

Book Review on
“Six Disciplines for Excellence”
“Building Small Businesses that Learn, Lead, and Last”
by Gary Harpst
(Review by Gary Tomlinson)
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Did you know that most growing businesses will eventually outgrow the very skills that made them successful in the first place? And that it happens so slowly, that most business leaders don't realize it until they're in deep trouble? When it comes to achieving excellence, figuring out the right things to do isn't nearly as difficult as continuing to do them over the long term. For these reasons, I have chosen Gary Harpst's *Six Disciplines for Excellence – Building Small Businesses that Learn, Lead, and Last* for this month's book review.

Harpst's book describes six fundamental disciplines that help people learn how to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of every growing business. The Six Disciplines for Excellence are:

1. Decide What's Important
2. Set Goals That Lead
3. Align Systems
4. Work the Plan
5. Innovate Purposely
6. Step Back

The Six Disciplines Methodology is different from other business improvement approaches in several ways. First, in contrast to the content of most business books, which focus 80% on principles and 20% on implementation, this book's content focuses 20% on principles and 80% on implementation. Harpst believes that the problem for most of us isn't knowing what to do, it's doing what we know.

Second, his Methodology is designed specifically for small businesses. Whereas most best selling business improvement books target large organizations, the focus of this book is small business. Third, the Six Disciplines Methodology is the first methodology to distill and integrate what were designed as separate best practices into one cohesive whole. It integrates various portions of strategic planning, continuous improvement, integrated learning, business process automation, performance management, and quality management.

Finally, his methodology is designed to work with the Internet in mind. Harpst believes that sustaining improvement requires each worker to learn how to align his or her work with company goals every day. For those who know how to use it, the Internet enables all workers everywhere to implement the best practices that can transform a company.

Harpst says his book is **not** for those looking for a quick fix. The Six Disciplines Methodology is more of a “long-term fitness program,” not a fad diet. This book **is** for those small businesses that have passed the initial stage of basic survival and are already good at what they do. These small businesses hunger to improve their current success in lasting ways and are willing to make the long-term investments required to do so.

In the first chapter, Harpst probes what excellence really means and examines how the best small businesses differ from the rest, based on market research. He wraps up this section by reviewing some of the main barriers that stand in the way of small business excellence. In the main part of the book, he describes each of the Six Disciplines and gives numerous examples on how to implement them. Harpst has taken great efforts to ensure that the typical small business owner will understand the step-by-step approach needed to achieve and maintain excellence within his or her business.

The Six Disciplines Methodology is all about what you want your business to become. There are many people who talk about excellence, there are some who achieve it for a moment, but there are a few who are willing to learn how to deliver excellence that lasts. Six Disciplines in an integrated *learning system*. It is a systematic way for the whole organization to learn how to set, and more importantly, execute strategy. By following the repeatable annual, quarterly, weekly, and daily cycles, people learn and grow at their own pace. It’s a way for every team member to continue to increase in understanding about how to work on the business, not just in it.

It’s surprising that in almost all professions, there are accepted methods and processes for becoming proficient. Yet for small businesses, there has really been no practical way to learn how to build an excellent business and keep it that way. Until now!

If you follow the Six Disciplines Methodology faithfully, Harpst says you’ll transform your organization into a place where the leadership team becomes expert at setting the vision for the company and engaging people in the pursuit of that vision.

Enjoy this month’s selection, *Six Disciplines for Excellence – Building Small Businesses that Learn, Lead, and Last* and share it with others in your life because as Alvin Toffler says; “*The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*”