

Excellence Defined

Dr. David W. Montgomery

Recently my wife attended an information session for a potential activity for one of our children. The director had told the gathered parents, “We don’t do perfection here. But we do excellence.” “What do you think that means?” she asked me that evening. “Is excellence that place one click below perfection, and one click above ‘good enough?’” This got me thinking about how we define our terms and whether we are being precise enough when we are communicating our goals and ideals about our band programs to students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

So, what is excellence? It is hard to define, because it is applied to so many different endeavors and said so commonplace. When people claim “this is a program of excellence,” what do they mean? Do they even know, or do they just use the word because it is what you’re supposed to say? Is excellence a standard? What does excellence look like? How is it achieved? How do you know if you are excellent?

To me, **excellence is a verb**. It is an action—an approach to the way things get done. It is doing things according to high standards, and cultivating a consistent approach to doing what is expected of you to the very best of your ability. **Simply put, excellence means giving your best at all times and not settling for mediocre effort.** To paraphrase Nick Saban, head football coach at the University of Alabama, excellence is doing what you’re supposed to do, the

way you’re supposed to do it, when you’re supposed to do it.

Excellence is rigor. It is enjoying the process of working hard, competing, and sacrificing in the pursuit of your goals and dreams. It is saying to yourself “I am capable of digging deep to get this done well and being better. And I can do it over the long haul.” Then, it is rolling up your sleeves and working at it on a daily basis. In this way, excellence is hard. It means bumping up against things you don’t do well over and over so that one day you will be able to excel at it.

Excellence is not accepting mediocre effort and “good enough.” **It is putting a personal stamp of quality on everything you do—school, work, conversations, relationships.** Excellence is a process, and a vehicle through which goals, dreams, and success are achieved.

It takes a conscious choice to “do” excellence, and it takes a lot of discipline. There is a tendency to give just enough to get by...the least effort for the most reward. But excellence requires that we give our maximum to every circumstance. This kind of approach is uncommon. It requires training yourself with new thoughts and expectations for what your standard will be.

We are all governed by our habits, and for most people the habit of doing just enough to get by is all they know, or is all they are willing to exert. Therefore,

a new habit has to be cultivated, one that is built through making the choice at each decision point to say “Yes! I will give my very best right now.” These moments are critical in creating excellence. They are especially critical when you don’t feel like doing it, or when others around you

are coasting. These are the occasions when you grow, and you establish habits of excellence.

In order to have a program of excellence, directors have to teach and emphasize excellence every day. This is done in a variety of ways, but most importantly through your actions (excellence is a verb) and through the standards you accept. Directors have to be models of excellence. This means being organized and prepared for rehearsal, leading rehearsals that are structured and well-sequenced, communicating clear goals, and pushing students to achieve them. **During rehearsal, directors must resist the temptation of accepting mediocre effort and results.** Whatever you accept, you will get more of. ‘Good enough’ is the enemy of excellence. It is never acceptable for students to loaf during rehearsal. Effort

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is contagious. Students should always be working hard in rehearsal—hustling back between sets, being quiet while instructions and feedback are being given, exerting full effort during repetitions and rehearsal segments. These daily disciplines create habits that compound over time and lead to excellence.

I've found that most of the talk about excellence involves a Niagara of words, but a trickle of action. It is within your reach, but you've got to be willing to do more than just put it on a bulletin board in your band hall. Excellence has to be lived.

Dr. David Montgomery is Associate Professor of Instrumental Music Education at Baylor University where he teaches courses in band music education and observes student teachers. Prior to his appointment at Baylor, Dr. Montgomery was Associate Director of Bands and Director of the Bronco Marching Band at Western Michigan University for 14 years, and taught high school band in North Carolina. Dr. Montgomery is an accomplished teacher and was recognized as a finalist for the "University Distinguished Teaching Award," and was recipient of the "Dean's Teaching Award" at WMU. In addition to his teaching duties, Dr. Montgomery frequently serves as an adjudicator and clinician in both marching and concert band settings. He is published in research and trade journals and has presented at numerous state and professional music conferences, including the College Band Directors National Association. Additionally, he served as State Chairperson of the Michigan chapter of the National Band Association. Dr. Montgomery is the founder and director of Serviam Leadership Academy, a high school marching band leadership camp.

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