

Who's Excellent Now? The unspeakable nature of business excellence

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1. Introduction

This paper borrows its title from an article previously published by *Business Week* (05/11/1984). Reviewing the core claims of *In Search of Excellence*, this periodical observed that many of those organizations, which Peters and Waterman (1982) had trumpeted as enduring exemplars of business success had suffered significant financial distress within just two years of the book's initial publication. This finding, it was suggested, demonstrated the flawed argument of *In Search of Excellence* and in so doing made it plain that Peters and Waterman were simply undeserving of the 'guru' accolades that each had been accorded by the popular press (see Collins, 2000; 2021; Hindle, 2008).

This paper builds upon the debate that has emerged as to the virtues (or otherwise) of *In Search of Excellence* yet it offers a distinctive contribution to this discussion. Critics, of the excellence project, as we shall see, have focused upon the conceptual, methodological and empirical limitations of *In Search of Excellence*. In so doing they have directed our attention to the conduct of Peters and Waterman. This paper readily acknowledges that the authors of *In Search of Excellence* did indeed produce a text which has significant methodological, conceptual and empirical limitations. Yet I will demonstrate that the excellence project not only persists but prevails in the face of this criticism. Indeed I will argue that the excellence project prevails because critics have a) focused upon the conduct of Peters and Waterman and in so doing have b) failed to consider the behaviour of those organizations offered to us as beacons for purposeful change and renewal. Shifting the focal point of the discussion to

highlight the conduct of the excellent organizations, I will offer a fundamental reassessment of the true legacy of the excellence project, which will I hope precipitate radical reconsideration of the core assumptions that underscore management education. To this end, the paper is structured as follows. In section two I will pause to consider the core ideas that shape the excellence project and the larger context, which made the concerns of *In Search of Excellence* both real and immediate. In addition, I will attempt to offer some indication of the book's global reach, commercial success and continuing significance. In section three I will turn to consider the manner in which the central message (and conceit) of *In Search of Excellence* has been received. I will begin this section by detailing the core claims of the *Business Week* article (noted above) before turning to consider the basis of the more conventional forms of academic critique. Section three will demonstrate that the body of literature, which has grown up around the excellence project remains limiting because it focuses upon the choices of Peters and Waterman when it should have focused upon the conduct of those organizations vaunted as excellent. Indeed I will argue that focusing upon the conduct of Peters and Waterman has made critics (and business educators) blind to what Burrell (1997) has termed the netherworld of business (excellence). Addressing this limitation, section four will consider excellence 'in practice' and will offer short case reports on two of the organizations, which have been presented as 'exemplars' of business excellence. Noting that Peters and Waterman (1982) have represented *Bechtel* and *Fluor* as models of 'hands-on; value-driven' organization, section four will demonstrate that these corporations were, in fact, engaged in serious misconduct. Indeed I will show that this misconduct, which includes corruption, sexism and that species of racism that goes by the name of anti-Semitism, was widely reported in the national press, and yet excluded from the narrative framework of the excellence project. In section five I will reflect upon these revelations and will offer brief remarks designed to confront this reality. I will conclude by

demanding that the academy must now address the unspeakable nature of business excellence in its research and in its teaching.

2. The Content and Context of *In Search of Excellence*

In Search of Excellence was written by two management consultants – Tom Peters and Robert (Bob) Waterman - who met while working for *McKinsey and Co.* By the mid-1970s *McKinsey* had begun to experience competitive problems. Indeed its senior management had become concerned that it was rapidly losing market share and reputation to key rivals. In an attempt to reverse this process *McKinsey* chose to institute three practices focused upon ‘strategy’, ‘operations’ and ‘organization’. Tom Peters was appointed to the ‘organization’ practice and, with colleagues, was instructed to:

- analyse publicly available data on performance,
- review the literature on organizational performance published during the previous 25 years,
- engage in structured interviews with personnel drawn from key organizations.

Responding to the recommendations of key colleagues and business journalists, Peters and Waterman (1982), tell us that they initially identified a group of seventy-five companies for their field research. The authors tell us however that they subsequently rejected thirteen of these companies as failing to reflect the pattern of American business. Despite the application of this filter, however, the French firm, *Schlumberger* was retained in the panel of what would soon become, ‘the excellent companies’.

Commenting upon the absence of banks from their sample, Peters and Waterman confide that they made a choice to exclude such organizations from their inquiries. Elaborating upon this decision the authors tell us that this exclusion was based upon an understanding that the

distinctive nature of the regulatory environment operating in this setting would make the problems and processes of business excellence in banking somewhat unusual and, hence, a poor template for managerial action beyond this immediate context. The authors did hint, however, at their intent to launch subsequent inquiries on excellence in the banking industry. While others did extend the excellence project to develop, for example, a distinctly European dimension (see Heller, 2002) the intention to develop an account of excellence in banking was, it seems, first postponed and later quietly dropped by Peters and Waterman. This outcome, I suggest, probably emerged for fairly prosaic reasons as Peters and Waterman struggled to keep up with the new commercial opportunities and broader media commitments, which the success of *In Search of Excellence* had enabled.

The reasoning, which underpins the exclusion of banks from the analytical framework of *In Search of Excellence* is of course reasonable and, within the parameters of the research design, perfectly sensible. Yet the authors fail to explain why other similarly regulated businesses were included. Thus the reader is left to wonder why banks were excluded from the analytical frame while companies such as *Procter and Gamble* and *Johnson & Johnson* (regulated by the *Food and Drug Administration*) and *Delta Airlines* (regulated by the *Federal Aviation Administration*) were a) retained and b) presented as offering general and transferable lessons on the business of excellence.

