

Ten Principles for Excellence

By David Blankenhorn

1. Any significant piece of work requires an internal champion – someone who “owns” it, feels passionately about it, and is deeply committed to its success. A significant piece of work should never be simply “assigned” to someone (even someone who is perfectly competent.)
2. A work needs to make an argument or answer a question. We want to avoid “topics.” An example of a topic is “Marriage Today.” An example of exploring an argument or question is “America’s Marriage Culture is the World’s Weakest.”
3. A work needs seriously to aim at reframing an issue. Reframing an issue means changing the way people understand an issue. Reinforcing or elaborating upon current conventional wisdom, or making arguments that are frequently made by others, are not our priorities.
4. The most important thing by far is to ask the right question in the right way (or, put negatively, the worst sin is a question poorly asked.) Getting this part right is its own task, and typically requires intensive, sustained effort, often in collaboration with others.
5. The quality of the writing must be good. We should eschew specialized language and all forms of professional jargon, including academic jargon. Good writing is typically an intensive, time-consuming task.
6. Achieving excellence in a piece of work takes as long as it takes. If the choice is between compromising on quality or missing a deadline, we should miss the deadline.
7. We do not do what we do to satisfy our funders. If the choice is between compromising on quality or disappointing a funder, we should disappoint the funder.
8. Having one’s work be better than what is normal or average almost invariably means working at it longer and more intensively than what is normal or average.
9. Our leaders should be primarily public intellectuals, not fundraisers or project managers.
10. The best PR strategy is high-quality work.

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