

Let's Be Honest

Uniting purpose with performance

BY BRAD YARBROUGH

Five years ago, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services was in crisis. Its volunteer board was under pressure for its lax oversight of the 7,000-employee agency that provided vital social services. The agency was continually in the news, especially regarding several high-profile child deaths. In fact, it was embroiled in a federal class-action lawsuit alleging abuses in the state's child welfare system. In response, legislators were calling for the agency director's resignation.

When the Governor appointed me as Chairman of its Commission in 2011, I knew that making a leadership change while facilitating a court-approved improvement plan to be implemented by the agency's child welfare division would be a huge undertaking. During that time, I couldn't help but notice the disparity between the agency's slogan and its perceived performance. Incorporated into its logo, the word "excellence" proclaimed a standard by which it was measured.

Nolan Clay, who extensively covered the troubled agency as a reporter for *The Daily Oklahoman*, recently told me, "Impossible or overstated goals for an organization may seem like a good idea, even justifiable as something to strive for. But when something goes wrong—and it will—the criticism by outsiders and the ridicule by enemies will be even worse.

And during the bad times, the morale in the organization will suffer greatly because the goals weren't realistic."

It's worth noting that the agency has since rebranded itself and replaced its logo. Although it continues to aim for operational excellence, it does not claim to have achieved it with the boldness it once did.

Striving for Excellence

Traveling this summer on an interstate highway, I was impressed by a slogan that appeared on the back of a TMC truck cab that read, "Destination: Excellence." According to its website, TMC is the largest privately held flatbed carrier in the U.S., and its tagline is proudly displayed on its entire fleet.

But I wanted to see how the company communicated what excellence means to them. Its vision statement reads, "TMC is known for its integrity, innovation, highly-trained drivers, impeccably maintained equipment, superior safety record and unwavering dedication to quality and customer service. The mission of TMC is to be recognized as the standard-bearer of quality performance in flatbed transportation. We will accomplish this by searching out the very best people, training them in the fundamentals of

quality and empowering them to develop innovative techniques focused on customer satisfaction." Then, the narrative continues, "Emphasis will be placed on continuous process improvement in all measurable aspects of our business."

There's an admirable humility in a mission that strives to be excellent and makes continual efforts to improve. Claiming that the company is known for certain virtuous qualities is acceptable when it's accurate. But declaring that you have already achieved excellence is a bit risky and, in many cases, unethical because it is flatly untrue.

There is a direct correlation between *excellence and ethics*. And there is no greater measure of good ethics than integrity. That means being truthful, and uniting our purpose with our performance. As a church minister once told me, "Your walk should match your talk." And when it comes to achieving excellence, it will likely be an ongoing mission we all strive to attain. ☘



Brad is the Owner and CEO of Pilgrim Land Services, a right of way services company in Oklahoma City. With over 35 years experience in oil and gas, he has clients nationwide and an extensive network of landmen and agents.