

TAKE YOUR SHOT

HOW SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS CAN CONSISTENTLY LEAD AT A HIGHER LEVEL



Dave Striegel, PhD

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1

WHY THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE MATTERS

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle said: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

While sitting in the stands at the alpine ski venue for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Park City, Utah, I was reflecting upon the power of habit. Nervous with anticipation for the ski competition, I was thinking, *This is what sports are all about.*

I was in Park City to cheer on my client and friend, Erik Schlopy, who was competing in multiple events at what would be his second of three Olympic Games.

The excitement in the air was palpable, but not because of my natural pride and competitiveness in wanting Erik and the US team to do well. Rather, the positive energy was from the knowledge that so many athletes and coaches, regardless of their nationality, had committed themselves to pursue excellence in sports. This was their time.

A rare few would perform well enough to win a medal. Most would not. All would be able to say they entered the ring

and gave it their best. There is tremendous honor in that, and it is what binds all the Olympics participants together. It is also what binds everyone together who strives for excellence in what they do. President Teddy Roosevelt famously spoke about those valiant enough to enter the arena; the courage to do so is something we should value.

Erik is a valiant competitor you want your child to emulate. Not because he set records or won Olympic gold. Others did that. Not because he became a worldwide celebrity or an endorsement magnet. Others did that, too. Erik is a quintessential role model because he epitomized the pursuit of excellence throughout his career. He fought through unimaginable adversity for over twenty years, never giving up hope and relentlessly pushing himself to become the best he could be. He is a great example of why pursuing excellence matters, not just for the victors but even more so for the masses who don't experience victory, or what our culture would define as the ultimate success.

You might think that having a last name like Schlopy would mean you would be destined to become a world-class alpine skier. You would be right. Erik started competing at a young age and, from the beginning, showed a gift for balancing fearless speed with precise technique. He also demonstrated a competitive quality that might have come across as annoying to adults but would end up being a key to the perseverance he would show throughout his sports career and beyond.

He just would not give up, no matter how lopsided the odds or the score. He said, "If I was behind 19-2 at ping pong, I'd keep fighting, then right away want to play again." What is fascinating, though, is that for Erik, the desire to do better was

more about him growing than about beating the opponent. He wanted to improve, not just win. That is pursuing excellence.

He and I met in the late nineties as he searched for ways to improve his performance and climb the ultracompetitive mountain known as World Cup skiing.

Unless you are an alpine skiing fan, you probably have not heard of Erik. Most elite and even world-class alpine skiers from the United States spend their careers in relative anonymity—except when the Winter Olympics come around and only then if they win a medal. Yet, there is so much to learn from people like Erik, the ones who don't end up on the podium.

Being the best is such a relative term. Erik was a world-class alpine skier for twenty years. Not bad for a guy who, in 1993, experienced a crash while competing in the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships that was so horrific it nearly ended his life, let alone his career.

In a January 2020 blog interview with REAL Trends, a real estate consulting firm, Erik described the crash. “I was young and lacking experience, and I shot into the air at seventy mph,” he said. “I landed on my butt and compressed six vertebrae, displaced my sternum, broke several ribs, punctured my lung, and bit my tongue almost all the way off.”¹

If you are not queasy, you are not human.

No one would have faulted him had he decided to put away his skis and get a real job. Yet, one year after the crash, Erik qualified for the 1994 Olympics. Yeah, one year.

He went on to compete in the 2002 Winter Games in Utah as well as the 2006 Winter Games in Turin, Italy. He was a seven-time national champion; was named to six US world championship teams; finished third overall on the 2001 FIS Alpine World Cup season circuit in the giant slalom; and was

the bronze medalist at the 2003 FIS World Championships, also in the giant slalom.

By all accounts, Erik had one of the longest and most successful careers in US ski racing history and was one of the best all-around alpine skiers in the world for upwards of twenty years, culminating in his induction into the US Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame in 2014. Yet, I bet you have not heard of him.

That is okay because fame was never his motivator. Ask him what his greatest athletic accomplishment was during his career, and he will mention the consistency and resilience he showed for all those years on the World Cup circuit. Even during the toughest times, he did not quit.

Ask him what he is most proud of in his life, and skiing does not come up. He will enthusiastically tell you about striving to be a great husband to his wife, Olympic gold medalist swimmer Summer Sanders, and dad to their two children, Skye and Spider. In fact, his realization that his singular priority was to be an active participant in his wife's and children's lives is what led to him deciding to retire from competitive skiing in 2009.

Erik's transition to a non-sports life was not easy. He came to find there were woefully few resources to assist athletes in the variety of important aspects of excelling outside of sports. But after hacking around in the jungle for a couple of years, he found his way.

He has developed knowledge and skill for real estate that has led to a primary leadership role in a family residential real estate business in his hometown of Park City while simultaneously building a commercial, multi-family real estate company that feeds his need for challenge and growth. He is clear about one thing: he works to live, not the other way around.

Just as when he was skiing, his life's purpose is focused on the process. Every day, he applies what he learned during his skiing career to pursue excellence in his second career as well as his family life. Why? Because, as he says, "You only have one life."

Real estate investor, business leader, husband, wife, father, mother, whatever you are—be the best you can be, not for the glory, but for those who have placed their trust in you.

The only way Erik has been able to embark on a lifelong pursuit of excellence is with a burning desire to explore all the nooks and crannies of his potential, even in the face of overwhelming odds and adversity. Yes, there are skiers who are more decorated and famous. However, Erik's commitment to the pursuit of his own excellence for two decades in skiing and another ten years of reinventing himself while simultaneously honoring his family is a model for anyone who wants to be great at what they do without sacrificing what matters most.

