

*Dissertation on*



# How to Excel

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in support of the honorary degree  
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By: CDR Richard R. Houck  
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# How to Excel

## 1. Under promise, over deliver.

- Never commit to something you cannot deliver. When negotiating deadlines or deliverables—be 100% confident that you will meet or exceed expectations. Deliver *before* your deadline.
- Do more than expected—include value added touches (executive summary, talking points, implementation plan, slick packaging, present complex data graphically, etc.).

## 2. Volunteer and search for good opportunities.

Throughout your career, you will be assigned many special projects, collateral duties, and odd jobs. Be proactive. Volunteer for collateral assignments where you can excel or from which you will grow and learn. Look for opportunities—let your supervisors know that you are interested in special projects that will help you grow.

## 3. Ask for help. It is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Whatever your current task, someone else has already done a similar project—and has learned from the inevitable mistakes/wrong approaches. Find these people so they can help you avoid pitfalls and improve your project. Look outside your unit and the Coast Guard—experience may reside in a neighbor who works for another office, unit, agency, or in the private sector.

## 4. Choose your battles wisely.

Remember the song about spitting on Superman's cape—nothing is more futile than fighting a lost cause. If you choose to fight for something, make it worth your effort—don't choose insignificant battles.

### **Corollary: Choose your enemies wisely**

Inevitably we all elect to make someone our enemy—either by taking an opposing position on an issue or just because we don't like them. Either way, make sure that you are willing to have that person/organization as an enemy—be ready to defend yourself next time you face off (which will be on your enemy's turf and timeframe).

## 5. If it's broke—fix it so it won't break again.

When you find something broken (a process, organization, or piece of equipment), find out why it broke, and fix it so it won't break again. Take the opportunity to dissect the process and find ways to improve it. Leave it in the best condition you can.

## 6. Know your strengths and talents.

Exploit them. Choose assignments where you will excel. Seek help from those who have different, but complementary talents. Design your workplace to exploit your strengths.

### **Corollary: Know your weaknesses.**

Improve them through classes, reading, special assignments, and challenges.

# How to Excel

## 7. For ethical or difficult decisions, answer these three questions:

- Would I want my Mom and Dad to know what I did?
- What will I say to millions of viewers (and my neighbors) when questioned on *60 Minutes*?
- Is this how *I* want to spend my tax dollars?

## 8. Meet every deadline.

Assignments don't get easier or go away if you procrastinate. Late work is career suicide. Remember: there are 24 hours in a day and seven days a week or you may be able to enlist help from others. If there is no possible way you can meet a deadline, let your supervisor know and renegotiate it *as soon as you know it might be late*.

## 9. As a supervisor, you are successful when your most important job is writing awards and recommendations for your crew.

Your job is to ensure your subordinates excel—and that they have whatever money, materials, time, training, and *direction* needed to do their jobs. Help them achieve their goals by giving them opportunities to learn and grow.

## 10. Your bosses should have it easy.

Give them what they want—before they know what it is. Make your bosses look good. If your bosses can take leave anytime they want, you're succeeding. Unwanted surprises are bad—pass bad news as soon as possible with a plan for mitigating the damage.

## 11. Establish your own personal support system.

We all need emotional support, a safe place to blow off steam and be heard. Keep your personal life healthy—including spouse, children, friends, and family. Don't be afraid to seek professional help early (marriage counseling is better than divorce proceedings). Good health, proper diet, and routine exercise are requirements to be effective at work.

## 12. Aim as high as you can.

Even if you don't hit your target, you'll still be higher than most everyone else.

## 13. Establish personal goals and priorities.

Set your own daily, weekly, annual, tour, and career/life goals. Set daily priorities that support your goals and answer the question "*What is the most important thing that I can do right now?*"

## 14. Use retrospection and introspection liberally and regularly.

Sit back and ponder...know your values, goals, and mission.  
Be sure your work is congruent with your beliefs.

## 15. Never use absolutes like always and never.

It's much easier to eat your words or soften the blow when you use phrases like "It appears that" and "I don't understand how this will work."

# How to Excel

Extra Credit Page (Remember #1—Under Promise, Over Deliver!)

## A. If you think you're good...

Try supervising in a volunteer organization.

## B. Read all about it.

Keep learning and growing. Find new interests and skills.

## C. Find a mentor/be a mentor—they are invaluable to growth.

A mentor will help you through the four growth cycles:

1. *Apprentice*—Learning about your organization and job. Establishing effective work practices and high work standards.
2. *Technical expert*—Becoming a master of your work specialty.
3. *Mentor*—Assisting others in their first two cycles. Helping your organization grow new talent.
4. *Organization director*—Charting a course for the organization. Searching for new opportunities and challenges. Positioning your organization for the future.

## D. If you're not having fun, something's wrong.

Figure out why and correct this problem (which could involve changing your career, but more often requires shifting *your* attitude).

## E. "Justice prevails" and "life is fair."

Don't try to ensure justice is served...in the long run, everyone gets what they deserve (good and bad). You just have to wait sometimes. Justice happens, even though you may not be aware of it.

## F. Learn to trust your intuition—it's usually right.

Intuition is probably your most underused talent. When used, it will be your best sounding board and an early warning system.

## G. Innovate, initiate, explore, discover, question.

Don't be afraid to jump into the fray. Push the envelope. Feel free to tell the emperor that he has no clothes on (but don't tell anyone that their baby is ugly).

## H. When defeat is inevitable, cut your losses and perform damage control.

You can't win 'em all—know the losers—admit defeat. Retreat to fight another day.

## I. Consensus decision making isn't necessarily unanimous.

Consensus requires everyone to understand the reasons behind the decision...they can still disagree with the decision. If you ask people to vote on a decision, be ready to accept the majority's decision.

## J. If you want to be a big dog, you have to get off the porch and check out a lot of hydrants

(Success is a result of hard and sometimes unpleasant work).

### Alternate Axiom

Don't sit at home waiting for Lady Luck to knock on your door...turn to and make your millions (or achieve whatever goal you have).