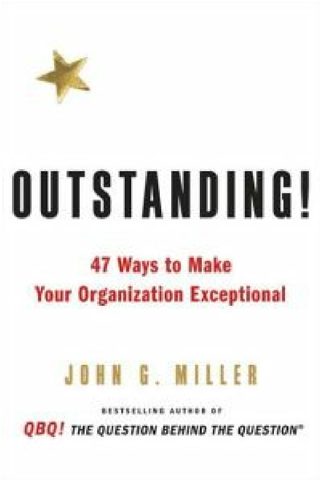

Book Outstanding!

47 Ways to Make Your Organization Exceptional

John G. Miller
Putnam's, 2010

Recommendation

John G. Miller always kept his eyes and ears open as he consulted with many *Fortune* 500 companies over the years. In the process, he became a perceptive student of business. Now Miller has assembled (and sometimes perhaps slightly oversimplified) 47 of the best approaches, practices and techniques he saw as a consumer or as a consultant when he observed superior organizations. *BooksInShort* finds that this engaging book does a good job of explicating each of these valuable concepts.

Take-Aways

- To make your firm outstanding, implement as many of the best practices of great companies as you can.
- These practices include making "fast" your organizational watchword. Be nimble; stay on your toes.
- Plan specific actions, deadlines and follow-up procedures.
- Make sure your employees fully understand your firm's mission and purpose. Good service often comes down to one person who cares.
- Outstanding organizations depend on employees who feel accountable.
- Consumers love such companies and go out of their way to buy from them.
- Consumers hate to buy from organizations that treat them in a cavalier manner.
- Humility is an attractive quality for organizations and their executives.
- Businesspeople often fail to communicate clearly; they tend to speak in code. Don't do that.
- Make sure your customers never regret doing business with you.

Summary

How to Become Outstanding

Personnel at many medical facilities see stroke victims as difficult to treat because people who have had a stroke often lack mobility, endurance and strength. But the staff members at Utah's Ashley Regional Medical Center work closely with such patients to encourage them. One nurse went to a patient's home to bring back some essentials, including her hairdryer and extra clothing. She helped the patient do craftwork and added brightly colored accessories to the hospital room. This made the stroke sufferer feel special and welcome.

> "Outstanding organizations have a tremendous sense of urgency. People get things done – quickly."

One evening just after closing time, All American Quick Lube received a call from a woman who noticed fluid leaking from under her vehicle. Although the shop was shut, the man who answered the phone told her to drive her car to the shop anyway. Mechanics found that her engine hose was cracked and ordered a replacement. The woman then realized that she left her purse at home. The shopkeeper told her not to worry, and gave her $20 and the keys to one of the garage's vehicles. He told her to come back the next day to settle the bill.

> "For most people in an outstanding organization, it's not so much about the future, but the present."

A Hilton hotel guest left the charger for his cellphone at home. He asked the front desk for help. Staff members could not find a compatible charger in the lost and found bin, so they went to the basement and searched until they found the right charger. Then they fully charged the guest's cellphone. He offered a tip, but they refused, asserting that it had been a pleasure to serve him.

> "Our passion and belief...propel us forward and help us stand out from the rest."

Such outstanding organizations have many special qualities, personified by employees who extend themselves for others: Dawn, a nurse at Ashley; Jason, the owner of Quick Lube and Angela, one of the helpful Hilton staffers. Excellent organizations have accountable employees as well as good customer service, products and practices. Such companies stress personal responsibility and earn their customers' high regard. In contrast, some firms never go out of their way for their customers. When these companies don't measure up, their attitude seems to be, "Sorry, that's the best we can do." Unsurprisingly, customers stop buying from such firms.

> "Personal accountability underlies the whole concept of the outstanding organization."

Don't let this happen to your firm. Make your business outstanding by emulating the best practices of superior organizations. To make these companies' ideas pay off for your firm, ask three important questions: "What specific action will I take to apply this idea?" "When will I do it?" and "Who will I ask to follow up with me to ensure I have done it?" Apply these questions – and the appropriate answers – to each idea.

