

IN SEARCH

OF



Alex Knox

DESIGN DIRECTOR, DYSON

Julie Lythcott-Haims

AUTHOR OF *HOW TO RAISE AN ADULT*,
FORMER DEAN OF FRESHMEN, STANFORD

Louise Murray

CONSULTANT, FORMER VP OF WALT DISNEY PARKS
AND RESORTS CREATIVE ENTERTAINMENT

Beth Viner

GENERAL MANAGER, KICKSTARTER

Barry Hughson

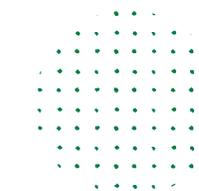
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE NATIONAL
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EXCELLENCE

For 35 years, mentioning the word “excellence” in a business context has called one name to mind: Tom Peters, author of the 1982 bestseller *In Search of Excellence*.

Selling more than three million copies in its first four years, it went on to sit on more shelves than any other business book in the years 1989-2006. Peters of course went on to become a sought-after keynote in the business world and a very prolific author of some of the most colorful management literature yet seen.

Looking back through the years from our perspective in 2017, the question arises: Does excellence still mean what it did in 1982? Is what Peters defined as excellence still relevant in a world that looks as little like 1982 as 1982 would have looked to someone in, say, 1942?

What started out infamously as a two-day, 700-slide presentation to a bunch of Siemens executives was eventually boiled down to eight overarching themes, things like quick decision-making, staying close to your customer, fostering innovation, nursing champions, treating employees as a source of quality, walking the talk every day, and encouraging shop-floor autonomy while adhering to centralized values.

To find out if these definitions are still considered the KPIs of excellence, or if the word means something else now than it did then, *MISC* talked to leaders from a variety of fields: the arts, apparel manufacturing, industrial design, crowdsourcing, academia, and entertainment.

Across the organizations covered here, some of Peters’ original themes are still considered relevant. Barry Hughson of the National Ballet of Canada speaks of artistic director and former prima ballerina Karen Kain’s nursing of champions; Patagonia’s Vincent Stanley reveals the importance of walking the talk when it comes to the company’s mission; Louise Murray, formerly of Cirque du Soleil and Disney Parks, passionately addresses the importance of fostering innovation.

Then there are new perspectives, some the result of how things really have changed since 1982, or more importantly, how quickly and widely they have changed. For instance, two of the six organizations we spoke with are registered B Corps (benefit corporations) – a designation that did not exist until 2010, and one which defines excellence as a set of corporate goals that include a positive impact on society, workers, the community, and the environment, as well as profit. No one in 1982 saw that coming – not even Tom Peters.

All in all, these conversations illustrate that, while our current definitions of excellence may be colored by the changes and disruptions that are reshaping the commercial, cultural, and institutional landscape, the notion of striving for the best possible outcome in any given situation is still a driving force in the human enterprise.



Alex Knox

DESIGN DIRECTOR, DYSON

Bladeless fans, powerful vacuums, innovative hairdryers – Dyson has been reinventing our humble home appliances since 1991, when British inventor and industrial designer James Dyson launched his eponymous brand after tearing the bag from his sluggish vacuum cleaner and replacing it with a cardboard cyclone. Through his experiments, Dyson created the first suction vacuum cleaner and, 5,127 prototypes later, rolled out Dyson’s DC01 vacuum in 1993.

Alex Knox is Design Director at Dyson and one of the longest-serving members of the company. He has worked as a design engineer on nearly every machine created by the brand, and he continues to lead the design and development of new Dyson products.

Dyson’s process seems to be iterative and incremental. Is this a key tenet of your innovation process and how Dyson aims to achieve excellence?

At Dyson, we solve problems in a methodical and logical way, one step at a time. We use the Edisonian approach of making a series of small iterative changes aimed at isolating small problems, finding solutions, and ultimately improving a machine. By changing one thing at a time, you understand exactly the impact of the change you have made – what works and also what doesn’t. We consider every aspect; we prototype and test every single part, from the geometry of the brush bar that beats the carpet down on the floor, to the strength of the handle you hold.

What are your other key values?

The idea of function over form. We don’t worry about what a machine is going to look like. The way our machines look is derived from the way they work. Each component contributes to the overall performance and usability of a machine. Nothing extra. This way, we’re able to make everything quite lean.

You’ve said in previous interviews that efficiency is essential to good engineering and sustainable design. What other criteria would you consider essential for excellent design?

Efficiency is absolutely essential to good design, but that is not to preclude us from figuring out the best way of making something efficient, and failing along the way. From the very beginning, James Dyson encouraged us to make mistakes and learn from our failure. In fact, it’s a philosophy that’s quite literally written on the walls at Dyson. We put young graduates in positions where they must make decisions early on, and we don’t expect them to get things right the first time. When you see failure, you can see where the limits are and just how far you can push a certain technology. Some of our best technology is born from these failures.

When you see failure, you can see where the limits are and just how far you can push a certain technology.

According to *The Telegraph*, Dyson has been undoubtedly successful at turning somewhat menial household appliances into luxurious objects of desire. How do you plan on continuing this success in the coming years as smarthome technologies continue to advance?

We don’t necessarily look to make our technology “smarter” just for the sake of it. We want to introduce truly transformational technology that betters lives in some way. Our purifier, for instance, tracks pollutants in the air in your home, works to automatically remove them, and reports it all through an app so you can begin to understand the air pollution triggers within your household. But this is just the first step – eventually, machines will be able to intelligently monitor all kinds of disturbances in your home environment and automatically respond to them, perhaps before you even notice them. But I’m afraid I’m already giving away too much!

Aside from technologically, how can Dyson push the envelope and excel with its design in order to stay top of mind in the years ahead?

