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“An army marches as fast as its slowest soldier” is an old military saying. This adage applies to an organization as well. The standard of performance is set by the poorest performer, not the best.

People look to the leader for clues and a model of great performance. The leader sets the standard for performance by what he or she will and won’t accept. One thing is for certain: If you accept other people’s problems and decisions, you get them more and more every day. This inundation will pin you down for the majority, if not all, of your day. It will stay this way until you learn to expect more and accept less.

Furthermore, what you accept determines what others expect to give you. A story about Henry Kissinger illustrates this principle. One of his aides was brilliant but did slipshod work. Mr. Kissinger counseled the aide on being more precise and doing more complete work, but the reports did not improve. After receiving a report one day, Mr. Kissinger called the aide into his office and asked, “Is this your best work?”

“Well, no,” the aide replied. “I had a deadline and all this other work. It’s good, but not my best.”

“Then take it back and redo it,” Kissinger said.

The scene was repeated several times until finally the aide answered,

“Yes, this is my best work.”

Kissinger replied, “Good, now I’ll read it.” From that day on, his aide’s reports improved drastically.

As a leader, you have to set the standard or others will set it for you. The standard then becomes the foundation for expectations.

Vince Lombardi understood setting high standards by what he accepted. When he became the head coach of the Green Bay Packers he scheduled his very first team meeting at 8 a.m. Ray Nitchke got there at 7:59. Lombardi yelled at him, “Nitchke, you’re late! That’ll cost you one hundred dollars.”

“But, Coach,” Nitchke complained, “it’s just eight o’clock. I’m right on time.”

“On time at my meetings is ten minutes early,” Lombardi said. People got the message that first day, and a team that had been chronic losers became world champions within two short years.

Even when dealing with customers, you get what you accept. Overly demanding customers can siphon extra costs from your business or organization to the point they shrink profits or generate losses. They also absorb your time, often leaving you with very little to show for it. Of course there are times to accommodate certain customers at a reasonable cost because it’s the right thing to do under a unique set of circumstances. But when a particular customer never seems to be satisfied, it’s probably a good idea to part ways after

you’ve delivered your product or effort.

Finally, you get what you accept for yourself as well. We usually can spot the people with great potential. But what’s the difference between those who reach their potential and those who don’t? I see people in every walk of life who do incredible things because they accept nothing less for themselves. Some have great talent and others have modest talents but great hearts. They bring a discipline with them to every task they face. They are willing to always challenge themselves. They keep learning how to get better because they do not accept falling short of their potential.

For instance, writing isn’t my favorite thing to do, yet I write this column. People ask me for advice on various topics and I do my best to deliver their request. I know the value of the discipline that writing brings to my thoughts. What Sir Francis Bacon said is true: “If you can’t write it, you don’t know it.” If I am going to be capable of providing valid advice, I must be able to write about it. I expect nothing less than the best from myself.

As a leader, develop this same mindset for yourself. And always remember: What you accept sets the tone for everyone else. Accepting nothing less than the best from everyone, including yourself, is the way to stimulate the right self-directed actions.

~ The End ~