Returning to the general sample compiled by the authors, it will be useful to observe that sixty-two of the organizations from the initial sample of seventy-five were subsequently analysed in the light of six financial performance indicators. These indicators being:

- compound asset growth;
- compound equity growth;
- average ratio of market to book value;

- average return on total capital;
- average return on equity;
- average return on sales.

To qualify as ‘excellent’ the authors decided that each company would have to post results in at least four of the six selected measures, which placed it in the top half of its industry.

Following a review of the performance of this sample of sixty-two organizations, Peters and Waterman ultimately decided that forty-three companies from their initial sample of seventy-five could be considered to be ‘excellent’. Figure one identifies the forty-three companies whose conduct and performance was reviewed within *In Search of Excellence* while figure two lists the fourteen organizations, which Peters and Waterman suggested exemplified business excellence.

[FIGURES ONE AND TWO ABOUT HERE]

Peters and Waterman (1982) offer no sustained analysis of the concept of organizational culture. Nonetheless the authors insisted that their excellent organizations were remarkably similar in cultural terms. Thus the forty-three organizations selected by Peters and Waterman, we are told, displayed and are in fact defined by eight organizational attributes, which indicate the presence of a common culture of business excellence. These attributes may be summarized as follows:

- (1) A bias for action
- (2) Close to the customer
- (3) Autonomy and entrepreneurship
- (4) Productivity through people
- (5) Hands-on; value driven

- (6) Stick to the knitting
- (7) Simple form, lean staff
- (8) Loose-tight properties

Commenting on the awkward translation of the six financial metrics used to gauge business excellence into the eight organizational practices, said to define the practices of the exemplars of excellence, Collins (2022) observes that these attributes were, in fact, a late and, largely, *post hoc* addition to the excellence project. Indeed Collins observes that what is now taken to be, perhaps, the central feature of *In Search of Excellence* emerged and was incorporated only because Tom Peters had been obliged to respond to feedback from *McKinsey's* client base, who having been expected to sit through a two-day presentation on business excellence (illuminated by a deck of 200 slides), demanded, in return, some sort of tool that might allow them to begin to implement the lessons of business excellence, which the 'organization' practice had promised to provide.

Given the peculiarities evident within the research designed by Peters and Waterman and the awkward translation of financial metrics into organizational attributes, it is perhaps unsurprising that mere mention of *In Search of Excellence* tends to excite and polarise opinion (Collins, 2007; 2022). Indeed there are many who would suggest that *In Search of Excellence* is, when viewed within the context of the parameters that shape academic research, a simple affront (see for example Stewart, [2009] 2010). Keichel (2000) of course recognises the inherent limitations of the text but nonetheless protests that *In Search of Excellence* deserves to be taken seriously. It has, he advises, been very influential on managerial practice and, what is more, provides, in the shape of the 7-S framework (see Figure Three) perhaps the closest thing that 'management studies' has to an over-arching organizational paradigm. Adding to this discussion Collins (2021) argues that *In Search of*

Excellence has had an enduring impact on management theory and on managerial practice. Accounting for this observation he suggests that this text, in effect, spawned the billion dollar segment of the publishing industry that is known as ‘popular management’. It is also worth noting that the success of *In Search of Excellence* has fostered and enabled the development of an international, business excellence awards programme. This award is significant beyond its commercial success, of course, because it quite literally shapes how managers must think, act and interact if they are to be deemed successful in their endeavours.

[FIGURE THREE ABOUT HERE]

Yet while these indicators usefully give an impression of the significance of the excellence project, we must understand that the success enjoyed by Peters and Waterman was, both, unexpected and unlikely (see Crainer, 1997; Peters 2018; Collins, 2021; 2022). Indeed if we are truly to understand the success of *In Search of Excellence* and its enduring appeal we must make some effort to locate it in its broader context.

2.1 The larger context of the excellence project

In Search of Excellence was first published in the middle of a deep economic recession; the worst economic conditions that Americans had experienced in a generation. Commentators generally accept that this recession was pivotal to the success of *In Search of Excellence* and indeed to the success of the excellence project as a whole (see for example Bogner, 2002; Byrne, 1992; 2001; Kauffman, 1993; Saunders and Wong, 1985; Wilmott, 1993). Yet even before this economic downturn, commentators within the US had voiced fears concerning America’s standing in the world and its faltering performance in the face of competition, especially, from Japan (see Hayes and Abernathy, 1978; Kahn, 1970; Kahn and Pepper, 1978). *In Search of Excellence* entered and altered this debate. It clearly reflected and built upon concerns regarding the growing strength of the Japanese economy but unlike other

contemporary accounts (see Pascale and Athos [1981] 1986) it did not offer a simple counsel of despair. Instead it deliberately and self-consciously projected the argument advanced by Ronald Reagan (among others) that a great national crusade to ‘make America great again’ was not only necessary but entirely possible (see Peters and Waterman, 1982: xxv).

