

Are You Good Enough?

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When is good enough actually good enough?

I guess we all have days when we feel "in the zone". We are really on our game and we seem to devour the to-do list, ace the presentation, crush the report - you may have heard this being called "in flow". It feels great and we might just allow ourselves the fleeting recognition of "I'm good at this", and they - whoever they are - just might be lucky to have me. Of course, there are people who feel like this most of the time, but I would suggest they are somewhat rare (and also that this excessive level of assurance serves more as a potential derailer - "over confidence" - that will feature in a future article on the right hand column).

We probably also have days when things don't work out too well. The meeting goes badly, we don't get the hoped for promotion, a key team member resigns: we forget stuff, say the wrong thing, write the wrong email, and then we beat ourselves up. Was it me or was it just too much? At this point it may be worth contemplating the difference between your best self and your worst self - the difference between you on a good day and you on a bad day. For most of us, I reckon our performance is pretty variable and there is a big gap between our best, our everyday, and our worst. Psychologists tell us that most of us have insecurities rattling around which inform our self talk and ultimately shape our conversations. "Am I good enough?" comes somewhere near the top of the list in terms of its impact on our behaviour. It's not simply a matter of confidence, but rather a question of how well hidden our natural fears really are (we can add, "do they like me?", "will I be ok?", "will I survive?")

The other factor here is expectations. The expectations we have of ourselves, and those we have of others. Attribution theory may tell us we tend to judge our own poor performance less harshly than that of a colleague, and also that we might tend to underplay the supporting contextual when we do well. (We think others were lucky but that when it was us, we just happened to do a great job!). And yet I wonder which of our inner selves we believe when we answer the "how am I doing" question. It may depend on how we are feeling on a given day but perhaps it also depends on a fundamental self confidence judgement (rather like locus of control), and is no doubt greatly shaped by the feedback we get from those around us. After a while we will start to believe the positive press, and take it as true, and no doubt the same will be true of the more negative assessments we get from others. I meet many people who say they have higher expectations of themselves than they do of the people around them, but I wonder if that's always the experience of those others being judged.

We've come to expect a lot of our leaders. Top executives, the thinking goes, should have the intellectual capacity to make sense of unfathomably complex issues, the imaginative powers to paint a vision of the future that generates everyone's enthusiasm, the operational know-how to translate strategy into concrete plans, and the interpersonal skills to foster commitment to undertakings that

could cost people's jobs should they fail. Unfortunately, no single person can possibly live up to those standards.

The Incomplete Leader (or Parent, or Pastor)

According to Deborah Ancona and co in Harvard Business Review, it's time to end the myth of the complete leader: the flawless person at the top who's got it all figured out. In fact, it was time 10 years ago when the article was first written, and the sooner leaders, in all walks of life, stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organizations will be. In today's world, we know the executive's job is no longer to command and control but to cultivate and coordinate the actions of others at all levels of the organization. But ironically, it is only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete —perhaps realising that they are not good enough and have evident strengths and weaknesses —will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others.

So although the good can be the enemy of the best and lead us towards mediocrity and lowered standards, the best can also be the enemy of the good, essentially leaving us, the the people around us, constantly disappointed. We know that no one person can possibly stay on top of everything. But the myth of the complete leader (or professional, parent, or pastor) and the attendant fear of appearing incompetent makes many people try to do just that, exhausting themselves and damaging their organizations (families? churches?) in the process. The incomplete leader, parent etc by contrast, knows when to let go: when to let those who know the local market do the advertising plan or when to let the engineering team run with its idea of what the customer needs, when to let their partner sort out the argument or negotiate with their teenagers for better terms. The incomplete leader also knows that leadership exists throughout the organizational hierarchy, the family, the community —wherever expertise, vision, new ideas, and commitment are found.

So are you good enough? Well, yes....and no!

In most circumstances, I believe you will have the skills, experience and motivation to be good enough, and quite likely to be be much more than that. But if your standards or the expectations of others are too high, then no you won't be good enough. And this will no doubt cause you considerable stress. But the other thing to remember is that no matter how good (or bad) we are, we can always get better. And actually, aim to get better we must. Because in a fast moving world, if we don't keep trying to get better, then our good enough for today, is not going to be good enough for tomorrow, or maybe at some point in the very near future.