We aren’t bound to any methodology, which releases a new type of thinking. James calls it wrong thinking – having an idea so off base that it rockets, until you hit on something that just might work. It’s this kind of freedom – which is of course compounded by the fact that we’re family owned and operated – that pushes Dyson to the next level. We have nobody to answer to but ourselves and our ideas. ☺



Julie Lythcott-Haims

AUTHOR OF HOW TO RAISE AN ADULT, FORMER DEAN OF FRESHMEN, STANFORD

A lawyer turned educator turned writer, Julie Lythcott-Haims has a particular passion for helping young adults break the mold that their parents have crafted for them. For Lythcott-Haims, parenting is not about constantly protecting and overseeing children, but rather helping them become adults who find success in their own ways, have opinions to share, and are not afraid to fail – a key component to achieving excellence in any given thing. She has combined her expertise in parenting (or rather, not overparenting) and education to help the students she mentors explore the world for themselves.

Julie Lythcott-Haims spent a decade as Dean of Freshmen at Stanford University, where she received the Dinkelspiel Award for her contributions to the undergraduate experience. She is the author of How to Raise an Adult, mother of two teenagers, and has spoken and written widely on the phenomenon of helicopter parenting.

What motivates our desire as parents to intervene in ways that prevent our children from achieving excellence on their own?

We don't [actually] know we're intervening in ways that undercut their excellence. What motivates us as parents are two things: fear and love. We love our kids fearfully, and we're terribly afraid of what awaits them in the world. If we have enough means, we've decided we can actually control and engineer outcomes to try to ensure that they have a successful future. What we've only just begun to realize is that this control, this effort to engineer, this effort to always be there, is effectively supplanting us into the role our kids must play for themselves. It not only undercuts their chances to achieve excellence, but it undercuts their mental health and wellness and ultimately deprives them of having the chance to live a healthy life.

Do you have any hypotheses or insights on why being an "excellent parent" has somehow evolved into this state of fear and love?

My first answer is peer pressure. When we have children and we look around our community, we see that parents are very involved. Parents are on top of everything, whether it's homework, a playdate, an after-school activity, or tutoring. Parents know about it, they've organized it, they're taking their kids to and from it, they're hovering and observing, and they're there in case any question needs to be answered. There's tremendous peer pressure; we are judged if we don't parent that way.

How we got here, however, began in the 1980s. There were five important things that ended up resulting in changing childhood. The first was that the playdate was born. Kids used to play freely, but around 1984, kids began having play organized for them. Parents decided what children would play with and how to make sure the play was enriching. That was a brand new concept. Second, there was the emergence of the self-esteem movement. During the same period of time, right here in California, we began applauding kids for every little thing. Certificates, ribbons, trophies, awards just for playing soccer – not for being any good at it. And this lexicon of "perfect, great job buddy!" was new



back then, but is now common place. The third thing was "stranger danger," which was born in 1983. A well-publicized case of the thing we most fear – a stranger abducted and murdered a child – became a made-for-TV movie [called *Adam*]. It was seen by more people than almost any other television show in America, and our fear that a stranger was lurking around every corner was born. We also became very safety-conscious in the mid 1980s. Seat belts, car seats for kids, bike helmets – all of these laws came into effect in this timeframe. Parents were ensuring that they were always there, always around to ensure safety and desired outcomes.

What are the metrics that we can use to measure success if it's not about achievement as it is currently being defined? Is it instead about not having metrics at all?

We're measuring the wrong things. We think success equals a degree from Stanford, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or a job with an investment bank, or a corporate law firm, or in the operating room of a hospital. The "right" college, the "right" career. And I might have once felt that way. I am a product of schools like that myself.

What I've come to learn from living it, from being a parent, and from being a dean, and then writing about all of this, is that we're measuring success incorrectly. It's not getting the degree from that school, it's what are your habits around hard work? What is your mindset? What are your philosophies? What can you do when you put your mind to it? How good are you at persevering? It really comes down to your work ethic and your character.



Whether we are successful or not ought to be something we can derive a sense of internally, rather than looking for external markers of it, like the applause and approval of others.



Our current metrics for success are problematic. We've got kids in Palo Alto jumping in front of the Caltrain because our definition of success is so out of reach. I would rather us refocus on the fact that each one of us is here for a precious number of years, and we're all relatively ordinary. But that doesn't mean we don't matter, it doesn't mean we're not successful, it doesn't mean we're not worthy of love – which is what we all crave. And the more we can just get content with, “This is what I'm good at, these are my skills, these are my strengths, this is what I love,” then we can live this exquisite life, even if we don't make a lot of money or people aren't giving us awards or clapping as we walk down the street. Whether we are successful or not ought to be something we can derive a sense of internally, rather than looking for external markers of it, like the applause and approval of others.

So how important is the experience of failure in one's ability to achieve success and excellence?

I think experiencing failure is an essential component of the path to a successful life. I'm based in Silicon Valley where, as a rule, our engineers and designers and tech people all know that failure, or the willingness to try and fail, is an essential component to generating the best ideas and solutions. They have built-in design thinking; you come up with ideas, you ideate, you prototype, you iterate. The expectation is that the first couple of ideas are not the best. But with trial and error

and tolerating that failure – not just tolerating it, but demanding it, knowing its value in the process – you ultimately get to the right solution or outcome.

Each struggle that we emerge from teaches us that we have strength, that we can bounce back, that the sun still comes up the next day, and we're still worthy of love. It's essential, and that's at the heart of what's wrong with what I call the “checklisted childhood,” which is a furtherance of that narrow definition of excellence or success. Us parents are trying to prevent our kids from ever falling or failing, whether it's academically or socially, so that we can lead them to this destination that looks like success. But they haven't had the right building blocks along the way. They've been deprived of the chance to develop the stronger selves that would have emerged if they'd experienced some failure.

