



## Do You Work in a “Good-Enough” Culture?

Billions of dollars are wasted each year by companies who compromise on standards. Many leaders endanger themselves and their organizations by permitting a “good-enough culture.” This danger of mediocrity fortunately has a remedy.

*“Only the mediocre are always at their best.” ~ Jean Giraudoux, French essayist*

The good-enough culture plagues an organization in every aspect of its operation, all the way down to the most basic. Some of the more prominent effects are:

- Lack of productivity
- Staff turnover
- Defective products
- Warranty costs
- Safety costs
- Inefficiency and waste
- Dissatisfied customers
- Lost sales
- Layoffs
- Shrinking profits
- Poor reputation

Leaders experience many more unseen problems buried down under the details of every department. The issues feed on themselves if not corrected.

### How the Good-Enough Culture Grows

The good-enough culture flows down from the top of the organization. It takes root when leaders believe that a good-enough approach is acceptable.

Typically, leaders who have the impression that life for them is rewarding enough don't see the need to work to make things better for everyone else. Leaders with a self-focused mindset have one or more of the following issues:

### A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are you in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that *“what got you here may not get you there.”*

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- **Apathy:** There is no real concern for what the others in the organization endure.
- **Laziness:** There is no felt need to give more than an adequate effort. Adequate often seems heroic to the lazy mind.
- **Disengagement:** There is not enough involvement with staff or specific operations to know that troubles exist. Worse yet, the leader intentionally avoids knowledge of problems.
- **Greed:** There is less monetary reward for the upper echelon if more resources are spent on addressing system shortcomings. This is the age-old deception of not believing a sacrifice today pays rewards tomorrow.
- **Fear of failure:** There is too much risk seen in trying something that could make things worse. This fear emanates from a lack of wisdom or confidence.
- **Pride:** There is a need to preserve image by avoiding the acknowledgment of a problem.
- **Ignorance:** There is no pressing desire to know how the operation works, to grasp how it could be better.
- **Resentment:** There is a dislike of bad news and the people who bring it. And of course, nothing can be improved if it's not discussed.

Leaders who don't understand the power of excellence don't care enough about pursuing it. This lack of caring is what author Subir Chowdhury claims is the main cause of a good-enough culture, in his book, *The Difference: When Good Enough Isn't Enough* (Penguin Random House, 2017).

When leaders don't care enough about being the best they can be, why would staff? Each layer in the organization takes its cue from the one above, and all of them ultimately from the top. Uncaring leaders set a strong example that caring is not needed by anyone. The result is mediocrity at best, total failure at worst. Leaders who are excellence-minded see both of these as failure.

Organizations fail, but not always because they've crashed to the bottom. Leaders often cause slow failure simply by allowing mediocrity to set in. When things are "good enough," people are lulled into a complacency and a false security. They are unprepared to respond effectively when the bleeding begins, and gradual decline ensues.

## Symptoms of "Good-Enough"

Organizations and leaders who don't care much about excellence will signal this throughout the system. Some signals are subtle, some are clear. Here are some examples:

- Leaders often ignore the elephant on the conference room table. Certain bad topics are not discussed. Waves aren't made. Upsetting bosses with bad news or concerns is avoided at all costs. When staff leave a meeting knowing an underlying issue is deliberately left unaddressed, this is a sign that the status quo is too important to disrupt. *Good enough is good enough.*
- When red tape bogs down a process and is discussed with no effort to get to root causes, this is a trouble sign. In these instances, leaders simply want the bottleneck to go away by any means necessary, and there's no real concern for preventions or improvements. They permit an exception to the rules and everyone goes back about their business because *good enough is good enough.*
- People start blaming one another during stressful situations rather than trying to reach understanding. Gaining clarity and collaboration takes work, sometimes a lot of it. Leaders don't regard teamwork worth giving of their time and effort, so they allow their people to endure disunity because *good enough is good enough.*
- Leaders are more upset at delivery numbers than product quality when production nonconformance arises. Standards are conceded to get the product out the door, or leaders approve a band-aid for the problem, hoping it's just a limited issue. The concessions are easier than diving into the causes and effective solutions, because *good enough is good enough.*
- Employees are skeptical of feedback forms, company surveys or information meetings because their voices are rarely valued, heard or acted upon. Suggestions go unanswered, survey results are not shared and organizational information has no real substance. Any improvements are minor, not requiring a significant investment. Leaders don't emphasize positive change because *good enough is good enough.*

- Leaders see staff turnover in a specific department, and exit interviews indicate a managerial problem. But they see it more difficult to replace a manager—with a higher salary requirement and a more complex recruitment process—than to continue finding new employees with fairly common skills. Leaders choose to make due, overlooking the manager’s weaknesses because *good enough is good enough*.

