



LEADERS: GIVE UP BEFORE YOU'RE PERFECT

✧ · by [Carlann Fergusson](#) · in [Authentic Leadership](#), [Emotionally Intelligent Leadership](#), [Leadership Lessons Learned](#), [Leading & Developing Other Leaders](#), [Values-Based Leadership](#).

How many of us have really screwed up as leaders? How many of us know those were some of the very best lessons we will ever learn?

If we know that learning by mistakes is a good thing, then why are there so many books, articles, and blogs about how to be perfect?

Imperfect Advice

Everywhere you turn there is well-meaning advice on how to get flawless leadership.

Here are a couple:

[5 Things Remarkable Bosses Never Do](#) (Really? Never?)

[5 Leadership Lessons from James T Kirk](#) (I'm not kidding)

So what's with this obsession with finding the recipe for the perfect leader?

Nobody's Perfect, So Stop Trying

Nobody is perfect. No leader is perfect. And this okay.



OK, I'm not talking about the leaders out there who would benefit their teams by **seeking professional help** and perhaps some medication.

I am talking about the rest of the leaders who are **striving** (for perfection) at the expense of **thriving**(in their journey).

I have worked for and with some great leaders and I have come to the conclusion that no one is perfect – Not even me (I know, shocking!)

Case in Point...

Let's take [Andy Grove](#). I worked for Intel for 10 years and this man is truly inspiring. It was his ability to create a vision which catapulted me into **leaving my job and joining Intel**.

He challenged people to do their best, he was driven by process, and was a whiz at being both strategic and tactical.

He even had the same size cubicle the rest of us.

Another skill he possessed was the ability to call it out if we screwed up. I remember I was giving a quarterly status update and we had had a major issue which was successfully addressed at the beginning of the quarter.

In Intel fashion of conducting a post-mortem, we even wrote a white paper enabling others to learn from our error.

I put the issue on the fourth slide of a 15-slide presentation and spoke to our most recent status first because I was thinking he'd be most interested on where we were today.

Well, he let me know both **verbally** and **non-verbally** that I should **never hide the negatives** by burying them in the presentation; the issue should have been on the first page.

I don't recall me saying, "Hey Andy, I understand your concern, but you should have criticized me in private or at least asked me first what my intentions were."

Instead, I do remember my hands breaking out in a sweat and me saying something eloquent like "Yes Sir, I understand."

Authentic Leadership Brand

It's alright that **he wasn't textbook perfect** in his criticism of me. My personal feeling didn't REALLY matter that much in the big picture. What I knew from his behavior was this:

- How **much passion** he had
- How **much he believed** in getting issues out on the table
- How **much he cared** that we got it right

He didn't bring the mistake up again because he believed that once corrected, this mistake **wouldn't happen again**; demonstrating trust.

He was an incredible leader, but not perfect. And this is okay.

Great Doesn't Mean Perfect

This isn't the **Andy Grove** you would have read about in books or articles.

Our stories of the great leaders put on pedestals have unintentionally made it impossible for any leader to be good enough. Our employees have read these **same books** and **articles** and think **we should walk on water**. Sorry, but your manager is human.

Even executives buy into the perfectionism myth. I've been in countless **succession planning discussions** and hours are spent picking at the imperfections of every internal leader who would be a candidate for promotion. And I'm not talking about candidates who have major development issues. Often, this rallying around "they aren't perfect yet" leads to an external hire being listed as the successor in hopes they can **find the perfect person**.

All of a sudden the person we don't even know who has just as many human idiosyncrasies is better than the person we do know??? Um.....???

Think, people: Think People

We are willing to spend over **\$100,000 in recruitment, turnover, and lost productivity costs** to find out that the external hire is also not perfect.

Q: What happens to the internal candidates we invested so much in?

A: They leave because they are perfect for another company.

Makes me wonder if Andy Grove would make it through as a candidate in some succession planning discussions.

Stop Striving For Perfection

I'm all for striving to be the best – but realize the best is still not perfect and actually that is a good thing. Maybe if we were perfect we would lack the pizzaz that makes us unique.

I'm a bit too passionate, a bit too visual, I get bored with too many details and I am dyslexic (which explains the visual). But I have built cohesive teams, created compelling visions, brought teams and companies to incredible levels of performance and have helped other leaders do the same.

So what is it you want from me? Oh, perfection. In that case, let me give up now.

That pedestal is a bit too tall for me to reach.

How does your organization strive too hard for perfectionism and what are the costs? What is the impact on you as a leader in trying to meet other's expectations of what perfect is? Where have you expected perfectionism from others and how has that worked for you? I would love to hear you thoughts!

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