standards, and neither will I."

If you need to buttress your argument with a pithy quote from a great leader, you have many to choose from. Want to quote an American sports hero? Use Vince Lombardi: "I will demand a commitment to excellence and to victory, and that is what life is all about."<sup>1</sup> Prefer a military hero? Choose Colin Powell: "If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude."<sup>2</sup>

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Colin Powell's quote is especially easy to take out of context. It's smart advice when helping a paratrooper understand the importance of packing a parachute with care. But it's exactly the wrong advice when trying to find a new solution to an old problem. Too often it's advice that leaders have internalized because of the long, persistent campaign from experts who preach the value of excellence.

If you work on an assembly line and want to keep working on that same assembly line for the rest of your life, I agree completely. Show up on time and execute with excellence. As long as you're certain you'll never need to innovate or grow, focus on excellence in every single thing you do. Otherwise, you're going to have to get comfortable with a little bit of low quality work from time to time.

My advice: be excellent occasionally. I doubt these words have been uttered by many head football coaches or four star generals. But study leaders who accomplish great things and you discover they seem to have a sixth sense that gives them permission to produce second-rate work on the way to doing a first-rate job. Sometimes excellence is the right choice, but sometimes it creates a paralyzing perfectionism that blocks progress and innovation.

Demanding excellence in every idea you share or rough draft you create is a recipe for aborting new ideas before they have a chance to be developed into meaningful innovation. The easiest time to kill an idea is at its birth. And the easiest way to kill a weak, newborn idea is to stab it with the sharp blade of exacting standards.

Leaders too often demand excellence in the small things because they lack the will to prioritize what matters most. Love all your children the same, but don't love all your work the same. Some activities matter more and therefore merit more of your attention. Leaders must have the discipline and energy to make tough choices and give differently to different tasks. It's intellectually lazy to work hard at everything.

*In Search of Excellence*, by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, is one of the most popular business books ever published. In it, Peters and Waterman urge leaders to raise their standards and produce excellence. They make no distinction between process and result, suggesting instead that excellence in everything leaders do is important. But all you have to do is look at the successes of Google, a company that famously launches rough work-in-progress and calls them beta versions, to see that their search for excellence wasn't the final word.

Tim Harford shows compelling research in his book, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts From Failure*, that excellent outputs come from rough inputs in a trial-and-error process that favors

the “just get started” mentality over a “make sure it’s excellent” approach.<sup>3</sup> And Harvard professor Clay Christensen, arguably the world’s leading scholar on innovation, teaches the value of making mistakes early and adjusting.

In the face of this movement in thinking I imagined the authors of *In Search of Excellence* might have shifted their opinion, but as recently as August, 2012 Tom Peters has stubbornly insisted on his point of view, taking to Twitter to spread the Gospel of Excellence. “There is one standard of Excellence,” he tweeted. “Tiny invisible tasks command that standard as much as ‘big’ visible ones.”<sup>4</sup> (Peters so admires the virtue of excellence that he capitalizes it.) He isn’t alone—Peters represents an ever-present call to raise quality, improve standards and reduce errors.

When excellence in everything is the mantra, there are unintended consequences. If you don’t permit yourself—and your people—to explore, experiment, fail and suck, you slow down learning, which reduces the quality of the final output. Christensen in particular has done the research to reveal this paradox. Relentlessly high standards can lead to a locked-in focus on providing your best customers with top quality products, leaving a wide open door for the scrappy upstart to make mistakes, learn from them, and disrupt your market.

# Four Ways to Suck Smartly

These four actions can help ensure leaders are excellent at the things that really matter and suck when it's a smarter strategy. This is an energy conservation program that preserves a leader's best for the most meaningful actions, and encourages a bit of play along the way. And it helps leaders create a culture that tolerates rough progress but insists on excellence where it matters most.

**1 | Make it Safe to Suck.** Ed Catmull illustrates the desire for a relentlessly high standard in destination, but comfort in messiness along the way. Catmull co-founded Pixar and became the president of Disney Animation after Disney acquired Pixar. Many years before being acquired, Pixar signed a distribution deal with Disney that enabled them to get wide release for *Toy Story*, the smash hit that saved the company (before Disney signed the distribution deal that made *Toy Story* possible, Steve Jobs was in talks with Microsoft to sell Pixar to them). As part of the distribution deal, Disney asserted they had control over the sequel to *Toy Story*. Disney usually made sequels more cheaply and quickly than originals, and sent them straight-to-video, not to theaters. Under those terms, Pixar started down the path of making *Toy Story 2* as a subpar sequel, but leaders at Pixar slammed on the breaks.