Yet despite this context and, indeed despite the pedigree of its broader political and economic discourse, the publishers of *In Search of Excellence* had, it seems very modest expectations for their product; and for good reason. Throughout the 1970s the general public had, beyond the occasional corporate scandal, shown no interest in reading books on the practicalities of business management (see Collins, 2021; 2022). Crainer (1997), a former employee of the *Tom Peters Company* (the training and consulting organization established to market the wares of Tom Peters) suggests that *Harper and Row* were keenly aware that books on the practice of management had very limited commercial potential in this period. He observes that the publishers forecast total sales of between 10,000 and 20,000 copies, and so, settled upon an initial print run of just 15,000 copies. Tom Peters (2018) however remembers things differently. He confides that *Harper and Row* did not actually believe that *In Search of Excellence* had any serious commercial potential and had, in fact, commissioned a print run of just 5,000 copies. To the surprise of all those concerned however, *In Search of Excellence* quickly proved itself to be a runaway, commercial success.

The complexities of international publishing agreements and the presence of unlicensed *ersatz* editions in territories such as China (see Crainer, 1997), for example, make it rather difficult to form reliable estimations of the overall book sales enjoyed by Peters and Waterman (1982). Nonetheless it would be fair to suggest that, despite the publisher’s dismal forecast, some three million copies of *In Search of Excellence* were sold between late 1982 and the middle of this decade (see Saunders and Wong, 1985). To provide some context for these sales it may be helpful to note that Peters and Waterman (1982) held the number one

slot on *The New York Times* best-sellers listings continuously for two years (Collins, 2000) and were displaced from the number one position, slipping to number two, only when the lead author, working with Nancy Austin released *A Passion for Excellence* (Peters and Austin, 1985).

Contemporary estimations of overall sales published by the *Tom Peters Group* while of course prone to serious under-reporting, suggest that perhaps ten million copies of *In Search of Excellence* have been sold in the four decades since its first publication. Recognising, both, the commercial success of this book and the manner in which its core message has shaped both management theory and the activities of practitioners, the publisher *Bloomsbury* named *In Search of Excellence* 'The Greatest Business Book of All Time' (see Collins, 2007). Not all, however, are content to announce the end of history. Indeed there are many who have attempted to (re)write the history of the excellence project in order to reveal the ways in which the core claims of *In Search of Excellence* are undone by a host of conceptual, methodological and empirical failings.

3. The Response to *In Search of Excellence*

The *Business Week* article (05/11/1984), which lends this paper its main title, is perhaps the most familiar of the critiques commonly rehearsed on the excellence project. Indeed its central claim: that the excellent project should be regarded as a failure because the (so-called) excellent organizations had begun to suffer serious financial distress within just two years of the first publication of *In Search of Excellence* is, we should note, very often repeated by those who assume that it effectively closes the debate. The *Business Week* attack, however, is far less damaging and much less significant than the textbooks seem to imagine. For example, the core claim of the article is time-sensitive and is, in fact, contradicted by later work, which suggests that in the two decades following the first publication of *In Search of Excellence*, the

excellent organizations (with one exceptionⁱ) had consistently out-performed the market (see Ackman, 2002). In addition the critique advanced by *Business Week* asserts that the financial distress experienced by the excellent organizations was, at root, a product of internal managerial failures, which Peters and Waterman (1982) should have noted but had failed to address within their research. Woolfson and Foster (1988: 4-5) however offer a dissenting view. They suggest that the financial distress suffered by the excellent organizations was, in fact, experienced across the US economy as a whole and arose, largely, as a consequence of external factors, namely relative shifts in currency values (which made US exports more expensive) and an associated decline in demand from developing economies due to a developing ‘third-world debt crisis’. Finally it is worth noting that while the *Business Week* critique seems to attack the excellence project at its very foundations, the truth is that this intervention quietly endorses the key presumption that underpins the excellence project. Thus the *Business Week* attack appears to accept, in principle, the existence of an elite group of excellent organizations whose leadership practices and broader cultural attributes would make them genuine beacons for economic change and political renewal but mocks Peters and Waterman (1982) for being ‘particularly bad stock pickers’ (Stewart [2009] 2010: 246).

3.1 Methodological Critiques

Academic accounts of *In Search of Excellence* have focused less upon business results and performance, choosing instead, to highlight the methodological, conceptual and empirical limitations of the text. Commenting upon these methodological issues, Guest (1992) for example observes that, in preparing their sample of firms, Peters and Waterman employed an unorthodox and largely unscientific methodology. As we have seen, the sample of ‘excellent’ companies, proceeds from an *ad hoc* grouping that becomes, Guest notes, progressively corrupted as the authors allow their own biases and orientations to adjust the population in a self-serving and thoroughly unscientific manner. Carroll (1983) adds to this complaint. He

observes that a great deal of weight is placed on anecdote and idiosyncratic recollection. Indeed, he argues that the interview data collected on the organizational practices of the ‘excellent’ organizations is undeserving of this pseudo-scientific label for it is, too often, the outcome of a simple chat with a senior executive. In addition Carroll (1983) observes that Peters and Waterman fail to constitute a control group. This omission, of course, means that the excellence hypothesis is ‘non-falsifiable’ insofar as the methodology is constitutionally incapable of uncovering information that would refute the idea that excellent firms a) have attributes in common and that it is b) these eight attributes which deliver business excellence (see also Rosenzweig, 2007). These methodological failings, we should note, are accompanied by a range of conceptual shortcomings, which further undermine the truth-claims of the excellence project.