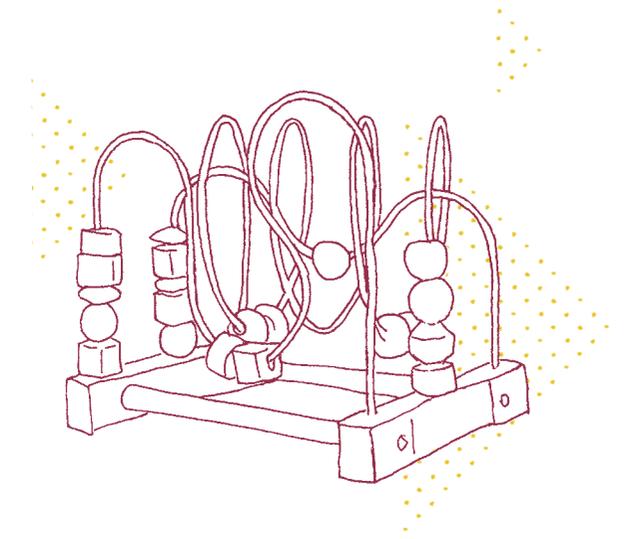
Is success the same as excellence, in your opinion?

It's funny, you have been using the term “excellence,” and I don't tend to use that term. It's not by choice, but just because I've probably been reacting to the definition of success that's out there. Is success the same as excellence? To me, excellence is mastery. Whether it's a biology course, or the ability to be a public speaker, or to be a dancer, or to be a kind human. It's a skill, an ability, or a set of characteristics that you have mastered, whereas it's important to have an internally derived sense of success.

Society decides if you're successful these days. It's society saying, “Oh, she has a job at such-and-such,” or “Oh, her salary is this,” “She's won this award,” “She's got a lot of followers on Twitter.” Success seems to be kind of a societal standard based on the norms at any given point that determine what matters.

What do you think the future will look like when it's run by adults who have had to depend on parental support and encouragement to achieve success?

I wrote my book, *How to Raise an Adult*, because, as a dean, I felt tremendous compassion toward the young adults on my campus who had been overparented. They seemed to be lacking a sense of self, lacking a voice. They looked sort of wilted or wimpy as humans. They were really content to text or receive texts from parents telling them what to do and how to feel. So I wrote this book because I cared about them, but heck, I wrote this book because I was worried for the sake of us all. If, effectively, the newest generation of adults cannot take the mantle of leadership from the prior generation, what's to become of our corporations, our schools, our governments, our families, and our nonprofits? What happens when they don't know how to “hashtag adult?” So I think it's an ominous, looming question.



I was giving a book talk the other night, and a parent asked me the flip side of this. He said, “Won't corporations just adapt to the way employees are?” We see it in Silicon Valley with Google and LinkedIn, who offer an employee every bit of food they want (farm-raised, local, organic), and playgrounds in the work environment. They clean your clothes, wipe your nose, bring your parents in for visiting hours. Aren't we just seeing corporations adapt to a set of young adults who are used to being micromanaged and coddled? But I can't imagine the economy at a meta-level or institutions at large yielding and bending to this. At some point, the real world is going to say – if only for economic reasons – this is financially inefficient. We can't have you need to be constantly coddled and checked in with and helped. You have to be able to be the adult in your own life and consult your internal resources around problem-solving and choice-making instead of texting your parents and having them figure it out for you.

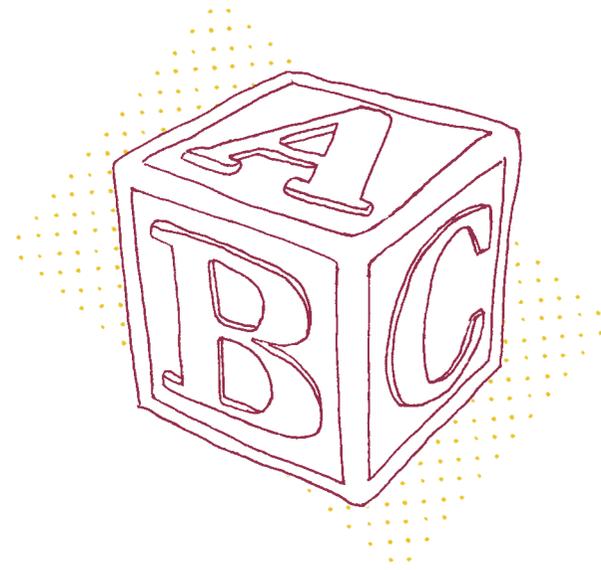


I think experiencing failure is an essential component of the path to a successful life.



Your use of “hashtag adult” and “adulting” is a really pregnant signifier. It’s the semiotics of that term, the fact that we have a generation of people that have been coddled for so long that they have come up with the term “adulting” for what it means to simply be a grown human. Do you see any signals of a shift in another direction?

Yes. You know what the signals are? I get direct messages on Facebook from strangers who are twenty-somethings or in their early thirties who say, “I think I was raised this way, what do I do?” I get strangers reaching out to me and asking for help. There’s this fundamental thing that humans need, which is to discover their own existence. Psychologists call it self-efficacy, which is not self-esteem. Self-efficacy is, “I know I exist. I am a being. When I act, there are results. My actions have outcomes.” That’s self-efficacy, and we’re depriving them of that. When a human discovers this and feels that they are weak in an existential sense, they either fold completely or say, “What the hell is this?” They finally want to shake it off and live life and make a choice and live with the consequence. Even if it’s an imperfect consequence, at least it’s the direct result of their own actions. That, to me, is a sign of a shift.



