Self and followers' assessment of four key leadership areas: an action research

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how a leader of an organization performs on four key leadership areas as perceived and assessed by himself through reflection and as appraised by his followers and investigate the implications of the findings of the study to leadership in the Ethiopian context. The research is basically a descriptive action research that aims to explore the performance of a leader of a public training and consultancy institute using instruments that measure four key areas of leadership, namely, ten leadership qualities, type of power used by the leader, his role in establishing and leading teams and his emotional intelligence. To this end, two sets of questionnaires for each of the areas of leadership were administered to be filled in by the leader himself and by a sample of his followers drawn from all key divisions of the organization. A total of 20 subjects (about 40% of the total population) including the leader filled in the questionnaires. Findings indicated that on the whole the leader and followers rated differently the leader's performance on most of the areas of leadership though insignificantly. The leader scored better and higher on most areas compared to others' rating on his performance. Based on the findings of the study, points of agreement and disagreement between how the leader perceived himself and how he is perceived by followers are explored, and actions are suggested to improve as needed.

Key words: leadership effectiveness, self-assessment, followers' assessment, action research

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Introduction and background of the study

Research on leadership, mostly academic, is a very recent practice in Ethiopia.   Those that have been done focus on limited topics such as organizational leadership, gender and leadership, some on NGO settings and on some sectors of regional states. Most are MA dissertations and others are conference papers, some of which have appeared in proceedings and other publications.

The Higher Education System Overhaul (HESO) team in its 'Outcomes from Improved Governance, Leadership and Management' called for

- more visionary leaders who can create a sense of belonging;
- a culture of respect and commitment;
- a participatory system of governance and management;
- more efficient and effective resource utilization to achieve strategic priorities;
- more competent and outcome-focused management; and
- enhanced students rights and participation (HESO, 2004:8)/

In relations to these points, though not measuring achievement with regard to those competencies and skills, this study attempts to shed light on the status of leadership effectiveness in the training and consultancy sector. The writer of this paper has not come up with a study similar to this one. This research is, thus, an addition to the growing interest in studying leadership effectiveness in Ethiopia in general and in academic contexts in particular. It also employs a research tradition, action research, which is qualitative in nature.

Research objectives

The aim of this study is to explore how a leader of a public academic organization performs on four key leadership areas as perceived and assessed by groups of followers and by the leader himself and explore if any differences are observed in assessment of the leader by himself and by his followers.

More specifically, the objectives of the study are to

- Investigate how the leader assesses his own performance in the four key leadership areas,
- Examine how the leader is assessed by his followers,
- Find out if there are any differences in the ways the leader is assessed by different groups of followers − management team members, senior and junior experts,
- Find out if mismatches exist in the ratings of the leader's performance by himself and by his followers?
- Suggest ways the leader can improve in the areas he scored lowest, and

Review of the literature

This section discusses a review of the literature of the premises that inform the study. These include leadership effectiveness, leadership as an art and process and where leaders learn to lead. Another important question discussed is 'Why ask individuals about their own performance?' Further literature on action research and the four key leadership areas is reviewed alongside the findings of the study.

Theoretical framework

As mentioned earlier, the premises or theoretical frameworks that inform the research include that leadership effectiveness is a process and that leadership is an art that can be developed through the mastery of key leadership areas of success which can be learned and improved through self-reflection and follower's appraisal and feedback in these areas. In the final analysis leadership effectiveness is deeply personal (Senge, 1994). The literature related to the above concepts is briefly reviewed next.

Leadership effectiveness in academic contexts

Leadership is about social influence, leaving a mark, initiating and guiding. The result of leadership is change and the product could be a new direction or character, etc. Effective leadership or effective leaders have the ability to attract and retain capable people, motivate them to put forth their best efforts, and solve problems that arise. Wren (1995) writes, leaders, through "their **ideas** and **deeds** show the way and influence the behavior of others". To do so successfully, an effective leader must be director and motivator, implementer and innovator, mentor and team builder, expert and moral force, organizer and developer of people (Wren, 1995).

