

S O P E   A G B E L U S I



*The Myth Of*

# Hard work

# The Author



## **ABOUT SOPE AGBELUSI.**

Sope Agbelusi is a highly sought-after executive coach, founder, international speaker, loving husband and father of two. He founded MindsetShift, a leadership development company dedicated to helping leaders, entrepreneurs, teams, and cultures navigate the complexities of today's rapidly changing business environment.

MindsetShift employs a forward-thinking approach that focuses on unlearning outdated behaviours, unlocking immense potential, and unleashing authentic leadership from within. This methodology addresses the professional obstacles leaders face and emphasises their personal growth, ensuring a comprehensive and impactful transformation.

He has worked with diverse clients, including Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 companies such as Google, Nike, Spotify, Philips, startups, government agencies, and non-profits, helping them achieve their goals and overcome challenges. His extensive leadership experience has seen him lead teams across four continents, generating over \$1 Billion in revenue. He is also dedicated to seeing more Black leaders in senior leadership positions and ensuring they do not have to navigate the corporate world alone like he had to.

# Why did I create this e-book?

In the current corporate climate, I truly believe that hard work no longer guarantees success. In fact, I believe that this outdated notion of thinking will result in you getting left behind whilst others advance in their careers.

This e-book was created to challenge your current definition of success and hard work, debunk a few corporate myths along the way (because why not), and finally, provide you with some of the tools that today's high-performing leaders are using to carve out their own lane, gain recognition, influence, and advance in their careers.



## HOW TO USE THIS E-BOOK

EACH CHAPTER WILL BE BROKEN INTO THE THREE AREAS TO MAKE IT AS EASY TO DIGEST AS POSSIBLE

### THE THEORY (EXPLANATION)

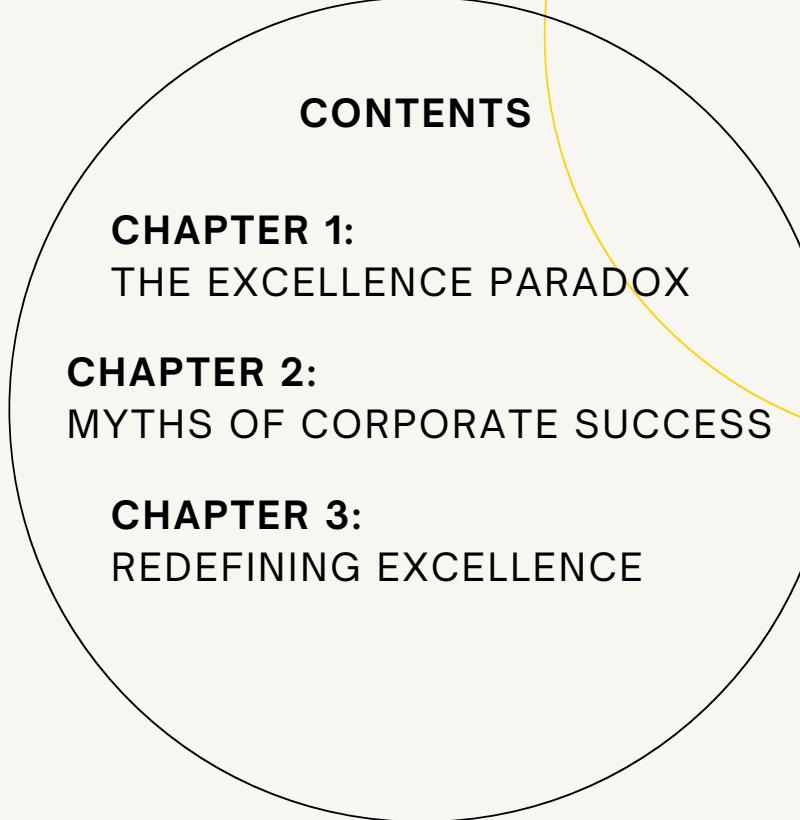
A mini blueprint that outlines the theory in an easy to digest manner.