When leaders reveal these and other symptoms it is a general indication that they don’t really care enough about excellence to truly implement it, and probably don’t understand how to.

## Overcoming a Good-Enough Culture

Author Chowdhury suggests four basic principles leaders can apply to overcome the good-enough syndrome.

- 1. Truthfulness/Directness:** Leaders who care about truth must instill a culture of transparency and honesty. They are advised to deal with trials directly and openly, and to reduce fear by welcoming feedback. This gives responsibility to staff to bring issues to the table and tackle them, with the incentive to solve them. Leaders who can accept bad news, and respond with fairness and understanding, establish higher levels of emotional safety, accountability, and excellence.

People learn to care about the day-to-day issues, and have a greater sense of empowerment to make things work better. Small successes lead to more, and succeeding becomes attractive. A leader who cares about making things right for everyone will create a following of people who want to do the same. Being truthful and direct builds trust. And trust breeds higher standards. Good enough is no longer good enough.

- 2. Consideration for Others:** Leaders who care about their people are attentive to them. They show them they’re valued by engaging them, listening to them, and understanding them. Their communications skills demonstrate an empathetic mindset, where the leader is concerned about what their people are going through, and how things can be improved for them. This requires humility and genuineness. Such leaders care enough to be helpful and unselfish.

People respond by returning a leader’s consideration with consideration of their own. They know they’re affirmed and appreciated, and this causes them to care about what the leader cares about, as well as each of their contributions. The staff becomes thankful and returns the leader’s thoughtfulness with their best efforts. Quality becomes a desired trait of their work, because good enough is no longer acceptable.

- 3. Taking Responsibility:** Leaders who care about excellence demonstrate responsibility and instill the same in their people. They accept critical feedback but not without viable proposals for solutions. They don’t accept a mentality of “it’s not my job.” Everyone participates and is expected to follow through on their assignments. Great leaders prompt everyone to add value and make positive changes.

This encourages engagement, positive outlooks, and a drive for the best ideas. These leaders forge the habit of analyzing strategies and their potential outcomes. An overall aim to enhance things for everyone is established.

The staff responds by getting involved, taking action, and being answerable for what they do. Everyone strives for improvement, and they raise their expectations. People find it exhilarating to be responsible for their portion of the overall success. They feel a sense of unity, and are encouraged to ask for help when needed. Staff go the extra mile because they care, and because good enough is not an option.

- 4. Determination:** Leaders who care lead by example. They show their people that success requires resolve, and nothing worth achieving comes easily. Leaders who persevere inspire the passion in their people to do the same. It shows the staff that the leader is serious about making commitments and staying the course. That demonstrates the importance of decisions and the worth of the goal. They support long-term improvements and reject quick fixes. Leaders who don’t give up when things get tough make a lasting impression on their people. That impression grows when they understand the struggles their people have, and help them with the needed resources.

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Workers respond to this with a determination generated from within. They take ownership as they are empowered to act and resolve. People adopt a willingness to change and improve, individually and collectively. They reject short cuts. This drives a can-do culture. They care about contributing to lasting value because they learn that good enough never provides that value.

Caring about excellence is everything. A truthful leader molds a team that improves communication, timeliness and a thorough review of all difficult issues, large and small. A leader who's considerate of others demonstrates the importance of relationships to success. Leaders who commit to such responsibility raise the level of accountability within their staff. Employees who are held to account by their manager also hold each other to account. Determined leaders foster a group spirit that overcomes challenges that once made people surrender.

Leaders can transform their organizations and reach potential never imagined if they put their immediate needs aside and care for their people and the outcomes of their endeavors. Their caring becomes contagious. Everyone's felt needs will be met more effectively when a caring culture is in place.



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