According to Spendlove (2007), the most common attributes for effective university leadership were, openness, honesty, the need to consult others, the ability to listen, negotiate and persuade, the ability to think broadly/strategically and to engage with people. Other people skills such as negotiation, delegation, motivating, mentoring, monitoring, team building and communication were also cited as important for effective leadership. These are all universal leadership competencies (Bertram, 2005).

However, some other attributes found particularly important for higher education leadership were very different to those required in business, and are not included in existing competency models. These were academic credibility, experience in academic leadership, "fellow feeling" and "outgoing, get around the place"(Spendlove, 2007).

According to Bass (1985), in order to create a high performing academic institution, leadership has to move from a more traditional, transactional view to transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is a traditional management process through which the leader brings about desired actions from followers by using certain behavior, rewards, and incentives. This leadership is based on the premise that a transaction takes place between follower and leader. This type of leadership can result in acceptable organizational performance (although not optimal) in periods of high certainty, as well as low need for growth or change.

Transformational leaders, however, envision the organization's future, articulate that vision to organizational members, and inspire and facilitate a higher level of motivation than those members have thought possible. Transformational leaders focus on the process of bringing about significant changes in the organization by emphasizing strategic leadership skills and qualities, by emphasizing on more personal power, forming and leading effective teams, and by being emotionally intelligent.

Leadership as process

Leadership effectiveness is a process. What factors influence leadership process? Two factors - individual qualities and environmental factors affect leadership process. The debate about the role of nature and nurture in

developing as effective leader is still vibrant. Some researchers believe, however, that both are important factors and compatibility between the two is what matters most. This research investigates how these factors affect leadership effectiveness.

Leadership is also seen as a social phenomenon, culturally determined. Leadership environment is made up of the kind of followers, working culture of the organization and systems. What is most relevant is leader – follower compatibility based on the type of power used by the leader. Both qualities of the person and environmental factors are important elements of leadership success. History has shown people who have innate abilities that unfold under certain conditions – external circumstances and internal qualities interact to create sudden and dramatic spurt of performance (Manning & Curtis, 2007).

Action research

Action research (AR) can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection. It is an iterative process, which converges towards a better understanding of what happens. In most of its forms it is also participative.

According to Hart and Bond (1995) action research is educative and reflective (critical reflection upon the process and outcomes). It deals with individuals as members of social groups and is problem-focused, context-specific and future-orientated. Aiming at improvement and involvement it involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are

interlinked. Finally, it is founded on a research relationship in which those involved are participants in the change process. This study shares some of these characteristics of action research.

Why should we ask individuals to reflect on their own performance?

Learning is deeply personal. Learning occurs when we test what we have learned through application and reflection. Helping leaders self –reflection will enable them to learn more about their performance and behavior. According to Branch & Paranjape, (2002: cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflective_practice) "Reflection leads to growth of the individual – morally, personally, psychologically, and emotionally, as well as cognitively". Moreover, it can lead to personal growth, professional growth all leading to meaningful change.

More specifically, through the process of reflection leaders can better understand their strengths and weaknesses, identify and question their underlying values and beliefs, acknowledge and challenge possible assumptions on which they base their ideas, feelings and actions and identify possible inadequacies or areas for improvement.

The Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire (1972) wrote "We apprehend the objective data of our reality through reflection." Taking time to reflect can help leaders identify approaches that have worked well, and in that way reinforce good practice.

Learning leadership skills is developmental. It is also internally controlled and mediated by the learner. When people as learners do not reflect on their place in the world or critically evaluate the validity of information presented to them, Freire (1972) claimed, they become passive and superficial,

accepting faulty logic, untested ideas, and allowing themselves to be swayed by deceptive arguments.

Research methodology

This part of the paper discuses who the participants of the research are the sampling system employed, and data collection and analysis methods used.

Research participants

The leader

The main subject of the study is the leader of an institute. He is the General Manager of an organization involved in the human resource capacity building sector. He has MSc in Human Resource Management. He also has participated and been awarded certificates in various short term training programmes on management, leadership, effective learning environment and public service reform. He has worked in the organization for a total of 16 years beginning as a junior expert all the way to acting general manger and since last three years as the general manager of the organization.

In addition to serving in the top management, the subject of this study has also actively participated in various training and consultancy services provided by the organization.