### CASE STUDY (STORY)

These are my personal encounters that i've experienced as a leadership figure and later on as an executive coach to high performing leaders in the corporate world.

### REFLECTION (QUESTIONS)

These are questions to ask yourself that will help you apply your learnings from each chapter and help you begin to think about how you can make changes to the way you operate within the workplace.



THE MYTH OF HARD WORK

CHAPETR 01

# The Excellence Paradox



# What is the Excellence Paradox?

“Be Excellent” “Display excellence” Excellence is a widely embraced term in the corporate world and is frequently touted as the key to advancing your career. However, as we delve deeper into this concept, it will become apparent that despite “Excellence” intelligence and ambition of many professionals, they frequently discover themselves less productive and fulfilled than expected and often overlooked and unrecognised when it comes to being promoted.

People are attracted to excellence because it seems like it can lead to a better career and personal recognition. But, why do so many talented folks face obstacles that stop them from moving up in their careers? This question sets the stage for looking closely at what people usually think about excellence.



## The Paradox in the corporate setting

In corporate environments, excellence is usually marked by surpassing goals, continuous improvement, and outperforming peers. Corporate culture champions these ideals often encouraging employees to embody these principles. However, a closer inspection reveals a paradox—an inconsistency between the expectations established by the traditional view of excellence and the real experiences of employees. The constant push to outperform, coupled with relentless comparisons, sets the stage for an unsustainable pace. This, in turn, leads to stagnation and burnout, two elements that underpin the excellence paradox.

As stagnation arises, individuals despite their efforts, find their career growth stalling and burnout emerges as a consequence of the relentless pursuit of unattainable standards, eroding both professional and personal well-being.

# The illusion of effort and workplace realities

The paradox goes even further as people believe that working harder means they can control what happens. But, real office life involves things like favouritism, office politics, and factors that have nothing to do with how good you are at your job. This makes people feel let down, adding another layer to the complexity of the excellence paradox.



## A run in with the excellence paradox (*My Story*)

Meet my younger self, in my early days in the corporate world, I believed that my hard work and achievements would naturally pave the way for my career progression. I dedicated myself tirelessly to not only meeting but exceeding every target, confident that these accomplishments would secure my promotion. Alongside my primary duties, I undertook a significant side project that ultimately saved the company millions, this came with accolades and recognition that shot my confidence through the roof.

However, my confidence turned to despair during my end-of-year review. Despite my hard work and tangible contributions, I was told I wasn't ready for the next step, receiving vague feedback that left me feeling confused and no longer sure of my abilities. Meanwhile, a colleague with seemingly lesser achievements and experience was celebrating his promotion.

This experience was my first run in with the Excellence Paradox, a lesson that reshaped my understanding of success in the corporate landscape. It highlighted the complex dynamics of climbing the corporate ladder, particularly the importance of visibility, strategic networking, and the political nature of workplaces.

This realisation forced me to adopt a more thought out approach to my career, focusing not only on my output but also on how it was perceived and valued within the organisation. It was a pivotal moment that taught me the critical balance between delivering exceptional work and strategically navigating the corporate environment—a balance essential for anyone looking to thrive and advance in their career.



# What is your perception of excellence? *(5 Questions to ask yourself)*



**Before you answer these questions think about your personal experiences in the workplace and whether there have been occasions where your efforts have led to promised rewards or if you've had similar experiences where things didn't pan out the way you anticipated**

**Personal Definition of Excellence:** What does excellence mean to you in your work and life? Do you think about it in the usual work way, or does it include other things that make you feel successful and happy?

**Pressure and Expectations:** Can you remember a time when you felt a lot of pressure to do really well at work? Did this pressure come from your boss or the company, or did you put it on yourself? How did trying to meet these high standards affect how you felt mentally and physically?

