

Coaching at Work

“pp48-50 Perfectionism”

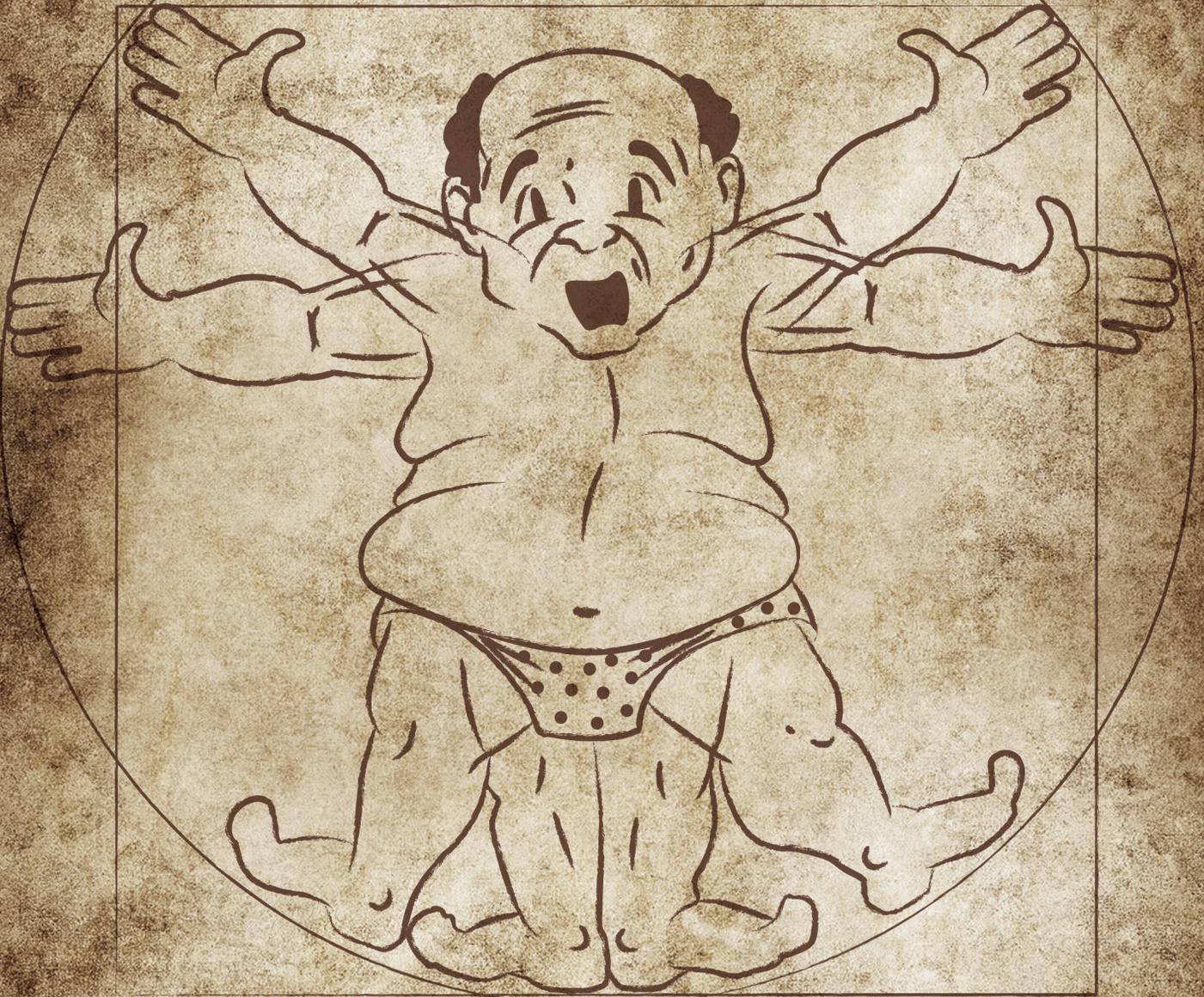
All rights reserved. © This article appeared in *Coaching at Work*, Vol 8, Issue 6, 2013 and has been reproduced in full by kind permission of the publisher. Not to be distributed electronically or made available to public websites without permission from the publisher. For personal and internal organisational use only.

Coaching at Work is a bi-monthly magazine, which is available in printed or digital format. Subscription includes access to all articles published in the last five years; free registration on our global coach listing, worth £50; a monthly e-newsletter, and membership of the Coaching at Work global 19,500-plus Coaching at Work LinkedIn group. There are discounts on subscriptions available to members of the main professional bodies and some coach training providers.

For more information, go to www.coaching-at-work.com

To subscribe, call 0844 322 1274 or visit website
www.coaching-at-work.info

Why do we strive for perfection? Is it even achievable? Better to master a task through practice, says Anne Lueneburger, than to chase the uncertain promise of perfectionism, whose only outcome is likely to be emotional distress, even burnout



**NOBODY'S
PERFECT**

Perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it." **Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (Anchor, 1995)**

The seductive allure of extraordinary returns, be it status, money or fame, is too strong for many to resist. The 'Ponzi scheme of Perfectionism' demands ever-greater circles of 'more' until the nagging difference between what is and what should be has metastasised throughout our lives. And, as with any Ponzi scheme (a fraudulent investment that pays returns to its investors from their own money or the money paid by subsequent investors), sooner or later the drive for perfection does not weather the test of reality.

Look at where you are sitting right now: what do you see that cannot be improved? Is the chair you are sitting on 'perfect'? Is the way the light falls just right? You get where this is going.

Yet, as an executive coach, I partner with many 'Type A' executives and can report that the drive towards perfectionism is alive and kicking.

