

JOURNAL OF ARBORICULTURE

January 1988
Vol. 14, No. 1

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE¹

by William L. Owen

In February, 1987, I was made President of the National Arborist Association. With the utmost respect for the many outstanding men who have preceded me, my goal as incoming President of NAA was and is to do a better job than anyone has ever done before. Frankly, if I were to approach the job wanting less than that, I should not have become President. With an appetite for less than the best I would be, as so much of this world is, mediocre. But I believe that we all deserve and should demand more, much more, than mediocre "business as usual." The President's job in any organization first and foremost is to lead, to focus the organization's energy and drive. I began that effort by challenging myself, and all NAA members, to the Pursuit of Excellence. I chose that to be the theme for my year as president. Let me quickly add that this is said with full respect for the many outstanding people, companies and programs that exist now in NAA and in the ISA, Commercial Arborist Society. My emphasis is about a new resolve, building for the future. I want to include anyone in arboriculture who is interested in the challenge.

It's quite simple. I'm asking first myself then you to make a conscious decision now to pursue excellence with a new resolve in every activity as professional commercial arborists in 1987-88, and beyond.

Hooray! That sounds great! I've said it, you've read it, now it will happen!

Baloney! That's where most concepts of this sort begin and end. Just words! What will make it happen? Only you and I can do that.

Let's be specific: What have you and I done in the past year to improve ourselves? To excel in

anything? Have we done anything to make ourselves better professional arborists? Have we attended a seminar? Taken a special course in arboriculture, business management, marketing or sales? Used the NAA slide cassette programs in a specific way in our companies? Used the Tail Gate Safety Program? Indeed, taken any specific steps to improve ourselves, or our company image? The list can go on and on. Just how do we stack up? Let's be honest and take a hard look at ourselves. Is there room for improvement? For Excellence?

I believe there is. Here is how. During this year (Feb 87 - Feb. 88), I want to challenge every person in commercial arboriculture to structure a specific improvement program or activity, based on wherever that person or company is now, and built on that base, for the future in professional development. The tools are available to us, from ISA publications, Arbor Age and other publications, and certainly from NAA. The list of aids from NAA, for example, as published on the Member Services sheet of self-help tools, is truly extraordinary in its breadth and possibilities for training and improvements. I respectfully, but no less firmly, hereby challenge everyone in commercial arboriculture to review his or her company's practices top to bottom to see where they can be improved upon. Sit down with your employees (or yourself if you work alone), one on one, and go through a self analysis exercise. Begin always with the positive things that you know are true. Only after giving credit for the positive should you talk about the negative. We all have both. Find where action toward becoming better is needed. Then make specific plans to improve through the pursuit of excellence. The results of these actions

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Keystone, Colorado in August 1987.

can be amazing. That, I can promise you.

To excel is to surpass in accomplishment, to be superior in achievement. If to surpass and be superior in achievement are what we pursue, and we strive to succeed every day, we have grown, and each day can become an accomplishment in success all its own. We won't always succeed; we won't always be superior in achievement. *But striving for nothing less is what matters.* The Pursuit of Excellence is, in itself, the goal. Real results in self-improvement, and a greater degree of personal and job satisfaction will follow. We have all heard motivational talks. "How To" talks on being successful, making more sales, doing a better job, etc., ad nauseum. How many of you have attended such lectures or seminars, gone away inspired, full of resolve, then done nothing about what you learned? I know I have. But, let's be positive. Don't be "down" on yourself about past perceived failures. Instead, be "up" on yourself for taking a specific step now toward improvement through the Pursuit of Excellence.

We all can and do grow stale. We become entrenched in what we are doing. It's part of being human. Stimulation is the reward and the fuel of new challenge, new direction, new purpose. The daily Pursuit of Excellence is generically unbeatable if we persevere. A wise man once said, "Of all things essential to success, only one thing is invincible, and that is perseverance. We can have all knowledge, wisdom, skill, persuasive ability, vast capital resources, even genius, but without perseverance toward a realistic goal, we are certain to fall short." Perseverance only involves *when* realistic goals will be achieved, not *whether* they will be achieved.

Maybe you know people who habitually do the

things I am talking about. None of my acquaintances, and of whom I have read, ever had simply "making money" as a primary goal. (Not that the profit motive is bad. It isn't.) They all did have the Pursuit of Excellence as the generic motivation for daily professional activity. These people succeed because they are constantly challenged, *by and within themselves.* They are never totally satisfied with performance, but are positive about their dissatisfaction and channel its energy toward better results. They are constantly renewed people who seem to have boundless energy and enthusiasm for whatever task is at hand. To people like this a crisis, of any kind in business, or any other seemingly insurmountable obstacle, is only a problem to be solved, not the "beginning of the end" or any of those negative things that only waste time and drain away energy.

Are we where we could and should be? Improvement begins with you and me. You fill in the blanks for your situation. *I will for mine.* I don't here mean to criticize or judge any person or company in commercial arboriculture, except in the most positive sense. I do mean to challenge and to motivate to a new perception of performance. I want to build toward excellence from wherever you and I are now.

I am determined to serve as President of NAA in the Pursuit of Excellence, and in that spirit, I extend that challenge to all of Commercial Arboriculture. The future belongs to those who prepare for it, and I want nothing less than one of excellence.

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