3.2 Conceptual Criticisms

Observing that *In Search of Excellence* tends to assert that organizational success is a product of managerial vision and its translation into action, Carroll (1983: 79) leads the conceptual attack. He wonders why Peters and Waterman have been so dismissive of factors associated with the success of other notable companies and economies. Indeed he suggests that the excellence project is flawed in a very fundamental manner because it fails to recognise the ways in which factors such as ‘proprietary technology, market dominance, control of critical raw materials, and national policy and culture’ might have a bearing upon the fortunes of an organization.

Guest’s (1992) reflections on the conceptual limitations of *In Search of Excellence* take a slightly different course. He observes that, despite some hesitation Peters and Waterman finally assert that business excellence depends upon the presence of all eight organizational attributes. Yet, given obvious overlaps between these attributes Guest wonders whether it

might be sufficient to honour, say, a simple majority of the eight factors identified and yet return excellent results. Van der Merwe and Pitt (2003) repeat and develop this line of analysis through three lines of critique. Firstly, they question the binary characterisation of excellence preferred by Peters and Waterman and suggest that business excellence might, more usefully, be construed as a continuum of possibilities. Reflecting further on the nature of such possibilities, Van der Merwe and Pitt raise a second point of criticism. Noting that the analysis of Peters and Waterman hinges around ‘leadership’, they question the efficacy of the authors’ preferred cultural management strategies. Thus Van der Merwe and Pitt note that Peters and Waterman portray excellent organizations as culturally unified collectives. Yet they counter that this simple-minded celebration of consensus prevents us from acknowledging conflict within the collective, and in so doing, effectively precludes the meaningful analysis of organizational politics and collective representation. On the strength of this more political reading of management and organization Van der Merwe and Pitt raise a third point of criticism, which invites us to consider the wider costs and benefits of the excellence project. Thus the authors suggest that the excellence project may well visit ‘externalities’ on other groups and constituencies who have simply been excluded from the analytical frame. This is a point we will return to in our case reports on *Bechtel* and *Fluor*. For the moment however we will turn to consider those critiques that invite consideration of empirical matters.

3.3 The Empirical Critique

Offering an empirical analysis of the merits of *In Search of Excellence* Saunders and Wong (1985) consider the extent to which success in business might be said to be a product of the eight attributes of excellence, highlighted by Peters and Waterman (1982). Contradicting the analysis of Peters and Waterman they suggest that the highly performing organizations which

they studied showed, in fact, only a very limited commitment to these organizational factors. Indeed Saunders and Wong observe that while there is some evidence to suggest that successful organizations commit to on-the-job training and have a preference for simple structures there is, in truth, no evidence to suggest that business success derives from ‘sticking to the knitting’, or from having a ‘bias for action’. In fact there is ample evidence to support the assertion that the excellent organizations had grown by acquisition and conglomeration (see for example Knight, with Dyer, 2005 for an account of the 236 companies, which *Emerson* acquired between 1954 and 1992). In addition Saunders and Wong (1985) observe that, while Peters and Waterman (1982) celebrate a ‘bias for action’, the available empirical evidence suggests that the more successful organizations in their study were more planning orientated than their less-successful counterparts. Mitchell (1985) highlights a separate empirical concern. Noting that the excellent organizations have failed to feature within the contemporary awards processes that celebrate the ‘best companies’ to work for, the author suggests a gap between the rhetoric of business excellence and the reality of the choices taken by those organizations said to constitute beacons of best practice.

These empirical observations are of course pertinent and, in Mitchell’s (1985) case at least hint at a world of practice unexplored and unimagined by Peters and Waterman. Yet, these critiques remain limiting because they continue to take the conduct of Peters and Waterman as their central concern, and so, fail to offer a meaningful or sustained engagement with the practices developed and the choices pursued by the excellent organizations. Thus, while Saunders and Wong (1985) usefully highlight the limits of the action orientation and organic growth policies applauded by Peters and Waterman (1982) they are largely silent on matters related to ‘productivity’ and ‘people’, and overlook for example contemporary newspaper reports, which demonstrated that *Delta Airlines* (*New York Times*, 11/08/1981; 15/08/1981;

30/08/1981) and *Caterpillar* (*New York Times*, 14/04/1983; 20/04/1983; 27/04/1983) far from representing unified and harmonious, cultural collectives had, in fact, fostered poor relationships with organized labour and had, as a consequence, experienced protracted labour disputes. Indeed it might be helpful to note that in 1983 the AFL-CIO felt it necessary to publish a ‘dishonor roll’ (*New York Times* 14/09/1983) to name and shame those organizations that had failed to bargain in good faith with the union movement and had chosen to place none other than an exemplar of excellence - *Procter and Gamble* - at the very top of this listing.

Turning to the issues suggested in the analysis of Mitchell (1985) it is again clear that in highlighting the gap between the rhetoric and reality of the excellence project, the author has chosen to make the conduct of Peters and Waterman central to the critique. Thus the ‘finding’ that the excellent organizations had failed to feature on the contemporaneous listing of ‘the best companies to work’, while intriguing, becomes a matter related to the research design employed by Peters and Waterman rather than being an issue closely tied to the actual conduct of the excellent organizations. Indeed it is instructive to observe that the failure of employees to endorse the conduct of their employers as ‘good’ could (and should) have been explored in relation to the choices made by their organizations and, for example, might well have been placed in the context of the poor employee relations practices highlighted above. Furthermore Mitchell’s findings might have been placed against the evidence of *Fluor’s* (*New York Times*, 13/03/1979), *Hewlett Packard’s* (*New York Times* 22/03/ 1989) *Caterpillar’s* (Woolfson and Foster, 1988) and *IBM’s* (*New York Times*, 09/11/1986) direct business dealings with South Africa’s racist, apartheid state.