**Achievements and Fulfilment:** Think about times when your work was seen as excellent. Did these achievements make you as happy or successful as you thought they would? Think about any differences between what you expected and what really happened.

**The Illusion of Control:** Have you ever thought that working harder would always lead to a certain result? Were there times when, even though you worked really hard, things didn't go as planned because of factors you couldn't control? How did this change how you see hard work and success?

**Redefining Excellence:** After thinking about the challenges with the usual idea of excellence, how would you define excellence for yourself now? What values, goals, and parts of your work and life would be important in this new definition? How might this change how you approach your job and personal growth?

## Tip:

### Reflect Honestly:

Take the time to reflect honestly on your experiences. Be open about both successes and challenges. Honest self-reflection will provide insights into your thoughts, feelings, and reactions in various situations related to excellence in the workplace.

THE MYTH OF HARD WORK

CHAPTER 02

# Myths Of Corporate Success



# What are the myths of corporate success?

At its core, “Corporate Myths” shape our expectations, drive behaviour and ultimately influence our definitions of success. In this chapter i’ll be exposing three common corporate myths of success (some you may already be familiar with). I’ll also be giving insight into the realities behind them, and guiding you towards a more nuanced understanding of corporate success.

Firstly what is a corporate myth?

## **Corporate Myth {Noun}**

*An ingrained belief or narrative within the corporate world that shapes expectations, influences behaviour, and contributes to the collective understanding of success.*

*Corporate myths often arise from shared cultural values, passed down through generations of professionals, impacting perceptions of hard work, meritocracy, and the correlation between effort and success. These myths may not necessarily align with the complex realities of the corporate landscape, often requiring individuals to navigate beyond conventional wisdom for genuine achievement and sustainable growth.*



## 3 Corporate myths of success

**1 Hardwork  
Guarantees  
Success**

**2 Meritocracy  
Rules**

**3 More Hours  
Means More  
Productivity**

# 1. Hard work Guarantees Success

The belief that success is the direct result of hard work is deeply ingrained in corporate culture. This myth suggests that if you put in the effort, success is guaranteed. However, the reality is far more complex.

**Reality Check:** While hard work is undeniably important, it is not the sole factor determining success. The corporate landscape is influenced by a myriad of factors, including networking, visibility, timing, and sometimes sheer luck. Hard work without strategic direction and the ability to navigate corporate dynamics often leads to burnout rather than advancement.

**Strategic Effort Over Sheer Hard Work:** Success in the corporate world requires more than just hard work; it requires smart work. This involves understanding the value of networking, the importance of being in the right place at the right time, recognizing opportunities, and leveraging your strengths. Strive for strategic effort that aligns with your goals and propels you forward.

# 2. Meritocracy Rules

The notion of meritocracy is appealing—the idea that the most talented and deserving individuals will rise to the top based solely on their merits. Unfortunately, this concept overlooks the structural inequalities and biases present in many corporate environments.

**The Complexity of Meritocracy:** While merit does play a role in advancement, numerous other factors can influence outcomes. These include unconscious biases, access to opportunities, mentorship, and sponsorship. Additionally, what is considered 'merit' can be subjective and influenced by corporate politics and personal relationships.

**Navigating the Real World:** Understanding the limitations of meritocracy is crucial. It's essential to recognise the value of building relationships, seeking mentors and sponsors, and being aware of the broader dynamics at play within your organisation. A strategic approach to career advancement involves a blend of merit, networking, and navigating the corporate landscape effectively.

# 3. More Hours Means More Productivity

The equation of long hours with high productivity and, by extension, success is a persistent myth. This belief drives many to work excessive hours in the hope of achieving recognition and advancement.

**The Productivity Paradox:** Research shows that beyond a certain point, productivity actually decreases with increased hours worked. Long hours can lead to burnout, decreased quality of work, and negative impacts on health and personal life.