As millennials come to an age of maturity and discover as they raise their own kids – as they’re now the adult in someone else’s life – I think they’re coming to all kinds of different realizations about what was good about their upbringing and what was a little off. The open question is: How are they going to raise their own kids? How will they go about reclaiming or finally inhabiting that adult self that they should have been taught to cultivate throughout their childhoods? ☉



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Louise Murray

CONSULTANT, FORMER VP OF WALT DISNEY PARKS AND RESORTS CREATIVE ENTERTAINMENT

As an expert on large-scale live entertainment, Louise Murray knows how to maintain the traditions of well-established brands while still striving for excellence and innovation. For her, excellence is a product of pushing your brand to reinvent itself constantly and allowing yourself to relish in discomfort. Above all else, Louise understands the power of the creative. She sees creatives not only as catalysts for change, but also as the ones who can inspire others to experience media and entertainment in a deeper way.

Louise Murray is the former VP of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts Creative Entertainment and the former VP of Tour Planning and Partnerships at Cirque du Soleil. She is widely respected as a leader and creative partner within the entertainment business industry, and she has been running her own consultancy since September 2009.

When you think about your work in creative, how do you define excellence within that?

I've been very fortunate to work with highly creative people. One of the best things that I've been able to do in my career is learn to live with both the discomfort and the freedom that you need when you have brilliant minds around you. Once you learn how to do that, you come to intuitively understand how excellence is addictive, just like creativity is addictive. It's like being a high performing Olympic athlete but performing with your mind. The beauty of creativity is you can do it on your own, but if you align your idea with another person's, everybody walks away with more than one idea.

So, when I think of creativity and excellence, the human component is at the forefront, because everyone becomes intertwined and they feed off of each other. It's everybody's willingness to live with discomfort and let the best solution emerge. The discipline required to remain uncomfortable is tremendous and taxing, and it's never linear. You need to be able to live with that discomfort no matter what sort of curves you encounter. But the outcome is incredible.

You mentioned the similarities between professional athletes and creatives. Can you elaborate on that? What motivates creatives?

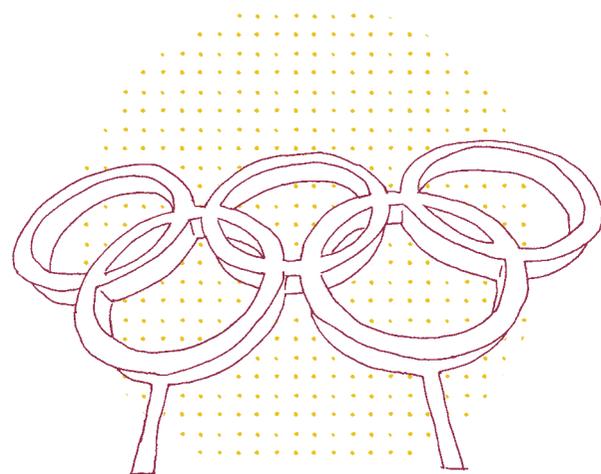
Just as there is physical pain involved with Olympic athletes when they push themselves to the limit, so too is there pain involved in the creative process. Athletes monitor and evaluate themselves constantly. Many use visualization techniques, where they put their bodies through what they might experience while performing at the Olympics or in another competition. For creative people, they not only need to visualize – they need to push it further. They are producing something out of thin air; they are bringing an idea to fruition that is not even whole yet. When you're dealing with the mind, it takes a lot of belief and faith in both yourself and the people around you to achieve success.

This is where the discomfort comes in. There's a lot of self-doubt and questioning involved: "Did we really do this? Did we think about it right?" I think this doubt is just a symptom of having to go through the process of bringing to fruition whatever has been envisioned.

The idea of excellence for an athlete is very much tied to winning. What is that end point of excellence for creatives?

You get an excellent result once the thing that has been created takes on a life of its own and its intended audience engages with it and makes it their own. Or perhaps it's in the testimony that what you were envisioning has reached its purpose. It's even more meaningful when whatever was thought of answers a need. When it answers a need, it just falls into place and it is welcomed.

Although high-performing athletes have winning on their minds, their constant pursuit is to be able to better themselves. And then timing comes in. It's all about being able to blossom at the right moment so that every talent that you have and all those long hours that you put in come to fruition with a win. It's the same with intellectual or creative work. Creatives have been training for so long and at some point it becomes a sort of mind game.



Excellence is addictive, just like creativity is addictive.



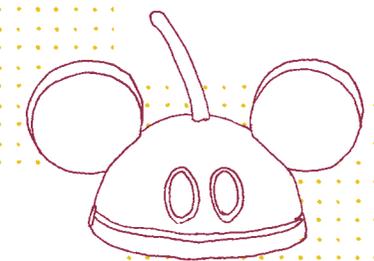
The idea of filling a need and cultural acceptance is so interesting; it's a tie between a person being a creative and their measure of success being defined by how much the material they create resonates with a larger audience. But some artists only experience this later in life or are ahead of their time. How do you balance this idea of being future-facing and having a good sense of what's culturally acceptable and desired today?

They always say that hindsight is 20/20, and this brings me back to the idea of discomfort. When you're on a creative journey, you may see some of the dots that you need to connect. The great part is taking the leap toward another dot or creating a new dot that will get you to your goal. But the creator needs to be able to live with the discomfort that exists between dots. The discomfort of having other people join in, interpret, and re-evaluate your work. When an audience gets to engage with that level of artistic work or that level of creativity, they walk out of that exhibition or performance like they're more intelligent. They feel like they were fed; it brings them fuel. And I can only imagine that they feel this way because the people who have been working on bringing this creative thing to fruition have, themselves, been fueled by the creative process.

Tell me more about the places you have worked. How do you, as a leader, balance the size of a corporation like Disney or Cirque du Soleil with their desire to be creative and innovative?