Maidique (1983) shares Mitchell's (1985) concern with rhetoric but pursues a middle path that concedes the essential appeal of the excellence project. While highlighting the conceptual oversights and methodological failings of *In Search of Excellence* therefore, Maidique was, perhaps, among the first to grasp the broader appeal of the excellence project. Thus Maidique acknowledges that *In Search of Excellence* is a hugely popular, if deeply flawed, text whose allure depends upon a revivalist tone. Highlighting the charm of this revivalist message, she observes that *In Search of Excellence* builds and depends upon the positive nature of its core message. The text has, she tells us, a conversational style which is enlivened by the presence of colourful, evangelical prose (see also Hyatt, 1999; Kaplan, 2003; Mitchell, 1985; Pattison, 1997; Saunders and Wong, 1985). Huczynski's (1993) overview of the essence of 'guru theory' echoes the evangelical account developed by Maidique. He invites us to consider the manner in which, Peters and Waterman, as failed scientists, have nonetheless managed to attract and to secure converts to their cause. Addressing this paradox, Huczynski argues that 'gurus' such as Peters and Waterman have successfully colonized our understanding of the world and its problems because they present a world of opportunities (and threats), built around an ideological focus which enhances the rights and privileges of management by undermining more pluralistic forms of analysis. Tracing the genealogy of 'guru theory', Huczynski suggests that the pronouncements of modern gurus such as Peters and Waterman have clear continuities with earlier works prepared by the likes of Watson [1963] (2003) and in many ways echo his suggestion that the primary function of the executive is to craft a normative code for others. Documenting the precise articulation of this moral code, Huczynski suggest that guru theorizing tends to exhibit three, common, core traits and, within these traits, twelve interdependent, complementary and overlapping features. Huczynski's analysis is we should note complemented by a sizeable body of like-minded work. For example Clark and Salaman

(1996; 1998), Lilley (1997), Kieser (1997), Furusten (1999), Jackson (1996; 2001), Pattison (1997) and Watson (2001) are just some of those who have probed the limitations of guru theory, while acknowledging its impact and rhetorical appeal. Watson's (2001) account of the legacy of the excellence project is particularly interesting in this respect. It is based squarely upon an analysis of the problems and dilemmas of managerial work and builds upon a 'strategic exchange' perspective to reveal the social-political processes of managerial work. Reflecting upon those characteristics that bring substance to a text otherwise separated from the architecture that sustains academic truth-claims, Watson protests that *In Search of Excellence* is persuasive precisely because it connects to those very human elements of the management process, which have been written-out of academic attempts at codification. Mitchell's (1985) analysis, despite its own limitations however, demands that we temper Watson's (2001) endorsement. Thus Mitchell concedes that *In Search of Excellence* builds and depends upon a concern with morality but protests that the meaning crafted within this narrative is manipulative and is appealing to managers and to policy-makers precisely because it has been designed to obfuscate the realities of working when viewed from the bottom-up.

Wilmott's (1993) contribution refines and extends the analysis of Mitchell (1985). Thus Wilmott reminds us that the excellence project has been presented as a humanist endeavour, designed to counter the excesses of Taylorism to provide 'the moral renewal' (Wilmott, 1993: 541) of the corporation. Yet he (too) protests that this promise of moral renewal is bankrupted by a failure to address, both, the plurality of social organization and the inherent ambiguities of managerial action. Challenging the suggestion that *In Search of Excellence* offers general and meaningfully transferable lessons on the management of social organization, Wilmott counters that it is, at root, a fabulous exhortation (see also Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007),

which provides no useful foundation for policy or action. The analysis developed by Grugulis and Wilkinson (2002) echoes Wilmott's (1993) concerns. Yet in being timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the text's first publication, Grugulis and Wilkinson are able to lever more fully those 'narrative' approaches, recently elaborated to explore the constitution of social organization (see for example, Gabriel, 2000). In this respect it would be fair to suggest that the analysis of Grugulis and Wilkinson offers both 'an illumination and assessment' of the theory of business excellence and 'a critical analysis of the real world implications' of this manifesto, which Wilmott (1993: 516), himself, had suggested was lacking within the discourse on excellence and indeed within his own analysis. In common with Wilmott (1993), therefore Grugulis and Wilkinson (2002: 180) complain that the excellence project offers an account of the business of management that is largely blind to matters of context, structure and power. Nonetheless the authors suggest that *In Search of Excellence* does enjoy some level of performativity. Pursuing this, Grugulis and Wilkinson (2002) suggest that Peters and Waterman have attracted and retained an audience because the excellence project deals not with *the* literal, empirical truth of social organization but with its more general *truths*. In other words, the excellence project is usefully taken to be a (fairy) story. Probing the realities of a culture change project enabled by the rhetoric of business excellence, Grugulis and Wilkinson offer a case report on *British Airways*. This report is however quite unlike the stories preferred by Peters and Waterman because it invites us to confront the manner in which the rhetoric of corporate renewal may be deflected and/ or reversed by the persistent influence of those things – context, history, social solidarity, collective representation, and plurality – that Peters and Waterman had, in effect, removed from the analytical frame. In short, Wilmott (1993), Grugulis and Wilkinson (2002) and Mitchell (1985) usefully challenge the essential nature of the moral order, which Watson (2001) highlights as being central to the excellence project.

