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The Need to Rein in Perfectionism

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In psychotherapy we have a useful concept to take the pressure off parents who feel they need to be perfect. We say they need only to be “good enough”, and that an important way of achieving that is to create the right environment for their children to thrive.

This implies allowing themselves to have imperfections and failings while supporting their children through their rages and anxieties in order to help them cope with life’s realities. All parents have their limitations; they are not perfect.

Being “good enough” does not imply mediocrity or complacency, but rather that mistakes are an inevitable and necessary part of growth and further achievement. Perhaps businesses, especially those that are intolerant of errors, imperfections and different approaches, could learn lessons from the notion of “good enough” parenting.

With many businesses facing financial restrictions, there can be a pressure to achieve goals more quickly, resulting in people working harder and longer hours but not necessarily more efficiently. Mistakes become more likely, as does the need to cover them up.

Nigel Nicholson, professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School, and author of *The ‘I’ of Leadership*, says organisations with an attitude of “We are the best and we are people who do wonderful things”, encourage executives to set too high expectations for themselves. He sees the problem as often self-induced by people who want to take on more because they think it will give them an advantage.

He outlines how this can lead good people to do bad things, including cheating and other deviant behaviour. “Terrible disasters have been caused by people airbrushing over mistakes they don’t want to admit. Often driven by unreasonable expectations, such as ‘We are an organisation that doesn’t make mistakes

’, you are immediately encouraging people to conceal errors. In trading environments, for example, where the worst thing you can do is to conceal losses, people under pressure may hide losses, and that becomes a very slippery slope.”

Julia Vaughan Smith, a psychotherapist and executive coach, explains how unrealistic targets set at board level – driven by ambitious chief executives – may not be achievable by employees who perhaps lack the skills or drive to run as fast and jump as high as their managers.

“There is a shared, colluded defence against the reality that things can’t be achieved at the pace people would like,” says Ms Vaughan Smith. “No one has the nerve to tell the board that the things they want can’t be done. People fear that, if they spoke up, they would be banished.”

Individuals can compound the problem. Those with perfectionist personality traits will go to any lengths to avoid mistakes because the fear of failure

, and the imagined potential consequences, feel unbearable.

Perfectionists may either spend too much time on details or doing the wrong thing and as a result lose perspective. Or, terrified of making mistakes, they become paralysed with fear and nothing gets done. Even the smallest risk can feel overwhelming.

Perfectionism can be a way of overcompensating for feelings of inadequacy and the anxiety of uncertainty. For many, it is an attempt to control the world around them and avoid the consequences if they were considered not to be up to the job. These fears are often imagined, and deeply rooted in childhood.

An example is a manager in retail marketing whose perfectionism, combined with a demanding job in an insecure climate, resulted in him working late hours most nights to try to ward off his fear of making an error.

Years before, his father had suffered mental health problems and left the family home, leaving him and his two siblings to be raised by their working mother on a tough housing estate. Often on his own, he discovered that by ensuring his immediate environment was in order he felt secure in an otherwise chaotic world. Lacking any emotional support, he grew up believing that his wellbeing depended on getting everything right, which eventually translated into perfectionist traits at work.

He says: “Retail is tough. They cut back on staff, and have random redundancies every year or two, and so there’s a gratitude that you have a job and an expectation that you have to take on that extra work.

“Part of the problem is me, part is the work culture. Companies are cutting back on so many things and there simply isn’t the investment in people. As a manager myself, when I recruit people I expect them to hit the ground running.”

His obsession with detail means that he often misses the bigger picture, he says, and fails to delegate by getting too involved with other people’s work. As a result he is overwhelmed, but tries to lessen his anxiety by being even more perfectionist, and so the cycle repeats itself.

A chief executive who takes a radically different approach is Eva Chen of Trend Micro, a global software security company based in Japan, which employs about 5,000 people worldwide.

Ms Chen believes that businesses today must change their mindset to adjust to a world of uncertainty, and cites unpredictable events such as the credit crunch, the eurozone crisis and the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami as examples that make goal-setting ever more unrealistic.

Instead, she concentrates on her staff’s ideas, particular talents and capacity to respond to change and uncertainty.

This was never more apparent than when a crisis hit Trend Micro in 2005, four months after she became chief executive. One of the company’s files caused millions of computers worldwide to crash and also created a ticketing problem that disrupted the Japanese railway system.

When asked by the press what the root cause of the breakdown was, she apologised for the inconvenience but gave the surprising reply: “I don’t know and I’m not going to find out.” Recalling the episode, she says the cause was human error. Yet she goes on to argue that the company must be able to live with unpredictable events: “We need our engineers to have the courage and ability to create new things. If I started to punish people, I would stop this whole innovation spirit.

“If things are unpredictable you can’t expect people to set a goal and say you must achieve this goal. [Instead], say, ‘you have the spirit to overcome any problem, or any obstacle in the future’ – that is all we can ask for.”

She adds: “We do not set MBOs [management by objective], for individuals or departments. Once you set an MBO you make the organisation too focused on your objective, and people do not have the time and the heart to deal with the unpredictable thing.”

Perfectionists have great strengths but may also exhibit the following negative traits:

- They set excessively high performance standards for themselves. They tend also to be highly self-critical and critical of others’ efforts
- They have difficulty delegating and interfere in others’ work in case a mistake is made and they will be blamed
- Obsession with detail means they miss the bigger picture
- Fear of making mistakes leads them to procrastinate
- People around them are frustrated because they delay completing tasks until perfect
- They focus on results and cannot enjoy the process

Instead, she questions her managers about their working relationships, in order to trigger meaningful conversations about the company, and where best to position people to make them most effective.

“A business is just like a person – it has emotions and non-logical thinking,” she says. “How can you expect a business, which is just a collection of people, not to have emotion? I think traditional business tries to ignore that part and believes that business can be run by logic. That is not true.”

One example of her approach of trying to create a climate free of fear, so that employees’ minds can flourish, was her decision during the credit crisis to reduce the salaries of senior management rather than lay off staff.

Since that 2005 software disaster, Trend Micro’s sales have doubled, and its strategy illustrates how businesses, like anxious parents, can benefit from the “good enough” approach.

A shift in perception is required from a fear-based culture, led by unrealistic expectations, to one that is far better equipped to cope with an uncertain commercial world by setting free people’s talents, innovative thinking and, yes, their imperfections too.

The writer is a psychotherapist and this article is based partly on her clinical experience. People not named have asked not to be identified.

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