

# Integral Leadership Review

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## Leadership Coaching Tip

### Perfection: The Impossible Standard

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“Out of perfection nothing can be made. Every process involves breaking something up.”

– Joseph Campbell



There is a dangerous parallel between over-achievers and perfectionism. What is perfection, and who holds the ‘truth’ about it? Who holds the standard for perfection? And once it is achieved, what next?

American business habits have changed drastically. Technology has enabled us to be available 24/7. It has also made information available to most everyone. Multiple time zones, diverse cultures, and clients and customers who have high expectations for excellence impact business. These impacts and high expectations can entice the most mild-mannered perfectionist into turbo-charge mode. But to what end?

Joe was working hard to improve his golf game. His handicap was a 7, and after weeks of practice, it became a 6. The following year, he achieved 0. Ah, perfection! Now what? Inherently, golf is an imperfect game fraught with variables, foibles, and personal challenges. After doggedly pursuing his goal, Joe realized that the journey was not enjoyable, the end was shallow, and it was impossible to maintain a zero handicap. Furthermore, he realized how much he hated the game. It became an obligatory burden that demanded his time and attention.

If business were a golf game, how many leaders pursue the metaphorical zero handicap? To be literal, this pursuit translates into the personal and organizational dysfunctions such as analysis paralysis, excessive detail management, missing the big picture, poor systems thinking, and poor or no decision making.

At an individual level, perfectionism adversely impacts self-esteem, self-confidence, and personal effectiveness. Business – like golf – is fraught with variables, foibles, and personal challenges. So aspiring for perfection is a perfect set-up for risk-aversion and minimal innovation.

*At her commencement speech at Mt. Holyoke College, Anna Quindlen challenged the graduates to really look at the motives for being perfect. She said, “it really requires you to read the zeitgeist of wherever and whenever you happen to be, and to assume the masks necessary to be the best of whatever the zeitgeist dictates or requires. Those requirements shape shift, sure, but when you’re clever you can read them and do the imitation required.*

*But nothing important, or meaningful, or beautiful, or interesting, or great ever came out of imitations. The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.*

American business, especially, is known for innovation and creativity. We invented myriad devices, machines, and processes. From the iPad to the facsimile machine, Americans have been on the forefront of new and brilliant innovation. Each one of these breakthroughs was preceded with mistakes, faults, and errors. Imagine a laboratory where the inventor is paralyzed by fear of making mistakes?

As leaders, we yearn to be authentic, be human, and be light with ourselves and others. And great leaders typically have extraordinarily high standards. High standards can create great results, but high standards can also put us in a self-critical, harshly judgmental place. What is the cost of such standards vs. the benefit?

More important, how can we ask ourselves to be divinely human and embrace excellence without the harsh judgment and criticism? How can we find ‘good enough’? One of our clients has a motto, “don’t let perfection get in the way of good enough”.

### **About the Author**

Micki is co-founder and Coaching Practice Leader of the Blue Mesa Group, LLC, a firm that supports senior leaders’ success through executive coaching, proven leadership development practices and whole systems thinking.

As a coach, business leader, speaker and teacher, Micki is recognized and respected for her clarity of purpose and her “no-nonsense compassion.” With her natural and straightforward communication style, Micki’s clients value her uncanny ability to open their eyes to their deepest values and future possibilities, all while coaching them forward to achievement and immediate results.

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