As we take a harder look at the superficial promise of perfectionism, what often surfaces is emotional distress and limited productivity, not greatness.

Analysis paralysis

Research shows that perfectionists are less comfortable taking risks, which lessens the chance of innovation. They tend to

“Going the extra mile can make sense, but for those of us who don't undertake heart surgery, we simply need a healthy, pragmatic approach to excellence”

procrastinate, get stuck in 'analysis paralysis', lack self-confidence, are at greater risk of depression and burnout and don't live up to their potential. They burden their teams with unrealistic demands, struggle with delegation and fail to empower others. This is bad news for organisations: an estimated 60 per cent of all absences in the US are due to stress-related issues, costing US companies more than \$57 billion a year.

Of course, there are places where going the extra mile makes sense, but for those of us who don't undertake heart surgery, we simply need a healthy and pragmatic approach to excellence.

Mastery, not perfection

Luminaries such as French chef Bernard Loiseau, who committed suicide in fear of losing a Michelin star, are victims of the pandemic.

Perhaps a more realistic goal is to master our jobs and work environment. But where does perfection end and mastery begin? Both are an asymptote: neither is ever attainable in an absolute sense. However, while a perfectionist's lens is driven by predetermined outcomes, masters view the world through a lens of development, with a focus on process and growth.

Coaching perfectionists Enough

Expert performers know when to resist the lure of 'more'. Clothing company, Patagonia's 2011 anti-consumerist ad in the *New York*

Times, with the headline: 'Don't Buy This Jacket', is an example of where short-term sales are sacrificed for sustainable growth.

Make it work Encourage clients to get focused and examine:

- What are you truly good at and where do you notice rapid learning curves?
- To what extent do those activities energise you?

There are a number of strengths assessment tools, including the University of Pennsylvania's VIA inventory of strengths, Gallup's StrengthsFinder bit.ly/19MPbSX and Capp's Realise2 bit.ly/17tEBk1 to define a client's signature strengths.

- What are more, or different, ways to play to your strengths?
- What activities drain your energy, even if you are pretty good at them?

Throw these into the 'enough' bucket. Then start delegating and manage strengths to energy drainers by a ratio of at least 3:1.

Narcisize

Perfectionism is an insidious form of self-abuse. The attitude of being 'always on' takes a toll on our sense of self-worth and wellbeing. Software leader SAS treats its staff with flexible work schedules, on-site massages, healthcare, a gym, childcare, and more.

A less than 3 per cent voluntary turnover rate and a top 100 ranking in Fortune add to its ROI.

CEO Jim Goodnight nonchalantly sums it up: "What's

wrong with treating your people good?"

Coach clients to start valuing themselves, not their achievement.

Ask:

● What would someone who loves you say to you about your professional and personal self? Write it on a Post-it note and stick it where you can see it. Move it every so often so it doesn't blend in. Take a break every 90 minutes from what you are doing, as this is when your productivity tends to dip. In that break, focus on something that energises you, be it a water cooler chat or a walk. What do you notice about your energy levels?

Fail

The all-or-nothing world of perfectionists is limited in scope, and they often miss seeing mistakes as opportunities. Not so the World Bank, which hosted FAILFaire, a conference to celebrate failure as a driver of innovation, social change and progress.

Practise

Suggest to clients that they take something that is important to them which they would like to move forward on. Ask:

- What has held you back so far? List the steps that bring you closer to your desired goal. Next, take the first step. Don't look any further. Give this first step 80 per cent of your effort. Then move on to the next step. Keep going. Notice.
- What does the outcome look like?
- How have you experienced the process of getting there?
- What differed from previous experiences?

Flow

Perfectionism carries a rigid quality. Moving from a lens of

Are you a perfectionist? Take our test

- Do you think that if you just try hard enough you can succeed at pretty much anything you take on?
- Is a fear of 'not being good enough' a familiar one?
- Is it important for you to do things 'right', even if it may mean burning bridges along the way?
- If you don't set the highest standards for yourself, do you worry about being 'average'?
- Do you think you shouldn't repeat the same mistake twice?
- Do you believe being tough on yourself and/or others will drive performance?

Did you 'yes' to many of these questions? Then you may be a perfectionist. Most of us have a streak of perfectionism inside. But the good news is that Ponzi schemes fall flat once discovered. Once we become aware of it, the con artist that is 'perfectionism' begins to lose its grip on us.

what 'should be' to a lens of what 'could be in the face of what is' leverages serendipity. Many scientific innovations have been fortuitous, accidental discoveries, such as Penicillin and X-rays.

Make it work

Encourage your client to pause for a moment the next time they come across an unexpected situation.

Suggest to them:

- You have the choice to ignore what is right in front of you or to explore it. Consider stretching yourself and going with the flow.
- What are you noticing in yourself?
 - What do you notice in those around you?
 - How does the outcome you may have expected compare to the outcome you see?

People first

Perfectionistic leaders tend to prioritise accomplishments above relationships. Masterful leaders, however, know how to flex their styles. They understand the importance of treating others as allies for sustainable growth and

performance: the 'who' needs to come ahead of the 'what'. A 'best buddy' at work raises our engagement there seven times.

Make it work

If clients put tasks ahead of people, suggest they take a moment to consider what this is costing them. Ask:

- What does the motivation of your team look like?
- What do your turnover figures say compared to those of other teams? If you see red flags, start intentionally putting people first and tasks second.
- What makes your team members tick?
- What do you know about the person at work?
- How can you give more positive feedback?
- How can you empower others?
- Who is someone you would like to get to know better? Then make an appointment for lunch. ■

Anne Lueneburger is founder of North of Neutral, a New-York based coaching organisation.

anne@northofneutral.com
www.northofneutral.com