Both Cirque and Disney are iconic organizations, and when you're dealing with an icon you have to think that, in order for it to remain iconic, it has to be willing to constantly reinvent itself. Everyone comes into an organization with different creative DNA and expertise. The thing with Cirque and Disney, however, is that the brands themselves have long tenures, so when someone comes into that kind of organization with a different mindset, they are joining a group of people who already have a well-defined culture that they embody. This might cause miscommunication or resentment, but they need to take the time to listen to each other in order to be successful. Once they've acquainted themselves with their new culture, they can help others understand what's going on outside of their day-to-day microcosm. Because in order to be able to reinvent itself, an organization needs to look outside, beyond itself, and not rely on what was.

An organization should see its past successes as milestones, but also be able to define what should be done next. Again, this can bring about a lot of discomfort (and sometimes leaders need to face the brunt of that to keep their team going). But, again, excellence is addictive. Once your group has experienced success, they will continue to generate ideas and seek out excellent solutions. And once the public has engaged with your brand in a way that goes beyond the creators' original plans, it belongs to the people who are consuming it, enjoying it, reworking it, and living it in their daily lives.



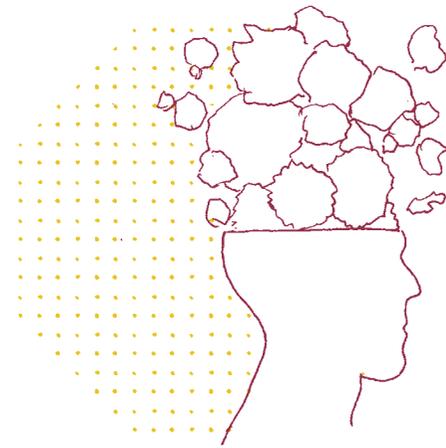
Throughout our conversation you've touched on two notions of excellence. One is about leaders helping to foster an environment of excellence, which involves both discomfort and bringing in outside stimuli to encourage depth of thinking; the other is about what it means to be excellent as a creative and be able to connect dots and provide value for your audience. The former is about the environment in which creatives work, and the latter is about the people themselves.

Exactly, and both are about accepting diversity and discomfort and everyone's different ideas and aligning on a common goal. After that, the results can be extraordinary. Your team will continue to pick up speed and achieve greatness, and once that has happened you won't be able to live without it anymore.

I think this ability to be speedy and keep up with the pace of change is one of the greatest challenges that corporations are facing right now. But you can only go faster if you have the right minds and mindsets on your team who are able to look at things differently and be one step ahead. Always trying to figure out what's next is key; it's more important than digging through loads of data. Imagining a variety of futures can really move an organization, change an organization, and be extremely profitable.



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You mentioned the idea of excellence being addictive and that success is not just about personal success but also about how the audience views something. So how do changes to the audience's makeup, shifts in technology and culture, and other variables change the way people consume entertainment and how they define what excellence is?

These days it's all about transmedia, because now people are their own media, and that's awesome. It means that people really get to engage with what they're consuming. The audience feels enabled to participate in whatever has been created. And this can apply to live entertainment just as much as it can apply to other CPG offerings.

Because of the personal computer and the way that we are constantly connected to the internet, the audience can not only find data on you, but can make your product their own and customize the experience they have with your product on many different levels. For live entertainment, this emanates from storytelling.

During my time at Disney, I challenged a lot of things. But one of the major things I pushed against was asking the audience to turn off their phones during performances. I thought, "Don't we want them to be recording and sharing their experiences?" That way, the work we do lives on even longer and the viewers get to customize their experience. They get to be aspirational, feel inspired, and express themselves. Of course, we don't want people in the audience infringing on other people's freedom to enjoy the performance, but we do want them to experience it on a deeper level. ☺



Beth Viner

GENERAL MANAGER, KICKSTARTER

Fostering a culture online where creatives feel empowered and autonomous is no easy feat – but that's what Beth Viner, General Manager at Kickstarter, and her team have set out to do. By encouraging an ethos of authenticity, generosity, and bravery, Kickstarter has practically become synonymous with the concept of crowdsourcing, but they want to do more. In our conversation with Beth, she discusses the company's roots, how they're vital to their future plans, and what types of campaigns they consider to be excellent.

Beth Viner is the General Manager of Kickstarter, leading the Communities, Marketing and Events, Brand, International, and Education teams. Before joining Kickstarter, Beth served as the CEO of Interbrand New York and San Francisco and spent almost a decade at IDEO, most recently as the Managing Director of their New York office.

Excellence in innovation is intrinsically and implicitly tied to that idea of independence.

The beauty of Kickstarter is that it's an inclusive platform – practically anyone can post a campaign. That also means, however, that there are perhaps a few silly campaigns on the site in addition to all the cool ones. How do you reconcile that with excellence?

At the highest level, Kickstarter is about leveling the creative playing field. Our goal is to dramatically shift who has access to funding for their creative ideas. We stand for creative independence, and finding independent funding is a piece of that. But it's also about creative control. Those two things coupled together – that open creative playing field and that shifting access – is how we think about excellence.

Our goal is really to encourage people to come forth with creative ideas that can be big or small, ambitious or whimsical, kind of silly, or something that's been sitting in the back of their head for decades. The idea is that they move forward and they put it out there. At its core, Kickstarter supports bravery. Because people are being vulnerable and putting themselves out there, they are opened up to the potential for amazing, great, and excellent outcomes.

But no matter what the project is, at the end of the day it's less about the outcome and more about the journey. Our goal is to get people to discover how they can find an audience who believes in them. We want to bring creators and backers closer together so that they can determine what excellence is for them. We're just a platform in the background that facilitates that connection. Our backers vote with their pledges for what they want to see come to life and which ideas they really think are amazing, inventive, or even beautiful.

So how do you define excellence within creativity and within innovation?

Excellence, for us, is defined by four characteristics: bravery, independence, generosity, and collaboration. Excellence is found in creative ideas and projects that represent that ethos and those ideals. When people are able to take that leap and really make something different, joyful, weird, or exciting – that's excellence to us.

