

When Best Practice is Just Not Good Enough

Why and How You Need to be Better than the Best

Mark McGregor

One of the management buzz words really getting a lot of air play and column inches these days is “Best Practice.” Wherever you look and listen, you will see or hear people writing about or speaking about the virtues of doing or being “Best Practice.”

It does not matter what the type or size of your business, everyone seems to tell you that you have to adopt best practice and that if you don't you will surely be left behind in your chosen marketplace. Yet for how many of us does “doing” best practice feel wrong?

Perhaps we are not sure why, but something deep inside us causes us to feel uncomfortable with the idea. For many people, they write it off as just resistance to yet another potential management fad. Well, I suggest you trust your instincts; your body is a highly complex organism and, more often than not, it already knows when something is wrong – in this case, potentially very wrong!

Before explaining why I make the above statement, let's take a look at a few businesses and ask ourselves a few questions. The examples are simple and designed to help you connect with your own experiences and feelings.

Firstly, think about your banking experiences over the years. Ever felt frustrated when transactions or interactions did not work? Now for many people, travel is another one of those industries that seems to turn up more than a few “surprising” experiences. Think of a time when you travelled only to be told that you could not get what you expected, usually after having paid for the very thing you are requesting. One of my other favorites involves mobile phone companies; they always seem to provide strange customer experiences and, more often than not, they are not geared to deliver the service I expect as a customer.

In almost every case, if you think about it hard enough, someone will have told you that they operate “Best Practice” or “Industry Best Practice,” which seems all well and good except that such practices very rarely lead to great customer service. Try looking at best practice from another angle – Best practice means that we are only as bad as the bank next door; best practice means we are only as bad as the airline on the next counter, or best practice means that we are only as bad as the other phone companies. In other words, best practice does not mean we are good or better; it actually means we are no worse than others in our market. When you are buying goods or services, do you choose on the basis of things being no worse than others?

So now we can start to understand why it is that a feeling of unease existed for many of us. It was because we knew deep down that we were leaving something on the table. We knew we were potentially cheating our customers and staff by pretending everything was all right and kidding ourselves that we are good.

So how then can we avoid the best practice trap? Well, in the first instance, we can make sure that we never settle for second best. As individuals, we deserve better than that, as customers we have the right to better than that. Should anyone think otherwise then may I suggest that you take a moment to consider how many competitors you have and ask yourself if you were the customer and you had the choice, would you accept second best from you when you could get great from someone else?

Having decided that only the best is good enough (sounds a bit like a “Milky Bar” kid advert!), then we must set out to redefine what the best means. The advice is to look way outside your industry and think about who executes the best on each of the component parts of your business. For example, if you were looking at brand and image, which companies do you see as having the best image? If you are looking at customer service, then who in the world provides the best

service? In terms of quality what industry or company do you know that is admired for the quality of their product or service?

As you run through your answers to these questions, add ones of your own that are specific to the functions or processes that you operate in your business. Then when you have your list, which should include businesses from different geographic locations and multiple industries, you now have the ideas that you need in order to make your business a stand out success.

If you look with a positive perspective – e.g., how you can adapt what they do to your business, rather than why it won't work for you – then you will have created a list of extremely powerful ideas that you can use to turn potential success into reality.

Your perspective is key here; you know that if you only look for bad things you can surely be confident that you will find them. However if you look for the good you can very often be pleasantly surprised in finding it. As any successful person will tell you, being wrong and sure is nowhere as fulfilling as being unsure and getting it right sometimes.

So as you look out along your business journey, I urge you to give up on “best practice” and start out by applying the concept I suggest above, making sure you only apply “Next Practice” – only apply the ideas and innovations that help to make sure that your business stands out from the crowd. In return, you run the risk of being seen as a leader in your market and of winning more business as a result of customers voting for you with their wallets! Surely a risk worth taking.

Author

Mark McGregor is the author of numerous books on business improvement. He can be contacted at mark@markmcgregor.com.