



How high can

Excellence is a goal that you can only achieve by working with your team members and your clients to involve them and exceed expectations, says Shaz Nawaz

We all like to think that we aspire to excellence – so, let's just take a moment to think about what this really means. If you look at the dictionary definition of the word, you'll see that it derives from two Latin words meaning 'out' or 'up' and 'high'. My point? Well, you often see excellence referred to as meaning one better than 'very good'.

This is fine, but I prefer to see it as having the extra meaning of 'out of the ordinary'. To excel means to surpass expectations. Whose expectations? Those of your customers, your workforce and, last but not least, yourself.

How can you achieve excellence in the true sense of the word? Here's a simple outline of a four-step plan:

- define your core values and business vision and aims
- use these to define your goals, and break these down into targets
- set up a system of measuring achievement against your targets and goals
- review and revise.

In all the above steps, there are two key words - consult and monitor.

A typical route

Just to give you an example, my firm belongs to an accountancy organisation called AVN whose function is to enable its members to achieve excellence in professional expertise, professional and business practice, and in business growth. One of the many tools available to members is the AVN excellence self-assessment worksheet, which I've used to great success within my own practice and also with my clients' businesses.

The system provides a list of criteria, and the idea is that we ask several key team members, preferably with different roles, to look at each criterion and decide whether the firm achieves this, in whole, in part, or at all. This process is likely to spark off a good deal of discussion before a decision is reached for each of the criteria, and the final decision is then marked in the 'achievement' column. This particular system has core criteria for 4*, and additional ones for 5* and 6* plus some optional extra criteria, and the system spreadsheet will calculate how far you are on the road to achieving each of the levels.

You then create an action plan with your team on how you can address any gaps and achieve the other criteria. Once you've

completed the exercise you can, if you wish, have it assessed for formal accreditation by AVN.

Looking at criteria

This is just one example and there are a number of different systems available in different industry sectors – or, of course, you can devise your own. Some example of possible criteria to include might be:

- business goals and vision are articulated with clarity in a document agreed by partners / directors and shared with team members
- formal written action plans are agreed and written up after meetings
- you have a business plan which is reviewed at least annually and shared with the whole team
- an ongoing plan is produced at least quarterly which indicates all the key performance indicators and measures these in terms of achievement
- there is a 12-month action plan shared with the whole team that works towards achieving the vision and goal
- the entire team meets once a month with a formal, written agenda based on the ongoing plan, and the entire team are involved in subsequently creating and implementing the improvement plan
- key financial information is available to the leadership team for future decision-making
- happiness is measured (by obtaining feedback, reviewing any complaints and so on)
- team happiness is measured (by feedback and / or an anonymous

'To stand out... you need to provide something extra... There's one little snag with this: once you've met expectations... then those expectations will be raised, so next time you need to jump even higher!'

you jump?

'...foster a culture of 'owning your role' with each individual seeing themselves as making a vital contribution to achieving excellence'



- survey) and any issues arising dealt with
- there is a systematic way for the team members to locate the information they need to do their jobs
 - every team member has a written job description stating exactly their responsibilities and the systems to be used
 - regular team meetings are held to share information and recognise achievement
 - a career development review system is used for every team member
 - regular events (eg two per year) are held to encourage team-bonding
 - suitable industry-specific accreditations are obtained.

As you'll see from the above, these are all criteria that are relevant to virtually every business. In the case of a nursery, you would of course be able to add some more criteria that apply specifically to that sector. Your goals and targets, for example, will be aligned with your Ofsted reviews as well as with your business plan.

Although I've described the criteria as relating to the business as a whole, it can also be cascaded down to smaller individual teams via team leaders. And this applies to whatever system you use: it should be flexible enough to meet all the requirements of the business.

Exceeding expectations

Going back to what I said at the start, if you aspire to excellence, this is more than a simple graded assessment. To stand out - and surpass your competitors - you need to provide something extra and this

means not only meeting expectations but exceeding them.

There's one little snag with this: once you've met expectations (whether those of your customers or your workforce), then those expectations will be raised, so next time you need to jump even higher! It's therefore essential to manage expectations in order to keep them to a realistic level and avoid them spiralling out of control. This is a whole separate topic!

Just ask!

Still looking at the expectations of customers and workforce, this is where consultation comes in right from the start. How do you know what people expect, or would aspire to, unless you ask them? You'll see from the sample criteria that the emphasis is on involving the whole team (and to a lesser extent the customers) in review and decision-making and also incentivising by acknowledgement and recognition of achievement.

For your workforce, foster a culture of 'owning your role' with each individual seeing themselves as making a vital contribution to achieving excellence. For your customer base, first of all, find out what their expectations of your service are, and make it clear how your existing service will meet these. Then move up a cog from very good to excellent by surpassing what they actually expect. It doesn't actually take that much more effort to distinguish yourself as a setting of excellence.

But what it does take is time – time for consultation, time for

working out what your criteria of excellence should be, time for making sure you can measure progress, constant review and reward. And I'm afraid the only way to maintain excellence, once achieved, is to stick to the system of continual consultation, review and improvement. There aren't really any shortcuts!

So, in conclusion, if you don't already have a self-assessment for excellence process, I hope I've given you ideas to use as a starting point. ■

- Shaz Nawaz ACA is managing director of **aa** Chartered Accountants in Peterborough. A finalist in the British Accountancy Awards 2014, Shaz is also a published author and professional speaker.
T: 01733 555 667
E: shaz@aa-accountants.co.uk
W: aa-accountants.co.uk
Connect with Shaz on LinkedIn