

Working Toward Excellence

By Paul Buyer

A few years ago, my percussion ensemble rehearsals were not going very well. My students were apathetic, arriving late, not practicing like they were capable of, and showing no sense of urgency. For whatever reason, they were not working toward excellence. I talked to them about it, both individually and collectively as a group, but we could not figure it out. I met with my seniors—my leaders—who understood our standards and knew what our culture was all about, but any progress we made did not seem to stick. I was frustrated and it bothered me, and when something bothers me, I write about it.

We eventually gave our concert. It was pretty good, but it certainly was not *excellent*—not like it had been in the past. I even had one student come up to me right after the concert and confess, “Dr. Buyer, I never want to feel that way again,” describing his lack of preparation and confidence.

In the days that followed, I started reflecting. I wanted to find out why this happened. As an educator, I wanted to use this experience as a teachable moment. I also wanted to make sure this never happened again. But most of all, I wanted to find out *what was missing*. What put us in that position in the first place?

I discovered that what was missing were eight values necessary for achieving excellence and uncommon success. These values, which I soon realized were universal and could be applied to any field, industry, or profession are: hunger, effort, process, quality, consistency, leadership, time, and perseverance.

As I began wrestling with the values, I concluded they act both independently and collectively. Each value in and of itself is powerful and capable of having a significant impact on our quest for excellence. Together, the eight values become an indomitable force, leaving no stone unturned, and putting us in the best position to succeed.

Since that turning point with my students, I am proud to say we have had many moments of musical excellence together. That semester of “pretty good” motivated us to lower our tolerance for mediocrity and raise our standards and expectations to always *work toward* excellence, even if we fall short sometimes.

Jazz legend Wynton Marsalis said, “Maybe the preoccupation with technological progress has overshadowed our concern with human progress.” This article, at its essence, is about human progress and defining the eight values that lead to excellence—as percussionists and as people.

1: HUNGER

Hunger is about your desire, passion, drive, initiative, and how proactive and self-motivated you are. One characteristic of people who are hungry is they “begin with the end in mind.” This means you must be proactive in establishing a game plan and *work backwards*, visualizing the end result and working toward excellence every day. As author John C. Maxwell said, “The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda.”

Several years ago, one of my students asked me a question I will never forget: “How do I become a great player?” What a loaded question! After thinking about it for a few minutes, this is what I came up with: “Well, first of all, you have to have a great semester every semester. To have a great semester, you have to have a great lesson every week. And to have a great lesson every week, you have to have a great practice session every day.”

How driven, proactive, and hungry are *you* on a daily basis? If I shadowed you tomorrow, what would I observe?

2: EFFORT

Effort refers to your work ethic, focus, and ability to execute at a high level. Legendary coach John Wooden called hard work *industriousness*, which meant “true work at your highest capacity, fully engaged, totally focused, and completely absorbed.” In addition to the physical effort of practicing snare drum, marimba, and timpani for example, *mental* effort is just as critical to your success. Sports psychologist Gary Mack proclaimed, “Once you reach a certain level of competency, the mental skills become as important as the physical skills, if not more so.”

When I advise my students on *how* to practice, I emphasize practicing with a high level of concentration, awareness, focus, intensity, intent, and purpose. When they focus, they are at their best. Their minds are engaged, in addition to their ears and hands. When they do not focus, they do not come close to reaching their potential.

Are you taking your practicing as far as you can—both physically and mentally—or are you going through the motions, treading water, and spinning your wheels? What, if anything, is holding you back from giving your best effort?

3: PROCESS

Process is about the journey, not the destination. Our society tends to overvalue results and undervalue process—the very

process that leads to the results we are aiming for. According to author Thomas Sterner, “We have a very unhealthy habit of making the product—our intended result—the goal, instead of the process of getting there. We look at the process...as almost a necessary nuisance we have to go through in order to get to our goal.”

We expect the concert to go well, despite punctuality, attendance, and focus problems in rehearsal. We expect the drumline to play clean, despite having only one week to prepare. We expect to get an A on the theory test, even though we waited until the night before to study. Who do we think we are? Excellence must be crockpotted, not microwaved. Microwaving is fast, rushed, and does not taste very good. Crockpotting is slow and steady, and as the meal simmers over time, it is much more satisfying.

Do you know someone who is not successful? Look at his process. Do you know someone who produces mediocre work? Examine her process. How much do you value the process compared to the result?

4: QUALITY

Quality is about taking pride in the work you do. It is about your performance level, confidence, and professionalism. Quality is also about taking care of the details, setting standards, and holding others accountable for meeting and exceeding those standards. Willa A. Foster wrote, “Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction, and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.”

As Director of the Clemson University Steel Band, I have a statement in my syllabus about quality called “Being a Professional.”