The followers

This study, instead of statistical sampling to maximize generalisability, employs theoretical sampling wherein participant selection is based on potential relevance to the study's research questions. Intensity sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select participants through internal expert selection of members who understood or manifested general leadership competence, knowledge and skills.

Of the possible 54 research subjects identified 27 or about 50% were included in the study. Of these, a total of 19 subjects (about 70%) filled in and returned the questionnaires. The participants represent members of the top management of the organization and lower level managers and experts. For purposes of comparison, the subjects are divided into three groups. The first group consists of two members of the management team of the organization who have stayed in this position for an average of seven years, the second group contains 7 senior members of the organization with an average stay in the organization of 6 years, and the third group consists of 10 junior members with an average 4 years of stay in the organization. This division is mainly based on experience in working in the organization because the longer one stays in an organization, the more one knows about the workings of the organization and mainly about its leadership.

Data collection and analysis

For the purposes of the study, two sets of questionnaires for each of the areas of leadership were administered to be filled in by the leader himself and by the selected followers drawn from all key divisions of the organization.

The four key leadership areas that were appraised of the leader include ten leadership qualities (10 questions); type of power used by the leader (16 questions); his role in establishing and leading teams /groups (12 questions); and his emotional intelligence (25 questions). Thus, a total of 63 questions were asked to a total of 20 research participants.

Outcome measures were assessed using an almost 360 – degree strategy in which the leader was evaluated by self, peers and followers as direct reports. 360 – degree strategy includes self, boss, peers, and direct reports (Kabacoff, 1998). The only missing is the boss of the leader.

Findings are compared and contrasted among the leader and the three groups of followers. Data is analysed and compared within groups and group average vis-à-vis leader's ratings. Each of the questionnaires has an already established and tested rating system. This is discussed alongside the results in the following section of the paper. Mainly simple percentages and averages are used to assess and compare each of the key areas of leadership as appraised by the leader and his followers.

Results and discussion on the our key leadership areas

In this section of the paper, each of the four key areas of leadership is first described and the role it plays in effective leadership development is established. This is followed by the results of the study regarding that key area. Here the ratings of the leader on his performance are compared and contrasted with those ratings by his followers.

Ten leadership qualities and what the study is looking for

Certain qualities belong potentially to everyone, but academic leaders are expected to possess these qualities to an exceptional degree. The following is a discussion of 10 qualities that mark a leader and help influence the leadership process – vision, ability, enthusiasm, stability, concern for others, self-confidence, persistence, vitality, charisma, and integrity.

Vision. The first requirement for a leader is a strong sense of purpose – understanding the vision, mission and goals of the organization. A vision of what could and should be is a basic force that enables the leader to recognize what must be done and inspires others to do it.

Our subject, the leader of an organization, rated himself the highest (100%) in terms of clarity of vision, mission and goals of the organization. His management team members rated him as very good (80%) whereas the rest, that is, Groups B & C rated him 70%. Overall average rating for this quality of the leader is 76% which places the leader on 'Average'. This indicates that the leader, though clear in the vision of the organization, his followers couldn't observe or see it clearly in his leadership. Thus, he needs to improve in this regard through vision awareness and clarification discussions.

Ability. The leader must know the job – or invite loss of respect. It helps if the leader has done the job before and done it well. Employees seldom respect the individual who constantly must rely on others when making decisions, giving guidance, or solving problems. Also, the leader must keep job knowledge current.

The results show that the leader and his management colleagues rated his ability the highest, 90%. The average rating for the two remaining groups is 75%. This shows a difference between the ratings by the leader and his followers. The overall rating is 80% showing that the leaders need to work more on this quality.

Enthusiasm. Genuine enthusiasm is an important trait of a good leader. Enthusiasm is a form of persuasiveness that causes others to become

interested and willing to accept what the leader is attempting to accomplish. Enthusiasm shown by a leader generates enthusiasm in followers.

Once again the leader and his Group A colleagues rated his enthusiasm as the highest (100%). The average score for Groups B & C is 75%. If this quality is not so apparent to followers, the leader needs to make sure that what he believes he possesses should be seen by followers.

