

Outstanding!

47 Ways to Make Your Organization Exceptional

This resource provides simple strategies to improve customer service and more

By Joy M. Shoemaker

We have a lot to read. We research, review vendor contracts, proofread drafts, skim news sources, and much more. When asked to keep current on management and marketing literature, curling up with the latest tome on improving the workplace is probably not at the top of most of our to-do lists.

Luckily, John G. Miller provides quick and practical advice in *Outstanding! 47 Ways to Make Your Organization Exceptional*. Miller fits 47 rules to work by into just 197 pages, an average of four pages per rule. He successfully distills each strategy to its most basic description. Using humor and short anecdotes in every chapter, *Outstanding!* is a quick read—easy to fit into our already hectic schedules.

Outside the “Library Marketing for Managers” Box

Given such a short text, there are many things this book is not. Miller makes it clear that this book is not about branding or large-scale concepts but rather focuses on everyday ideas. He offers straightforward rules we can follow every moment of the day to make a difference in our organizations.

The author is not a librarian and does not write for librarians in particular, which is actually refreshing. Miller regularly works with large companies, focusing on personal accountability to improve internal operations. He doesn't tiptoe around problems or bother with a history of management styles or theories of customer expectations.

This book is also not just for managers. The text is aimed at everyone, top to bottom, because, as Miller reminds us, an organization is made up of individuals. One chapter is titled “Coach, Moment to Moment”; the next, “Be Coachable.” You can pick and choose chapters or read the book from cover to cover. The book does not use any jargon—something he advises against generally in chapter 11, “Don't Speak in Code”—making this an easy read for everyone, whether seated at the front desk or in the back offices.

Storytelling

Each chapter discusses one rule and includes three parts: a story from everyday life, application to the work environment, and at least one takeaway rule. Miller uses relatable examples from everyday situations. Interactions at the grocery store, calls to a customer service line, and attempts to return retail items are some examples. In fact, he has so many stories, you almost wonder if they could all be true. In “Put Performance Before Titles” (chapter 45), you can almost imagine George Clooney playing the heroic airline pilot in the movie version of Miller's story on humility and selflessness. If you don't care for the stories, however, you don't need to read far to get the lesson of each chapter.

Accompanying these stories, Miller offers a number of obvious rules, but he knows they are obvious. In “Try! Risk! Grow!” (chapter 47), Miller starts with a story about his daughter learning the balance beam as part of gymnastics and offers this takeaway: “There's a real danger in any organization that doesn't promote risk-taking: Nothing changes.” We know change and adaptability are necessary parts of our work. Several times, Miller admits that his rules may be self-evident. Yet these are rules worth repeating. Even basic principles can get lost as we strive to put out fires and meet looming deadlines in real life. The advantage in Miller's approach is that he doesn't bog down his message with unnecessary explanation.

The Importance of Respect

While the book does not focus solely on public relations, customer service, or marketing, a fair number of chapters address earning repeat business by treating customers and colleagues with the respect they deserve. Just browsing the table of contents, the chapter titles tell you the author isn't hiding the ball. “Do What You Promise” (chapter 15) seems simple enough. “Let Every Player Count” (chapter 28) provides a nice anecdote on feeling personally invested in our jobs. “Never Forget Who Pays the Bills” (chapter 24) gives us a handy

sound bite to aspire to: “Service is simply doing for others that which we don't have to do.” If all this sounds a little too conciliatory, there is still this advice: “Fire Customers! (If Necessary)” (chapter 33). Respect works both ways.

One chapter that strongly resonated with me is titled “Speak Well: Make the Right Impression” (chapter 29). Personal accountability is highlighted here: “The people with whom [customers] interact are the organization.” Sometimes basic but forgotten rules are illuminating. This rule was for me.

Let me take a note from Miller himself by telling a story. I recently went to my local public library to get a library card. The woman at the counter was entirely unpleasant and condescending. I was so steamed by how she treated me that I almost left without obtaining a borrowing card. If I had, I probably would not have returned. But I held my tongue and waited as she finished what she needed to say in the most unfriendly tone. What I really wanted to tell her was that I am a librarian, too, and I think it is horrible she treats patrons this way. I now find myself weary of dealing with anyone at that library—that one experience tainted the entire organization for me. The sad thing is that I don't think my experience is unique. Have you been to a library lately where the person at the front service counter is like a character from “High Fidelity”? I was reminded that we need to make sure some public relations strategies are working on a small scale, as individuals, not as managers creating burdensome policies or meaningless mission statements (see chapters 1 and 3, respectively).

Throughout his book, Miller emphasizes that when customers are respected, they feel good about an organization and will provide repeat business. While we grapple with at least an outside perception that libraries need to change drastically to remain relevant, returning customers or patrons are vital. If you do your job, they will come back.

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Share with your Library

Miller is an adequate storyteller with practical advice. Any brief, digestible chapter could provide a nice starting point to spark discussion at your next department meeting. If you really like Miller's style, the book could extend over weekly department meetings for nearly a year.

A key feature of this book is that it addresses the work environment on a personal level. Strategies can be successfully adopted by one person, a department, or the whole organization. Miller starts with the premise that outstanding organizations are so because each individual who works there is outstanding. In plain language and with

relatable stories, he can help anyone pick up an idea or two on how to get one step closer to that ideal. ■

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