

Stewardship for Sustainable Success

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When Tom Peters and Thomas Waterman Jr wrote *In Search of Excellence*, first published in 1982, they set out to provide a blueprint for how companies can “stay on top of the heap”. Through their research, Peters and Waterman identified eight basic principles (later referred to as attributes) that separated their excellent companies from the rest.

Interestingly, the Author's Note of the 2003 edition of the book includes a riposte to detractors of the book who pointed out the subsequent decline of some of the featured companies. Addressing the criticism, the authors retort, “They miss the point, which was to learn from those who'd had a long run of success, just as we learn from athletes in their prime. We weren't writing *Forever Excellent*, just as it would be absurd to expect any great athlete not to age.”

But to what extent are companies analogous to athletes? Does a company's performance have to decline over time in the same way an athlete's invariably does, for example? And if not, how can a company avoid declining performance over time in a way that an athlete can't?

What might sustainable success look like?

Sustainable Success?

In my mentoring work with individuals, I define sustainable success by the following criteria:

1. **Alignment** with your core purpose and values *overtime*.
2. **Consistency** of results in achieving your goals and pursuing your aspirations (values) in a meaningful way *overtime*.
3. **Durability**, which is your staying power in overcoming distractions, temptations and challenges to stay in the game *overtime*.

This same criteria can also be applied to organisations. Can an organisation be successful if it isn't aligned with its core values and simply chases money? Could it be seen as successful if its results are patchy and inconsistent from one year to the next?

“Sustainable success requires more than flashes in the pan or one-hit wonders.”

Finally, durability speaks for itself – if a company can't weather the storms of distraction, temptation and challenge that will inevitably come then it may struggle to survive let alone be successful.

The key phrase to take note of in this definition of sustainable success is over time. Sustainable success requires more than flashes in the pan or one-hit wonders. To borrow Peters and Waterman's analogy, it's about an athlete that can win today, win tomorrow and remain in a prime state long after its original 'body' would have given up.

This kind of sustainable success, then, requires constant vigilance on the part of the individual and the organisation. Considering the VUCA world in which we live, it requires not just one transformation but perhaps several transformations to obtain, and crucially maintain, this kind of success. Transformation as a way being may even have to become part of the company's DNA. (Cf. The late Clayton Christensen's writing on sustaining innovations.)

How can an entire organisation go about transforming to achieve sustainable success then?

Who is Responsible?

One of the biggest challenges when pursuing any sort of meaningful organisational change lies in winning the support of those at the grassroots of the organisation, who through their values, beliefs and behaviours determine the organisation's culture. Big pronouncements from senior leadership teams about organisational transformation can invite cynicism and eye-rolls from those who think they have seen and heard it all before.

But there's a bigger issue to address than convincing the fad-weary cynics to get on board, which is the issue of responsibility. Who is actually responsible for bringing about change and transformation within the organisation? Glibly stating that it's everyone's responsibility probably won't cut it – even if it's true. Speaking to everyone is sometimes akin to speaking to no one. When it's declared that we are all responsible, does anyone really feel like they are responsible?

The question of 'individual responsibility' for the transformation of the whole is underlined by the significant decentralisation and dispersal of power that's occurred within organisations over recent decades, not least due to shifting technological and workplace trends. Individual employees, particularly knowledge workers, now have more power and influence within their organisations than those of previous generations. If the organisation is going to transform in any meaningful sense, then, not only do individual employees need to be on board, they need to be the drivers of that transformation.

This then begs the question of how organisations can achieve sustainable success through transformation that is driven by its

individual employees. For this, I present a principle that I liken to a key that will never rust: Stewardship.

Stewardship for Sustainable Success

There are various ways of defining a principle like stewardship, potentially making it a woolly concept. It doesn't have to be like that, however. It can, and should, be simple enough to be understood by all, otherwise applying it in any meaningful sense will be nigh impossible.

I define stewardship as:

Voluntarily taking responsibility to care for someone or something.

At first glance, that may seem too simplistic to be useful but don't be too quick to dismiss it. Let's take a look at its three core components:

1. **Voluntary:** Stewardship comes from within, not without. It doesn't rely on, nor is it conducive with, an external party or authority dictating the behaviour of another through coercion or manipulation. It goes beyond a sense of obligation and sometimes even beyond a sense of duty. How many authority figures are stuck in the mode of carrot and stick manipulation, deterring those they lead from taking real ownership within their roles?
2. **Responsibility:** Stewardship is about taking responsibility – taking deep ownership to find solutions to problems and to achieve successful outcomes in doing their part. Taking personal responsibility to do one's part that endures over time happens when the commitment is intrinsic. How many could add greater value to their organisations through taking greater personal responsibility to fulfil their roles?
3. **Care:** Stewardship is fuelled by care, which is love in action. Care is about meeting needs – the needs of the self and the needs of others. The care of one who lives by the principle of stewardship will bring about an unprecedented amount of problem solving, creativity and success. And that is no accident. How valuable would it be to your businesses if your people were intrinsically committed to care more?

What might be a good way to illustrate stewardship in action vis-à-vis non-stewardship, though? For this, I like the New Testament parable of the good shepherd. In this parable, found in John chapter 10, the good shepherd knows his sheep and cares for them, protecting them from danger. The hireling, on the other hand, flees at the sight of danger, leaving the sheep exposed and unprotected.

"The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." – John 10:13

The hireling is principally concerned with his material reward for doing the job; he cares more about his own interests than the wellbeing of the sheep whose care he has been entrusted with. He has not taken on the mantle of stewardship to care for the sheep. And he cannot be forced to do so.

Hirelings don't drive organisational transformation or sustainable success. They may do a job, staying strictly within its parameters, but don't expect much more from them. It's those who apply the principle of stewardship who will go above and beyond, enabling the organisation to survive and thrive over time.

The beauty of the principle of stewardship is that those who apply it innovate and transform their ways of working as a matter of course. They see, and pre-empt, problems way beyond their pay-grade and then apply solutions to mitigate them. They also see opportunities before others and seize them without hesitation for the benefit of the whole. They are constantly learning, creating and contributing beyond the scope of their employment contracts without needing to drive themselves into the ground in the process.

It behooves organisations who are serious about organisational transformation and sustainable success, then, to hire for stewardship. Those who live by that principle will bring about lasting success – and will inspire others to do the same.

The Proof is in the Eating

You may see the value of stewardship as self-evident in the pursuit of sustainable success. Or you may not yet be convinced, demanding further evidence. My recommendation is that you try it for yourself in your own life. Try it in the context of yourself, your relationships and your contributions, and then

see what sort of results follow. Be mindful of the question, who needs my care right now? And seek to answer that question daily through taking commensurate action. If you make a habit of doing so, you can then make a reasonable assessment of its value.

As I have become more effective in living the principle of stewardship, I have achieved greater results in all aspects of my life. I have won eight sales awards in just over eight years on the job, contributing ideas that have transformed the way the organisation serves its customers throughout the international business. And through my own business, 3Stewardships, I have witnessed the lives of those I mentor change significantly through their application of the principle of stewardship. It really does work.

Within *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman noted how their excellent companies paid explicit attention to their values, not dismissing them as “vague abstractions”. Better still, perhaps – to ensure that the proverbial athlete can remain in its prime for longer than it should by normal standards, companies would do well to pay explicit attention to the values that underpin sustainable success. Stewardship would be an excellent place to start. ■

**Mr. Tom English is the Founder of 3 Stewardships Ltd., which is dedicated to empowering individuals and organisations to achieve their version of sustainable success. He also hosts the 'Real Clear Values' podcast, which discusses all things relating to human values – the good, the bad and the ugly.*