

# How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches

January 2012

By Amiel Handelsman

## HOW TO IDIOT PROOF EXCELLENCE

It's now been thirty years since Peters and Waterman published *In Search of Excellence*. As Art Kleiner, Editor of *strategy + business*, has pointed out, this book brought into the mainstream the notion that building a successful company requires more than simply managing the numbers. Since then, hundreds of books and articles have examined the topic of excellence in organizations and individuals. This month, I present my modest contribution to that conversation: **how do we idiot-proof excellence?**

Idiot-proofing means designing something so that even a person of low intelligence would use it properly. In my experience, there are few bona fide idiots in the world. In fact, if you subscribe to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, everyone is smart at something. Thus, calling anyone "stupid" or an "idiot" is, well, stupid.

Yet I would also assert that there is an idiot within each of us. To be specific, the magnificent human brain contains a part that acts more like a reptile than a homo sapiens. It responds to external events by fighting, fleeing, or freezing. This "survival brain" is very effective at protecting us from genuine harm, yet it also gets activated when no true physical harm is present. A variety of wonderfully mischievous behaviors result.

The rub is that this idiot within us can interfere with the full expression of our natural gifts and talents. It can trip us up. Thus it pays to ask: how do we idiot-proof excellence? Here are five ideas:

1. **Get eight hours of sleep.** Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that sleep enhances focus, clarity of thinking, resilience and just about every other cognitive, emotional and physical skill that makes a difference. Conversely, cumulative sleep deficit is like giving the idiot within us a promotion and pay raise.
2. **Eat multiple lean protein, slow carb, healthy fat meals throughout the day.** I've been talking about this a lot lately with the people I coach. The reason: it's hard to maintain excellence throughout a day when we are on a sugar roller-coaster, feel bloated, or are cranky from cravings or deprivation diets. Personally, I was loyal to the much-heralded "low-fat diet" long after research showed it to be counterproductive. (Low-fat has often meant high-sugar, and some fats, like Omega-3s, are good for us.) For more on this topic, check out Jonny Bowden's excellent and easy-to-read book *150 Ways to Boost Energy*.
3. **Sort your stuff and set it in order.** During a two-year stint applying lean thinking (the Toyota Production System) to a non-manufacturing environment, I learned the business value of (a) sorting stuff you really need from stuff you don't, (b) getting rid of the unnecessary and, (c) setting the necessary in order so you can find it quickly when you need it. Looked in your file cabinet recently? How much of what's in there do you actually need? How long does it take you to find electronic files you need? Search time is wasted time, and it gives the idiot within each of us a performance bonus. The key principle of "set in order" is "A place for everything, and everything in its place."

4. **Say "thank you." Say "I'm sorry."** These simple declarations go a long way toward strengthening positive relationships and rebuilding fractured relationships. Why does this qualify as idiot-proofing? Because, as the Chilean biologist Huberto Maturana has said, love is the only emotion that amplifies intelligence, and both of these declarations increase love. Conversely, have you ever observed the dumb things we all say when guilt and resentment are present in a conversation (when both you and I know but never say that things ain't so great between us)? Unmended relationships give the idiot within each of us a spacious corner office. A sincere apology backed by consistently respectful actions can go a long way toward reversing this.
5. **Clear your mind.** Since I started coaching leaders almost thirteen years ago, I've encouraged them to use yoga, meditation, interval cardio training, massage, and other practices to bring greater clarity to their minds and calm to their bodies. Many are skeptical at first, but a remarkably high percentage later thank me for pushing them into this unfamiliar terrain. More recently, I've started encouraging people to take a look at Getting Things Done, David Allen's approach to stress-free productivity. The basic idea is to get action items out of your head and into a trusted system of follow-up...and then use it. The combination of a mindfulness practice and Getting Things done works magic in demoting the inner idiot back to its rightful place.

Send your comments, questions and critique to the usual place. I look forward to hearing from you.

Cheers,

Amiel Handelsman  
CuriousLeader Consulting LLC

---

email: [amiel@curiousleader.com](mailto:amiel@curiousleader.com)

phone: 503-235-8557

web: <http://www.curiousleader.com>

Read How We Lead archives and sign up for this email newsletter (it's free):

<http://www.curiousleader.com/articles.html>