Yet these critiques, while highlighting the manner in which the experience of organizational plurality tends to undermine the rhetoric of business excellence and its associated baggage of culture change, continue to place the conduct of Peters and Waterman at the centre of the analysis, and so, fail to offer a sustained engagement with the practices of those organizations, which have been celebrated as ‘excellent’. Indeed these critiques, despite their radical credentials, do tend to indulge the suggestion that the exemplars of excellence actually abide by the standards of conduct expected within liberal democracies. In our next section I will correct this presumption. I will offer a, long overdue account of excellence ‘in practice’ and in so doing will reveal that which has been edited from *In Search of Excellence* and ignored by its critics. Indeed I will demonstrate that there is much within the excellence project that has been obscured and which remains unspoken precisely because it is truly unspeakable.

4. The Exemplars of Excellence

In this section I will offer brief case histories of just two of the fourteen exemplars identified by Peters and Waterman (1982) namely *Bechtel* and *Fluor*. This small sub-set of the exemplars of excellence is offered to:

- a) illustrate the serious organizational misconduct overlooked by Peters and Waterman
- b) demonstrate the limitations of conventional critique, which in focusing upon the conduct of the authors of *In Search of Excellence* has failed to engage with the practices of the excellent organizations
- c) challenge those apologists who, in the absence of any meaningful engagement with business practices simply insist that *In Search of Excellence* offers useful, transferable

lessons on the conduct of management (see Dahlgaard and Dahlgaard, 2007; Kaplan, 2003; Heller 2000; 2002).

4.1 Bechtel

The *Bechtel Corporation* (as we now know it) was founded by Warren Bechtel in 1906.

Within a decade of the company's formation Warren Bechtel was 'one of the most successful construction bosses' (McCartney, 1988: 22) in the United States and by the end of the 1920s he had amassed a personal fortune of some \$30 million.

Bechtel was born as a private company and unusually remains so. Indeed Denton (2016: 7) reminds us that the company with revenues reputed to be in the region of \$38 billion in 2013 remains, at root, very much a family firm. Documenting the growth and reach of this family business Denton (2016: 7) observes that 'five generations of Bechtel men have harnessed and distributed much of the planet's natural resources – hydroelectricity, oil, coal, water, nuclear power, natural gas and now solar geothermal power and asteroids.'

Bechtel is plainly a very large and a very significant business entity. But, does its financial performance, for example, place it consistently towards the top half of its industry? And is it truly value-driven?

The simple answer to the first question is that *we do not know*. A more candid answer however would be that *we simply cannot know* the answer to a question which surely lies at the very heart of the excellence project. Commenting upon the manner in which the company operates, McCartney (1988: 135) observes that *Bechtel* is highly secretive and shares little meaningful information with the public. Indeed, reflecting upon the first ever annual report produced by *Bechtel*, *The Economist* (May 8th 1981) noted:

‘An inquiry about profits to an otherwise charming Bechtel boss produces a sharp reminder to mind your manners. Such things remain the concern of the Bechtel family (who still own the vast majority of the stock) and a handful of top officers.’

On the second question listed above, McCartney (1988: 149-150) is publicly doubtful of *Bechtel's* values. Discussing the firm's work on behalf of the Libyan state, for example, McCartney notes that in 1969 *Bechtel* took steps to cover-up work that was not only sub-standard but unsafe. And this Libyan cover-up was, we should note, no isolated incident. McCartney (1988: 153) observes that in 1974 *Bechtel*, while building a pipeline in Alaska, chose to falsify the certification of welding activity and in so doing subverted processes developed to assure the safety of its work. Furthermore McCartney (1988: 158) alleges that throughout the 1970s, *Bechtel* participated in widespread corruption to secure business. For example, he notes that *Bechtel* furnished senior Indonesian officials with bribes totalling some \$3 million in order to secure contracts.

Probing the values underpinning its interactions with its customers, McCartney (1988) observes that the corporation's desire to secure contracts with the Egyptian state served to foster a deeply anti-Semitic corporate culture that has denied employment to those of the Jewish faith. We should note however that *Bechtel's* prejudice was not restricted to those born into Judaism. *Bechtel* was, in fact, similarly hostile to organized labour (McCartney, 1988: 168) and chose to engage in practices that were openly prejudicial to its female employees and to its black employees. Denton (2016: 9-10), for example, notes that by 1975, *Bechtel*, the secretive organization that took care to maintain a low profile, ‘was battling numerous lawsuits on grounds of sexism and racism. A sex discrimination case brought by 6,400 female employees claimed that Bechtel functions “like a gentlemen's club” that kept women employees – 4,000 of whom were college graduates – in low-paying secretarial jobs. Meanwhile, 400 black employees who claimed that they were victims of racial discrimination

and harassment had filed a separate lawsuit.’ Furthermore Denton (2016: 120) reminds us that even as the class action suits brought by its black and female employees progressed through the court system ‘Bechtel was...being pummelled by a sudden, unfamiliar and relentless bad publicity. *The Washington Star* had been running an investigative series of articles about Bechtel’s business practices, its ties to government agencies, and its uncanny ability to obtain no-bid contracts. Then there was the bribery scheme involving a pipeline right-of-way in New Jersey that led to the convictions of four Bechtel employees. The indictment of six Bechtel employees at Calvert Cliffs, Maryland, nuclear plant, charged with extorting nearly a quarter of a million dollars, followed.’