"Be Fast"

Wendy's uses a digital clock to time how long it takes to serve drive-up customers. The clock resets for each customer. Managers check results every three hours. As one supervisor put it, "We need to be fast, you know!" The "be fast" principle does not apply only to fast-food restaurants. All organizations should have speed as a primary goal. The most outstanding organizations do their best to do everything quickly: They cut back on meetings, they don't let committees or red tape create delays, and they are organized to react immediately to new market conditions.

> "Whenever a customer is absolutely delighted, it's because someone did something for them that they didn't have to."

Unfortunately, many organizations do exactly the opposite. They are sclerotic. They take forever to make decisions, often coming to a conclusion too late to exploit opportunities. Many times, they create "buying committees" that represent, for example, $250,000 in aggregate salaries to make decisions worth $50,000. That is dumb math. Of course, companies must be thoughtful and considerate; they should not make rash decisions. In today's business world, where everything occurs at lightning speed, work hard to "make good decisions faster."

"Do What You Promise"

Everyone – from bosses to employees – makes or breaks their individual reputations based on whether they do what they say they will. If you set a meeting for 1 pm, start on time. If you promise something, deliver it so you establish your credibility and people learn that they can count on you. Organizations constantly tout teamwork and collaboration, but teams cannot collaborate unless their members can count on each other. Indeed, organizations cannot function without individual, personal accountability. Make sure your employees assume responsibility for their actions and their promises.

"Be Humble"

The CIO at a major health care organization sent a memo to the members of the firm's large technology group saying that he was changing the vendor who supplied cakes for employee birthday celebrations. In his memo, he treated the subject lightly, sarcastically calling the switch a "drastic cost-cutting measure." The CIO thought he was being funny, but instead of eliciting chuckles from his staff, he irritated them. They didn't like an executive making fun of their tradition. When the CIO learned that his memo had caused a furor, he immediately sent another note to his tech team. He apologized and acknowledged that he had made a mistake with his earlier message. In a remarkable display of humility – the cornerstone of strong leadership – the CIO said that he sometimes did not communicate well or demonstrate good judgment. How important is humility for executives? Russ Gardia, Purdue Pharma's VP of sales and marketing, describes the "three characteristics of an 'effective leader'" as "humility, humility and humility."

"Keep the Mission Top of Mind"

Many organizations fail to communicate their primary purpose to their employees. This is a big mistake. Employees need to understand the specific mission of their company because, "purpose powers passion." When employees know their pivotal goals – not just the "whats" but also the "whys" – they feel inspired and become more enthusiastic about what they do and the contributions they can make. To facilitate top performance, executives and workers should communicate constantly about the organization's mission. Your employees should always be able to answer the question, "Why do we exist?" and to answer it quickly.

"Don't Speak in Code"

Too many businesspeople use imprecise, inelegant jargon in their conversations with each other. Some examples: helping someone "separate" from the organization (that is, get fired), "downsizing" and "right-sizing" (eliminating jobs on a wholesale basis), seizing the "opportunity" (dealing with problems) and "fulfilling their social responsibility" (volunteering to do community work). Another example: A politician who made a dumb comment and had to apologize said, "I could have calibrated those words differently," instead of simply saying, "I'm sorry." Such stilted language works against honest, straightforward communication. It is mealymouthed. It is not authentic. It makes people cynical. Don't use it.

"Stand Behind Your Stuff"

Author John G. Miller and his wife, Karen, bought a table that had to be assembled at home. They removed the furniture's separate components from the box and began to put them together. After getting most of the job done, Miller found that one of the table's eight legs was an incorrect fit – the holes did not align. He called the company, assuming that its staff would deliver the correct piece quickly so he could finish building the table. Instead, the salesperson he dealt with told him to "pack it up and bring it back." Miller asked if the store could have someone deliver the right part instead. "No," the salesperson replied dismissively. Later, Miller learned that the store's written policy actually says that the consumer must "return any imperfect or incorrect product for exchange," even a large piece of furniture.

