



Raising the Bar: Setting Expectations for Excellence

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When I was in high school, I was a member of the track team and most specifically, a high jumper. I don't remember now how I became interested in this, or why, but there I was doing the Fosbury Flop with the other teenage athletes. Back then, I was pretty good at it and even won the regional medal my junior year to advance to the state competition. It was very exciting!

When I arrived near the pit on the day of the big event, I was dwarfed by my Amazonian contenders. I didn't look much like a high jumper, and if you've seen me in person, I probably look less like a high jumper now! Most of the other girls were close to six feet tall and I'm 5' 6" and don't have particularly long legs. Click here just for fun:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TADJh_DZOfE&feature=fvw

When I would practice, I'd start with a warm-up height—something I knew I could clear easily to get my muscles

warmed up and get the feel for the form, which involved running on a curve, pivoting, twisting, lifting and finally, that up-and-over part that felt just like flying for a split second, before landing in the foam pit. I'd challenge myself by raising the bar, inch by inch, to push myself higher and higher. Some of my success was determined by skill and talent; some by confidence. We called it "getting psyched up." Sometimes I could clear the bar by several inches, only to catch the edge of the bar with my heel, thus not making the jump. Other times, I might not clear a height I'd jumped many times before. And on rare occasions, after all the warm-ups and practice jumps, we'd set the bar higher than ever before, and I'd sail over effortlessly, surprising everyone, but especially myself.

"Raising the bar" has become part of the vernacular for both business and life and synonymous with continuing to push farther and set goals that you've not yet attained. Organizations, with their eyes on gaining a competitive edge, continually ask themselves, "How can we raise the bar?" Jim Collins, in *Built to Last*, suggested companies set Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAGs) to encourage strategic vision.

What does it mean to Raise the Bar for you?

1. Identify, as part of your visioning process, something that you are not absolutely sure you can pull off.
2. If there were no obstacles, and all the conditions were favorable, where would you lead your team or organization?
3. What sort of goal or accomplishment sits squarely between “easy” and seemingly “outrageous”?

Simple ways to Raise the Bar:

1. Specificity: Sometimes (dare I say often times?) Raising the Bar is supremely affected by increasing specificity. If you find you are mired in mediocrity, look around: what’s going on in the surrounding environment to support high levels of specificity? By that I mean, when you make requests, identify new goals or projects, deal with corrections or readjustments, how specific are you? When someone really knows what excellence looks like (because you’ve given them enough detail so it’s visible) chances are much greater that they’ll be able to rise to the level of expectation that you’ve set for them.
2. Variety: What are the options or ranges for excellence? If there’s only one way to win, or one way to be excellent, you diminish chances for success and innovation. Sometimes, Raising the Bar is about identifying the what but not necessarily the how, which allows people to utilize their talents, skills and creativity and often to even go beyond what you initially had imagined. Make room for this possibility to happen by identifying a variety of ways to Raise the Bar.
3. Accountability: You need to build accountabilities into Raising the Bar. This element is sometimes under-

emphasized because leaders assume that once they’ve set the bar, people will just do it. Or, they assume they know how. Creating some accountabilities, including identifying timeframes and other structural elements help to ensure that your Raising the Bar efforts are more efficient. Creating accountabilities, especially in the areas of managing performance, is especially critical because individual performance directly impacts organizational performance.

4. Learning: An essential element of Raising the Bar in high jumping involved lots of practice and frankly, lots of failure. Sometimes leaders and organizations as a whole underestimate the importance that practice and mistake-making play in elevating success. Learning, by definition, cannot happen without practice and mistake-making. When you Raise the Bar, if you neglect to build this in, and instead you create a high-risk scenario where someone is likely to fail, the cost can be devastating. Like other activities, muscle memory is important in business scenarios, too. (Maybe here we should call this mind muscle memory!) When someone has developed skills through the process of learning, they are much more likely to perform as desired when they face the big event, presentation or situation.

You can, and should, Raise the Bar for your team, your employees and your organization. Purposeful growth is less likely to happen without it, so why not increase your effectiveness for the potential of success? You should also Raise the Bar for yourself, stretching, taking risks and being bold. Robert Browning, a classic Victorian poet reminds us: “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” We have been raising the bar before we even “raised the bar!”