

Calculated Risk: Journey of a Lifetime



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Feeling inadequate? Dreaming of doing something with your life? Want to make a difference? Get real! Here is a work of miniscule proportions that will lower the bar — again!

Do you strive for perfection? Do you spend countless hours doing and redoing just to get something just right? Are the “benefits” of technology like word processors and networked printers driving you to make version after version of documents when a little dab of white out would do you just fine? If so, you may be a victim of perfection compulsion, the relentless drive to achieve excellence regardless of the cost in dollars or time. Yet deep in your heart you know that you are not up to the task. You know that no matter how hard you try, you will never be quite good enough. Yet you keep on trying anyway and as a result you become unhappier and more dissatisfied every day. Now comes a startling revelation — excellence is a sucker’s game!

In the last year or two as the bottom has fallen out of the economic revolution that was the techno-bubble, one “well-run” company after another has hit the skids. A year ago, Enron was one of the fastest growing companies in the world. Today, its assets are being sold off on eBay. WorldCom, Arthur Andersen and Lucent Technologies are once-hot names that currently invoke about as much awe as used chewing gum.

These are, of course, the same companies that just a few years back were having ghostwriters pen lengthy tomes under their CEOs’ names on how to run a successful company. You know the ones on sale in airport bookstores: *The Dot Com Way*, *The Messiah CEO*, and of course the classic, *Excellence Is My Runway* by the former chief of the now-defunct airline, JetSet Go!

All of which has drawn me to a reluctant conclusion that excellence is highly overrated. In fact, I’m working on a little management advice book titled, *Good Enough: Methods in Mediocrity*.

Don’t get me wrong, I was once also an eager student of the excellence gurus. I bought the concept hook, line and sinker.

Many years ago after a number of bad experiences with the giant American retailer Sears, I stopped patronizing the company for good. My darling was the efficient, the high-quality, the excellent mail-order company Lands’ End. I even wrote a letter to the CEO of each firm. To the Lands’ End CEO, I directed praise and compliments. To the Sears CEO, scorn and disdain. I explained to the latter why I would never in my life purchase another item from Sears or from any of the myriad businesses operated by the company. And I enjoyed a moment of *schadenfreude* when Sears discontinued its mail-order catalog a year later amid losses and consumer

complaints. Mediocrity had, I was convinced, sealed the company's death warrant.

How wrong I was! How naive, how misguided! But the fact is that it took me some time to learn what the executives at certain companies knew years ago. Some things that may be worth doing are not worth doing well. It has taken me a while, but I have finally seen the light. Here's what the back cover says about my unwritten masterpiece.

"From way out in left field, comes a mindless work that invites you to sit back, postpone your deadlines and space out. Stop the systematic consumption of the earth's limited resources, stop pulling your hair out trying to be something you can't be. Accept mediocrity and find peace."

— Rodney Quailfeather, Author of *Zen and the Art of Whiter Teeth*

"In this landmark volume, *Good Enough: Methods in Mediocrity*, management pundit Dennis M. Kirschbaum discloses the secret to letting go and allowing your "I could care less" attitude to reign unrestrained. Let the author take you on a lackluster journey into yourself where you will learn to appreciate and value your imperfections and translate them into a less demanding and less competitive vision of your company or organization."

— Tim Peters, star of the hit comedy series *Petering Out*

"In a world where the bar is constantly being raised higher, where better and faster are the ultimate values, you will learn to cultivate a healthy fear of excellence and come to appreciate that oftentimes "just okay" is plenty good enough. In a way that is neither in-depth nor thoughtful, Good Enough tackles the tough problems and teaches you how to:

- *Feel good about zoning out at business meetings (you probably won't miss much).*
- *Use "personal emergencies" to excuse late or poor quality work.*
- *Blame others for your shortcomings — and be believed!*
- *Sleep more, do less.*
- *Dress for duress.*
- *Accept the fact that the impression you will leave on the world is like the impression of a hand removed from a pool of water."*

Of course, I'm not the first person to think this way. That would be an original thought, God forbid. You can buy on the Internet an inspirational-style poster that features a picture of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Under the photograph, the caption reads, "Mediocrity. It Takes a Lot Less Time and Most People Won't Notice the Difference Until It's Too Late."

Face it — you're no Einstein. But then again, who is? Why let the fact that you are barely adequate in almost all respects depress you or make you unhappy? After all someone has to be average. It may as well be you. Besides, people will expect less. Remember that if your spell checker doesn't catch it, your readers probably won't either.

Will my book make me internationally sought after and staggeringly wealthy? I certainly hope so. But I will never forget that like Sir Isaac Newton, I have seen far only by standing on the shoulders of giants.

Here's what a few other luminaries have said about mediocrity.

The way to get on in the world is to be neither more nor less wise, neither better nor worse than your neighbors.

— William Hazlitt

Women want mediocre men, and men are working to be as mediocre as possible.

— Margaret Mead

Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity, and some men have mediocrity thrust upon them.

— Joseph Heller

Only the mediocre are always at their best.

Jean Giraudoux

Only a mediocre person is always at his best.

— W. Somerset Maugham*

Of course, behind the biting satire, the sidesplitting humor, and the clever witticisms my work will contain a simple but deeply compelling undercurrent. Is our search for “excellence” getting in the way of real achievement? We love to pat ourselves on the back for doing a quality job, but what do we really accomplish? Sometimes the perfect is the enemy of the good. The excellent is the enemy of the mediocre. In other words, forget excellence and do what you can because the mediocre will win every time. How can we doubt this when all of the excellent companies of the nineties are now the Chapter 11 disasters of the appropriately named aughties?

If there was any lingering doubt in my mind, that doubt was banished in July of this year. In that month, my darling, my excellent Lands’ End, with little fanfare or fuss, sold itself to Sears.

* Please note: I found these quotes on the Internet and could not be bothered to verify them in any way. Perhaps they are true or maybe someone made them up. The last two, for example, are curiously similar.

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