> "Whenever a new CEO is hired, we tell him or her, 'Don't do anything for the first three months other than shut your mouth, open your ears and go around listening'." (Bernie Marcus, founder, Home Depot)

For a contrasting example of how companies should support their products, consider consumer Jason Ragan, who bought a used Timex watch from a web reseller. After a few months, he dropped the watch and cracked its plastic casing. The watch's GPS feature stopped working. Ragan sent the watch to Timex for repair. It was out of warranty, and he did not have proof of purchase, but Timex still helped him. When Ragan opened the return package from Timex, he found that the company had replaced the used, broken watch with a new one worth $300. Timex did not charge a replacement cost. It sent a bill for the shipping only, with a note apologizing that its technicians could not fix the old watch. Which company would you prefer to deal with in the future? Outstanding companies never make their customers feel bad about buying from them.

"Skip the Vision Thing"

Being visionary is not always that visionary. Some reasons why: Organizational leaders seldom spell out exactly what they mean by the terms "vision," "mission," "core values," and so on. People easily confuse these labels, assuming they all refer to the same thing. Organizations need to use explicit, exact language. Mission is the organization's purpose. Vision is how the organization sees itself in the future. The idea of a vision often seems to be little more than an item to check off on the "management to-do list." Often, no one takes it seriously. Further, the vision seems to have little relevance to employees' daily work. Plus, the term "vision" is a fiction; no one can see accurately into the future. Certainly, a place exists for a genuine vision in any organization, but "keep it in perspective" and focus on achieving all you can right now, doing the best you can in the present.

"Try! Risk! Grow!"

Does your organization encourage fresh ideas? Is it willing to try new things? Are you? If you are not willing to take a chance – even if you fail – you cannot accomplish anything worthwhile. Life is a gamble for organizations, as it is for people. Outstanding companies take risks and try new things to get ahead, to beat the competition and to stake out new leadership positions in their industries. Do they always win these gambles? Of course not. But they always learn from their mistakes and grow accordingly.

"Fire Customers! (If Necessary)"

A very famous coffee house company has good and bad customers. One of the worst was a man who routinely ordered a "Venti Americano," a concoction made of water and four shots of espresso. He always asked his server to replace the water with soy milk. As coffee aficionados know, this turns the drink into a latté, which includes only two espresso shots. So the customer was using his little subterfuge to "get the soy milk and an extra two shots of espresso free." Additionally, he often was mean to the people who waited on him. At the drop of a hat, he would argue with staff members at different store locations. Once the district manager learned about this customer, she sent an email to each of her stores, instructing them to stop serving him. She supplied a detailed description. The district manager acted appropriately. By barring this abusive customer, she stood up for her employees, showing that she and the company valued them.

"Keep Entitlement at Bay"

In outstanding organizations, employees work hard. They take care of business and do not shirk their responsibilities. This is not always true in ordinary or inferior companies, where employees have a basic selfish philosophy that they deserve to have everything just handed to them. A manager once gave each of his staffers a copy of a book he believed would help them develop professionally. One employee offered a prime example of the entitlement mentality when he asked, "If I read this book at home on my own time, will I get paid for that hour?"

> "When the bullets are flying, don't call a meeting. Don't stand around and contemplate. Do something!"

In another case, executives shut down an industrial complex for five hours during a workday due to a life-threatening mechanical situation. They did not want to endanger their workers' safety. Days later an employee filed a request for payment "for the lunch hour he missed." Organizations have a hard time becoming outstanding if they have such selfish employees on their payrolls.

"Never Forget Who Pays the Bills"

One Saturday, Miller arrived at a hair salon just before it opened at 9 am. He wanted to beat the rush and get a haircut. At 8:58 am, a woman – who turned out to be the manager – arrived at the shop, unlocked the door, opened it a bit and squeezed through the gap. Miller tried to enter in her wake. She turned to him, said, "We're not open yet," shut the door in his face and locked it. What if, instead, she had reacted in a friendly, inviting manner? "Good morning, sir," he imagined that she could have said. "You've come to fork over some hard-earned cash so that my colleagues and I can pay our bills, put food on our tables and send our children to college." The fact is that customers pay the tab. Outstanding organizations treat them as the world's most important people.

About the Author

John G. Miller is the founder of QBQ, Inc., a consultancy focused on teaching personal accountability. He also wrote *QBQ! The Question Behind the Question* and *Flipping the Switch.*
