

**Note: This is the first chapter of *That Doesn't Just Happen: How Excellence Accelerates Everything* by Mike Kai, edited by Ken Walker. Released August 31, 2021 by Inspire.**

## CHAPTER 1: EXCELLENCE IN THE PROCESS

*It may be a challenge to transport yourself back in time some three thousand years, but put your imagination to work. Envision yourself as part of the Queen of Sheba's camel caravan bearing gold, jewels, and expensive spices as they neared their destination: Israel. When she got to the top of Mount Zion, the queen couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was not just the higher elevation and cooler air that blew eastward from the Mediterranean Sea. Or the snow-capped mountains of Lebanon situated to the north. No, it was that she had never imagined that she would finally be looking down from this mountain at something she had heard of and now was seeing for the first time. Indeed, it was worth the three months or so that it had taken her to arrive.*

*It must not have been an easy trip, but it started with what she had heard about Solomon. In that long-ago day and time, neither travel nor communication flowed as easily as it does in the modern, instantaneous, always-connected era. In the ancient world, trade routes and well-worn desert highways represented treacherous journeys. The heat from the blazing sun reflecting off the hot sands could fry an egg without a magnifying glass. Plentiful numbers of marauders and bandits patrolled the highways and byways with the same merciless efficiency as their pirate counterparts on the high seas. If the heat didn't get you, the bandits might.*

*Since in desert climes water was always needed, a foray through the desert would mean taking the original Yeti bottles: rough goatskins, ferried on the backs of donkeys and camels. Such a trip could mean delays from sandstorms, circling the wagons to protect against enemy threats, or servants needing attention because of extreme dehydration. The potential challenges facing a caravan ploughing their way through the desert? Daunting, to say the least. Yet when word came to the Queen of Sheba that there was no greater or magnificent city within traveling distance than Jerusalem—and no man with greater wisdom than Solomon—she paid close attention. The traveling inconveniences she might encounter were going to be worth making it to her destination. She had a clear objective to see both this promised city of unfathomable riches and to learn more about the mighty King Solomon.*

*Raised in royalty and doing her best to advance a kingdom and protect the realm, she was obviously intrigued. But she did not hear of Solomon's greatness just once. Over the course of months and years she began to hear it more frequently. Finally, she thought, I must see with my own eyes what I am hearing with my two ears.*

### A GRAND VISIT

So, with great anticipation and the necessary planning, strategizing, and stocking of provisions to fuel the royal traveling party, the queen initiated a site visit of grand proportions. No greater

wealth would ever leave the country, no greater gifts ever given, than what she would bestow on the legendary King of Israel about whom she had heard so much. Her plans to visit King Solomon and the Kingdom of Israel called for determining logistics, gathering supplies, and mapping out possible routes.

The entourage and military caravan led by proud soldiers at the front and another squadron at the rear, all riding on stately, decorated camels must have caused quite a stir among onlookers in Jerusalem. Not only would the presence of so many dignitaries, servants, and soldiers cause eyes to widen, so would the precious cargo they carried that symbolized the worthiness of such an escort. It wasn't just the gold, jewels, and spices that were so impressive. So was the beautiful and yet mysterious, dark-skinned woman who hailed from a southern kingdom, protected and cared for by her eunuchs and ladies-in-waiting. The procession would definitely have piqued the curiosity of a people unaccustomed to such a curious and beautiful sight.

Of course, their arrival would have been announced by an advance party. The queen would likely have dispatched a small traveling party of emissaries to smooth the road and pave the way with gifts to King Solomon and his court before her arrival. This was no ordinary visit; no protocols would be overlooked as her officials stepped down from their camels and offered their gifts after being escorted through the impressive gates of the holy city. They returned to their traveling party, excited over how well they were received and the respect and honor accorded them. *This is a promising trip*, they must have thought to themselves (to put it lightly).