**Quality Over Quantity:** Emphasising efficiency, prioritising tasks, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance are key to sustainable productivity and success. Organisations are increasingly recognising the value of flexibility, mental health, and the need for rest in fostering innovation and productivity. Strive for quality in your work, focus on impactful tasks, and ensure a balance that sustains your well-being and long-term success.

## Corporate myths in action (Sarah's Story)

Meet Sarah, several years ago, I had the privilege of coaching a mid-level manager named Sarah, who was a textbook example of excellence in her organisation. Sarah was known for her unwavering commitment to her work, consistently exceeding her performance targets and being the first to arrive and the last to leave the office. Her dedication was apparent to everyone, and she was the epitome of excellence by all traditional measures.

However, despite her hard work and undeniable contributions to the company, Sarah found herself repeatedly passed over for promotion. This puzzled her, as it did many of her colleagues. It was a situation that seemed to defy the very principles she, and indeed many of us, had been taught to uphold. According to the prevalent myth of excellence, her dedication and achievements should have naturally propelled her career forward. But the reality was starkly different.



In our coaching sessions, Sarah and I delved into the nuances of her situation. It became clear that while her performance was outstanding, she had focused almost exclusively on her direct outputs, neglecting the broader strategic aspects of her role and the importance of internal networking. Sarah had assumed that hard work alone was sufficient for advancement. This belief, deeply ingrained in the myth of excellence, had obscured her view of the larger corporate chessboard.

Together, we worked on expanding Sarah's perspective, moving beyond the narrow focus on individual performance metrics. We strategised on building her internal network, enhancing her visibility within the organisation, and aligning her efforts with the company's broader strategic goals. Sarah learned to advocate for herself and her achievements, understanding that excellence in the corporate world is not just about what you do but also about how you connect, communicate, and contribute to the larger organisational narrative.

The transformation was remarkable. Not only did Sarah's sense of fulfilment at work increase, but she also began to be recognised as a leader beyond her immediate responsibilities. Eventually, her newfound approach to excellence led to the promotion she had long deserved.

This anecdote is a powerful reminder that the myth of excellence, which suggests that hard work alone leads to success, is just that—a myth. True excellence in the corporate world is multidimensional, encompassing not just what we achieve but also how we engage, influence, and align our efforts with the organisation's broader goals. As we debunk this myth, we empower ourselves and others to navigate the corporate landscape more effectively and fulfil our true potential.

# Dispelling the myths of corporate success (5 Questions to ask yourself)



**These questions aim to prompt reflection and self-awareness regarding commonly held beliefs in the corporate world, in the hopes that they may lead to a few key realisations:**

**Thinking About Hard Work:** Remember a time when you thought working really hard would make you successful. Did it work the way you expected? Think about other things that might have affected the result, both good and bad.

**Understanding Meritocracy:** How do you see meritocracy, where people get ahead based on their skills, at your job? Can you think of times when someone didn't move up just because they were good at their job? How does knowing this change how you see doing well at work?

**Looking at Work Hours:** Think about how much you work. Have you noticed a point where working more hours doesn't make you get more done? How has this changed how you manage your time and work?

**Changing What Productivity Means:** What does being productive mean to you at work? After reading about it, how would you describe productivity now, thinking about more than just hours or tasks?

**Making Practical Changes:** Considering the myths we talked about, what can you do differently at work to be more successful? Think about ways to work smarter, not just harder, and how to use other things that help you succeed.

## Tip:

### Connect Personal Experiences:

Relate the questions to specific instances in your career. Connecting the questions to real-life examples will help you delve deeper into your thoughts and emotions. Consider both positive and challenging experiences to gain a comprehensive understanding.

THE MYTH OF HARD WORK

CHAPTER 03

# Redefining Excellence



# Is there an ongoing quest for success?

In the corporate world, the quest for excellence typically revolves around nailing performance metrics—sales numbers, client feedback, and completing projects. But, you know, that's just one part of the story. In this chapter I'll be expanding your understanding of excellence by briefly touching on creativity, emotional intelligence, personal growth and how they all play a role in success.