Another key component is autonomy and independence. Not only are the people who use Kickstarter creating these amazing ideas, they're also retaining as much financial freedom or creative control as they want. So excellence for us has to, at its core, also involve the idea that creators have the ability to make choices for themselves. Excellence in innovation is intrinsically and implicitly tied to that idea of independence.

As a brand, how do you walk the fine line between contrived messaging in campaigns and actually being genuine?

I think there's a difference between building a brand and running a campaign. Campaigns can have great storylines, but if they don't actually come from a true, authentic place, then they're empty. For me, the most important thing is the commitment that goes beyond the campaign's story.

In some ways, Kickstarter is behind the times in terms of its marketing. But as we continue to build these efforts in the future, I'm certain that our marketing will continue to come from an authentic place. It will be based on the belief system that is embedded into our organization, which is fundamentally based on the ideals I outlined earlier.

Have you seen a correlation between how genuinely a Kickstarter campaign presents itself and how successful it is?

For us, excellence in a campaign may be about how engaged the creator is with their backers and audience, or about the fact that they put an idea out in the world and it's not just their friends and family who back it.

In terms of authenticity, we find that backers are most engaged with the process and the journey of the people who are telling a clear, genuine, and authentic story. If we look back at the *Anomalisa* campaign, which was nominated for an Oscar this year, it was originally supposed to be a short. But one of the backers on the campaign reached out to the creator and said, "I think this should be a full-length feature." And they wrote them the check to make it into a full-length feature! For us, it's those kind of meaningful connections that truly make these creative projects excellent. It's less about how much money they raise. Of course there is a goal, and we hope that the projects hit their goal, but it's also about much more than that.

We want to be an institution that supports creators for decades to come.



How does Kickstarter's position as a benefit corporation position it for excellence in the future?

We have a commitment as a public benefit organization. We serve arts and culture in addition to serving innovation and technology. We've always been a mission-driven organization, and we're constantly looking at how we can provide value and questioning what we believe in as a company. So becoming an official public benefit corporation doesn't actually change the way we work or operate on a daily basis. But what it does do is it makes our mission hard-coded as part of our contract with those in our ecosystem, whether they're our investors, our employees, or our audiences. Those values are implicit and they're in our DNA, and it's a long-term commitment.

Kickstarter is not an organization that wants to be around for two or three years and then go away. We want to be an institution that supports creators for decades to come. We're not here to go public, we're not here to find other ways to take money out of the system or charge our creators for other things – those aren't our goals. Our goal is to help support creators and bring audiences who really want to be on that creative journey with them.

I'll be honest; maybe it's seen as "cool" to get on the corporate social responsibility bandwagon, and of course it's hard to stay that path when everyone around you is moving in other directions. But I think the difference for us is that it's not a line item under our pursuit of profits: it is our pursuit. We believe that the world will ultimately head in this direction, where business goals and priorities will shift. These kinds of decisions are not always easy, but I think that's what makes this a really interesting place to be. 



Barry Hughson

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA**

How do you define excellence in the arts, a field where a red circle on a blank canvas can be defined as an excellent piece of work? With so much relying on personal taste and opinions, ballet stands out for the sheer technique required by its dancers in order to be considered “excellent” – but does that actually mean these dancers embody true excellence in their field? Barry Hughson, Executive Director of the National Ballet of Canada, discusses his views on excellence in the arts, and how the company is embracing both old and new – classic methods and technology – to remain relevant and work toward their own definition of excellence, a definition based on two far more important notions: authenticity and integrity.

Barry Hughson is the Executive Director of the National Ballet of Canada. He has worked in the performing arts field for 23 years and previously served as Executive Director of the Boston Ballet and the Atlanta Ballet. He is also an award-winning dancer and choreographer.



The heart of excellence is about bringing together the best and the brightest.



How do you feel that the National Ballet embodies the notion that excellence in the arts stems from authenticity and integrity?

For me, the heart of excellence is about bringing together the best and the brightest and not compromising on those two principles. When Karen Kain became Artistic Director about 10 years ago, she articulated a very clear strategy. Her first priority was to ensure that the company was populated with the best artists that we could train or find, and she spent the first few years of her tenure building the company, investing in rising talent, and bringing new talent from around the world. Then, her second priority was to use those dancers to attract the best dancemakers in the world; over the last several years, we’ve been working with the likes of Christopher Wheeldon, Alexei Ratmansky, Wayne McGregor, and Crystal Pite. Finally, her third priority was to take these new works and bring the company and the brand around the world, reintroducing the National Ballet of Canada as an international brand.

You keep using the word “best.” Is this term seen as black and white within a form as technical as ballet?

One of the challenges in ballet is that we have international ballet competitions, and there’s great debate within our field about art as competition, because technique is not what makes an artist. It’s part of what makes a great ballet dancer a great ballet dancer, but it’s only a part of it. If you look across our company, obviously they all have very strong technical skills, a minimum requirement to work in a company of this stature. But above and beyond that, what Karen’s trying to find are really interesting artists. That’s ultimately what distinguishes the company.

Still, you can argue that ballet is very traditional as an art form in a lot of ways, so how do you push something that is considered so traditional to challenge excellence?

What we’re trying to do is get people to redefine what they think of the word “ballet” and what it might mean today and into the future. We’ve recently done a project with a Canadian choreographer named Robert Binet in partnership with the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), where we commissioned Robert to create a new work with 12 of our dancers in a gallery in the AGO, inspired by the work of painter Lawren Harris. It was a completely new way for an audience to engage in what we do. People were able to experience the performance as if they were moving through a gallery. There was no seating; they could engage, and there were three separate stages. It was a unique opportunity to reimagine how people might consume our art in the future. Our businesses are still built on a proscenium theater model, where the art is on a stage and the audience sits on the other side of the proscenium. But we have to continually break down and experiment with new ideas and new ways of engaging the public. That’s where the future lies for the art form.