The Pursuit Of Excellence Is Not About Talent

The pursuit of excellence is not about talent. Over the past twenty-five years, I have had the sincere privilege to work with world-class athletes, like Erik, competing at the top echelons of their sports. When you spend time with professional athletes, you quickly learn how jaw-droppingly talented they are. You shake your head, wondering how they do what they do.

A reasonable person might assume successful pros have dominated their sports every step of their careers. Surely, they were the most talented player among their friends. More often than you might think, they were not.

When asked if anyone from their past always beat them like a drum, a typical response begins with a chuckle, followed by, "Oh yeah, I couldn't do anything against so and so, no matter what I did! He had my number."

Frequently, the person mentioned was someone you had never heard of. When asked what happened, why he didn't make it big, often the reason was, "He didn't have the focus and discipline I did."

Yes, the pros are some of the most talented athletes on Earth. But they are not the only ones. They are just the ones you see on television. So, the pursuit of excellence is not about talent.

The Pursuit Of Excellence Is Not About Results

Results are essential measuring sticks of success in business and sports, to be sure. However, results, especially those tied to meaningful performances, generally reside in the future, meaning they are a byproduct of a series of smaller actions and decisions that lead to the big win.

As such, focusing on results as a primary daily motivator creates frustration and anxiety because results are inherently outside of the control of the performer.

You can control the result of a meeting or the outcome of a single conversation in the moment. The beginning and end are easily seen, felt, and managed. The compounding of many of these small performances leads to a bigger outcome or win.

You cannot set an annual production record in your business in one day. You cannot save a million dollars until you have saved a thousand. You cannot win a game in the first three minutes. And you cannot have the business of your dreams only a month after having inherited a historically average team.

Results in the performances that make a real difference in your business come from a commitment to doing each step of your job as a leader to the best of your ability, even when the results may not be good at times. You persevere. You don't settle. The more you keep at it, the better your performance

will get through learning and adaptation. So, the pursuit of excellence is not about results.

The Pursuit Of Excellence Is About Growth

The pursuit of excellence is about growth, a process that requires consistent, daily focus, even if just a little. In relation to leading a small business, the pursuit of excellence is about the day-to-day decisions you make as a leader regarding the effort and attitude you and your team bring to the workplace. No matter what's going on around you, you can always control those two aspects of your performance, and they are essential for growth.

As Carol Dweck emphasizes in her landmark book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, people who bring a mental approach to their work of looking for challenge and growth opportunities thrive over those who try to maintain the status quo and protect themselves and their positions from failure.² For of all the qualities and abilities leaders and their teams bring to their companies each day, effort and attitude are two that are always within their control, regardless of circumstance.

So, what separates the pros from those super-talented but unfocused friends who did not make it is a commitment to growth. It's an understanding that the enduring gifts of an accomplished career are in finding challenges and opportunities in the daily grind.

The pros you see on television and read about on the internet have figured out how to harness and focus their ability through patient, consistent work on the little things that lead to repeated progress. They learned how to extract excellence from themselves as they navigated through the inevitable failure and adversity that accompany trying to be the best at something.

We All Perform

The good news is your choice of careers does not matter. What ties everyone together is that no matter what you do for a living, if you want a consistent result, you perform. That means that as much as a professional athlete performs, so does a stay-at-home parent. Of course, the CEO of a major corporation performs, but so does the dentist who treats your toothache. Performance venues may differ. But if you care about the quality of the result of what you do, you perform.

Here is what the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. had to say about pursuing excellence when he spoke to the students at Barrett Junior High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in October 1967:

*If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Leontine Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well."*³

The same applies to leadership. Pursuing excellence as a leader matters because it gives you purpose for making decisions in your daily life as you guide the people with whom you work—those people you likely spend more time with than your own families. If you are going to commit so much time and energy to earning a living doing something meaningful, do it in such a way that you feel growth, progress, achievement, and maybe even mastery.

What follows are strategies to help you be the best leader you can possibly be. Strategies to prepare you, as the leader, to

lead, and strategies for you to deploy with your team to create the platform for its members to pursue excellence side by side with you.

This book is about the day-to-day actions and interactions of leaders. How you mentally prepare to lead. How you communicate your expectations. How you offer feedback. How you treat mistakes. How you make the tough decisions. These actions are the building blocks of leadership. How much you strive to excel at each one determines the extent to which you develop a habit of how you lead yourself and others.

You have chosen to lead. You also have the choice to pursue excellence for yourself as a leader. The path will not be easy, but it may well be the most important decision you make in your career. But before you can lead others, you have to elevate your own performance. Let us examine how to consistently perform at a higher level in the next chapter.

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- Three-time Olympic alpine skier, Erik Schlopy, is an example of someone who has devoted his personal and professional lives to the pursuit of excellence. He shows that fame and notoriety, while celebrated by many in the American culture, are not a necessary goal to find value in this pursuit.
- The pursuit of excellence is not about talent. Many of those who achieve great success are not the most talented among their peers. Instead, they bring a consistently good attitude and effort to their work that others do not.
- The pursuit of excellence is not about results. People who commit to being great at something do so with no guarantee of success. Therefore, they must embark on that journey with a desire to immerse themselves in the process of pursuing excellence, the incremental steps that lead to success. That is what gives them the best chance to succeed.
- The pursuit of excellence is about growth. A growth mindset where the ups and downs of the improvement process are embraced is a characteristic many elite performers adopt. It allows them to find motivation and satisfaction along the way as they strive toward their goals.
- We all perform. No matter what you do as a profession, if you want a consistent and repeated outcome over time, you perform. Therefore, you have the opportunity to pursue excellence in that performance. Leadership is no different.