

## Benchmark Against the Best

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My high school tennis coach used to occasionally pair us against better players to help us improve. Though I hated to lose, it was a good opportunity to bring more clarity to my own flaws (I had a lot and still do) and force me to push harder just to stay in the game. Sometimes I'd compete better than what I'd expected, which made me really wonder what I was capable of. I'm sure many of you have personal experiences like this, and that's probably why a recent educational keynote had such an impact on me and the rest of the audience.

I attended this talk at the annual meeting of the industrial buying group, NetPlus Alliance, where the speaker — Rick Wallace from Next Level Coaching — outlined his assessment of the lies we tell ourselves that ultimately hold our businesses back.

As he addressed the internal stumbling blocks many companies face, several of these lies turned out to be excuses that I've seen time and again — and I bet I'm not alone. Do any of these ring a bell?:

- "We're too busy to be more productive."
- "We'd have more sales if we had more salespeople."
- "We can't afford the best talent out there."

Ultimately, said Wallace, many businesses suffer from "self-limiting beliefs." If we try to outdo our KPIs by being just a little bit better than we were last year, we miss an opportunity to really focus on significant process and business improvement. This is why we need to benchmark ourselves against the best in the business.

Benchmarking against the best creates courage, said Wallace. This is not to say

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there isn't a place for small measurable goals — quite the opposite, in fact. Creating big, long-term strategic targets means you must flesh out the stepping stones and use transparent communication to gain positive buy-in from your employees. It means you may need to get real with them about your profits, so they can understand that working more effectively isn't just lining the pockets of investors; it's allowing for further internal investment, creating new jobs, or enabling bigger and better things. And once you aim high, you need the clarity of purpose, focus, and execution to all be in alignment in order to succeed.

Thinking about these points in a manufacturing context, what really struck a chord with me was this idea of learning from the best. Based on my experience visiting manufacturers over the years, I think it would be rare to find one who actually knew without a doubt they were best in class. Most of the folks I meet are humble, and I've yet to meet one who has been so bold as to pull out the foam finger and chant "We're number one" — even if they've been pioneers in their industries, have flawless safety records, or productivity rates.

I believe that, in this industry, it's possible that the best are hiding from you — and that's why it's important to find ways of getting to know your peers. Find an association or business group that brings businesses together for collaboration in a non-competitive environment. Even the most minimal networking can yield the kind of feedback you'd never get internally, or from a customer. Ask questions. Be a leader. And God forbid, don't rest on your laurels just as you're starting to learn something. Which reminds me, I could stand another tennis lesson or two.

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