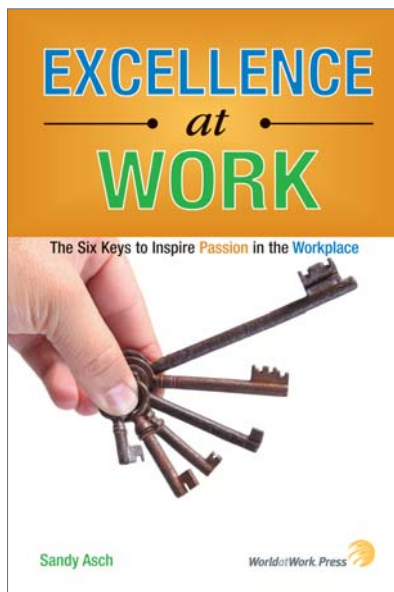


Excellence at Work: Inspiring Principles to Live and Manage By

Dan Cafaro



Excellence at Work
The Six Keys to Inspire Passion
in the Workplace

Sandy Asch. 2007. WorldatWork Press. Softcover.
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Sandy Asch tells a funny story about how she once was approached in a grocery store parking lot by an engineer who participated in her excellence program. He couldn't remember her name and resorted to calling her the "excellence lady." But he did remember some of the key concepts of her leadership training: namely, to *avoid downward-spiral conversations* and to *speak possibility*.

The six principles that Asch lives, breathes and teaches are "simple truths that resonate with us," she says. "When we're reminded of them, we're called forward." The principles are:

- 1) Use your word wisely.
- 2) Be accountable.
- 3) Focus.
- 4) Mine the gold.
- 5) Strive for balance.
- 6) Lighten up.

"I will run into people and they delight in reciting the principles to me," Asch says with a laugh. "The simplicity of them (the six principles) really stays with people. They're very sticky."

Even though Asch could see the powerful effects of living and working by the excellence principles, at first she presented them with trepidation,

wondering if business audiences would "get it," or if they would think the principles were too "touchy feely." To her surprise and delight, she found that, regardless of their position in their organization, job responsibilities, industry, age or gender, participants responded with enthusiasm.

Over the years, Asch says she has come to realize that the excellence principles are an essential foundation for organizational success. They are the "glue" that makes human resources, training initiatives and business processes "stick" and produce lasting results. She asks, "What good does it do to invest resources in training employees on new customer-service skills or to implement a new quality program if your employees don't have a foundational commitment to excellence?"

To respond to what Asch calls the "exasperation of thousands and thousands of managers," she wrote the book *Excellence*

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at *Work*, just released this month by WorldatWork Press. Asch, the principal of Alliance for Organizational Excellence, will present themes from her book during the workshop, “Implementing Strategies to Become an Employer of Choice,” at the 2007 WorldatWork Total Rewards Conference from 3:15 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday, May 7, in Orlando, Fla.

The excellence principles began percolating for Asch in the mid-1990s when she was speaking at seminars and teaching fundamentals on “how to become a better manager and get more results from your people.” Her students appreciated the importance of learning how to reward, recognize and manage their employees’ performance, but what was missing, she says, was “how to establish ground rules: the playbook for how we do things around here.” What was missing was that “internal [employee] commitment, engagement and passion ... that shared language of why we’re here and why what we do every day is very important.”

“Other than bombarding people and commanding them to work harder and longer, [employers should ask], ‘How do I create better results in the long term using a different approach?’”

“The long-term impact [of greater rewards and recognition] dissipates over time,” Asch says. “You can never really pay people enough. You can never really recognize them enough. What we’ve seen over time is the positive impact doesn’t stand up. People want more. What you give them becomes par for the course.”

That’s where the excellence principles come in. Employers should make them part of the work experience and integrate them deeply into everything employees do every day, Asch says, so that they

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become transformational and foundational: “a glue for all the great people processes that HR professionals are so good at implementing.

“The principles are very simple [to understand], but they’re not easy to do consistently,” Asch says. “They’re all very synergistic and serve to support each other. They’re intertwined. As people master these behaviors, they move forward in all their behaviors.”

One of the primary benefits of the book *Excellence at Work* is how it teaches readers to integrate the excellence principles in their organization. As Asch writes, students of the excellence program realize that “no matter how valuable their individual use of the principles is, in order for the program to have lasting effect, they need a way to achieve sustainable organizational change. *Excellence at Work* is the answer to their requests.”

In the book, Asch offers a comprehensive guide to the six principles, case-study examples of their effectiveness, and tools and strategies for *operationalizing* them

in your workplace. She not only believes they will make a difference in your work life, but in your personal life, too.


Consider the simple profundity of principle No. 1: Use Your Word Wisely. She writes:

“When you use your word wisely, in every sense, you are focused on moving forward, producing results and delivering your very best. On the other hand, when you are engaged in downward-spiral thinking and speaking, you are distracted, frustrated and fatigued—and your performance suffers.”

The work of Asch, in part, is inspired by motivational speaker and author Benjamin Zander (*The Art of Possibility*, 2000, Harvard Business School Press), who says that the passageway “out of the downward spiral is to think and speak possibility.”

Asch writes: “Possibility thinking and speaking is positive in nature, and it always moves things forward powerfully. It includes communication that is kind, respectful, truthful and, above all, communication that is clear and steeped in integrity.”

Asch’s words clearly have had a positive impact on those who’ve seen her speak and carry her teachings with them. The engineer in the parking lot, for example, went on to thank Asch and proudly explain that his department has managed to stay positive despite an overwhelming workload and persistent organizational change.

A well-deserved compliment, indeed, for the “excellence lady.” 

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