Placing this appreciation of *Bechtel* within the context of *In Search of Excellence* it should now be apparent that the company’s secretive practices simply denied Peters and Waterman (1982) the intelligence necessary to validate their core claims as regards the financial performance of this organization. Of course it is true that *Bechtel* does appear to have been very successful. But beyond guess-work and supposition Peters and Waterman (1982) did not know and could not know if *Bechtel* was, on the six indicators selected as indicators of business excellence, truly performing beyond its peers. But some things *were* known. Journalists in the employ of leading national newspapers knew and understood that the company discriminated against its black employees; against its female employees; and against those of the Jewish faith. In addition it was known that the company had been involved in bribery and corruption. Any one of these widely-reported controversies, I suggest, should have been enough to deny *Bechtel* its exemplary status and would have been enough to sustain an academic rebuttal of the core *conceit* of *In Search of Excellence*. Yet somehow these reports slipped under the radar of the research undertaken by Peters and Waterman (and by their critics) *or worse* were known to the authors but were deemed to be somehow, routine; normal; inconsequential to the larger excellence project.

4.2 Fluor

The Fluor Corporation has its origins in a saw and paper mill, partnership formed between the three Fluor brothers in 1890. The company expanded quickly in its early period, growing from its origins in milling to become the *Fluor Brothers Construction Company* in 1903. This expanded operation prospered in the early years of the new century by gearing its production expertise to meet the needs of the growing US petroleum industry. In 1924 the company was incorporated and in 1957 offered its shares to the public for the first time.

Fluor has worked closely with Saudi Arabia's *ARAMCO* since the 1940s. In the mid-1970s the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia approached its key business partners with a funding proposition designed to advance the standing and reputation of the territory. The Kingdom sought funding of some \$20 million for this endeavour. *Fluor* duly contributed \$1 million to this 'soft power' project (*New York Times*, 02/04/1981ⁱⁱ). Controversy arose however around the formation of a Middle East Studies Centre at the *University of Southern California* made possible by these donations. It was alleged that the University's Board of Trustees, which was at this time chaired by Fluor's Chief Executive, J. Robert Fluor had sought to attach conditions to the funding of the Middle East Studies Centre which were not only inappropriate infringements of academic freedom, but anti-Israeli in orientation and, indeed, reflective of a deeper anti-Semitism. *The New York Times* in a series of articles (see 11/02/1979; 28/08/1979; 11/09/1979) charts this developing controversy and the company's response. The *New York Times* (11/02/1979) records for example the resignation of Dr Hubbard, President of the *University of Southern California* against a backdrop of claims that those charged with the oversight of the endowment had sought to exercise improper influence on the University (*The New York Times* 28/08/1979). In addition this newspaper also reports that Jewish leaders, the student body and members of the faculty had all voiced concerns over the establishment of the centre and its perceived anti-Semitic orientation. *The New York*

Times (28/08/1979), of course, also allowed *Fluor* a right of response. Quoting Mr Etter, then, the Vice President for Public Relations at *Fluor*, it reported the company's position. Charges of anti-Semitism, Mr Etter reassured readers were bogus confections: 'This whole affair,' he advised 'has been distorted by the Jewish press.'

In 1984 the *New York Times* (10/09/1984) returned to the controversy that had grown up around the establishment of the Middle East Studies Centre when it published an obituary for J. Robert Fluor. The obituary observed that the American Jewish Committee had protested that the University would, in effect, allow Arab governments to exercise, wholly improperly, a veto over the University's curriculum. The obituary did however also acknowledge that the University had responded to these claims of anti-Semitism and had altered the centre's approach and terms of reference to recognise these concerns. Nonetheless the obituary paused to remind readers that *Fluor* had been heavily criticised for its involvement in this plan and for its long-standing involvement in South Africa's apartheid state. Indeed it may be helpful to note that in 1986 the newly elected Mayor of Los Angeles revoked the \$310 million contract that the city had awarded to *Fluor*, warning the corporation that it could not hope to do business with the city of Los Angeles while propping up a racist state (*Los Angeles Times*, 02/08/1986; 22/08/1986).

Despite being listed as an exemplar of excellence, *Fluor* merits just five mentions within *In Search of Excellence*. Two of these entries amount to an endorsement of the corporation's focus and strategic orientation. *Fluor*, we are assured is, like *Bechtel*, a star in the field of project management and has achieved its star status by 'sticking to the knitting'. Two more entries praise the company for having 'a bias for action', while the final entry is reserved for an endorsement of its 'lean' staffing policy: The firm, we are told, runs 'its \$6 billion operations with three corporate planners' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 312). No mention is made of the remaining attributes said to be necessary for the achievement of business

excellence. We hear nothing of ‘customers’, for example, and readers would search in vain for any sustained account of culture and/ or values. And that is probably just as well because any sustained reflection on the corporation’s policies and orientations might have revealed to Peters and Waterman that which had become clear to the *New York Times*, namely that *Fluor* was, to judge by the public pronouncements of its key officers, unapologetically anti-Semitic; had questionable friends; and few scruples when it came to serving the needs of its core clientele.

In concluding comments I will reflect upon what these case reports have to teach us about the business of excellence. Indeed I will suggest that my reflections on the practices of these exemplars of excellence suggest the need for a form of inquiry and pedagogy that can appreciate the broader political economy of managerial work and, beyond this, the netherworld of social organization (Burrell,1997), which my case reports have uncovered.