The Queen of Sheba set up on a journey that would change her life forever. It would expose her court officials to excellence and the very best. In witnessing what creating a culture of excellence would do for them, it would expand their horizons, expand the queen's influence, and open her eyes to more than she had previously imagined to be possible. This journey would ultimately further prosper her country through the resulting trade agreements and protect her people by creating allies in Israel. In addition, this site visit would open her country's eyes to a God (Yahweh) who would bless her people for centuries to come. It would result in the story of the treasurer of Ethiopia being baptized by Phillip in the Book of Acts (Acts 8:26–39) and land her name in the Bible, as well as in legends and stories told for hundreds of years to come. She would go up to Jerusalem one way and return another, but as a different person.

There is much we can learn from her visit, since it reveals truths and principles on which we can build our own organizations as we emphasize excellence:

## **1. THE PRINCIPLE OF DECONSTRUCTION**

*Principle: How deconstructing can reveal insights you can build upon; also known as reverse engineering*

One reason I am so intrigued with the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is my penchant for discovering new things. I wanted to know more about this mysterious encounter whose biblical narrative is rather brief. Setting out to learn more reflects my nature throughout life. I've always been fascinated by the way things work. I was the child in the family who would excitedly anticipate opening one gift on Christmas Eve and then go crazy on Christmas morning opening the rest. But what differentiated me from my brothers and sister: my most favorite toys on Christmas morning would end up broken by the end of the day.

The reason for this rather curious phenomenon? My ongoing attempts to take apart my toys to see how they worked. I wanted to see why the wheels turned a figure around, why that long plastic stick—which looked like a whip with a T handle—had all of these plastic teeth in it, or how Kenner made that cool toy car wind up and run. On the slightly more gruesome side, how could I pop GI Joe’s shoulder out of its socket and put it back into place? I’ve always been the curious one asking questions like, “How does it work?” . . . “Why does it work that way?” . . . “Is there a better way to do this?”

I would say that I am builder by training and a de-constructer by nature. I can build things like businesses and buildings, but I also immediately begin to pick things apart. I want to know how it works and sometimes more importantly, why things did not work. Such as: where was the communication breakdown, where did we drop the ball, and how can we prevent that from happening again? And yet, despite this inveterate curiosity about toys, rarely could I determine how to put any of them back together again. Humpty Dumpty would definitely not want me on his team!

Still, leadership requires us to become de-constructionists. That is much different from being someone who likes to demolish things, in *Wreck-it-Ralph* style. What separates an excellent leader from an average leader is the person who can figure out why their systems and structures are not working and improves them. For example, in recent times, the deconstruction of cuisine has taken off as a trend. Chefs have studied other chefs’ culinary creations, deciphered what the core ingredients and ideas are, and dismantled the food down to its basic components. Then, unconventionally served in creative ways, these newer chefs have discovered different ways to apply this creative adaption while adding their own flair to the dish. And, charge an extra twenty dollars for it!

Despite my limited mechanical abilities, I believe the curiosity and intrigue behind my young mind has carried on through to today. I keep asking the same kind of questions I did as an eight year old. Just add a few more decades to life, and some things never change. That’s what prompted me to write a book on Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and the story’s inherent applications to creating a culture, curating it, and creativity adapting it into other contexts.

For instance, much can be learned about quality, excellence, and customer service just by going to a five-star restaurant for dinner. While this dining experience may last for an hour and a half, customer service and excellence start way before you enter the establishment (more about that later).

Now, at the risk of sounding like a fossil, I was raised in a day and age where we were taught to respect our elders and that—whether at a restaurant, in a retail store, or running a simple lawn moving business—the customer was always right. In a fast-paced, selfie generation raised on a diet of social media, I feel we’ve lost a lot of that ethic. However, I also feel that the lost art of customer service and excellence can be recaptured and applied to a younger generation that is more tech-savvy, app-literate, and globally connected than anyone over the age of 50 could ever have imagined.