## Getting Creative

In today's fast-paced corporate jungle, being creative and innovative is gold. We're talking about fostering a culture that celebrates those who think outside the box, suggest fresh solutions, and are bold enough to take smart risks.

*For example: Imagine you're part of a marketing team tasked with launching a new product. Instead of sticking to traditional methods, a team member suggests leveraging social media influencers to create buzz. This approach could potentially reach a wider audience and generate more excitement for the product.*



## Feeling It Out

Ever heard of emotional intelligence? It's like having a superpower to understand, use, and handle emotions in a positive way. From nailing effective communication to empathising with colleagues, this skill boosts leadership, team vibes, and customer relations.

*For example: Picture a scenario where a project deadline is approaching, and tensions are high. A team member, with high emotional intelligence, notices the stress among colleagues. Instead of pushing harder, they suggest a brief team huddle to address concerns and redistribute tasks more efficiently. By understanding and positively handling the emotional dynamics within the team, this individual not only boosts team morale but also ensures effective communication and collaboration, enhancing overall project success.*

## Seeing the Whole Picture

By embracing creativity, innovation, and emotional intelligence, we're taking a 360-degree view of excellence. It's not just about hitting targets but appreciating the unique contributions each person brings to the table.

*For example: In a project team, there's a push to meet tight deadlines. Embracing a 360-degree view of excellence means recognising that it's not just about completing tasks but also appreciating the diverse skills each team member brings. A creative solution proposed by one team member may not align with traditional methods, but acknowledging and incorporating these unique contributions can lead to a more innovative and successful project outcome.*



## Corporate Checklists

Now, corporate excellence often sticks to the script—conformity, competitiveness, and ticking off achievements. Sure, these play a role in organisational success, but they might not always sync with your personal growth goals.

*For example: A company sets strict performance metrics and checklists for employees to adhere to, focusing on conformity and competitiveness. However, an employee realises that these corporate expectations may not fully align with their personal growth goals, which include pursuing more innovative projects and expanding their skill set. Striking a balance involves communicating with supervisors to explore opportunities that align both corporate expectations and personal aspirations, fostering a workplace culture that values diverse forms of success.*

## Personal Evolution

Personal excellence is a journey of self-discovery and improvement. Think values, goals, and well-being. It covers everything from bouncing back from setbacks to staying curious and diving into your passions.

*For Example: A professional encounters a setback in their career, missing out on a promotion. Instead of dwelling on the disappointment, they embark on a journey of personal excellence. They reflect on their values, set new goals, and prioritise well-being. This involves attending skill development workshops, staying curious about industry trends, and diving into personal passions, ultimately leading to a more fulfilling and well-rounded professional life.*

### **Striking Harmony**

Navigating between personal excellence and corporate expectations is like finding the sweet spot. It's about aligning your values with your job, seeking growth opportunities that benefit both you and the company, and pushing for a culture that celebrates success in all its diverse forms.

*For example: An employee seeks harmony between personal excellence and corporate expectations by aligning their values with their job responsibilities. They actively pursue growth opportunities that not only benefit their professional development but also contribute to the company's success. In pushing for a culture that celebrates success in diverse forms, they initiate team-building activities that recognise and appreciate different strengths within the team, fostering a collaborative and supportive work environment.*

# What does success really mean? (Michael's Story)

Meet Michael, I had the opportunity to work with Michael, a high-ranking executive at a top tech firm, and his story sheds light on the often misunderstood paths to corporate success. When Michael joined the company, he epitomised the corporate dream—ambitious, dedicated, and relentlessly focused on surpassing targets. His career trajectory was impressive, marked by swift promotions and recognition.

However, as Michael approached what he believed was the pinnacle of success, a profound unease set in. Despite his achievements, he felt a noticeable void, questioning the true meaning of success. This led to our coaching sessions, where we explored the heart of his discontent.