5. Concluding Comments

In Search of Excellence is, despite its manifest intellectual and academic failings, an incredibly important text. It has been hugely successful in commercial terms and has – by means of legitimate and pirate editions – reached a global audience. Furthermore, *In Search of Excellence* has had a crucial impact on ‘popular management’. It is Collins (2021) suggests the prototype that became the archetype of this genre. Yet the text has a broader significance beyond its sales and beyond its role in the development and perpetuation of ‘popular management’. Indeed the text has, we should note, generated a whole industry geared to the certification of business excellence (Collins, 2007). This certification process is significant because in a very real and enduring fashion, it shapes how managers now think about, talk about and practice ‘management’. In a variety of different ways, therefore, the excellence project has (re)shaped organizations, organizational processes and literally generations of

management practitioners. And, although we may not care to acknowledge this, *In Search of Excellence* has also shaped the management curriculum and has formed a considerable component of the research agenda that has been pursued within Business Schools (see Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019). And yet despite 40 years of review, revision and outright attack, the excellence project not only persists it prevails in the context of the competing counter-narratives developed from within ‘the guru industry’ (Collins, 2000; 2021). Who now, for example, would challenge the idea that successful corporations need to get close to the customer? And who now would dispute the suggestion that organizations are cultures which build and depend upon symbolic exchanges that managers can learn to shape?

This paper, developed in the long shadow cast by the 40th anniversary of the first publication of *In Search of Excellence* has essayed an approach designed, finally, to crack the edifice of the excellence project. To this end it has offered critical reflections on the theoretical constitution of the excellence project and, *much more importantly*, a distinctive reappraisal of the practices of two of those organizations said to exemplify best practice in this arena. Noting that academic accounts of *In Search of Excellence* and the broader project that it spawned have tended to focus upon the conduct of Peters and Waterman, this paper has offered instead reflections on the choices of the excellent organizations. This analytical counterpoint offers a challenge to the central conceit of *In Search of Excellence*; that the exemplars of business excellence have done well by being good. Indeed the analysis developed here demonstrates that *Bechtel* and *Fluor*, key exemplars of business excellence were not, as is commonly supposed, beacons for good practice.

It would, of course, be fair to suggest that I have been selective in my consideration of the exemplars of excellence. I have, after all, focused attention on just two of the fourteen exemplary organizations highlighted by Peters and Waterman. Given space, however, I could

have extended my analysis. I have, of course, already highlighted the direct dealings which *IBM*, *Hewlett Packard*, *Caterpillar* and *Fluor* had with South Africa's racist regime.

Furthermore I have revealed the manner in which the industrial relations practices of *Procter and Gamble*, *Delta Airlines* and *Caterpillar* challenge the suggestion that the exemplars of excellence represent culturally unified and harmonious collectives. Beyond these examples however, I might also have highlighted *Boeing's* corruption (Sampson, 1977: 288); *IBM's* serial anti-trust infringements (DeLamarter, [1986] 1988) and its historic ties to Nazi Germany (Black, 2003). Equally I might have highlighted the decade-long, money laundering conspiracy arranged by *3M* to facilitate the bribery of local, state and national political figures (*New York Times* 09/03/1975). Furthermore I could have discussed the harassment of employees and activists by *Procter & Gamble* (see Swazy, 1993) or indeed the dreadful misconduct of *Johnson & Johnson*, which for a generation chose to obscure the presence of asbestos in talcum powders marketed to the mothers of infants (*New York Times*, 15/12/2018; 20/12/2018; 29/10/2019; *The Guardian* 18/10/2019). For reasons of economy, however, I have chosen to focus only upon *Bechtel* and *Fluor*. I have made this selection because I hope that my consideration of the deep-seated and unapologetic racism evident at the very core of the excellence project might now precipitate a fundamental reconsideration of *In Search of Excellence* and the legacy it has bequeathed to management education and research. Readers of course may choose to take solace in the suggestion that no author today could hope to secure the levels of rhetorical control achieved by Peters and Waterman in the face of grass-roots, contemporary movements related, for example, to environmental matters and 'me too'. There may be some truth in this suggestion nonetheless it will be useful to observe that this optimism builds and depends upon a clear engagement with the realities of business practice, which the academy has simply failed to provide. Recognising this fact, this paper has endeavoured to confront the academy with clear evidence of widespread and deep-seated

organizational misconduct across those organizations, previously offered to us as beacons of good practice.

Turning, briefly to the limitations of my present analysis it is of course, true that due to limitations of space I have been unable to trace the historical roots of the racism revealed through my case reports. Nor have I sought to theorise these practices. Yet it is enough for our present purposes, I suggest, to highlight the presence of this vile prejudice since this evidence facilitates, surely, a new set of rather important and theoretically searching questions, previously unthinkable (Weick, 1995). For example:

Why did *In Search of Excellence* fail to record the serious misconduct, which had been widely reported in the national press?

Given the academy's attempts to claim the monopoly on management knowledge (see Collins, 2001), why must my research on the lived experience of business excellence lean so heavily on the insights of those who practice the trade of journalism?

And finally, given the academy's current focus upon ethics, when may we expect this institutional collective to acknowledge the problem of anti-Semitism in the workplace and in so doing to bring its conscience in-house?

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ⁱ This exception is *Wang Laboratories*, which ceased trading.

ⁱⁱ There is I believe a typographical error in this report since the newspaper reports a billion dollar gift, whereas other reports highlight an endowment of some \$20 million. That said all contemporary reports highlight the controversy associated with this development.