Stability. The leader must understand her or his own world and how it relates to the world of others. One cannot solve the equation of others when preoccupied with the equation of self. Empathy for employees cannot be developed if the leader is emotionally involved with personal problems. Leaving personal problems at home allows the leader to think more clearly and to perform more effectively on the job. Our subject, the leader of the organization, was rated "Excellent' by himself and all his followers. He needs to sustain this quality in the future.

Concern for others. At the heart of caring leadership is concern for others. The leader must not look down on others or treat them as machines – replaceable and interchangeable. The leader must be sincerely and deeply concerned about the welfare of people. The caring leader never tears down, belittles, or diminishes people. Concern for others requires patience and listening, and the result is trust, the bedrock of loyally.

This is one of the three qualities where the leader scored the lowest by Groups B&C and overall average though he rated himself 'Excellent'. This quality of a leader is largely observed by followers. Though the leader believes he cares for his followers, it is when they see and recognize it that matters. Thus, the leader needs to show through words and deeds that he really cares.

*Self- confidence***:** Confidence in one's ability gives the leader inner strength to overcome difficult tasks. If leaders lack self-confidence, people may question their authority and may even disobey orders. Researcher has found that successful leaders remain calm and confident even during intense situations.

Unlike the quality – 'Concern for others', 'Self-confidence' is relatively personal. However, the leader seems to have rated himself lower in this quality compared to all others. As a result, the overall rating is lowest for this quality. The presence of this quality in a leader is important to instil confidence in followers. The rating for 'Ability' is on the other hand very good on average. Thus, if the leader has demonstrated ability, he needs to show it to the world.

Persistence: The leader must have drive and determination to stick with difficult tasks until they are completed. Historians agree Winston Churchill, with his bulldog will, was a determining element in the success of the allied nations in defeating the axis powers in World War II. In the face of impossible odds and seemingly certain defeat Churchill rallied his people. Simply, he would not give in: he would not give up.

The ratings for this quality are the same as those of 'Self-confidence'. This quality is of paramount relevance for an organization in the process of change. Our leader needs to improve his determination and drive and show this to his followers.

Vitality: Even if the spirit is willing, strength and stamina are needed to fulfil the tasks of leadership. Effective leaders are typically described as electric, vigorous, active, and full of life, no matter how old they are or if

they are physically disabled. The caring leader must have health and vigor to pursue his or her goals.

Our subject, said, "I have 'Excellent' vitality" and his Group A colleagues agree. But followers seem to disagree, saying "You have 'low' vitality level, you need much to improve." Once again if the leader believes to have strength and stamina, why are his self-confidence and persistence low? Our leader needs to answer this question and work on to improve this quality.

Charisma: Charisma is a special personal quality that generates others' interest and causes them to follow. Optimism, a sense of adventure, and commitment to a cause are traits found in charismatic leaders. Charisma is difficult to define, but the result is admiration, enthusiasm, and the loyalty of followers.

This is the only quality the leader rated himself the lowest. All his followers seem to agree as well. A lot needs to be done by the leader to become more charismatic leader. As discussed above, there are lots of advantages of being a charismatic leader.

Integrity: The most important quality of leadership is integrity, understood as honesty, strength of character, and courage. Without integrity there is no trust, the number one element in the leader-follower equation. Integrity leads to trust, and trust leads to respect, loyalty, and ultimately, action. It is trust coming form integrity that is needed for leading people from the meeting room, to the shop floor, to the battlefield.

This quality of an effective leader is where our subject scored an overall rate of 'Very good.'

Table 1. Leadership Qualities

	Leadership Qualities	
Group A	70	Average
Group B	70	Average
Group C	88	High
Group Average	**76**	**Average**
Leader's	**95**	**Excellent**

Scoring and Interpretation:

Score	Evaluation
100 – 90	Excellent; exceptional
89 – 80	High; very good
79 – 70	Average; needs improvement
69 – 60	Low; much work needed
59 and below	Deficient; poor

As discussed above and as shown in Table 1, there is a mismatch between the leader's and the followers' overall ratings of the leadership qualities. The overall ratings show that the leader is doing very good or scoring 'High' in terms of manifesting the ten leadership qualities. According to Groups B&C, the leader scored the lowest for the qualities 'Self – confidence' (55%), 'Vitality' and 'Charisma' (65% each). The leader, thus, needs to improve on qualities such as 'Charisma', 'Concern for others' and 'Vitality' in that order. If the leader chooses to disagree with these overall ratings, he needs to realize the importance of proving or showing otherwise.