Still, there’s something missing behind a smartphone, a Google search, and an OpenTable app. “What’s missing?” you ask. A desire to honor our guests. On a personal level, we demonstrate this by deep-cleaning our homes before out-of-town guests arrive. Having fresh towels, sheets, and even basic toiletries available demonstrates to our guests that we are happy to see them and honored by their presence. This is the kind of excellence that distinguishes the Ritz-Carlton from the average hotel. When people bring this kind of outlook, service, and

performance to daily life and make it part of their journey, it enriches others' lives, satisfies customers and clients, and expands the business.

## **2. INTENTIONALITY SHAPES EXPERIENCE**

*Principle: Intentional leadership is required to shape the experiences you desire*

Applying this principle to a church context, we've intentionally shaped our weekend service environments, social media strategies, online events, and outreaches to expand the impact that Inspire Church is making in hundreds of thousands of lives—locally and globally! One of the most important shifts we have focused on is our “connect groups.” These home-based groups met weekly, following the model of discipleship outlined in the New Testament: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, praising God, and prayer. During the 2020 season of shutdowns, we moved all our groups online. It was a radical, but a necessary change to increase and strengthen people's faith.

### **Trivia Tidbits**

- Gabrielle Robinne originated the role of Queen Sheba in the 1913 French silent film, *La Reine De Saba*, which followed the opera that premiered in Paris in 1862.

However, newcomers aren't necessarily going to feel comfortable sitting down at someone's home for a connect group right away. That normally takes a bit of time, and COVID-19 conditions have changed a lot of people's comfort levels. That's why as we grew from a church of a few dozen two decades ago to where we are now, we decided to create a culture that would prove attractive to those outside the church and pave the way for them to explore a relationship with Jesus.

In our first two years after launching, I learned very quickly about creating the type of environment in which the right type of culture would grow our church. We wanted something that grew deep and wide. In the beginning and for the first seven years or so, our growth was steady, healthy, and incremental. Of course, it wasn't fast enough for me personally, but it was growing! The key was that the culture wasn't accidental or created by default. It was intentional and on purpose.

Although growth was incremental at first, as we began to move up and to the right of the chart and then mushroomed beyond that, I realized I we had a bit of a tiger by the tail. It quickly became apparent that I needed to know who was doing what and how well they were doing that job. As senior pastor, I had to have a more efficient way to know that we were managing this hockey-stick growth rate. Some management consultants would call these your KPI's: Key Performance Indicators. We called them our metrics. Whatever they're called it's critical, because the old saying is true: What you measure grows and what you neglect grows.

Fast forward to today. When the early 2020 shutdowns happened and our state issued a shelter-in-place order, I quickly pivoted the church to embrace these new realities. We were encouraged as our viewership numbers skyrocketed beyond our expectations! I was encouraged to teach on and about how we functioned locally and globally as Inspire Church. Recently we discussed culture to inform all the newcomers and the mushrooming online audience we

welcomed during the pandemic what we were all about. We needed to tell them: “This is how we do it here; this is the culture of Inspire.”

So, in the middle of 2020, while I was still doing primarily prerecorded sermons, this is what I told them: “If you were going to come to Hawai’i and came to our parking lot at the Waikele shopping center, I bet you by the time you pulled in you’d have ‘chicken skin.’ You’d be thinking, *Wow, there’s something about this place that just feels different.*

“When you get out of your car and you walk up to the front, normally you’d feel a little nervous. But you’d also feel this sense of welcome. When you walked through the doors, you’d see the different kinds of people who are a part of this congregation. People from many different races, ethnicities, ages . . . you name it.

“And then you’d walk in and you’d see the building and hopefully you would realize, *Wow, this is really nice. This is an incredible lobby—there’s a cross in the lobby, how amazing.* And then you would see the sign that says, ‘Welcome Home.’ Then the deeper you came into this place, you’d think, *Wow, look at all this technology . . . this is pretty amazing.* Then you would see the worship team and hear the pulsing music and worship with us. You’d feel the presence of God in this place. There would be a part of you that wants to cry, and a part of you that doesn’t want to let go . . . you know what I’m talking about? And then you’d think, *WOW! This must happen everywhere!* And the truth of the matter is this: No, *this* does not ‘just happen.’ It is *intentional.*”

A culture of excellence doesn’t just happen. It’s intentional, and it starts with leadership. The team at the top must establish the tone, set the example, plan the execution, and then trust those you have trained to carry out the mission. This is true for every business and organization and is important for every customer, congregant, and client.