In a Harvard Business Review article and podcast, Catmull describes Pixar's unyielding dedication to hold each of their films to the same standard of quality. He tells the story of stopping other productions to make time to make Toy Story 2 up to their standards. In the 2007 documentary The Pixar Story, John Lasseter, the director of Toy Story 2, describes rewriting the film in one weekend. The new script demanded better special effects than the computer animators had ever created, and it included a serious, slow ballad that explored complex emotions of loss and abandonment. Toy Story 2 would not be the trite, slapped together sequel that had become industry standard. "By rejecting mediocrity at great pain and personal sacrifice," Catmull said in the Harvard Business Review article, "we made a loud statement as a community that it was unacceptable to produce some good films and some mediocre films. As a result of Toy Story 2, it became deeply ingrained in our culture that everything we touch needs to be excellent."<sup>5</sup>

Sounds like Colin Powell and Tom Peters, right? Everything we touch needs to be excellent. But look closer at the Pixar creative process and you'll find a cultural norm of sharing unfinished scene sketches and regular check-ins to review very rough work that may never turn into anything usable. It's a daily habit for these animators to show incomplete, sucky work to one another. By making it a norm, Pixar takes the shame out of the process. Each animator embraces the mess of progress, while also knowing there is no compromising on the quality of the finished product.

The strongest leaders tirelessly drive toward an excellent outcome, but they accept good-enough progress along the way there. Catmull knows that to achieve excellence in the things that matter most, you need to create a safe environment. Otherwise, excellence can be a noose that chokes off the sometimes messy progress you need in the beginning. Catmull makes it okay to share first draft work,<sup>6</sup> and the best way to do that is to make it mandatory to share rough draft work. Because every animator shares their incomplete work every day, the messiness of progress becomes a norm that enables excellence in the final outcome.

Leaders need a nimble mind to hold both those ideas at the same time. You must lower the day-to-day standards of work so that you can achieve the absolute highest standards at the end.

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**2 | Ask Dumb Questions.** Phantom limb pain isn't just sad, it's weird. That's the way it looked to 16-year-old Katherine Bomkamp. She went to Walter Reed Hospital with her dad, a disabled Air Force Veteran. "There were all of these very young amputees returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and they weren't a lot older than me at the time—maybe 18 or 19 years old," said Katherine. Always curious, Katherine got to know more about the amputees, and one of the first things she learned is that phantom limb pain strikes as many as 80% of amputees.

The standard of care for phantom limb pain is often addictive painkilling barbiturates. But Katherine didn't know that. Her first thought: a heating pad. She used a heating pad when her leg hurt, and she figured heat might work for an amputee.<sup>7</sup>

Will a heating pad work on a prosthetic limb? That's a pretty dumb question. Where exactly do you put the pad? Then again, it's pretty dumb of the brain to think that its missing leg hurts. Katherine was naïve enough to think of the heating pad question. She wondered: can we trick the brain to think there's a heating pad on the limb? I love Katherine's thinking. If an amputee's brain is dumb enough to be tricked into thinking it has an aching leg, can't we trick it into thinking that aching leg has a heating pad on it?

Katherine is now a college student and CEO of a business built around the Pain Free Socket.

Research scientists working on this problem for decades didn't pursue her approach. Maybe a heating pad isn't an interesting therapy to consider when exploring the frontiers of medical knowledge. I'm sure the research scientists who didn't pursue the idea have written many excellent grant applications and published a series of excellent articles in leading science journals.

If you need to feel smart you won't think of dumb questions. If you need to look smart you won't ask dumb questions. Both of those needs can get in the way of actually doing something smart. Expertise can be a curse. It's the sort of reward we work hard to achieve, and once having achieved it we must protect it. Like Gollum pursuing and then protecting his precious One Ring in Lord of the Rings, our desire to protect something often correlates with how hard it was to gain.

If you need to tackle that unhealthy desire to seem smart, hit it head on. Lead your team in a dumb-question lunch, where everybody asks the dumbest questions possible, with no eye-rolling allowed. As a leader you have a responsibility to create a safe place to experiment. That might mean clearing someone's calendar and it might mean clearing someone's conscience. Guilt can prevent playful exploration of new ideas and a sense of obligation can halt playful progress.

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**3 | Be a Hacker.** Denis Waitley, a motivational speaker and author of *The Psychology of Winning*, among other books, says that you should “take pride in your own efforts on a daily basis.” I disagree. Sometimes you should be ashamed of your work. Consider what Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, said at the South by Southwest Interactive Conference: “Launch early enough that you’re embarrassed by your 1.0 product release.”<sup>8</sup>

Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook conveyed a similar notion in his first letter to investors as part of the company’s IPO. In the letter, he celebrated the hacker ethic: “Instead of debating for days whether a new idea is possible or what the best way to build something is, hackers would rather just prototype something and see what works.” They distance themselves from the quality of the solution and reduce the chance they will fall in love with it. Instead, they just try stuff until something works.