Type of power the leader uses

The second key characteristic of leadership is the empowerment of people. There are two views of leadership authority – top –down and bottom-up. Top-down is traditional, where power flows from the top to the bottom. Frontline workers support managers and supervisors, who, in turn, support top level executives. Bottom-up is where power flows from below. Leaders make sure that their orders fall within their subordinates' zone of acceptance. Both have merit. For example, servant leadership recognizes both top – down and bottom-up approaches to leadership.

Sources of leadership power

Successful leaders master the use of power to influence the behaviour of others. Research by Manning and Curtis (2007) found out two sources of power for leaders. The first is power of the position based on what leaders can offer to others. Here the leader can use reward, coercive, legitimate or information power to influence followers' behaviour. The second is based on how leaders are viewed by others and refers to power of the person. Using expert, referent, rational or charisma power the leader attempts to persuade followers to do what he/she deems important.

Results and discussion on the leader's power sources

All participants agree that on average, the leader uses power of the person above the power of position. The score is good. But the ratings for individual manifestations of the two sources of power by the leader and his followers are different. The ratings by the leader and his followers for 'Power of Person' and 'Power of Position' are 9.5 and 7.5; and 7.5 and 6.5,

respectively. The lowest rated type of power used by the leader on average is 'Coercive' and the highest is 'Rational' power (See Table 3).

Table 3. Leader's Power Sources

Power of Position			Power of Person		
	Group Average	Leader		Group Average	Leader
Reward	7	8	Expert	8	9
Coercive	5	2	Referent	7	10
Legitimate	6	5	Rational	8	10
Information	7	8	Charisma	7	9

Areas for improvement include for the leader to work more on 'Charisma' followed by the need for the use of expert power. The lack of charisma in this leader has already been established in the assessment of leadership qualities discussed earlier.

Characteristics of an effective group

One of the major leadership principles according to Manning and Curtis (2007) is the leader's function as a as team builder. Leaders today rely on teams and new technology to enable communication across time and geographic boundaries. Leadership success requires an understanding of group behaviour and the ability to tap the constructive power of teams. For optimum results, a designated leader should coordinate the group, advocate for the team across the organization, access needed resources and processes, and ensure that results are supported by, and meaningful to, the organization.

Results and discussion on the leader's EI

Twelve questions on the above twelve characteristics of effective groups or teams (rated 1-10; where 1 is low, 10 is high) were included to assess this key leadership area. As shown in Table 4, all three groups rated group effectiveness in the organization as 'Good' while the leader rated it as 'Excellent'. If we look at the highest and lowest ratings for the characteristics, the picture depicts the following. On average, both the leader and his members of management team rated as higher (10) characteristics such as 'Disagreement is Ok', 'Criticism is issue –oriented, never personal', and 'Consensus is the norm'. The followers seem to agree but their average rating for these characteristics is 8. The characteristics that were rated the lowest overall and which call for improvement include 'Active listening', 'Trust and openness', 'Commitment', 'Shared values and norms of behaviour' and team 'leadership'.

Table 4. Group Effectiveness

	Group Effectiveness Rating		**Score**	**Rating**
Group A	98	Good	108 – 120	Excellent
Group B	89	Good	84 – 107	Good
Group C	71	Average	49 – 83	Average
Group Average	**86**	**Good**	25 – 48	Poor
Leader's	**108**	**Excellent**	12 – 24	Failing

What is the leader's emotional intelligence (EI) at work?

The fourth key leadership area is Understanding People. "Effective leaders focus on three "p"s – people, products, and profit – in that order" (Manning & Curtis, 2007). Understanding people refers to comprehending human motivation, the art of persuasion and the value of diversity. What are the important determinants of human behaviour? Physical and emotional needs help explain why people work, why they have certain personal goals, and what they want in their relationships with others.

Emotional Intelligence can be defined as the capacity for awareness of our own moods and attitudes and of those of others and the ability to for managing ourselves well in our relationships with others. It is a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions (Goleman, 1998).

