

Achieving Pre-eminence: The Seven Pillars

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**The traits that give businesses staying power
and drive them to excellence every day.**



How does an organization become pre-eminent, and what does the word itself really mean?

Let's begin with the latter: What is the definition of pre-eminence? From studying some of the best corporate brands—from Apple to Google to Chick-fil-A—I define pre-eminence as extraordinary excellence that, once reached and sustained, creates a competitive advantage.

The key part is the sustaining. Having the staying power and unflinching commitment to get better every single day is no easy feat. This focus and discipline separate your business from the pack.

You know you have become pre-eminent when others aspire to achieve what you have sustained. Other organizations genuinely want to learn from you and “hear how you did it and continue to do so.” They are fascinated, spongelike, eagerly leaning in to soak up your wisdom.

There are seven distinct pillars that pre-eminent organizations sustain. These observations are based on working with some exceptional brands over the years, keenly observing how they maintain a degree of excellence head and shoulders above the rest.

1. Trust

Stephen Covey is spot on. Nothing moves faster than the speed of trust. Trust is the most important five-letter word in all of business. It is a function of character and competency. You need both to establish trust. The best brands are trusted, and their values keep them accountable. It is their center of gravity, the star they steer by.

Fred Smith of FedEx said this about trust: “At the end of the day, we are essentially selling trust.” I could not agree more.

2. Relationship building

It is the complete opposite of networking. Relationship

building—“R&B music” is what we call it—is about investing in people. Networking is about meeting people. A big difference. Networking is a task while relationship building is a commitment. It's more long term than short term, more quality of relationships than quantity. Networking can be superficial, while relationship building is always about professional and personal sincerity.

Pre-eminent companies are real on the relationship front and have excellent relational discernment. They have an emotional intelligence that they use naturally. They trust their intuition, factor in their observations, and control their emotions to make a timely decision and take a timely step.

3. Marketing communications

Every organization has a brand bank account, whether they know it or not. Pre-eminent companies understand the need to make marketing deposits daily into their

“bank.” They see their brand as a promise kept. They relentlessly keep the promise and polish their brand, knowing that for brands, you either polish or tarnish them. These are the two diametrically opposed options each day. They do the former intentionally and strategically.

They also understand that part of the brand ambassadors’ role is telling stories clearly and effectively to demonstrate brand differentiation. They create a retelling ripple effect through those who hear the stories and, in turn, tell these memorable stories to others.

4. Assessment

This pillar is key; it is often overlooked, preventing reputational growth for many companies. Pre-eminent organizations are always assessing. They are specifically asking these types of questions about their business:

- What do we need to anticipate?
- What is the commonsense thing to do?
- What do we need to fix?
- What do we need to improve?
- What is the right thing to do?
- How can we innovate?
- Why do we matter? Why are we in business?
- How can we inspire?
- How are we personally growing as leaders?
- How can we give back and where?

By staying focused on these questions, pre-eminent companies intentionally maintain their commitment to sustaining their extraordinary excellence and long-term competitive advantage.

5. Cultural torch of servant leadership

A healthy culture can’t be overemphasized. Drucker was right: Culture eats strategy for breakfast every morning. I’ll add lunch and dinner to this meal analogy.

Companies that have a competitive advantage see culture as a torch that shines externally and incandescently for their organization. This torch is bright and attractive. People want to be around it. When you combine this cultural torch with servant leadership, it really illuminates. Leaders who are true servants have a mindset that no task is too small or too big for them. They can make the big speech and on the same day, carry boxes in the production room. Such leading by example helps create a greenhouse of learning inside the company where ideas and people constantly flourish. It leads to high productivity, high morale, and low turnover, as Pat Lencioni writes in his superb new book, *The Advantage*.

6. Fanatical focus

This focus provides clarity—clarity of judgment and purpose. Pre-eminent companies do not hesitate to say no to opportunities that just don’t make good sense. And they are not distracted by their success. The focus and aim for excellence never waver. Nothing is taken for granted, as they remain humble and hungry, gracious and ambitious. These organizations strive, stretch, strain, and, in persistent fashion, succeed.

“Opportunity does not equal obligation” is a mindset they have. They are laserlike in the areas that deliver results for their customers and for their bottom line. All in all, narrow and deep is their focus—not wide and shallow. They also understand the difference between

“hard-easy” and “easy-hard.” In other words, they make hard decisions when they have to make them—knowing that will make things easier over time—instead of a take-it-easy approach that only makes things harder over time.

Also, pre-eminent organizations place tremendous focus on teams, with awareness that a healthy organization is about everyone, not just someone. They have a real focus on building a team of teams and creating a sense of esprit de corps that makes a difference in the growth of teams and growth of the business as a whole.

7. Remarkable resiliency

Toughness. Resolve. Persistence. Endurance. Pre-eminent companies have all these traits and then some. They eschew the path of least resistance. They swim upstream. They are able to withstand the peaks and valleys of the marketplace and endure the challenging headwinds around them, eventually turning these strong winds of adversity into helpful tailwinds. This commitment reflects immense stamina, like that of an Olympic marathon runner, and leads them to develop durability. A durable brand goes together with a durable competitive advantage in the marketplace.

I have dedicated myself to studying the concept of pre-eminence over the past decade, and these are the pillars I have observed through countless interactions with brands and the people who make them what they are. Simple, yes, but not to be underestimated. And not to be taken lightly. Easier said than done, too. Here’s to getting it done. Strength for the journey.

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