### **3. WHEN “GOOD ENOUGH” IS THE ENEMY OF EXCELLENCE**

*Principle: Excellent service requires going beyond what’s normal*

In the introduction, I mentioned my teenage forays into a series of entrepreneurial endeavors and regular employment. But I didn’t chronicle my service in the airline industry, which began at the age of 19 and continued (with other part-time work along the way) for 12 years. You could say I worked in the “back of the house,” since hardly any travelers saw us baggage handlers and cabin cleaners as we toiled day by day. When I started as an inexperienced young man, I was the youngest employee on the ramp for American Airlines (AA) at Honolulu International Airport.

I learned some bad habits along the way, such as what “good enough” looked like. I should note that delivering this kind of performance meant you wouldn’t last long, nor would fellow employees who took pride in their work allow you to get away with it. During my 12 years of employment with American, the great CEO Robert Crandall led the company. His innovation with the SABRE computer reservation system revolutionized airline travel. Along with the airline industry’s first-of-its-kind miles reward program (called AAdvantage Miles), Crandall’s leadership thrust AA to the top. It eventually acquired such airlines as TWA and Air Cal and, in particular, their routes. Once a winner of the prestigious Horatio Alger Award, Crandall’s innovations would be copied by others across the airlines and travel industry, forever changing global travel.

## Trivia Tidbits

- There are eight hotels named after King Solomon in parts of the world like Israel, Nigeria, Solomon Islands, The United Kingdom, Philippines, Ghana, and a landmark located in Australia. Similarly, you can find four Queen of Sheba hotels located throughout Israel, Ethiopia, and Tanzania.

I also learned from managers what excellent customer service looks like. They taught me how to load a bag properly, including putting it in the right baggage compartment in order for that luggage to make its way across the Pacific Ocean and through several different stops. These steps ensured when the customer arrived at the other end of their trip and went to the baggage claim carousel, they indeed received their luggage and saved them from the nightmare of waiting a day for their necessities to arrive. (Anyone who has waited in line at midnight to file a missing luggage claim after several flight delays en route can appreciate that kind of service.)

I also learned what it meant to provide sparkling clean toilets on the plane, replacing used pillowcases with fresh ones, organizing the seat pocket material, wiping down trays, and not allowing a single crumb to be seen on the seats or floors that were my responsibility. I learned how to work with the in-flight crew, captains, and stewardesses, and relate to those hardworking staff members who were working face-to-face with customers. I learned that many of those customers had embraced a lifelong dream to come to Hawai‘i. Consequently, we did not want to taint a single moment of the beauty of this place and the hospitality of its people.

While not everything was under our control, there was much that we could control when we were highly responsible for every hardworking, high-paying customer. In addition to those details we could pay attention to, there were others that were beyond our capability to control, such as flight delays in other venues that affected our arrivals and departures. But there was also one beautiful thing that we couldn’t control: the gorgeous Hawai‘i weather.

I’ve heard it said that many people save all their lives to come to this beautiful spot in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Arriving from such destinations in the heartland as Des Moines, Iowa; Nashville, Tennessee; Fargo, North Dakota; or Midland-Odessa, Texas, as soon as the plane touched down, I observed passengers as they unbuckled their seatbelts, retrieved their luggage from the overhead compartment, and stepped onto the jet bridge. Smiles would cross their faces as the gorgeous scenery, pleasant warmth and atmosphere, and the smell of plumeria flowers (a tantalizing mix of such scents as honeysuckle, citrus, and peach) let people know: “You’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto.” I didn’t want to ruin anyone’s dream vacation.