Our conversations uncovered a unique perspective on the myth of corporate success. Michael had pursued a version defined by external benchmarks and societal recognition, neglecting his intrinsic values and personal fulfillment. His relentless pursuit had brought professional excellence but left him personally unfulfilled—a clear example of the myth that equates corporate success with personal happiness.

Together, we set out to redefine success on Michael's terms, integrating his personal values, passions, and sense of purpose into his professional life. This shift was transformative. Michael started seeking roles and projects not just for prestige or career advancement but for their alignment with his personal ethos and the impact he could make.

# Redefining excellence on your terms (5 Questions to ask yourself)



***Redefining excellence requires a shift away from purely performance-based metrics towards a more inclusive approach that values creativity, innovation, emotional intelligence, and personal growth. The aim of these questions are to help you expand your definition of excellence.***

How do you define excellence in your own life and career? Does this definition align more closely with personal growth or corporate expectations?

Can you recall a situation where your creativity or innovation led to a positive outcome at work? How was this achievement recognised or rewarded by your organisation?

Reflect on your emotional intelligence skills. How have these skills impacted your professional relationships and success?

Think about the last time you took a risk at work. What was the outcome, and how did it contribute to your personal or professional growth?

How can you better align your personal values and goals with your professional role and responsibilities? What steps can you take to advocate for a broader definition of excellence within your organisation?

## Tip:

### **Include Others:**

When redefining excellence for yourself, involve people you trust in the discussion. Get their input on what they consider important in defining success and fulfilment. Collaborative discussions can lead to a more comprehensive and aligned definition of success.

CONCLUSION

# Learnings & Actions



# Learnings & Actions

As we wrap up, let's take a moment to look back at the journey we've been on together. We dismantled those stubborn myths that often steer our approach to corporate success, dove into the complexities of excellence beyond the usual metrics, and championed a holistic view of professional achievement that values creativity, innovation, emotional intelligence, and personal growth. This exploration isn't just an intellectual exercise; it's a nudge to revamp and redefine your definition of success.

For those of you nodding along and finding gems in these pages, your journey doesn't stop here. The principles we've unpacked are merely the starting point of your adventure. If you're interested in going a step further and learning how to put these concepts to work in a structured, impactful way, our **Chess Not Checkers** programme will be the next step in your evolution as a leader and professional.



The **Chess Not Checkers** programme is tailor-made for ambitious leaders aiming not just to navigate but to excel in the corporate world, securing recognition, influence, and career growth in under a year. Across eight thorough modules, the program spills the beans on frameworks and strategies that have propelled many professionals to new pinnacles of success.

# What this Programmes offers:

## MODULE 1: Mindset Shift

Completely shift the lens through which you view your challenges and opportunities. Adopt a mindset that positions you for long-term success.

## MODULE 2: Think Strategically

Master the art of foreseeing moves in the corporate landscape, stay steps ahead of your competition and make calculated decisions that matter.

## MODULE 3: Become a Brand & Network Expert

Craft a powerful personal brand to build and leverage relationships for mutual success. Position yourself as a company asset, utilising your network to open new doors.

## MODULE 4: Lead with Influence

Cultivate the skills to inspire and lead teams with confidence, empathy, and vision. Learn to easily navigate interpersonal dynamics and become a leader people trust and respect.

## MODULE 5: Drive Innovation

Tap into the creative to drive innovation within your team and organisation. Set new benchmarks and establish yourself as a forward-thinking leader.

## MODULE 6: Progress with Intention

Uncover techniques to amplify your career trajectory and communicate your value. Ensure efforts are recognised & rewarded by those who matter most.

# Start your journey **Today**

This is the framework aspiring leaders are using to gain recognition, influence and career advancement in less than 12 months



This program isn't just about quick wins; it's about instilling a mindset and skill set that will serve you throughout your career. **Chess Not Checkers** is for those ready to move beyond conventional success metrics and embrace a leadership style that's dynamic, influential, and profoundly fulfilling.

**SCAN ME**