Over the last few decades and with newer generations, ballet has gotten a reputation for being on the – we hate to use this word – boring side. How do you challenge this viewpoint?

What I always say about ballet is that it's not a museum it's a living theater. So while we have a commitment to preserving the canon of great classical ballet works, like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, we're also really interested in reimagining what those ballets might look like going into the future. We're going to preserve the past, but we're also going to challenge ourselves to reimagine these works in new ways.

Sexuality and gender is such a hot topic now, especially among younger people. Have you considered casting different genders for classic roles – say, two Romeos or Juliets?

I think there are a number of players around the world that are experimenting with those kinds of concepts. Matthew Bourne made an all-male *Swan Lake*, probably 20 years ago now. What we believe is that whatever we do has to come from a place of authenticity, not simply trying to be reactive to whatever the conversation of the moment is. It can't be a gimmick and it can't be pandering. It has to be done with the right intent and for the right reasons. That's something we talk about all the time as we explore new ways of thinking about ballet. It's important to note that the great classical works are still great classical works, and if you look at the National Ballet's box office revenues, *Swan Lake*, which is one of the oldest ballets in the classical ballet canon, still sells more tickets than anything else we do (with the exception of *The Nutcracker*). There's still a great appetite and hunger for great classical ballet. The reality is that the classical ballets are what drive the box office and allow us to invest in more cutting-edge, contemporary work. If we weren't doing the *Sleeping Beautys* or *Swan Lakes*, none of the other performances would be possible. What makes them fresh and relevant today is having them interpreted and performed by today's artists. That's what keeps them exciting and what keeps audiences coming back.



Having an audience is arguably necessary for keeping any art form alive. How do you push engagement with your audience?

Social media has really been transformative for our industry. We're very aggressive now on social media platforms, especially in terms of trying to humanize the artist. There was a time when we had these creatures that we called ballet dancers and we kept them as mysterious and distant as possible. Today, we have to actually humanize the dancers. Social media has given us this incredible platform to create interactive dialogue between artists and audiences. We had World Ballet Day on October 4th, 2016, which was a 20-hour live-streaming event with five major companies around the world. It started in Australia for four hours, then moved to the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow for four hours, then to the Royal Ballet in London for four hours, then to the National Ballet in Toronto for four hours, then it finished at the San Francisco Ballet. All of the companies chose a dancer to blog or respond to questions in real time throughout the 20-hour live-stream. We were inundated with questions. It was incredible; there is such an appetite to know all kinds of things about the dancers, not just simply about the work they are doing, but what their lives are like – everything from the spiritual to the mundane. And in terms of live performance, opportunities to engage an audience in a really new and unexpected way, like our project at the AGO, is going to be really important as we think about the future.

We talk about living in the experience economy. How does that influence the work you do?

You go to a restaurant on date night, and you sit and look around, and everyone is sitting with their iPhones – not talking to each other, but looking at this little screen. For me it's disconcerting to see that lack of human engagement. But, in a way, I think it actually drives our desire to engage with humans again. There was a lot of fear that technology was going to get to a place where we'll watch virtual reality ballet performances on a computer screen. But the reality is that people want to be together. People want to gather for a collective, shared experience. I'm actually quite optimistic about the future as it relates to live audiences and live performance. I think we have to be brave in exploring new ways to engage with the art, but I don't think technology can ever replace a live human experience.

Admittedly, it would also be interesting to see what a VR experience of *Swan Lake* would be like, being able to stand with the dancers right in the middle of the stage. Maybe it's good to have both?

And that's the reality, we have to embrace both. We have to leverage the incredible advances in technology that bring more people to the art form. It took a long time, particularly for the live performing arts field, to embrace that idea, because there was great fear about one replacing the other. But we know enough now that we shouldn't fear that. The performing arts should be at the front in the field of technological innovation and audience engagement through technology. But always, again, with integrity and authenticity.



The performing arts should be at the front in the field of technological innovation and audience engagement through technology.

Along with a push toward excellence, could you say?

When you're working in an art form that continually needs to bring new people to it, it's incumbent upon us to be bold and to really be in the lead. There is no model to duplicate. There is no "best of show" or best standard. We've got a handful of big ballet institutions in the world, but no matter what our size is, we all have to strive to be the best and to create the next best practices for our industry. That's how I try to lead the institution, and that's what Karen believes in. We want that to be inherent in the National Ballet brand. We're creating our own future for the art form, right here.

You can't inspire audiences, you can't inspire philanthropy – you can't inspire with mediocrity. Excellence has to be a core value, and it can't just be a glossy page in an annual report. It's got to be authentic and it's got to be felt through the entire institution. That's where the future lies: authenticity and integrity in the pursuit of excellence. ☉



Vincent Stanley

**DIRECTOR,
PATAGONIA PHILOSOPHY**

With fast fashion running rampant and major retailers only dipping their feet into sustainable practices (think H&M's Conscious – Sustainable Style collection), Patagonia stands out for their unconventional business model. Instead of an offshoot sustainable line, they base their entire business practice on how they can not only reduce their impact on the environment, but how they can give more back to nature than they took in the first place.

Vincent Stanley is the Director at Patagonia Philosophy, an author, and a visiting fellow at the Yale School of Management, as well as a visiting executive at INSEAD in Fontainebleau. His work as a poet has appeared in Best American Poetry.

Patagonia's mission statement is: "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis." How do you intend to uphold these promises as our environment and technology continue to evolve?

We've had that mission statement now for 25 years. The good news is that the company is better at living out its mission now than it was in 1991, before our switch to organic cotton, the introduction of recycled polyester or neoprene-free wetsuits, the expansion of our clothing repair center to become the largest in North America, or the taking back of all worn out Patagonia products to be recycled or "downcycled."