## 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF AN EXCELLENT EDUCATION

*Principle: Challenging seasons instill great lessons for high standards*

By the time I was 21 years old, I’d become a single father, raising my then two-year-old daughter, Courtney. As her sole provider, I needed to grow up fast. Needless to say, it was one of the most difficult times of my life. I had no choice but to discontinue my college education at the University of Hawai‘i. I took on two part-jobs (to equal the pay of full-time employment) in order to provide for Courtney and survive. Along with my hopes of entering the US Air Force as a second lieutenant after completing my degree, other dreams flew out the window. Survival

mode was in full effect and let me tell you, the struggle was real! Unbeknownst to me, I had automatically enrolled in the College of Hard Knocks, and would then go to graduate with a master's degree from the University of Success. ("Siri, play *There Goes My Life* by Kenny Chesney.")

As if I weren't busy enough, I signed on with a multilevel marketing (MLM) business. It was during this phase I learned to grind, make presentations, read amazing books, and attend numerous master-mind groups. I stuck with it for five years. There is no doubt that this phase was part of the setback that was needed to set up my next growth phase. The MLM Grind was a necessary detour that I needed to get my mind right for what was yet to come. This is also when I began going to church regularly. It is also where I learned about God's love for me and where I decided to surrender and dedicate my life to Jesus. All this by the age of 21!

So, let's recap: a single dad raising a two-year-old girl dedicates his life to God, has no college degree—but two great part-time jobs; add in a MLM business, mix it all up and what you get is a recipe for . . . whatever you want it to be.

The second job in my journey through my twenties was at The Willows, a well-known historical restaurant set in a gorgeous emerald garden in suburban Honolulu that takes one's breath away.

The Willows stood in the midst of a beautiful three-acre parcel of land. A local landmark, it was a favorite spot for celebrating birthdays, weddings, and other milestones. Owned by the late Randy Lee, over the eight years I worked there I gathered many insights about customer service, hospitality, direction, and humility. I started as a busboy, then became a member of the banquet staff, and finally worked as a valet. My education in customer service was a hard-earned, hard-learned one, but this experience gave me an eye for excellence (which can be considered a blessing or a curse). Sometimes I can't even relax when I'm on vacation because I can see all the things that *could be* better. It's not that I harbor a critical spirit, but that I have developed a discerning eye.

Mr. Lee helped me develop this discernment. He was a true gentleman who drove a tasteful Jaguar and often wore shining white shoes to match with his white slacks. He also liked to wear a classy Hawaiian shirt—not some cheap imitation you can find at a swap meet or the cheesy ones that college students wear with fake plastic leis around their necks and sunblock on their noses as they party like it's 1999 ("Siri, play *1999* by Prince.") Nope. Mr. Lee always wore a one-of-a-kind, designer-made creation. He also wore a nice gold watch or a silver one, depending on the occasion. And, a black Onyx ring with gold for his wedding band. I rarely heard him raise his voice because he didn't have to—his chefs did it for him!

The most amazing of these chefs was a woman named Kusuma Kooray, who was born and raised in Sri Lanka; her husband was a professor at the University of Hawai'i. Let me assure you, she knew how to run a kitchen with an iron fist. I would say that she was the original Iron Chef! However, within a few months I was able to win her soft heart. She loved me because of my innate curiosity and hard work. Later, I will tell you more about my experience at The Willows, which made such an impression on me in those early years. At the time, I was too young and too preoccupied to realize what a great treasure it was to work for Mr. Lee and Kusuma (as we called her).

My experiences at American Airlines and those at The Willows, coupled with a mind eager to learn how things work, have instilled in me a desire to help people do the best they can with what they have—not what they wish they had—utilizing the gifts, talents, abilities, and

know-how that are part of their intrinsic make-up. *That Doesn't Just Happen* is giving me the opportunity to fulfill that mission.

It doesn't matter if you are in the hotel industry, a restaurateur, the manager of a nonprofit, or a business executive. You could be older but young at heart, or you could be younger and just a few lessons away from an incredible career. My hope is that at whatever point you have reached, this book will inspire you to do the best you can and be the best you can, right here and right now. I hope it will help you to build like Solomon as you see like the Queen of Sheba in your quest for excellence.