

Why Perfection Isn't Good Enough

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“I just want it to go the right way,” he said, with tears starting to form at the corners of his eyes. “I’m trying and trying and trying and it’s not working.”

The tears began to flow, as he rapidly stamped his feet on the green artificial turf covering the mini-golf course. His knuckles turned white as he gripped his club with a surge of frustration, and he swung as hard as he could at the ball.

He missed. It was fortunate that he did, because had his club head connected with the ball, property damage or harm to bystanders would have been probable.

During that moment in 2014 watching my then 3-year-old son, I had a flashback. It was a moment of complete and total empathy.

Years ago, that was me.

When I was a kid, I loved playing board games with my family. But I hated losing. I remember swiping all of the chess pieces off the board mid-game in a fit of anger. For a few years, that was my common reaction to even a hint of things not going my way.

I once ruined a National Geographic trivia game for the entire family by spending a full day or two memorizing the answers to every single question. I quickly became unbeatable—and I became a totally annoying competitor. No one would play with me. Game over.

The strength of one’s quest for perfection is probably a function of both our environment and our genes. Regardless, perfection as a quest or even as a goal needs to be abolished—for children, for adults, for leaders, for teams, for organizations.

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In other words, perfection simply isn't good enough. In fact, it's entirely counterproductive in today's fast-paced world. Expecting perfection, either from yourself or from the people around you, is anathema to success, and **here are a few reasons why.**

- 1 It's isolating.** When people project an image of perfection, those around them might be less likely to suggest different ways to do things. They might think, "She's perfect and knows everything. She's never wrong. So why would she need my idea? She has it all figured out." This saps the creative energy from any team, and it can insulate the "perfect" person from potentially critical information.
- 2 It's exhausting.** We only have so many resources at our disposal, only so many activities to which we can attend. So if you're attempting to achieve perfection in all of them, you'll run out of gas very quickly.
- 3 It's slow.** As LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman is often quoted as saying, "If you are not embarrassed by the first version of your product, you've launched too late." Achieving anything close to perfection takes a lot of time, and if you're trying to develop the perfect product or service, it's going to take so long that you risk (a) creating something that perfectly solves a non-existent problem or (b) creating something that's already outdated. Focus instead on creating quickly and learning.
- 4 It's often unnecessary.** Many problems in our lives and in our organizations can be addressed adequately with a solution that takes care of 80 percent of the issue. And the effort that it would take to have a 100-percent solution (assuming one actually exists, which is doubtful) often far outweighs the benefits.
- 5 It's a unicorn.** It doesn't exist. Even the most seemingly error-free organizations and groups (like nuclear power plants, naval aircraft carriers and surgical teams) encounter small failures frequently. The key is that the people in those situations have been trained to recognize weak signals of danger quickly and make rapid course corrections. That's not perfection; it's highly reliable iteration.

When I think about my son and that moment of frustration on the mini-golf course in 2014, I feel for him. And it's not just that I feel his pain in that moment. It's that I know that setting the bar at the level of perfection is harmful. It limits his willingness to try, to fail. As such, it's my job to help him learn to experiment, to mess things up and to learn.

Because after all, it's not perfection that the world needs. It's grit, leadership and teamwork.

So, perfection? You and I are over. We're done.

Please excuse me now while I go to the golf course.

And cry on every hole.



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