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Don't Let Perfect Be the Enemy of Good

Career Development



As a young lawyer at a large firm, I was conditioned to spend countless late nights obsessively reading, re-reading, and re-reading again motions and briefs, because our firm “will never send out any document that is not perfect.” I spent many evenings that way, convinced I was doing the right thing.

When I went in-house, I quickly realized that I had to shift my mindset. In a busy work environment, where “legal” is an enabler of the business and not the business itself, priority and practicality are far more important than perfection. You simply don’t have enough time for that kind of effort and attention into every single project. No one can, and more importantly no one should, be invested in everything they touch.

Intensity of effort should be proportional to the nature of the thing. Effective people know how to set priorities and focus on the things that matter most. A low-risk, low-value transaction should not absorb the same mindshare and resource as, for example, a major acquisition.

A good manager helps the team understand when “good enough” is just that and when it is time to put “pencils down.” At some point, the urge to win that last element of a negotiation, and the investment required to achieve that win, is actually undermining the broader mission of the company or team. The quest for perfect often thwarts the more important goal of simple completion. I coach colleagues on this all the time.

Decide when you need to go beyond “good enough”

There are times, however, when perfection should be the target and when “good enough” is an unfortunate (or lazy) compromise. This is when you need to stop being expedient and focus completely on a single objective. This is when you have push yourself, and your team, to strive for the exceptional. Deciding when that time comes is one of the most important challenges of a leader.

That line is different for everyone. On my team, we invest completely in becoming a more responsive, aligned, customer-centric organization. We want to be fast, integrated, and connected to our stakeholders. This is not an abstract vision; it is real, grounded in goals and metrics. There are plenty of things on my team where “good enough” is fine — but for anything that has to do with us living up to that vision, we pull out the stops.

Decide what matters the most to you and how you will measure it. That is where you need to focus the attention and commitment of your team. Sometimes the answer is obvious, sometimes you have to work and refine your priorities to arrive at what matters most. But once you have it, once you land your vision, it is so much easier to push yourself and others.

Don't let success stop you in your tracks

Success carries its own special challenge to teams trying to become exceptional. Constantly pushing to get better is like rolling a rock up a hill. It's hard work. The higher you go, the greater the temptation to stop and admire the amazing progress already made. And when you start receiving praise and validation for your hard work, it's just human nature to wonder if it's time to stop.

At a great company like NetApp, this can be a big temptation ... for all the right reasons.

We are blessed with amazing clients who welcome our involvement and are generous with gratitude. I've long since stopped counting the number of times a client will tell me “Elizabeth is the best counsel we've ever worked with,” “Max did the best training I've ever attended,” “We wish Spencer worked on our team,” and so on. And I love that! But I don't want to use that positive feedback as an excuse to hit cruise control. I want it to inspire us to embrace newer and harder challenges.

Once an organization starts seeing results, it is very easy to lose the momentum and the urgency. In technology especially, very few companies can sustain excellence over long periods of time. What happens next depends on the culture of the team and whether a “good enough” mentality becomes a weapon against extreme performance.

I am so proud of my team for winning the Best Legal Department of the Year award from *The Recorder* and being named the only two-time ACC Value Champion ever. These awards reflect the team's talent, innovative approaches, and hard work. I love that this recognition will only push us further. Success shouldn't put out the fire; it should stoke it.

Embrace the journey

Seeking excellence is a journey with no shortcuts and no finish line. You need to find your own motivation and separate from what others expect of you. You have to push, even when no one else is telling you to. You must persuade yourself and your team that good enough is a dangerous stopping point. It is hard. But if you are doing it for the right reasons, and with the right people, it can lead to amazing and fulfilling results.

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