Confronted with examples like this from the software industry, leaders who don’t work in software have two options. They can say: Sure that works for software. But we make real things with real consequences. We can’t goof off like those kids. Or leaders can say: I wonder what we can learn from their world to apply in ours?

Encourage people to be embarrassed by the first version of the idea they share. Sell your people on the idea of living with some short-term shame in the name of long-term pride. This can be an important step to change a culture from one that resists imperfection to one that makes it safe.

You can't wave a magic wand and instantly create a Pixar-like culture in which it's safe to share incomplete work. Before it becomes safe, it might be a little shameful.

Say you're in a conference room listening to two people have the same debate for the sixth time. One says "we've got to build this new system." The other one says "yeah, but people will never use the system once we build it." You could delay the debate by asking the two workers to gather evidence or check in with other people. Or you could kill the debate by challenging the person who advocates the new system to leave the meeting and test the prototype of the system that afternoon.

As the Old English proverb says, "the shortest answer is doing the thing."<sup>9</sup> And there weren't many software companies in Old England.

**4 | Make More Mess to Get More Progress.** The 2012 Grammy winner for best orchestral performance was Gustavo Dudamel, who won for conducting the L.A. Philharmonic's performance of Brahms's Symphony Number Four. Dudamel became the music director of the L.A. Philharmonic three years earlier, when he was 28 years old. Perhaps the most famous music conductor in the world, 60 Minutes called him "the next Leonard Bernstein."<sup>10</sup> Musical America named him musician of the year for 2012.<sup>11</sup>

Born and raised in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, Dudamel is a product of El Sistema, the program that gives children throughout Venezuela the opportunity to play music at an elite level. Dudamel isn't alone. The Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra (SBSO) of Venezuela tours the world and was called by The London Times one of the five best orchestras in the world. Jose Antonio Abreu founded El Sistema in 1975, and he was awarded the TED Prize in 2009 for his achievements. Surely this is mastery and excellence at the highest levels.

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Alejandro Carreño, the 27-year-old concertmaster of the SBSO, says that it doesn't start out that way. “For most orchestras around the world,” said Carreño. “You master your instrument first, then you join the orchestra. But here it's exactly the opposite. With El Sistema, every kid who wants to play is invited to join a local orchestra that is part of the system. And from there, we master our instruments together.”<sup>12</sup> Taking music from the elite few and giving it to the masses is messy. There might be noise along the way, but there's music at the end.

When leaders tolerate more playful experimentation on the path to a destination defined by excellence, they make it more likely that people will stay engaged and produce truly distinguished work. **Sometimes the progress may be lower than the normal standards have been, and that can lead to the very difficult decision to share work a leader isn't proud of. But so long as a leader is okay with the mess of progress, the final result can be a masterpiece.** 📖

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**1** J. Kramer, Lombardi: Winning Is the Only Thing (New York: Maddick Manuscripts Inc., 1970).

**2** O. Harari, The Powell Principles: 24 Lessons from Colin Powell, a Legendary Leader (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

**3** T. Harford, Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

**4** Tom Peters, Twitter post, August 7, 2012, 2:07 p.m., [http://twitter.com/tom\\_peters](http://twitter.com/tom_peters)

**5** E. Catmull, "How Pixar Fosters Creativity," Harvard Business Review (September, 2008).

**6** Pixar and Collective Creativity." Narrated by Paul Michelman. Harvard Business Review Ideacast (August 28, 2008). <http://blogs.hbr.org/ideacast/2008/08/harvard-business-ideacast-109.html>

**7** N. Laporte, "Don't Know How? Well, Find Someone Who Does" New York Times. November 26, 2011.

**8** Reid Hoffman, South by Southwest Interactive Conference, March, 2011. <http://venturebeat.com/2011/03/15/reid-hoffman-10-rules-of-entrepreneurship/>

**9** Often attributed to Hemingway, but it's described as an old English aphorism in Thomas Longworth, Longworth's American Almanac (New York: T. Longworth, 1826)

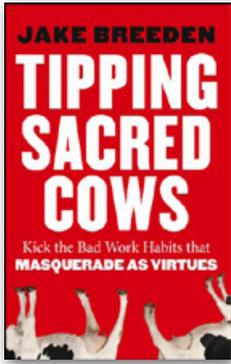
**10** Gustavo the Great," 60 Minutes, CBS News (February 11, 2009). [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560\\_162-3841251.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-3841251.html)

**11** M. Boehm, "Gustavo Dudamel named musician of the year by Musical America" Los Angeles Times. November 7, 2012.

**12** Dudamel Conducts Mahler 8—Symphony of a Thousand," Narrated by John Lithgow on LA Phil Live, broadcast by Cineplex to movie theaters, live from Caracas, Venezuela (February 18, 2012).



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