The hard news is that reducing harm incrementally is insufficient for dealing with the magnitude of the environmental crisis. We will have to all reach the point, sooner rather than later, where we give back to the planet as much as we take from it and transform our economy into one that works for nature and for all people, not just a few. So while we work hard to reduce the social and environmental harm we do, we're also working to do some positive good.

We work in several ways to stay true to our mission. A year ago, we introduced what we call the Footprint Council, comprising all the operational heads of the company plus those working most closely on environmental strategy and on social and environmental work with the supply chain. That council meets monthly to address new problems or information and assess our progress against short- and long-term goals. Everyone who works at Patagonia has, and feels, the responsibility to keep the company true to its purpose.

We also work with third parties – B Lab, bluesign®, and the Fair Labor Association – to garner independent assessment of our performance. We helped found the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, which works to improve environmental and labor standards for the apparel and footwear industries. We also subscribe to production standards for down and wool, which involve animal welfare, that exceed industry standard; third parties vet and verify our practices.

As the first company in California to become a benefit corporation, how do you think Patagonia has set the standard and led the way for other corporations to do the same?

It's helpful for companies who want to operate with social and environmental values at the core of the business to have colleagues and feel a sense of community and be able to share stories of success and failure with like-minded enterprises. It's also important for these companies to have an impartial eye on the process (and the progress), which B Lab and its biannual assessment provide.

We are both a legally defined benefit corporation in California and a certified B Corp. The legal designation provides us the long-term benefit of ensuring that, should the ownership change, any future stockholders would have to abide by the values stated in our charter and articles of incorporation.

It's important to be a certified B Corp. While many of our practices are vetted by independent organizations – for instance, bluesign® for textiles, dyes, and finishes and the Fair Labor Association for legal pay and good working conditions in contracting factories – only the B Lab Assessment views all our practices holistically in light of our stated values and holds our feet to the fire.

We counsel like-minded companies to become certified B Corps, especially entrepreneurs who start off on the right foot.

Everyone who works at Patagonia has, and feels, the responsibility to keep the company true to its purpose.

With Patagonia Provisions, you've taken your learnings from the fashion industry and applied them to food. In what other industries do you think your learnings could apply, and how could this knowledge be made actionable for consumers?

The beauty of Patagonia Provisions is the opportunity to do good. In the clothing business, we've had to unlearn (where we can) some bad industrial practices. With food, we're starting from scratch. We don't make a product that doesn't represent a positive change. We're also excited about the potential for regenerative organic agriculture in general. Where farmers restore soil to health by reducing tillage and planting deeper-rooted crops, they also drastically reduce the need for chemicals and irrigation. And there is strong evidence that healthy soil has the capacity to sequester carbon – to help make up for our loss of forestation and the acidification of the ocean. This is where we see the potential to give back to Mother Nature as much, or perhaps more, than we take. And more and more people care about food, about the quality and healthfulness of what they eat.

We're not planning to get into any other businesses now, except as an investor through our Tin Shed Ventures in like-minded enterprises involving clothing, food, energy, water, and waste.



Sustainability is often discussed in academia and around boardroom tables, but how can brands make this information accessible and digestible enough so that consumers can actually act on the ideals and values they align themselves with?

Transmitting clear, simple, but not dumbed down or “greenwashed” information to consumers is a worthy challenge. It is still our hope that, for clothing and footwear, the Sustainable Apparel Coalition will develop a consumer-facing index so that you can hold your cellphone up to a hangtag on a pair of jeans and get an industry standardized 1 to 10 or 1 to 200 rating on its environmental and social performance.

Consumers are becoming familiar with a number of standards, including FSC for forest products and LEED for commercial construction. The challenge for the industry is to continually improve these standards.

How does Patagonia balance its strides in innovation with its responsibility to remain socially and environmentally conscientious?

The great thing about where we are now is that environmental and social responsibility at Patagonia is intrinsic to long-term design and product innovation. And we aren't the only ones who think this way. If some new technology or process involves an environmental setback, it isn't that hard to give it a pass and keep looking. We don't have to go very far. There are so many possible innovations now that will bring less rather than more harm to nature – and to people as a part of nature. ☺

Transmitting clear, simple, but not dumbed down or “greenwashed” information to consumers is a worthy challenge.



IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE

As can be seen in the preceding conversations, the concept of excellence in the organization of human activity is still a powerful performance motivator. What is interesting to note, however, is how the theme of excellence was, in many of these conversations, so closely aligned with the principles that underlie innovation.

For example, entertainment consultant Louise Murray's insistence that excellence demands “the discipline to remain uncomfortable” could just as easily be about innovation. Dyson's Alex Knox and Stanford's Julie Lythcott-Haims both asserted the acceptance of failure as a prerequisite for success – again, a core principle of any innovation practice. And foresight – something that Tom Peters did not address in his 1982 book, but which is a critical component of creating innovative product and service experiences that will be relevant three, five, or ten years from now – was a theme espoused by

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both Louise Murray and Patagonia's Vincent Stanley. If the search for excellence devolved into an obsession with operational efficiency in the turbulent years that followed Peters' text, it would appear that the organizations cited here have taken it to a richer, more holistic place, a place where excellence is indeed synonymous with themes of constant reinvention, incremental iteration, and a lack of methodological orthodoxy.

While Peters' eight themes still resonate, the paradigm shifts that have occurred since 1982 have infused the search for excellence with a more urgent thirst for the new, and the most effective ways to quench it.

And although Peters' exhortation that a company should stay close to its customers is a tenet that goes even further back than 1982 to Peter Drucker's dictum that the only goal of a corporation is to make a customer, it wasn't until the early noughties that customer experience design became a distinct discipline.

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