Emotional Intelligence is the tool a leader can use to persuade followers to accomplish goals. Goleman (1998) explains that though technical skills are important, emotional intelligence is the essential and indispensable requirement for effective leadership. Leadership success requires the ability to understand and deal effectively with people.

Results and discussion on the leader's EI

For this key area of leadership, Emotional Intelligence, 25 questions were presented for participants to rate each from 1-4 (where 1 is low, 4 is high) the highest possible score being 100. of the 25 questions, the leader has been rated the highest by all for statements such as 'usually stays composed,

positive, and unflappable, even in trying times', 'holds himself accountable for meeting his goals', 'good at generating new ideas', 'is always trying to learn how to improve his performance, including asking advice from people younger than he is' and 'readily makes sacrifices to meet an important organizational goal'. Some of the statements the leader needs to work more on include 'thinking clearly and staying focused on the task at hand under pressure', being 'organized and careful in his work', being 'results – oriented, with a strong drive to meet his objectives' and 'setting challenging goals and take calculated risks to reach them'.

Table 5. The leader's EI

	Level of EI	
Group A	86	Above 70 is Good
Group B	74	Good
Group C	70	Good
Average	**77**	**Good**
Leader	**92**	**Good**

When we look at the overall performance of the leader, all participants including the leader rated the EI of the leader as 'Good' (see Table 5). However, the total scores range from 70-86 by followers in contrast to 92 by the leader. As EI is always an ongoing affair, the leader needs to learn and reflect on his performance in this area continuously.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this section, conclusions and recommendations on each of the four key leadership areas the leader was assessed are presented. This is followed by a summary of performance of the leader on the four key leadership areas. Finally, some limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are forwarded.

Conclusions and recommendations on each of the four key leadership areas

As discussed in earlier sections of the paper, there seem to be disagreements in inter-group as well as between groups and the leader on the ratings of the leader's performance in the four leadership areas assessed. The conclusions and recommendations of the leader's assessment in each of the areas of leadership and his overall rating are provided below.

Key leadership area 1   leadership qualities

The overall ratings show that the leader has scored 'High' in terms of manifesting the ten leadership qualities. The leader scored the lowest for and needs to improve on qualities such as 'Charisma', 'Concern for others' 'Self –confidence', and 'Vitality' in that order.

Key leadership area 2   Type of power used by the leader

The leader's use of power of the person above the power of position is rated as good. Areas for improvement include for the leader to work more on 'Charisma' followed by the need for the use of 'expert power'.

Key leadership area 3   Characteristics of an effective group

The three groups rated group effectiveness in the organization as 'Good' while the leader rated it 'Excellent'. Teams in this organization manifest characteristics such as 'Disagreement is Ok', 'Criticism is issue –oriented, never personal', and 'Consensus is the norm'. The characteristics that were rated the lowest overall and which call for improvement include 'Active listening', 'Trust and openness', 'Commitment', 'Shared values and norms of behaviour' and team 'leadership'.

Key leadership area 5   Leader's EI at work

When we look at the overall performance of the leader, all participants including the leader rated the EI of the leader as 'Good'. To be an excellent EI leader, however, the leaders needs to learn more and improve his management of personal as well as followers' emotions. According to Goleman (1989) emotional intelligence is not a permanent state. It can be learned, and we can each develop it, in varying degrees, throughout our lives.

Reflections

Findings of the study indicate that,
- On average, the leader is doing well as the leader of the organization.
- Points of agreement and disagreement exist between how the leader perceives himself and how he is perceived by followers. That is, on the whole the leader and followers rated differently the leader's

performance on most of the areas of leadership though insignificantly.

- Members of the management team of the organization seem to have favourable appraisal of the leader compared to other members of the organization. This is consistent with other studies that show people in upper levels of responsibility often evaluating leaders more favourably than do people in lower levels.

- Of the four leadership areas, the leader has performed well and up to the level expected of an effective leader in two key leadership areas. These are his use of the power of person and his/her emotional intelligence.

- The areas he needs to improve more include upgrade his leadership qualities from 'very good' to 'excellent'. He also needs to transform his team leadership skills from 'good' to 'excellent'

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