When you get paid to play music, you are considered a professional. When people hire us, they expect quality—period. There are no excuses. Not being prepared is simply not an option...One of our goals is to get hired again by the same people, because they know what they are getting with their money. Word of mouth spreads very fast as well. Remember—people don’t pay for average. Would you pay for an average meal, an average movie, an average book, an average concert, an average cell phone, or an average computer? People pay for quality and excellence.

Does your name stand for quality? Do you

stamp a superior quality on everything that goes out of your hands?

5: CONSISTENCY

Consistency refers to repeatedly doing the things that will put you in a position to succeed. In fact, it is one of the invisible secrets of success. Consistency is also about making smart choices and decisions that add up over time. It is about slowly chipping away, making steady progress, and constantly getting better when others who are inconsistent are stagnating. Consistency is about having the self-discipline to embrace *repetition*, a key to learning, improvement, and achieving excellence. John Wooden said, “There is a choice you have to make in everything you do, so keep in mind that in the end, the choice you make, makes you.”

As percussionists, many of us would agree that developing 4-mallet marimba technique takes time and requires a great deal of consistent practice. When I attended the Leigh Howard Stevens Summer Marimba Seminar many years ago, I remember coming back a completely different player. The daily consistency of Leigh’s excellent instruction and feedback, the inspiration we received from guest artists like Bob Becker and Michael Burritt, and the intense practice sessions we engaged in gradually started adding up over time. Not only did my hands develop better technique, my mind was more focused and receptive to learning, and my ears were more aware of the sounds I was producing.

How consistent are *you* on a daily basis? Do you have the self-discipline to repeatedly do the things that will put you in a position to succeed?

6: LEADERSHIP

Leadership is about working toward excellence *with others*. The truth is that excellence is rarely an individual accomplishment, but rather a team accomplishment and joint venture. What few leaders truly understand is that real, authentic leadership is not about you, but the people you are responsible for leading. If you want to improve your leadership skills, simply improve the seven C’s of leadership: character, competence, commitment, caring, confidence, communication, and consistency.

There are countless examples in percussion where leadership is necessary to achieve excellence. Think about your studio, percussion ensemble, or drumline and the culture you have created. How do you rehearse? What is your philosophy? What are your standards and expectations? Are those in charge leading by example, putting others first, and walking their talk?

Colin Powell said, “The performance of an organization is the ultimate measure of its leader.” So how is *your* organization doing

these days? Are you shining the leadership spotlight on yourself or on your people?

7: TIME

Time is about time management and organization—two of the most important keys to success in work and life. One of the great equalizers in this world is that everyone has 24 hours in a day. How we use those hours is what separates excellence from mediocrity. Author Steve Jamison said, “Time, used correctly, is perhaps your most important asset. Treat time carelessly and it will do the same to you and your organization.”

Saying no is another important skill of valuing your time. For example, sometimes I have to make a decision to cut a piece of music from our concert program. When this situation occurs, I usually explain to my students that “No one cares what we *don’t* play.” In other words, in my opinion, it is better *not* to do something at all than it is to do it poorly. More often than not, biting off more than you can chew will lead to mediocrity. Instead, eliminate the stress. Allow more time to focus on other things. The result is doing *less—better*. Less is more. By saying no, you are saying yes to doing less better and greatly improving your chances of achieving excellence.

How well do you value time? Are you comfortable with saying no?

8: PERSEVERANCE

Perseverance is the persistence, resiliency, and inner strength you need to move forward during tough times. If you were to study the careers and experiences of those who have achieved uncommon success in the percussive arts, you would find a time when they arrived at a crossroads and had to decide whether to give up or to persevere. Successful people also learn to *expect* adversity as they work toward excellence. They are not surprised when it comes, and they do not let it deter them from their goals.

Perhaps your dream is to complete your DMA, attain a college teaching position, or become a virtuoso soloist. Or maybe you are preparing for a recital, applying to graduate school, or searching for a job. Whatever your situation, whatever your goals, you will have to develop the value of perseverance if you want to succeed. Authors Dennis Coates and Meredith Bell said of perseverance, “Just decide that after most people have dropped out, you’ll be one of those still in the game.”

Do you give up easily, or do you have the inner strength to keep going when things get tough? Does adversity deter you, or does it motivate you and make you more determined?

CONCLUSION

Excellence is a quest all of us can and should undertake. It is a never-ending journey that provides meaning in our lives. It is a noble

pursuit that just happens to be valued and rewarded. But more than anything, excellence is a mindset that applies to any and every endeavor, regardless of who you are or what you do.

So how do you work toward excellence? By identifying, practicing, and developing the eight values in this article. This is your game plan. After identifying the values, start practicing them. After practicing the values, start developing them. After developing the values, start mastering them. And after mastering the values, start teaching them. Does this guarantee you will achieve excellence? No. Excellence is never guaranteed. But if you always *work toward* it, you will not have any regrets.

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